Russ Castronovo, ed.

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE

Reviewed by Randall Fuller

Lately I have been remembering the excitement I felt as a graduate student when a rapid succession of dazzling and polemical New Americanist work made literary scholarship and American Studies seem suddenly, urgently vital. At the core of that excitement was the prefix "re-," a promissory word that suggested the entire corpus of American Studies was up for grabs, subject to change, to radical re-thinking. The American Renaissance, for instance, was to be "reconsidered." American literary history was to be revised, revaluated, reimagined, reconceptualized, remade, and perhaps revolutionized. All of this was animated by a desire to unmask social narratives, to critique ideology, to lay bare oppressive power structures--and for these reasons the work of the New Americanists was hotly debated and simultaneously emulated, providing foundational touchstones and potent points of view to my generation of scholars.

This legacy is especially evident in the present book. Like other Oxford handbooks, this one features a roster of emerging and distinguished scholars from a broad range of theoretical and methodological perspectives. Unlike the recent Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism (2010), however, this collection highlights methodology--how we read nineteenth-century American writing. The twenty-three essays gathered here cover a wide range of topics, authors, and works examined from a diverse and often discordant variety of perspectives that include animal studies,
periodical studies, disability studies, cognitive neuroscience, chaos theory, and environmental criticism—to name only a few. Taken as a whole, the volume exemplifies nineteenth-century American literary studies as it is practiced in the present moment.

That moment, it turns out, is rife with productive and often contradictory crosscurrents. There is a compelling disagreement, for instance, over what is arguably still the dominant trend in American literary studies: its reframing within a transnational context. One of the movement's chief expositors, Paul Giles, begins the volume by reading Washington Irving as an early transatlantic American author of "'Globular' Narratives," arguing that Irving has been "short-changed by the nationalist assumptions that came to regard the embodiment of U.S. cultural identity as a natural good in itself" (24). But in her essay on Toni Morrison, Anna Brickhouse offers a nuanced critique of Giles' methodology: "transatlantic models of literary history," she contends, "have enabled a concomitant literary history of hemispheric disavowal" (148). Likewise critical is Jared Hickman's "On the Redundancy of 'Transnational American Studies.'"

One of the Handbook's great strengths, then, is its presentation of a field that remains methodologically messy, discordant, and at times brilliantly creative: arguably a byproduct of the New Americanists' project to dismantle the consensus approach to American literary history that characterized the field during the middle of the twentieth century. Less salutary is the way in which the New Americanists' dominant mode of analysis—its critique of ideology—continues to steer interpretations toward familiar and predictable results. If, as John Dawes notes, "one of the primary pleasures of criticism" for the New Americanists "was the pleasure of unmasking, of revealing the lie" (358), that pleasure has grown formulaic. Worse, it has often come to promote modes of
investigation that determine their findings in advance. A handful of the essays in this collection subsume interpretive insight in fairly standard recapitulations of colonial violence, political oppression, and the invidious treatment of racial and ethnic others. No one would deny the significance of these historical realities, nor their complex role and presence in the literary culture of the nineteenth century. But nearly four decades after the critique of ideology became the signature approach to American literary studies, the effect of such readings can be interpretive exhaustion, a sense that the same story is being told over and over.

In Colleen Glenney Boggs' compelling look at liberal subjectivity and animal rights, for instance, we are told near the conclusion that "in the hands of a writer such as Emily Dickinson, the relationship to animals [in this case, her dog Carlo] also provides modes for resisting social order and imagining alternative subjectivities" (203). Boggs' use of animal studies to trace out the emergence of liberal subjectivity is one of the bravura performances of the collection. But one might legitimately ask how far Emily Dickinson may still be profitably read through the lens of "resisting social order," whether such resistance is effectively made through manuscript poetry, and whether other, more compelling, and less predictable inferences might be drawn from her texts.

At its most interesting, the Handbook reveals a group of critics grappling mightily with the ambiguous inheritance of the New Americanists. Although that inheritance includes a conviction that culture is saturated by power and therefore always susceptible to containment, many contributors seem unwilling to adopt this notion entirely. In her essay on American literature and philosophy, for instance, Elizabeth Duquette admits that while the benefits of ideological critique "have been undeniable and far-reaching, there
have also been consequences, most surely unintended, associated with the assumption that a text's manifest content. . . is less important to its meaning than material pressures or latent political traces" (347). Or as Anna Brickhouse notes in the above-mentioned chapter on Toni Morrison, if "we. . .step away from this mode of reading the text suspiciously, against its grain, we may discover that it embeds its own theorization of an interpretive mode" (152).

One result of the effort to escape the totalizing pressures of what Dawes calls "unmasking studies" is that many contributors accord more agency to American authors than New Americanists have typically granted them. Nineteenth-century American writers are no longer considered captives of ideology or as socially-constructed automatons, but rather critical agents: sophisticated, intentional, and biting in their critique of the dominant culture. In Robert Levine's account of race and empire in *The Deerslayer*, for instance, the much-maligned Cooper is a far more savvy writer than has generally been assumed. Likewise, Boggs' Emily Dickinson, Susan Gilman's Helen Hunt Jackson, and Giles' Washington Irving are all said to deploy the "instability and duplicity of . . .rhetoric" (17) to advance a "general skepticism about the efficacy of national [and other] narratives" (12).

As the above sentence suggests, much of the work in this volume foregrounds the generative, creative force of literary writing. While John Ernest calls for a "new understanding of aesthetics" (40) in African-American literature, an approach that highlights the "limitations of the ideal forms," Nancy Bentley stresses the power of fictional techniques, claiming the novel "opens a different order of signification" (102) that remains "untouched by public power or even paternal rule" (105). And Travis M.
Foster argues for "closer reading," a technique that takes into account the "strong identification between reader and character," the "affective investment that current disciplinary norms position against close reading along a critical-uncritical axis" (297).

Ultimately, this handbook presents a complex and rumbustious field that is still up for grabs, still marked by healthy suspicion of consensus, still anxious to try out new approaches. If that means there is little unity or agreement about what constitutes content, methodology, or interpretation in American literary studies, it also means that this book is particularly well suited for readers--especially graduate students--seeking an overview of this always-protean field. Collectively the volume's contributors suggest that nineteenth-century authors (as well as contemporary critics) are neither cultural automatons nor fully autonomous egos, that just as history impinges upon the individual's consciousness, so too does that consciousness shape and transform history: not only the riverine flow of canonical literary tradition with its snags and sandbars of "schools" and movements, but the selective remembering, interpretation, and reinterpretation of the past that constitutes our larger cultural history.

At their best, these essays show why their interpretive methodologies matter--now and in the future. In so doing, they suggest the excitement and energy that might accompany a newer Americanist dispensation.

Randall Fuller, Chapman Professor of English at the University of Tulsa, is the author of *From Battlefields Rising: How The Civil War Transformed American Literature* (Oxford, 2010), winner of the Christian Gauss Award for 2011.