

## REVIEW

*A new literary history of America*. Greil Marcus – Werner Sollors (eds.). Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009. Pp. 1128.

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*A new literary history of America* is a fascinating and outrageous project. It is a perfectly post-modern literary history, one that does not even try to aim at completeness or coherence. Hence, among the authors of its individual chapters the reader will find American as well as European university professors along with poets, writers or artists; and among its contents works of literature along with documents, folk songs, entries on Alcoholics Anonymous, pornographic industry, or Mickey Mouse. The book is framed by two specific dates: 1507, when the name “America” appeared on the map, and November 4, 2008, when Barack Obama was elected president. It is within this timeline that particular works of literature are situated, but always with the accompanying historical context. The Puritans classically come together with the city upon a hill and witchcraft trials, though *Absalom, Absalom!* is clustered with *Gone with the wind*, which is far less conventional, if historically justified. This eclecticism proves that the distinction between high-brow and low-brow culture is long gone, and that literature cannot be separated from cultural or historical events at large. Most importantly, there is no one unified narrative called “the history of American literature”, but rather a kaleidoscope of fragmentary data that can be gathered and mixed together in order to create a patchwork that may say something about America’s culture.

The essays composing the book are put in a chronological order, as the word “history” suggests, but no other divisions are present: no thematic blocks of literature versus history, no periodization as such. A reader who wants to study a chapter dedicated to a particular author to get some general knowledge about his/her works will be rather disappointed. The essays are fragmentary as they focus on chosen aspects of their subject matter, leaving other works unaddressed. The chapter devoted to Henry David Thoreau, for example, discusses at

length “Civil disobedience” as expressing the importance of revolution in American mentality, but not *Walden*, which would have seemed an obvious choice. The essay on *The catcher in the rye* focuses on its reception and its place within American literature rather than on giving the reader some general analysis of the book. Emerson’s works are represented by “The American scholar” and “The Divinity School address” rather than by “Nature” or “Self-reliance”, which shows him as a philosopher who, in the words of Herwig Firedl, “begins to undermine traditional assumptions, axioms, and principles of Western cultures” (p. 245), thus making room for uniquely American thought.

The reason for this subjectivity and fragmentariness is that Marcus and Sollors’s *A new literary history* is not a history of the literature created *in* America, as of the literature that *has created* America. It is not a faithful rendition of the American literary tradition (if such a thing is at all possible), but a diagnosis of the United States today, and what of the American cultural past matters for a present understanding of the country. As the editors put it: “This book is a reexamination of the American experience as seen through a literary glass, where what is at issue is speech, in many forms” (p. xxiv). While in traditional literary histories the focus is on literature with a more or less defined historical background, in Marcus and Sollors’s both literature and its context seem to be treated on equal terms. This results rather in an encyclopedia of America than a history of its literary heritage per se.

*A new literary history of America* does not focus even on the history of ideas: the point of departure is not America’s European philosophical and literary legacy, as in some earlier projects of this kind, for instance in Robert Spiller’s *Literary history of the United States* or *The Columbia literary history of the United States* edited by Emory Elliott. Marcus and Sollors’s book starts with the conquest of the New World, which reveals that their perspective is historical and rather political. Why then “literary”? After all, if an author decides to write a “literary history” instead of “cultural history”, it would suggest he/she does believe in the concept of literature as distinct from other forms of culture and *noblesse oblige*. Marcus and Sollors’s introduction does not explain why this particular designation has been chosen for a book that deals with literature in no more than 50 percent of its content, so it is not clear if behind this project there is any specific ideology: for example, an attempt to deconstruct the term “literature”. It seems rather that the title was intended either to tease the reader by playing with his/her expectations, or that the editors wanted to appropriate the glamour of the “literary” as opposed to the more watery “cultural” – simply to be taken more seriously. Their understanding of literariness is “not only what is written but also what is voiced, what is expressed, what is invented, in whatever form” (p. xxiv). However, even though the idea of the volume under review is interesting and original, the title induces more confusion

than discussion. The linear arrangement of the essays, without subdividing them into periods or thematic groups may not be very practical, especially for a reader who wishes to treat the book as a history of American culture. Nevertheless, this very arrangement as well as the range of covered subjects and the variety of authors invited to contribute to the volume do communicate the editors' idea of America as a non-hierarchical melting pot.