

THE OXFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF  
AMERICAN  
LITERATURE

*Jay Parini*

*Editor in Chief*



Volume 1

ACADEMIC NOVELS—THE ESSAY IN AMERICA

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2003

# OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford New York

Auckland Bangkok Buenos Aires Cape Town Chennai  
Dar es Salaam Delhi Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi Kolkata  
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Mumbai Nairobi  
São Paulo Shanghai Taipei Tokyo Toronto

Copyright © 2003 by Oxford University Press, Inc.

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.

198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

<http://www.oup-usa.org>

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,  
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise,  
without the prior written permission of Oxford University Press.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Encyclopedia of American Literature / Jay Parini, editor-in-chief.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-19-516724-4 (v. 1: alk. paper)

ISBN 0-19-516725-2 (v. 2: alk. paper)

ISBN 0-19-516726-0 (v. 3: alk. paper)

ISBN 0-19-516727-9 (v. 4: alk. paper)

1. American literature—Encyclopedias. I. Parini, Jay.

PS21 .E537 2003

810'.3—dc21

2002156325

Printing number: 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America

on acid-free paper

# CONTENTS

List of Articles ix

Preface xiii

Topical Outline of Articles xvii

## THE OXFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

Topical Outline of Articles vol. 4, 547

Directory of Contributors vol. 4, 551

Index vol. 4, 557

# PREFACE

by Jay Parini



**T**he *Oxford Encyclopedia of American Literature* represents an attempt, necessarily limited by space, to provide a comprehensive discussion of literary practices within the United States from colonial times to the present. It includes discussions of individual authors, notable texts, and literary movements, institutions, and—for lack of a better term—aggregations (such as the academic novel or the production of “little magazines”). The term “encyclopedia” itself, while old-fashioned in its resonances, has some meaning here, in the most literal sense: this project might be considered an attempt to “walk around” the subject, encircling authors and texts, literary developments, ideas, programs, themes. This walk has been taken by an array of critics, many of them well-known scholars, without much in the way of restraining orders. My only charge, as editor, was that each critic write for the so-called general reader, a term that includes high school and university students, as well as the sort of person who might visit a public library on evening after work to find out about someone or something connected to American literature.

Anyone looking for a consistent theoretical approach to the subjects at hand will be disappointed, since no effort was made to enforce a particular theoretical method, critical approach, or ideological strain, apart from a general openness to multicultural dimensions and feminist theory. (The sheer number of articles devoted to, say, African American or feminist topics will be obvious at a glance.) Jargon, as such, has been discouraged, and the writers of these articles—some very lengthy, some relatively short—have been steered away from excessive theorizing, although theory itself is the subject of one detailed essay, and many aspects or branches of literary theory and criticism are treated separately. It would be fair to say that many, if not most, of the articles in these pages reflect a serious attempt on the part of the writers to grapple with the subject before them in the context of recent theory and literary practice. In this sense, the articles included meet a high professional standard while remaining accessible to general readers.

Attempts to encircle, or represent, the subject of American literature on a broad scale have been relatively few and far between. Several historians of literature in the nineteenth century approached the subject with distinction, such as Moses Coit Tyler, who published in 1878 a two-volume *History of American Literature* (1878), which focused on the years 1606–1765, regarding American literature as a “noble and distinctive branch” of English literature. Another excellent critic was Charles F. Richardson, who in *American Literature: 1607–1885* (1896) wrote: “No critical task is more difficult and delicate than that of estimating the rank and analyzing the achievements of American authors.” With palpable displeasure he noted that Victor Hugo had declared Poe “the prince of American writers” while saying he had never even heard of Emerson. Richardson also viewed American literature as a local branch of English literature and described his project as an effort to comprehend and describe “the Saxon mind in America.” His two-volume study remains valuable and fascinating. Perhaps the most visible project of the era was *Appleton’s Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, edited by James Grant Wilson and John Fiske in six volumes between 1887 and 1889. For decades, this remained the standard history of American literature, taking a strongly biographical and belletristic approach.

In the twentieth century, a number of historical surveys of American literature were published by individual scholars or groups of scholars. Among the major publications of this type were Walter C. Bronson’s lucid and meticulous *Short History of American Literature* (1900) and Isaac Woodbridge Riley’s *American Thought: From Puritanism to Pragmatism and Beyond* (1915). The latter was an especially useful study that weighed the influence of European—as opposed to English—thought on American writers and thinkers. Riley was especially interested in American authors who had managed to digest the great German authors, such as Goethe and Schiller, remaking an American tradition from these influences as well as the more obvious British sources.

The first modern, cooperative study of American literature was the *Cambridge History of American Literature* (1917–1921), which remains readable to this day. One might well trace the beginnings of the multicultural approach currently secure within the academy to this impressive effort to include many voices, American and Canadian, and to attempt to avoid what the editors called “the temptation of national pride.” There was a chapter on Native American writing and other chapters on American literary work written in languages other than English, such as Yiddish. The Continental origins of American movements such as transcendentalism were traced with considerable energy and vision to European sources. This work was comprehensive and remarkably lucid and in many ways provided a model of sorts for this enterprise, although we have stepped away from a strict historical approach in presenting this material in a nonchronological fashion, allowing the alphabet, with its arbitrary sequencing, to govern the shape of the whole.

A few well-known and ambitious surveys of American thought and literature were published during the middle decades of the twentieth century, ranging from Vernon Louis Parrington’s *Main Currents in American Thought* (1927) to Robert Spiller’s *Literary History of the United States* (1948). Each of these attempted to “place” American literature within the context of British and European culture, showing how American authors had transmogrified their sources, made something new from something old, giving a national inflection to their writing and thus helping to shape American national identities. There was also a fresh sense that American literature was not simply a passive receptor of Old World energies but that American writers and writing had begun to influence European writing, as the widespread impact of Emerson, Poe, and Cooper on European literature exemplifies.

More recent attempts to assemble comprehensive histories of American literature include Emory Elliott’s excellent one-volume *Columbia History of American Literature* (1988) and Sacvan Bercovitch’s *Cambridge History of American Literature* (1994–). These volumes, written by many hands, reflected earnest attempts to encompass the pluralist nature of American writing, exploring literary texts as a reflection of the tensions and disruptions that are part of any living culture, but especially one as complex and heterogeneous as that which has arisen within the geographical and spiritual boundaries of the United States. Both Elliott and Bercovitch tended to bring forward and emphasize the immense cultural diversity of American literature, giving weight to multicultural and

feminist texts in particular. If anything, I have taken my cue from these first-rate studies, although my aim is more directly focused on the general reader than were these “histories,” which made no attempt to provide the sort of basic information and “coverage”—a dreadful but useful term—that one will find in these pages.

Critics of these recent historical surveys have been suspicious of attempts merely to gather discordant, even dissenting, voices into an imaginary tent of some kind—the liberal nation-state itself—that totalizes and somehow undermines the bite and fierce independence of voices coming from the margins. This tendency inevitably will exist in anything resembling an encyclopedia, with its heavily Enlightenment accent, its aspirations to comprehensiveness. I’m hoping that, by the variety of critical voices present here, representing a considerable range of approaches to literary studies and textual interpretations, something fresh will be made available. These volumes do contain a lot of old-fashioned “close readings,” and no apologies need be offered for this. These articles, on works ranging from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Great Gatsby* to *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Beloved*, should prove useful to students in particular. But interested readers will also find speculative essays here in which critics explore the multicultural dynamics of African American, Native American, Hispanic, Asian American (including Filipino), Italian American, and Jewish American as well as gay and lesbian writing.

In keeping with the encyclopedic tradition, we have included a lot of facts in these articles. Readers will find reliable surveys of the lives and works of most well-known American authors from Ann Bradstreet through the usual suspects, such as Longfellow, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Dickinson, Hawthorne, and Melville: the great procession, which still continues. To a degree, the canonical authors—Whitman, Dickinson, and so forth—have been given more space in this project than lesser-known authors. It goes without saying that many readers will (quite rightly) question whether So-and-So was given too much or too little space. Certainly the “major” authors have all been thoroughly examined in essays by leading scholars. Their writing lives are presented, with bibliographies of primary works and selected secondary works that include brief commentaries on those critical and biographical texts.

The most difficult part of this project involved deciding on which lesser-known or contemporary authors to include and which to exclude. In any work of this kind, exclusion is necessary. This is true of any text

## PREFACE

not randomly produced. I would hope that the *Oxford Encyclopedia* offers many pleasant surprises for readers, treating authors and texts and subjects not often discussed in projects such as this one. As for the contemporary authors included, I will only say that every effort was made to include subjects who might interest high school and college students as well as the general reader. Certain texts receive separate analytical essays simply because they have proven popular in the classroom in recent years. We make no apologies for the fact that this encyclopedia can (and will) be historicized, and that it reflects current tastes and prejudices. All literary histories suffer from this limitation. (There will be supplements in due course, taking up authors and texts and literary movements that have been excluded in the original four volumes for one reason or another.)

Many of the “topic” essays, such as those on Puritanism or naturalism or nature writing, include references to authors who are treated elsewhere in greater detail. Readers should consult the index entry on a given author or work to see where these are discussed and in what context. There is also a good deal of cross-referencing, designed to help readers find out where they can find out more about a given subject. Readers will also discover that many authors and texts are discussed in various articles in different ways, and this is intentional. In the case of masterworks, such as *Moby-Dick* or *The Great Gatsby*, readers may wish first to consult the longer essay on the authors, Melville or Fitzgerald, where brief discussions of the major text are offered; the longer essays on individual works are supplementary, allowing the critic room to explore a text in a closer way.

Readers will find articles on ethnic literature (Jewish, Italian-American, and so forth), on movements (transcendentalism, the Black Arts Movement, the Beats, or the Black Mountain school), on city-specific movements (the Harlem Renaissance, the Chicago school), on broad themes (the literature of war or the academic novel), or on specific genres (the slave narrative or the long poem). Major literary figures in all these periods, movements, or genres are given a separate article, so that while Henry David Thoreau is discussed as part of the transcendental movement, there is also a longer article on his life and work and, indeed, a separate essay on *Walden* itself. In this way, a reader interested in the movement as it relates to Thoreau will have both a broad context for understanding his work and an opportunity to look closely at a given text.

Embracing four centuries of writing, mostly in English, the *Encyclopedia of American Literature* should prove valuable to researchers at many levels of inquiry and stimulating for readers who simply want to find out about a particular author or text, movement or period. If anything, this project testifies to the astonishing diversity and range of writing—poems, novels, plays, journals, letters, memoirs, criticism, history—subsumed under the heading of “literature” within these national borders. What the term “American” means is open to interpretation, a term that specifies a geographical space, to be sure, but something much less definable as well: a patchwork of individual and group desires, a vision, a power play, a palimpsest of constructions, represented by a wild and vivid assortment of texts produced in time, and thus governed by limits which have, in many instances, proved affirming.