

General Introduction to the Chinese Translation of
The Cambridge History of American Literature

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It is a great privilege to bring the history of American literature to a Chinese readership—a privilege that marks a dramatic meeting of cultures. The American literary tradition is perhaps the youngest in the world; Chinese literature one of the oldest. And yet American literature is senior in one respect: it is the outgrowth of the first nation born of the modern world. Of course, the Amerindians (or Native Americans) occupied the territory of what is now the United States for thousands of years before the European settlers arrived, but they had an oral, not a written, literature. The American literary tradition as we now understand it is essentially the product of Anglophone writers. It begins in the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century with the narratives, sermons, diaries, and poems of English colonists who were harbingers of a new proto-capitalist way of life; it flowered in the nineteenth century with the transatlantic triumph of industrial capitalism; and it persists in our time as the literature of the major nation of the liberal, free enterprise, open market West.

The result is a far more unified body of writing than the ancient, many-faceted, enormously variegated literature of China; it is also the world's oldest and most complex national expression of the conditions of modernity. It is a literature of individualism and enterprise, of expansion and exploration, of race conflict and imperial conquest, of mass migrations and ethnic tensions, of bourgeois domesticity and constant struggle between personal freedom and social constraint. The writings move from issues of nature and “natural man” to problems of alienation, discrimination, urbanization, and sectional and racial violence. They are inspired by ideals of a democratic aesthetic (in opposition to the perceived elitism of Europe (the “Old World”)—an aesthetic of “common people ” and “ordinary affairs”—and they are remarkable for a sustained critique (often rising to denunciation) of the excesses of a culture built on slavery, land expropriation, and capitalist greed. Finally, it is a literature distinguished throughout by a troubled double focus on identity: on the one hand, an attempt to forge a redemptive myth of “America” as the land of the future, “the country of tomorrow,” and, on the other hand, a tortuous, self-lacerating anxiety about what it means to be “American.”

For Chinese writers, the concept of China is a matter of ancient history—of millennia-old myths, legends, and events. American writers are obsessed with the profoundly modernist problem of creating one's identity anew.

There have been several histories of American literature, dating back to the early nineteenth century, but only three large-scale Histories. In effect, these Histories chart the country's coming-of-age. The first was published during World War I, in 1917, when the United States was first asserting its international presence; the second appeared in 1948, shortly after the end of World War II, when American economic as well as military power was fully displayed. Our History is the product of the late-twentieth century, the era of globalization, when the very meaning of nationalism has been called into question, and when, in the United States, there is a new, *critical* consciousness of the fundamental terms of cultural cohesion.

This new consciousness has taken two forms, historical and intellectual. During the past three decades, scholars have uncovered various repressed or neglected aspects of the national past. We have become aware of the importance of the writing of women and ethnic minorities, of literatures by non-Anglophone emigrants, of the centrality of African-American culture, of the contributions of "regional" and marginal writers. We have also become aware of the way that certain catch-all concepts—including concepts of "the American" and of "literary classic"—have served to conceal as much as reveal the realities of America's becoming. In intellectual terms, the new consciousness I speak of involves the breakdown of a central literary-critical authority. These past three or four decades have witnessed the flowering of a number of contending schools of theory and criticism: deconstruction, feminism, "queer theory," neomarxism, reader-response theory, new historicism, multiculturalism, and others. This eight-volume History is the first large-scale effort to represent a time of *dissensus*, rather than a particular orthodoxy. Our intention is not to provide the story of American literature for all time, once and for all; we do not pretend to have found the key to the development of our national literary traditions. Rather, this History represents the special outlook (a pluralist, sometimes contradictory, often volatile outlook) of a certain generation of Americanists, one that has radically expanded and redefined the boundaries of the field.

Accordingly, this History has a format different from its predecessors. I discuss this difference in some detail in my General Introduction. For present purposes I would like to stress two points. The first pertains to the question of dissensus. Earlier Histories built on either common basic assumptions about literature, history, and the relation between them (that is, on a literary-historical consensus shared by all the contributors) or else on some grand view set out by a single “master literary historian.” Neither of these options was available to us. Our History, as I’ve suggested, reflects a variety of methods and approaches, some of these mutually contradictory, each of them representing an important constituency in current literary studies.

My second point pertains to *narrativity*. This History is intended to literary-historical narratives. Hence the the unusual (monograph) length of each section of our History. All previous collaborative Histories solicited relatively short contributions from experts on the subject: 15 pages on the Southern novelist William Faulkner, 5 pages on the Puritan poet Anne Bradstreet, 30 pages on the prose of the Eighteenth-Century Enlightenment. The editors then proceeded to weave all this into a harmonious unity. Our case was just the reverse. Each contributor required adequate space to explain his or her special approach, his or her particular narrative of the literature in question. It was not enough just to “cover the ground” (texts, movements, genres, etc.); we had to allow for the development of different voices, each of them expert and yet skeptical about the claims of final authority. In place, therefore, of a long series of authoritative proclamations, we offer, in each volume, a group of disparate-but-related narratives, which together constitute a coherent *dialogic narrative* of the period—an open-ended narrative in which the variety of the parts contributes to the depth and scope of the whole. One might call it (after William James) “varieties of American literary history.”

This is the most comprehensive History of American literature ever undertaken. It is also the most challenging. Readers will find themselves in dialogue with a diversity of major Americanists and at the same time they will be provided with the richest accounts available of the diverse subjects under discussion. We hope that, from both perspectives, Chinese students will not only profit from their reading but feel provoked by it to think in new ways about American literature, and about literary study in general.