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The Rewriting of American Literary History

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The rewriting of American literary history has been a subject in contemporary critical discourse for at least the last two decades. A short time, indeed, to solve such a controversial problem. One of the latest contributions to the topic is Sacvan Bercovitch's compilation of essays under the title *Reconstructing American Literary History* (1986). As pointed out by Professor Alan Wald in his review of the book, "Most of the important questions about conventional literary history are asked in this book, but no coherent response emerges" (1986, 3s1

One of the most important weaknesses of the book, also underscored by Professor Wald, is the fact that, with one exception, all the essays "are wholly Eurocentric. American Indians, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, and Asian-Americans are as absent from this sketch of a new literary history as they were from Mr. [Robert E.] Spiller's work [*Literary History of the United States*, 1948]. Mr. Bercovitch's 'dissensus' produces some brilliant analytical pyrotechnics, but the result is a very gentle kind of revisionism" (35~.

Professor Wald's criticism implies that a true reconstructing of American literary history must take into consideration ethnic writing. In Bercovitch's book the only essay touching upon this aspect of American literature is Robert B. Stepto's contribution, "Distrust of the Reader in Afro-American Narratives." To complicate matters one of the contributors, Werner Sollors, takes the position that single-sex and single-ethnic-group approaches have no place in a reconstructed history of American literature. He goes on to add that "The wide-spread acceptance of the group-by-group approach has not only led to unhistorical accounts held together by static notions of rather abstractly and homogeneously conceived ethnic groups, but has also weakened the comparative and critical skills of increasingly timid interpreters who sometimes choose to speak with the authority of ethnic insiders

rather than that of readers of texts" (Sollors 1986b, 2561. (21)

The rewriting of American literary history is not a new occurrence; it has been taking place since its first history was written. But it was not until the last three decades that the question about the place of ethnic literatures in that history was raised. The arguments regarding the problems of their inclusion or exclusion in mainstream American literature have not been resolved, some critics thinking that there is no need to consider them as different from mainstream American literature, and others insisting that ethnic literatures are "not quite" American, that they belong to a different type of discourse. Other critics take a neutral position and feel that literary historians should not be overly preoccupied with their inclusion, especially the works of authors writing in a foreign language.

Some critics attribute the exclusion of ethnic writers from the canon not to the fact that these writers are members of ethnic groups, but to other causes, such as well established friendships or tendentiousness. They point out that although the works of some ethnic writers like Joseph Heller and Philip Roth are included within the American literary canon, the works of Hispanics, Afro-Americans, Native Americans, and Asian-Americans are not considered as American in the histories of literature. This inconsistency has been explained by Werner Sollors in his book *Beyond Ethnicity* (Sollors 1986a) by saying that "writers of national fame or of striking formal accomplishments or of international fame are often categorically excluded from the realm of ethnic writing. This is illustrated by the cases of Nathanael West, Eugene O'Neill, or Vladimir Nabokov and suggests that the limited scope of what we define sometimes quite tautologically—as ethnic literature" (Sollors 1986a, 241-42). He goes on to add the name of Carl Sandburg, a writer he considers to be "an interesting example of a popular ethnic who may be excluded from ethnic definitions because of his very popularity" (421).

Sollors's position would be one more example of those critics who have determined what is and what is not American literature, since only nationally famous authors of ethnic background—or very popular writers like Sandburg—would be included in the canon. However, Sollors goes on to say that "While tautologically narrowing definitions are of little persuasive power, a broader and more inclusive definition of ethnic literature is helpful: works written by, about, or for persons who perceived

themselves, or were perceived by others, as members of ethnic groups." But he then contradicts himself by adding, "including even nationally and internationally popular writings of 'major' authors and formally intricate and modernist texts" (Ig86a, 243~. This definition would not exclude, of course, the writers, like Sandburg, listed by Sollors in the preceding page.

Most recently, ethnic critics have attributed the exclusion of minority (22) writers from the history of American literature to a deep-rooted and well-established ideology of exclusion affecting not only literary history but all aspects of American life. To justify the exclusion of ethnic literatures, critics belonging to the majority group proceed from the principle that ethnic literatures are aesthetically inferior. In the article, "An Introduction to Chinese-American and Japanese-American Literatures," which appeared in the volume *Three American Literatures* ~ I 982), the authors, Jeffery Paul Chan and his colleagues, state that "American culture, protecting the sanctity of its whiteness, still patronizes us as foreigners and refuses to recognize Asian-American literature as 'American' Literature" jlg82, Ig8i.

In one of the two essays on Native American literature appearing in the same volume, Lester A. Standiford traces this patronizing attitude back to the second decade of the century. As early as IgIg, he points out, Louis Untermeyer, reviewing a collection of translations from Native American oral poetry, said that the book was a document valuable chiefly for its ethnological interest, adding that "the harsh aborigine can commit poetry as trite and banal as many an overcivilized paleface" las quoted by Standiford I 982, I 69 i. That review had brought a response from Mary Austin, one of the few critics who at that time found aesthetic values in American Indian poetry. Two months later, in the same publication, *The Dial*, she wrote, "Mr. Untermeyer describes himself as a 'mere man of letters' . . . but it begins to be a question in America whether a man is entitled to describe himself as a man of letters at all who so complacently confesses his ignorance or inability to enter into the vast body of aboriginal literature of his

country" II982, I6gi. Years later, in her book *The American Rhythm* II930l, Austin accused Americans of refusing to receive anything "from the self-contained culture of the aboriginal" II930,42~.

It could be said that the ideological background of the traditional canon is not necessarily representative of the nonethnic population. The majority of the works classified as "regional" or "marginal" are those not written by ethnics, but by Euro-Americans. As early as the last decade of the nineteenth century, Charles F. Lummis, in his book *A New Mexico* (1891), complained of the absence of a history of the United States "not written in a closet," but based on the knowledge that history "began in the great Southwest" ~ 1891, 1741. And this complaint, extended to include literary history, was voiced in 1938 by Mabel Major in her book *Southwest*, where she says, "It is annoying to find American history and letters continually described as a style tradition with its genesis in the Mayflower and the Massachusetts Bay Psalm Book" (Major 1938, 33~).

Professor A. Owen Aldridge in *Early American Literature: A Comparative Approach* (1982) attributes the nature of the traditional canon to the (23) narrowness of the British intellectual domination of comparative studies and also to the fact that the earliest compilers of histories of American literature were of New England states and therefore more interested in Puritan New England writers. No less important is the fact that these New England writers gave emphasis to aesthetic values over ideas and historical or political relationships.

It is interesting to observe that for Aldridge the designation "American literature" refers to the literature of the Americas and not only the United States. It is for this reason that he includes such works as Alonso de Ercilla's *La Araucana* (1589-91), written in Chile about the Spanish conquest of that region, but not a similar work of 1610 about events that occurred in the Southwest, that is, Gaspar Perez de Villagra's *Historia de la Nueva Mexico* (1609-10), a work similar to Ercilla's in form and content, since both are epic poems about the conquest of native American groups. We don't know why Aldridge excluded this work, but it may be due to the fact that it has never formed part of the canon on aesthetic grounds. This in spite of the fact that Mabel Major had advocated its inclusion in 1938, when she wrote, "Villagra's account of the heroic capture of Acoma by Zaldivar and seventy men bears comparison with the scaling of the heights outside Quebec by Wolfe if one keeps all the circumstances in mind" (1938, 33~). The poem is also excluded from the Mexican

literary canon on the same grounds, that is, aesthetic merits.

One of the two references to Mexicano/Chicano literature found in Werner Sollors's book, *Beyond Ethnicity*, is Villagra's epic poem. The reference, however, appears in a different context. In his chapter on "Ethnicity and Literary Form" Sollors mentions Villagra's work as an example of the presence of the epic, a form "generally associated with ethnogenesis, the emergence of a people, and can therefore seemingly be appropriated transnationally by all peoples" (1986a, 2381). However, he does not mention Ernesto Galarza's autobiography, *Born a Boy* (1972), when discussing the presence of this genre among immigrants. Why Villagra? Perhaps because epics produced by members of ethnic groups are few, while autobiographies seem to be plentiful.

Some critics speak about "other American literatures," a designation which implies the existence of more than one American literature. They say that the presence of these "other" literatures is the result of ethnic groups not being fully integrated into American life, as opposed to the conflict of cultures, as proposed by Americo Paredes (1958). If their theory is accepted, then we could say that there will not be a body of homogeneous American literature until these ethnic cultures entirely disappear; in other words until there is total integration or assimilation. There is a strong (24) sociological reason militating against this ever happening in the near future, since immigration from Latin America and Asia continues, reinforcing and enlarging their ethnic groups in a constant process. As Colin Clarke and his colleagues state in *Geography and Ethnic Pluralism* (1984):

Ethnic identities may be more abiding and less superficial than is suggested (Jews providing the clearest example among Caucasian minorities), and racial identity continues to be a major social cleavage; moreover, as long as overseas migration exists, ethnic diversity will continue to be replenished and sustained. In addition . . . attitudinal and life-style diversity appears to be compounding in the advanced societies with the consolidation and politicisation of life-style groups . . . especially in metropolitan areas. In everyday cultural and political life this less complete form of pluralism appears far from trivial, if largely untheorized. (Clarke, Ley, and Peach 1984,

2)

There are other reasons working for the preservation of a multicultural society, such as the reluctance of people to give up their culture and of races to mix freely. As Wayne Charles Miller stated in 1981, "the United States, considered in a broader cultural perspective, is a composite of peoples . . . still in the process of self-definition" (1981, :9~.

In his defense of the melting pot theory Werner Sollors states that pluralism equates with unhistorical ethnic persistence and group survival, while the melting pot equates with historical change and group emergence. Sollors is obviously thinking about certain Northern European ethnic groups that have been thoroughly assimilated into American society, while disregarding the experiences of Afro-Americans, Asian-Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanic-Americans who, having been here for centuries, have not yet been assimilated into the mainstream of American society. At the root of cultural pluralism there may be, as Sollors points out, quoting the early pluralist Horace M. Kallen, "a notion of the eternal power of descent, birth, natio, and race" (1986b, 260), but to this we need to add that there are also shared values and traditions, cultural pride, and group solidarity, not to mention the negative factors, such as low educational achievement, economic deprivation, and isolation.

Today, the fact that the fusion of the ethnic cultures into the mainstream has not been achieved gives rise to the presence of literatures written by representatives of these ethnic groups that have not been integrated into the history of American literature or made an integral part of the canon. One factor working against this acceptance is that the Chicano writer can choose his language of expression, or even write in two languages, such as English and Spanish. As Miller says, "the voices of a distinct (25) Hawaiian culture, the influx of millions of Spanish-speaking people, the continuing insistence by blacks on a discrete African-American consciousness, the resurgence of American Indian cultures, and the phenomena of an ethni-geographical nature all attest to the evolvement of new definitions" (1981,29~. Even supposing that these ethnic groups were to merge, which is quite improbable, there would still be a literature that had to be accepted as American since ethnic

literature, according to John M. Reilly "is not so designated because of the authors' race, color, creed, national origin or association.... What we designate 'ethnic literature' are the products of authors who choose to feature the significance of ethnicity in their writings (1978,4~

There is no unanimity today regarding the form that histories of American literature should take. Sollors rejects the so-called "mosaic" procedure, according to which the history of American literature can best be written by separating the groups that produced such literature in the United States and then writing monographs about them. He believes that the results of this procedure "are the readers and compendiums made up of diverse essays on groups of ethnic writers who may have little in common except so-called ethnic roots while, at the same time, obvious and important literary and cultural connections are obscured" (1986h, 255i. He documents his assertion by quoting what James Dormon wrote in a review "of such a mosaic collection of essays on ethnic theatre." According to Dormon, "there is little to tie the various essays together other than the shared theme 'ethnic American theatre history'" (1986h, 255~.

The theory of unlimited space for other literary traditions, proposed by Marco A. Portales (1984), is also summarily dismissed by Sollors for the reason that "a literary history now could not be more inclusive than those of the past without being explicitly exclusive, too; and it is here that more theoretical statements have to be made to offset the unrealistic combination of pluralist faith and the idea of limitless space" (1986h, 255~. At the same time he rejects contemporary literary pluralism because "literary pluralists of our time would like to construct a mosaic of ethnic stories that relies on the supposed permanence, individuality, and homogeneity of each ancestral tradition and has no space for the syncretistic nature of so much of American literature and cultural life" (1986b, 274~.

On the other hand, Miller believes in the existence of a multicultural America and suggests that, "While continuing to make use of the tools of close textual analysis, we should seek to 'place' the various American literatures in their cultural contexts. In fact, that process should be our primary work. It may be the key to the next literary history of this nation" (1981,33). (26)

We can see, then, the complexities facing the independent critic, the academic, and other responsible persons now engaged in the reconstruction of American literary history. Should it be a complete history, with limitless space, or a history with designations for regional or ethnic literatures? As to terminology, should we keep the hyphenated designations or do away with them? Chicanos, of course, have already solved this problem by accepting the term Chicano over Mexican-American. One thing is clear, and that is, the idea—with which even Sollors agrees—that no writer should be excluded from the reconstructed history of American literature by virtue of race, region, or gender.

We must also remember that the problems confronted by critics and literary historians are the same as those found in other countries and other regions. As an example, I quote Wellek and Warren who observed in 1949 that a history of literature in England during the Middle Ages "which neglects the vast amount of writings in Latin and Anglo-Saxon gives a false picture of England's literary situation and general culture" (1949,401).

Most Chicano literary critics are in agreement that there should be an opening of the definition of American literature to include ethnic literatures, not as separate entities, or marked with hyphenated designations, but as forming an integral and important part of that history. They do not agree, of course, as to the time when that will take place, some thinking that it will be years before that happens, while others assure us that the reconstruction of American literary history is already under way. But even if the rewriting of a new history of American literature has begun, much remains to be done. I believe that for the present at least, Chicano scholars should not be overly concerned with historiographical and canonical problems and should dedicate more of their time to textual and historical Chicano literary studies. (27)