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AMERICAN AUTHORS AND THEIR CRITICS

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN FISHER IV

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- William J. Scheik. ed. *Critical Essays on Jonathan Edwards*.
Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1980. xxv, 310 pp. \$25.00.
- Jayne K. Kribbs. ed. *Critical Essays on John Greenleaf Whittier*.
Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1980. xl, 228 pp. \$22.50.
- Joel Myerson. ed. *Critical Essays on Margaret Fuller*.
Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1980. xvi, 289 pp. \$18.50.
- Elizabeth Ammons. ed. *Critical Essays on Harriet Beecher Stowe*.
Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1980. xviii, 307 pp. \$18.50.
- Arlin Turner. ed. *Critical Essays on George Washington Cable*.
Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1980. xxviii, 251 pp. \$25.00.
- Don Graham. ed. *Critical Essays on Frank Norris*.
Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1980. li, 231 pp. \$25.00.
- James J. Martine. ed. *Critical Essays on Arthur Miller*.
Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1980. xxii, 217 pp. \$25.00.
- Stanley Trachtenberg. ed. *Critical Essays on Saul Bellow*.
Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1980. xxv, 200 pp. \$27.50.
- Joseph J. Waldmeir. ed. *Critical Essays on John Barth*.
Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1980. xi, 247 pp. \$25.00.
- Linda W. Wagner. ed. *Critical Essays on Joyce Carol Oates*.
Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1980. xxi, 180 pp. \$25.00.
- William T. Pilkington. ed. *Critical Essays on the Western American Novel*.
Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1980. xviii, 275 pp. \$25.00.

Literary researchers and students of greener years increasingly comprehend declining library funds when they search vainly for runs of periodicals — nay, for current subscriptions that may no longer be solvent. These first eleven titles in “Critical Essays on American Writers” series (under the general editorship of James Nagel, in progress from the G. K. Hall Company) ought to go far in assisting and revitalizing the cause of American literature, as well as in illuminating the reputations of individual authors who have contributed to our national letters. Spanning colonial days to recent years, their appearance will be welcomed by all with interests in American literature and in broader dimensions of our culture. In a way, the “Critical Essays” will complement, and perhaps supersede, the “Critical Heritage” series that now seems to be defunct. Certainly, with the concentration on the literary figures of a single nation, Nagel’s shelf of volumes should provide adequate coverage of major and minor writing.

“Critical Essays” parallels the Twayne series of biographies for American authors in presenting introductory materials. From these foundations, users can go on to build their own knowledge of a particular writer or, in the case of Pilkington’s volume, school of writing. Advanced students will value the conveniently collected contents as time-savers.

No rigid format is imposed upon the compilers. Each volume opens with an introductory critical survey of the subject’s reputation. Some of the makers of these books, like the late Arlin Turner, are names long familiar in the world of American literature; others are newer to the field. Turner’s comments devolve from lengthy acquaintance; the standard biography of Cable, editions, and a host of articles flowed from his pen. Graham’s overview embodies a deep knowledge of Norris demonstrated previously, and that ease with his material probably accounts for the grace throughout his screed. Reading his introduction, one wishes to go to the Norris shelf and read more. Although one is not surprised to encounter the name of Joel Myerson attached to a book about an American Transcendentalist or that of William T. Pilkington with western topics, other compilers are not so ordinarily bracketed with their subjects.

Let us now examine more closely the differing techniques. Martine, for example, interviewed Miller, and that record gives us information not found uniformly in the volumes on living authors or at least those on authors who were living when such interviews might have occurred. Usually the editor first provides contemporaneous

reviews, and then marshals lengthier, later critiques, although materials conform to no Procrustean norm. The Oates book contains a preface by Joyce Carol herself. Scheick divides his selections into "Biography," "Thought," "Lineage," and "Literary Criticism." This last category may mislead; it includes writing about, not by, Edwards. Trachtenberg separates "Reviews" from "Essays." Kribbs follows no strict chronology. Pilkington creates a section of essays establishing the nature of western novels. Martin and Waldmeir categorize essays under their subjects' individual titles. Turner proceeds chronologically. Myerson lists "Contents," then sets out pieces from contemporaneous reviews of Fuller's writings to critical comment through the early 1970's. It is refreshing to see a series wherein individual contributors are allowed freedom within reasonable limits.

Most of these collections impart a strong sense of chronology. The changing fortunes of an author's reputation come clearer through such linear progression, particularly in the Cable, Norris, Fuller, and Barth books. Such methodology is also valuable in the overview of the western novel. For writers whose work was completed before 1920, we gain a sharp profile of the increase in critical estimates and in the acumen in such analyses, Whittier, Cable, and Norris furnishing prime examples. Edwards accumulates popularity as additional interpretations of his writings appear, and so do Fuller and Stowe. If "Critical Essays" are accurate barometers, the twentieth-century authors, at least those included here (even if the interpretive essays do not bear Ruskin's "golden stain of time"), also wax in popularity and critical esteem. Such volumes *do* carry the imprint of golden wits at criticism. For instance, Martine remarks that the information on Miller also highlights only O'Neill and Williams as "serious dramatists" in American literature. Considering the dates for these playwrights' lives, such theories may initiate reassessment of American dramatists and their productions — at the expense of some who are much touted because they are younger than the three named here. Those who dismiss Cable as one more local colorist may take their lumps after perusing Turner's assemblage, wherein occurs, time and again, evidence of this literary descendant from Poe and Hawthorne. Norris, too, moves from the ranks of "sole" and "mere" Naturalist by means of Graham's book. Although Norris's stature has altered considerably during the past twenty years, Graham's placement of contents gives succinct, convenient charting of newer, changing views toward the "boy Zola."

Here it is proper to note a feature in the "Critical Essays" series that must occur to any surveyor. Most of the writers included to date remain rather "minor." Some twentieth-century names, like Bellow, will doubtless prove to be "major," although the quality of writing about them so far does not attain the excellence of that devoted to many earlier writers. Should such a series as this zero in on minor authors or should it cover mightier artists? Major or minor, those represented still figure in courses and anthologies; with the American spirit of frontier and discovery, such allowance is no doubt appropriate. Each of Melville's titles will have an individual "Critical Essays" volume, we hear, and if sales continue solid for what Nagel has already gotten into print there will be no worry about the continuance of a valuable, useful group of reference works.

A problem facing most of the compilers is the amount and substantial value of available writing about their subjects. Those concentrating on Miller, Barth, Bellow, and Oates, for example, confront far less quantity than those dealing with Edwards, Stowe, Fuller, or Cable. Just so with a topical awareness about the "western American novel"; such consciousness moves us toward popular culture. There is as yet no similarity of bulk in secondary writing about popular arts to that, say, about Faulkner, James, or Melville, so far as American writers go. For those compilers encountering sheer mass concerning their authors, burdensome decisions arise. Although Perry Miller's essay on Edwards and Emerson is a leading warhorse, it is also oft-reprinted. We may therefore find fresh the appearance of Miller's "Edwards, Locke, and the Rhetoric of Sensation," from *Errand into the Wilderness*. We might wonder at the inclusion of Leslie Stephen's screed on Edwards from *Hours in a Library*, wherein Stephen, himself a fallen-away Christian, lines up Edwards's thought with nineteenth-century pantheism. Another oddity of Scheick's *Edwards* is the omission of much material, Edwin H. Cady's essay excepted, from between the first and fifth decades of the twentieth century. Although the names of Clarence H. Faust and Theodore Hornberger appear in the introduction, it is strange to find no essay by either in the contents proper. A comparable omission is that of J. Frank Dobie from Pilkington's collection.

There are not so many surprises in the books about Fuller, Whittier, Stowe, and Cable. Joel Myerson brings out Poe, Brownson, Hedge, and Lowell from among Fuller's contemporaries; he gives space to her interesting relationships with Hawthorne and Emerson; and

he delineates her significance in German-American cross-currents—and presents good recent criticism by Urbanski, Stern, and Allen. One might object to exclusion of anything by Mason Wade, an earlier champion of Fuller's importance, but Myerson furnishes good implicit reasons for this exclusion. Akin to Myerson's methods, Waldmeir's practice is to exclude excerpts from previously published books.

Jayne Kribbs does not follow chronology as regards the secondary materials in her book, preferring to plot a chronological course for Whittier's works themselves. Although contradictory opinions are offered, for example, Griswold's perceptions of passion as opposed to J. G. Forman's view that passion was Whittier's least concern, we leave this anthology with a greater understanding of why Whittier remains behind the door of greatness in American writing. His techniques are, generally, clumsy and mechanical; his themes are abolition, history, and folklore. Most critics deplore Whittier's shift from folklore substance, in which he showed signs of greater development, to religion and social criticism. *Snowbound* alone makes for remembrance of Whittier, and the essays centering upon it are the highlights among Kribb's items. That this minor poet attracted the attention of luminaries is interesting: Parrington, Foerster, Clark, Ringe, Warren can not be ignored among circles of Americanists, nor can the name of the late Howard Mumford Jones. His statements about Whittier's suspicions of symbolism are worth remembering in this era of "getting into" reality and returning to basics. Kribbs's introduction is excellent, but other essays in her book do not convey so vital a Whittier as she does.

Elizabeth Ammons's book divides into four large sections. In the first (containing materials on the anti-slavery novels) and in the last (containing reminiscences), *Uncle Tom's Cabin* predictably receives greatest attention. The section titled "New England Matter and Novels of Manners" includes fewer essays than do the other portions treating Stowe's imaginative writing. The six essays making up part two, "The Byron Furor," disclose a side of Stowe often forgotten in modern times, but her defenses of Lady Byron against what she supposed were outrageous calumnies created sensations in her day. This volume gives a sense of Victorian critical perceptions, as does part of that on Norris.

Turner's book presents positive and negative attitudes toward Cable, second only to Lafcadio Hearn during his time in establishing simultaneously a sense of the verisimilar and the weird. Turner is

particularly skillful in ordering his materials to show the progression from the first faint notes of sourness toward Cable's portraiture of Creoles to the later outspoken hostility toward that treatment and to his view of Negroes. Considering her own wish to right what she discerned as Cable's distortions of Creole character, the lone mention of Grace Elizabeth King may strike some as strange. This is Cable's, not King's book, however, and it is a testimony to his continuing vitality and to Arlin Turner's scholarly soundness.

The *Frank Norris*, as noted earlier, reveals a many-sidedness about that writer hitherto often overlooked. Naturalistic tendencies are evident in his work, to be sure, although he might deserve an essay in Pilkington's collection, where he is mentioned as a novelist of the west. Romance, realism, domestic fiction, social criticism, narrative technique: all these, and much more, receive their due a la Norris. Indeed Graham reminds us of his subject's stature as a transitional figure, chronologically and otherwise, between Edwards and the twentieth-century writers surveyed here. The matter of chronology will cause no surprise, although the question of Norris's place in terms of myth and technique might. But, after all, there is a clear line from the imagery and allegory in Edwards through subsequent figures of the nineteenth century and on into Bellow, Oates, and Barth. Norris's comic impulse may also align him more centrally with twentieth-century satire and parody than has previously been demonstrated. Authoritative representation — that is, inclusion of established students of Norris — imparts the air of excitement to be found within Graham's book, in my estimation the best of the series to date.

The volumes on the twentieth-century writers are the shortest in the series, perhaps implying that meager amounts of criticism, or sound criticism, are available here. The Bellow collection contains twelve reviews and ten essays. Does this division reveal the state of academic, or other, writing about him? A glance at the 1979 *MLA International Bibliography* shows fifty-one items devoted to Bellow proper and nine tangential pieces. Are we to assume that the essays gathered by Trachtenberg are the best to be offered? I wonder why some of the material cited in his introduction and notes to it is not reprinted afterward. Nonetheless, we do gain a sense of Bellow's work and American literary tradition in essays like Warren's on *Augie March* and Cohen's on Bellow's treatment of sex. Questions about balance arise as well. A reader expects secondary items from the 1940's as samples of Bellow's early reputation. Instead, most of the

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contents date from the 1970's. Three critiques were specially prepared for this volume (by Fuchs, Rodrigues, and Stevick); another is an interview with Bellow, a feature aligning Trachtenberg's book with Martine's. Although the first three items were penned by distinguished scholar-critics, and the fourth attains value because it provides information from the horse's mouth, the distribution suggests that there is no great body of consequent criticism about Bellow.

The Miller book also reveals that much of what has been published on his work does not meet high critical standards. With the 252 pages of John Ferre's *Arthur Miller: A Reference Guide* (1979) to place in near proximity to the 217 of Martine's work, we wonder again whether reviewers have been more acute than others in considering the playwright. I am reminded of a link between Martine's gathering and that by Oscar Cargill and others, *O'Neill and His Plays — Four Decades of Criticism* (1961), where reviews furnish an ample portion of selections. Here I observe on format: why did not Daniel Walden's essay, which could introduce admirably an anthology of Miller's plays, not come nearer the front of Martine's book — where it would give uninitiates a handy run-through for Miller's life and early work? I ask with no intention of diminishing the excellence of Martine's own introduction, one of the best among those in the "Critical Essays."

Looking briefly at the series entire to date, we notice that fiction seems to be in the lead. Whittier is the sole poet qua poet, Edwards and Fuller the only essayists, and Miller the single dramatist. True, during much of America's literary history, *pace* the shades of Montrose J. Moses and Arthur Hobson Quinn, drama has been no shining generic light. Potentially significant, nonetheless, is Miller's appearing among the initial artists in the "Critical Essays" series. Maybe Martine's book and any future titles on American dramatists will spur reevaluation of our national playwrights individually and of native drama in general. One such topic within the large framework which, so far as I am aware, no one has assessed (although it cries out for study), is American Gothic Drama. Even students of that pioneer Gothicism of the boards, William Dunlap, have shied from his plays in the supernatural or horrific vein — a carry-over, doubtless, from Quinn's *History of American Drama* wherein the Gothic is passed over in favor of nationalistic themes — and that aversion despite Dunlap's enthusiasm for Kotzebue. Among individual playwrights ripe for treatment from the Gothic angle, O'Neill stands out.

We need not move far in approaching Oates, whose verse and

plays give way to her fiction. She is far from Edwards and his notions of order, though, in her depictions of fear and violence. She commented perceptively about these matters in *The Edge of Impossibility: Tragic Forms in Literature* (1972). Oates is a personage of the 1960's and 1970's, her writing as yet not finished, and these essays provide as much of a survey of recent literary currents as they give insights about Oates herself. She has attracted some outstanding critics — Kazin, Friedman, and DeMott among them (one wonders why Helen Vendler is not represented since her name appears prominently in the introduction, index, and selections) — and their attitudes by no means afford us a consensus.

Like the Miller volume, this one on Oates features more reviews than essays of length, an interesting apportioning because of the fifteen entries under "Oates" in the 1979 *MLA International Bibliography* five are essays first published in Wagner's book, as is the section from the Twayne Series volume by Joanne Creighton. Somewhat misleading is the placement of Irving Malin's "Possessive Material" among reviews. Altogether, one might well suppose that the current state of Oates criticism is uncertain. If not, why are so many of the items in Wagner's collection new?

Waldmeir's harvest of Barth material also draws many reviews into the barn. Curiously, perhaps, I was reminded of Kribbs's book on Whittier as I proceeded through Waldmeir's chronological-by-title format. Furthermore, the wealth of comment about Barth's playfulness and deft handling otherwise in matters of language recalls J. R. Lowell's remarks about Whittier's handling of words and customs in his review of *Snowbound*. In such an unlikely pair we detect a continuity within our national letters!

With Pilkington's book on western American fiction we come full circle, insofar as "Critical Essays" represents American literary tradition. The Puritan conception of the American wilderness as symbolic of dark forces is mirrored in such western fiction as that by Larry McMurry, although there is decidedly more blatant sexuality in his output. The East and West meet more than once in Pilkington's pages, be those hostile meetings, as exemplified in Barrett Wendell's dismissal of the West for not having attained high seriousness in its culture, or positive meetings, implied by the overall contents. All of the ideals and hopes, as well as the grotesqueries and nightmares, of the American tradition are embodied within the borders of the western American literary milieu examined by Pilkington and his contributors.

Many users of this book will register surprise when they realize just how far from dime-store sleaziness western novels can go.

To conclude. If the titles reviewed here represent the work going into the "Critical Essays," let us have more of them. Apart from diminishing bibliographical lacunae in libraries, the series makes us think about other aspects of American literature. First, although fifty and more years have passed since Jay B. Hubbell and Duke University launched *American Literature*, there is evidently still uncertainty over just who does read an American book, if the volumes in the Hall gallery are representative. There is no reason to suppose that they are not, even with variations noted here, or that forthcoming titles will depart widely from the overall quality established by these first eleven. With a large body of secondary sources now convenient for the study of our native literary art — as there was not in the early days of Jay B. Hubbell, Killis Campbell, W. B. Cairns, Thomas Ollive Mabbott, and Gregory Paine — that very corpus serves just as often as a reminder of what remains to be done as it does to tell us what has been accomplished. Although certain selections within the "Critical Essays" are now quite old, such writing continues to stimulate additional research and publication. For the avid scholar in remote libraries, these volumes will facilitate researches that could otherwise easily occupy much time. Second, these books are convenient bellwethers for the state of their subjects' reputations, and they make readily accessible bibliographical survey information supplementary to titles like *Eight American Authors*, *Fifteen American Authors before 1900*, or the continuing *ALS* annuals. All this and much more for a reasonable price, considering today's book trade.

The "Critical Essays" volumes might gain value, and sales, if a brief list of worthwhile readings not numbered among the selections within were appended. Thus undergraduates, for example, could continue beyond the covers of which book they consult, without the lengthy poring over another bibliographical compilation. Annotating such checklists would also add usefulness. Meanwhile, these eleven titles are respectable guides toward the future. If the laborers in Professor Nagel's vineyards continue vigorous, the services to American literature, to academic communities, and to general libraries will be inestimable. In an age of "instant," "quick," and "convenience" products, the "Critical Essays on American Writers" offer us far more than a grease-burger could.