

God in American Literary History: Changing Perspectives

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Abstract: American literary history was transformed in the 1980s by the application of critical theory, which called into question the terms *American*, *literary*, and *history* from a secular, historicist perspective. What are the implications if this secular perspective for students with religious beliefs? In order for students to fully understand and appreciate American literature and be prepared to confront a world of increasing religious turmoil, secular teachers and scholars must respectfully take into account reasonable religious perspectives.

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In 1993 the eminent Harvard political scientist Samuel P. Huntington published an article in the journal *Foreign Affairs* titled “The Clash of Civilizations.” Viewing contemporary international relations from a geopolitical perspective, he predicted a clash of the world’s major civilizations: the West, the Islamic world, and the Confucian East. He subsequently elaborated this widely-noted thesis in his 1996 book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Among the responses to Huntington’s thesis was James Kurth’s article in the September 1994 issue of *National Interest* titled “The Real Clash.” Kurth, one of Huntington’s most brilliant students argued persuasively that more fundamental than the clash between world civilizations is the clash within the West itself between those who espouse the Judeo-Christian worldview and those who have abandoned it in favor of the “isms” of contemporary American life—postmodernism, feminism, multiculturalism, and others, which Princeton law professor Robert P. George has lumped together as “the secularist orthodoxy.”¹ As the historian Gertrude Himmelfarb describes the situation, “We have become two nations separated by a profound cultural and moral divide.”²

Perhaps nowhere has what Kurth identifies as “the real clash” been more conspicuous than in the study of American literature, which has radically transformed itself during the past thirty years. *Literary History of the United States*, edited by Robert Spiller and others in 1948—the long-time standard reference authority—was by the 1960s perceived by many as the supreme expression of something called without affection the “liberal consensus.” With the political-academic upheavals and the advent of French “Theory” in the late sixties, many Americanists

¹ Robert P. George, “A Clash of Orthodoxies,” *First Things*, August/September 1999, 33.

² Quoted in James F. Cooper, *Knights of the Brush: The Hudson River School and the Moral Landscape* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1999), 15.

felt that the Spiller history must be supplanted. Two major efforts to do so were carried out in the eighties: *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, edited by Emory Elliott (1988) and the five-volume *Cambridge History of American Literature*, edited by Sacvan Bercovitch and others (1989). The process of compiling these histories was accompanied by over a dozen articles in the “Extra” series of *American Literature* and “The Round Table” series in *Early American Literature*. These exchanges focused primarily on how to select texts and narrate their significance as things American, literary, and historical—all three terms were called into question. The debate was also taken up in prefaces to anthologies of American literature and introductions to collections of critical essays on American literature.

Both Elliott and Bercovitch are explicit in their introductions regarding the fact that their projects demonstrate the attitudes and methods of the latest versions of Theory, a term encompassing all practices that insist on radical reflection about established power and the claims of the marginalized. Elliott explains that “many aspects of this project are the result of significant developments in the theories of history and criticism that have affected the writing of literary history today. In order to appreciate this volume, it is necessary to have a sense of the fundamental transformations in literary criticism that have occurred on the theoretical level over the last twenty-five years.”³ Bercovitch tells us that his contributors are all Americanists trained in the sixties and seventies, making up “twenty-one spokespersons for dissensus.” Their intent is to dissent from leading liberal myths about American history and their application to the criticism of American literature. Specifically, they are uncomfortable with the consensus “on the meaning of the term *literary* that involves the legitimation of a certain canon, and the consensus on the term *history* that was legitimated by a certain vision of America.” The task of this group, says Bercovitch, is “to reconstruct American literary history by making a virtue of dissensus.”⁴

In a well-known article in the *New York Review of Books*, Frederick Crews labels the scholars engaged in this project of reconstruction the “New Americanists.” He points out that they are broadly poststructuralist in sympathy, which is clearly borne out in Bercovitch’s preface to *Restructuring American Literary History*. According to Crews’s summary, “they refuse to draw categorical distinctions between literature and history, foreground and background, art and advocacy, and they distrust all ‘foundational’ claims, whether they be for fixed aesthetic quality,

³ Emory Elliott, ed., *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), xv.

⁴ Sacvan Bercovitch, *Restructuring American Literary History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), vii.

authorial autonomy, a specifically literary kind of discourse, or scholarly detachment.” For them social struggle must always be kept in view, with issues of race, class, and gender being paramount.⁵

Many Americanists questioned whether the Cambridge project, produced by like-minded young radicals, would strike against disinterestedness and foster the “ideologizing” of scholarship. And, of course, despite the claims of open-endedness, dialogue, and resistance to closure or totalizing on the part of the editors of the Columbia and Cambridge histories, their contributors fervently make revisionist cases. They claim to be exposing ideology, not promoting it. Their posture is that even if they subscribe to a definite radical politics of their own, they are not to be thought of as ideologues but as unmaskers. They expose false consciousness and its historical determinants and deconstruct unified schemes and hierarchies of every kind. The irony is that their histories, given the nature of such reference works, will be taken in the future as oracular final authorities and will inevitably shape attitudes and perspectives regarding American literature and history. The anti-foundational, in other words, becomes foundational. The liabilities of the New Americanist enterprise, according to Crews, include “its self-righteousness, its tendency to conceive of American history as a highlight film of outrages, its impatience with artistic purposes other than ‘redefining the social order,’ and its choice of critical principles according to the partisan cause at hand.”⁶

It is not my purpose here to evaluate in any depth the New Americanist enterprise. A substantial body of writing exists that critiques the motives and results of that project and of Theory in general. A prime example is *Theory's Empire: An Anthology of Dissent* published by Columbia University Press in 2005. I wish to call attention to an aspect of the dramatic shift in perspectives on American literary history that I have not seen addressed. Regardless of the debates over the strengths and liabilities of the New Americanists' approach to literary history, one fact is clear and indisputable: it is thoroughly secular in nature. Bercovitch, for example, quotes this description of American literature from the “Address to the Reader” section of the Spiller *Literary History of the United States*: “It has been, on the whole, an optimistic literature, made virile by criticism of the actual in comparison with the ideal.” He then explains that the ferment in current American literary study is due to the belief that the assumptions of Spiller's

⁵ Frederick Crews, “Whose American Renaissance?” *New York Review of Books*, 27 October 1988, 70.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

statement are no longer accepted—“the paradigm has become inoperative.” He describes this situation as “the fall from transcendence into history,”⁷ which I take to mean a fall from concerns with God, religion, spirit, essence, logos, and foundations into new historicist concerns with vigilantly unmasking such concepts of transcendence and uncovering political consciousness in literary texts seemingly devoid of any. What I wish to explore briefly are the implications of this fall into secularism. What does it mean for how American literary history is taught and how students are led to perceive their national literary heritage? And further, how does it prepare students to live in a society that is, despite its civic secularism, still largely religious? Moreover, how does it prepare them to confront a world in religious turmoil?

In characterizing the secularism of the New Americanist project, I realize I am being unjust to individuals. Human beings have a genius for embracing contradictory philosophies, largely unwittingly and without discomfort. Few of us rigorously ferret out the full implications of the ideas and attitudes we entertain. Obviously there are New Americanists who espouse only a qualified or partial secularism. I am describing the secular in its strongest, unqualified forms—the mounting suspicion of foundationalism, of essentialism, and of transcendental explanatory categories. Such secularism rules religious arguments out of bounds or submits them to cosmetic improvement to make them acceptable. It lacks the slightest sense that our immortal souls are at stake as a result of our beliefs and actions. For it the term “God”—meaning a divine Father, the reality of spirit, openness to eternity, absolute goodness and truth—is weightless, a hollow metaphor.

Alexis de Tocqueville reported 175 years ago that when he met Americans he asked “whether in their opinion religion contributed to the stability of the State and the maintenance of law and order. They always answered, without hesitation, that a civilized community, especially one that enjoys the benefits of freedom, cannot exist without religion. In fact, an American sees in religion the surest guarantee of the stability of the State and the safety of the individual.”⁸ That same question posed today would not always receive the same answer. With rising secularism, we are reaching a point for the first time in American history when cultural elites insist that we can flourish *without* religion or sacred authority, when the notions of reason and

⁷ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 354-55, 357.

⁸ Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*. Used as epigraph to Alfred Kazin, *God and the American Writer* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).

intelligence are being quarantined from religion. Atheism seems fashionable, judging by books like Christopher Hutchins's *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*, Daniel C. Dennett's *Breaking the Spell*, and Sam Harris's *The End of Faith*.

Yet America is filled with believers. According to a 2007 Princeton Survey for *Newsweek*, 91 percent of Americans believe in God. Eighty-seven percent identify themselves with a specific religion—Christian, Jewish, Muslim.⁹ Academic secularism is a tail wagging the dog. Why should students, many possessing religious beliefs, be taught their national literature in a secular vacuum in which religious concerns are ignored or suspect? Literature affects our total sensibilities. How unfortunate when students are taught—often indoctrinated—to “do Theory” rather than to appreciate the full range of literary response, which has important aesthetic, moral, and religious dimensions. Literary art, besides having social and political import, has qualities of beauty, spirituality, and virtue that enable us to make order out of chaos, light out of darkness, faith out of despair, beauty out of ugliness, and transcendence out of alienation. The imposition of Theory, with its roots and impetus in secular leftist politics, in place of inductive study of individual literary works using methods that appeal to all our sensibilities has trivialized and diminished the role of the humanities.

Religion, defined broadly, has played and continues to play a significant role in American literature. Alfred North Whitehead said, “Religion is what man does with his solitariness.”¹⁰ Elsewhere he said, “Apart from the religious vision, human life is a flash of occasional enjoyments lighting up a mass of pain and misery, a bagatelle of transient experiences.”¹¹ Such sentiments indicating how fundamental the religious impulse in human beings is can easily be multiplied. Alfred Kazin suggests that Emily Dickinson explained the religious quest brilliantly in a comment tossed off in a letter: “It is true that the unknown is the largest need of intellect, although for this no one thinks to thank God.”¹² The religious consciousness is revealed in the fertile tug-of-war between the transcendent and the concrete, a struggle thoroughgoing secularists ignore or deny. To be concerned with American literature is to be deeply concerned with the devious ways in which the irrepressible religious consciousness finds expression in the

⁹ Michael Novak, “Remembering the Secular Age,” *First Things*, June/July 2007, 35.

¹⁰ Quoted in Kazin, 22.

¹¹ Quoted in William Barrett, *The Illusion of Technique* (London: William Kimber, 1978), 269.

¹² Kazin, 15.

midst of its resolutely secular and frequently very ordinary materials. God in American literature is manifest not simply in statements of creed. As Alfred Kazin says in the prelude to his *God and the American Writer*, “I am interested not in the artist’s profession of belief but in the imagination he brings to his tale of religion in human affairs.”¹³ War, slavery, and social injustice do not displace religion; they are really the very reasons for the awful fascination of the whole subject of God in America. In other words, the religious perspective I have in mind transcends doctrines and churches and encompasses fundamental human spiritual concerns. The secular perspective I have in mind, in dismissing the former, often indiscriminately includes the latter.

Fundamental to what Kurth identifies as “the real clash” is the conflict over reason, which secularists have attempted to commandeer. Because secular humanism has, from the beginning, incorporated the modern scientific view of the universe, it has always felt itself—and today still feels itself—“liberated” from any kind of religious perspective and in possession of a monopoly on reason. While there is no conflict in principle between faith and reason, there exists in American studies today a conflict between reasonable religious perspectives and a truncated concept of reason held by militant secularists. Whatever is to be said for or against secularism, there can be no legitimate claim that it is a “neutral” doctrine that deserves a privileged status as the arbiter of reason. As Frederick Crews has persuasively argued, secularist Theory is “bogged down in apriorism.” It appears “to satisfy the most austere skeptical intellectual taste while casually introducing propositions of gnomonic certitude, prophetic reverberations, and exhilarating historical scope.”¹⁴ It disparages totalizing explanations and foundationalism while simultaneously advancing foundational propositions of its own that are to be taken entirely on faith and bear a markedly theological cast. More than one critic has recognized Theory as an emergent religious impulse in conflict with traditional biblical religions. Crews distinguishes between two kinds of discourse: “disciplinary and self-ratifying” The poststructuralist element in Theory is an assault on the disciplinary, which Crews describes as “the ethic of respecting what is known, acknowledging what is still unknown, and acting as if one cared about the difference.” For the disciplinary spirit to operate, says Crews, “members of a given intellectual community must read one another’s work discriminatingly and try to show,

¹³ Kazin, 14.

¹⁴ Frederick Crews, “The End of the Poststructuralist Era,” in *The Emperor Redressed: Critiquing Critical Theory*, ed. Dwight Eddins (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995), 50.

through pointed reference to available facts that certain apprehensions of those facts are more plausible than others.”¹⁵

Self-ratifying discourse is just the opposite. It traffics in apriorism and tends to dismiss the usual notions of truth. “Lacking an ethic of appeal to evidential scruple, it focuses only on congenial instances that serve to keep contrary evidence well out of consideration; it tends to supplant measured argumentation with appeals to group solidarity; it indulges a taste for diffusely explanatory terms such as capitalism, the West, logocentrism, and patriarchy; and it takes a tone of moral absolutism toward the past and, as well, toward the commentator’s adversaries, who, instead of being chided for careless reasoning or incomplete knowledge, are typically condemned as harboring an intolerably retrograde social or political attitude.”¹⁶ To question such self-ratifying discourse is to risk being labeled a right-wing ideologue and a foe of oppressed people everywhere. Unfortunately, there is too much self-ratifying discourse in the New Americanist enterprise.

The need for secularists to tolerate and even respect religious perspectives received emphasis recently from an unexpected quarter. The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, an atheist and secularist, surprised many professors and journalists in 2004 by affirming not only the importance of religion for civilization but also the obligation of secularist thinkers to engage with religion seriously and honestly. In a series of dialogues he engaged in with Joseph Ratzinger before he became Pope Benedict XVI, he said, “For the normative self-understanding of modernity, Christianity has functioned as more than just a precursor or a catalyst. Universalistic egalitarianism, from which sprang the ideals of freedom and a collective life in solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality or conscience, human rights, and democracy, is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love.”¹⁷ Since 2001 Habermas has been announcing “the post-secular age.” His main argument is that secularism is receding before a tide of religious commitments. The question emerges as to whether secular thinkers will find the internal resources to enter into respectful dialogue with religious believers. For Habermas, the key to “communicative discourse” is the ability of the opposing parties to learn to respectfully examine viewpoints contrary to their own. The liberal state, he says, has so far required believers to “translate their

¹⁵ Ibid., 51, 52.

¹⁶ Ibid., 52.

¹⁷ Quoted in Novak, 36.

religious convictions into a secular language before their arguments have the prospect of being accepted by a majority . . . but the search for reasons that aspire to general acceptance need not lead to an unfair exclusion of religion from public life, and secular society, for its part, need not cut itself off from the important resources of spiritual explanations, if only the secular side were to retain a feeling for the articulative power of religious discourse.”¹⁸

Habermas makes sense in pointing out that after September 11, 2001 secular and religious people in the West need one another if they are to create a sustainable humanistic culture. And his arguments have pertinent application for American studies. How many secular New Americanists can muster the intellectual and moral strength not only to tolerate but also respect and enter into the viewpoints of believers? As the sociologist Philip Rieff warns in *My Life Among the Deathworks*, “Where nothing is sacred, there is nothing.”¹⁹ Whether or not Habermas is right about a post-secularist age, students need an understanding of the religious perspectives revealed in American literature for the enrichment of their lives and for their ability to cope with a world of growing religious tensions.

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¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Quoted in R. R. Reno, “The End of Criticism,” *Intercollegiate Review* 42.1 (2007): 46.