# *Canons by Consensus: Critical Trends and American Literary Anthologies* (review)


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Studies in American Fiction, Volume 33, Number 1, Spring 2005, pp. 124-126 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
*DOI:* *https://doi.org/10.1353/saf.2005.0012*

one quantify or qualify anxiety when it appears everywhere in the historical record or, to put it differently, what makes one set of (inter)textual relations more anxious than another? Similarly, readers expecting the traditional authorial exercise of thesis, argument, and linear demonstration may become frustrated with the frequent jumps in Samuels' exposition and her deferral of any conclusive judgments. She cautions that "interpretive work that crosses even the supposedly simpler disciplinary formations of history and literature must keep terms in productive suspension, tracing the abstractions of desire and power through layers of possibility" (23).

Such deferrals have their ethical as well as epistemological rationales in *Facing America*, however, and these are perhaps most appropriate when Samuels engages the poignant photographic record of the Civil War. As she notes, photography became a popular medium for mapping, controlling, and memorializing the human body precisely at a time when new technologies of warfare were being mobilized to destroy it. Troops of photographers followed soldiers from battle to battle, for example, to make *cartes de visite* for nervous combatants to mail home (71). In "The Face of the Nation," the centerpiece of the book, Samuels explores the rhetorical crossing of photography, violence, and mourning in Whitman's poetic catalogs and elegies, medical photographs of (often naked) soldiers displaying their scars or missing limbs, and the posed photographs of Civil War dead created by Alexander Gardner, an employee of Matthew Brady and a prolific wartime photographer in his own right. What emerges from these juxtapositions is an "erotics of national trauma" in which ways of viewing the human body both produce the interiority we now associate with individuality and reduce the individual to a representative type or instantiation—a face—of the nation (80). Especially here, Samuels' inquiry would benefit from the voices and first-person perspectives of Civil War soldiers themselves, such as those James McPherson provides in his analysis of Civil War letters and diaries, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (1997). Too idiosyncratic to become a standard account of the era's iconography or literature, *Facing America* nevertheless offers an intriguing look at the ideological contradictions and personal costs that informed what Lincoln called, in his First Inaugural, the nation's "mystic chords of memory."

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Csicsila, Joseph T. *Canons by Consensus: Critical Trends and American Literary Anthologies.* Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 2004. 288 pp. Cloth: $38.50.

In 1847, the first two anthologies of American literature appeared, and the acrimony that ensued made clear that strong emotions attach to

the question of what constitutes an appropriate canon of American literature. The Ducykinck brothers *Cyclopedia of American Literature* reflected the editors' Democratic Party allegiances; it was capacious and ambitious, manifest in its literary destiny. It included writers from every region of the country, including the western frontier and the South. Rufus Griswold's *Poets and Poetry of America* reflected the editor's Boston Whig cultural background. New Englanders dominated; no westerners were included. Literature of merit embodied Whig, not Democratic, values in Griswold's eyes. The Ducykincks and Griswold exchanged harsh reviews of each other, and the fact that neither side "won" is suggested by the durability of the debate between merit and inclusiveness. It still shapes discussions of American literature anthologies.

Joseph Csicsila's excellent *Canons by Consensus* takes up the story a few decades later, after the teaching of American literature had become established in the academy and after the Modern Language Association had been founded (1883). Displaying a gift for accessible synopsis, Csicsila quickly summarizes the sorting points that distinguish the major phases of anthology creation down to the present before taking up specific writers and their fates. Literary historiography shaped the first phase and the major anthology of that era, *The Cambridge History of American Literature* (1917–21). It quickly became clear, however, that one effect of putting an anthology before the public is to generate reflection on what might constitute alternatives. The New Humanists like Paul Elmer More were more interested in "literary craftmanship and formal structure" than in history and were highly critical of the Cambridge approach. More time would pass before their "merit" approach would become established. In the meantime, anthologies moved from compendia to textbooks for use in schools with Norman Foerster's *American Poetry and Prose: A Book of Readings, 1607–1916* (1925). Overall, these early anthologies chose selections for how well they pictured "American life in some characteristic way" (10). Hampered by bookbinding technology that had not yet developed the capacity to embrace thousands of pages, they tended to leave out novels, although they occasionally included *The Scarlet Letter*. That they left out "The Custom House," which supplies the key to understanding the novel's political allegory, is suggestive of how literature was coming to be seen in purely aesthetic, as opposed to traditional rhetorical terms.

After World War II, anthologies shifted to more belletristic concerns. In this "New Critical phase," writers were chosen for their merit, not for how characteristic their writing might be. If earlier anthologies included anywhere from 150 to 260 writers, belletristic anthologies such as Beatty's *The American Tradition in Literature* (1956) and Hubbell's 1949 *American Life in Literature* managed with 100 or fewer. Falk and Foerster's *Eight Major Writers* (1963) speaks for itself in this regard. A third and final phase of anthology making occurs after the 1960s, when anthologists began to include writing by ethnic and gender minorities. This era is also

characterized by a focus on social history. Csicsila notes that "by the late 1970s, editors were eschewing 'literary merit' as their criterion."

The substance of Cscisila's book consists of a detailed analysis of how writers have fared over time in the literature anthologies. For example, Washington Irving, after an initial phase of popularity, fades from view and disappears in some instances. E. A. Poe, another waning moon, is bright in the 1920s, somewhat gray and insubstantial by the modern period. Herman Melville, nowhere in sight in 1917, suddenly in 1948 gets an entire chapter of his own in the *Literary History of America*. Scholars often play a role in this process; Alan Tate's 1928 essay on Emily Dickinson is credited with her accession to canonical status in the 1920s. Csicsila wishes to refute critics such as Jane Tompkins whom he feels mistakenly accuse early anthologists of ignoring women writers. He notes that women writers such as Alice Cary, Lucy Larcom, and Celia Thaxter, who were both popular in their lifetimes and popular with anthologists up to the 1920s, fade from view only once the criterion of merit is instituted by the New Critics.

The book has only one shortcoming. Csicsila too readily dismisses claims by critics of anthologies that they serve a cultural filtering function that often reflects the interests of dominant social groups such as white heterosexual men. He also does not note how canons preserve biased acts of exclusion that become less visible with time. For example, Whittier's *Songs of Labor* (1850), as significant a work historically as other "classics" of the American Renaissance, continues to be ignored in favor of works with more "American" themes.

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Glass, Loren. *Authors Inc.: Literary Celebrity in the Modern United States, 1880–1980.* New York: New York Univ. Press, 2004. 242 pp. Cloth: $60.00. Paper: $20.00.

Glass offers an ambitious project and an interesting argument to the burgeoning field of literary celebrity studies. He proposes a reevaluation of literary authorship in the twentieth century, one that argues that "in the collision between private interiority and public exteriority . . . we can see an emerging dialectical relationship between modernist authorship and mass cultural celebrity that deeply informed the field of cultural production in the twentieth-century United States" (8). He builds his argument in successive chapters on Henry Adams and Edward Bok, Mark Twain, Jack London, Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, and finally Norman Mailer. Through analyses of each of these authors, Glass hopes to show how the conflict between high and low culture, or what he follows