

The Confidence-Man is probably a caricature of Emerson, but Amasa Delano in "Benito Cereno," despite his naive optimism, is not. I am more troubled, however, at this cultural juncture and after recent experience in California, at Williams's viewing Babo as an embodiment of diabolism.

The interpretation of Melville's final work, *Billy Budd*, is supposed to drive home the conclusion that Emerson's influence on Melville was profound and enduring. Instead the assertion that Billy is "the ideal of a pure Transcendentalist"—although he lacks the intelligence to grasp the symbolic importance of language or action—is critical nonsense. A book that refers to Allan Melvill as "Allen" and to Mary Melville as "Aunt May" needs an informed copy editor and then some.

Denis Hollier, ed.

A New History of French Literature

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Pp. xxv + 1150. \$49.95

Reviewed by Anthony R. Pugh

Since its publication in 1989, this *New History* has received wide critical acclaim. It should be accorded the status of a standard reference work, required reading for anyone involved with French literature, although it does not do away entirely with the need to consult the more traditional kinds of History.

Its provocative title is fully justified. This is a comprehensive survey of the literary culture of France from the death of Roland in 778 to the five-hundredth program of "Apostrophes" in 1985, undertaken in a very different spirit from the traditional manual. Instead of the systematic subdivisions of genres and political self-contained units to which we are accustomed, we get a series of short but concentrated essays which take as their starting point a significant date (the essays all have a year, or a year and a month, as their title), and explore various implications of the event. The choice of dates shows remarkable imagination, often picking on very minor events which prove to be really illuminating. Some things get lost in the process (French-Canadian writing surely deserves more than one essay of just four pages), but the number of new insights is extraordinary. The emphasis is less on the publication of classic texts, than on the social context, or the intellectual climate, or the prevalent sensibility.

New too (at least for a work of synthesis) is the contemporary flavor of the interpretative approaches employed. Most of the contributors write in a way that would not have been possible twenty years ago, keenly aware of the cultural situation and the deficiencies of the accepted norms that are being analyzed. At the same time the contributors seem to have moved beyond the doctrinaire assertions that were common until quite recently (the shrill and strident tone of some of the feminist essays being a notable and irritating exception), and recaptured the urbanity of a much earlier tradition of critical discourse. The volume though long and (as I know through having carried it around Paris for two successive summers) heavy, is always readable and stimulating. It is indeed a remarkable triumph

for the editor, Denis Hollier of Yale, to have brought his team of individual scholars to such a level of consistency, without ever imposing a set style or a set approach. The result, one is tempted to say, is a compendium of the most informed and ideologically aware opinion of the end of the twentieth century.

Because of the diversity of outlook, the cumulative effect of reading the volume is of circling round the books and events described, and seeing them from a variety of mutually complementary perspectives. The brief bibliographies attached to each article are most helpful, and enable the reader to follow up some of the clues dropped in the text.

Ideally, this book requires a review that would comment on every one of its two hundred articles and it is perhaps invidious to single out any for especial praise. But there are a handful of articles which seemed to me to be especially distinguished, even in this distinguished company: Undank on Marivaux and the *philosophe* ("1727") and on *Jacques le Fataliste* ("1771"). Madelyn Gutwirth on "Civil Rights and the Wrongs of Women" ("1788," not 1787 as it is listed on p. 1084), Rosbottom on *La Nouvelle Héloïse* ("1761, Feb"), Gossman on the Enlightenment ("1761, Dec"), Brooks on "1830," Chambers on "1851," Humphries on Baudelaire and Poe ("1853"), Clifford on negrophilia ("1933, Feb"), Atherton on the American novel ("1933, Nov"), Suleiman on *Tel Quel* ("1960"), Alice Kaplan's thoughtful and humane piece on Brasillach ("1945, Feb"). There are some excellent analyses of individual works, on *Liaisons dangereuses* ("1782"), on *Illusions perdues* ("1843"); it is a pity that the author is not very open about the sources of some of her ideas, presented as if they are her own—I write that with feeling, recognizing two of them as mine), on *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* ("1925"), on Giraudoux's *Siegfried* ("1928").

Nevertheless I could not entirely stifle a sense that the fashionable attack on the canon has at times weakened the *raison d'être* for most people's belief that literature is important. We hear little about masterpieces, never mind about what gives a work that title (other than the arbitrary favors of fashion). Somehow the great writers are the ones that come off least well. Constant's supremely concise and ambiguous novel is made to seem no different from Mme de Staël's interminable counterpart (557), no better than *René* (616) or than Constant's own sketch, *Cécile* (618). There is an exceptionally silly and infantile essay on *Le Père Goriot* tied in with Stendhal's *Chartreuse* under the latter's date of 1839 (though even there the parallels are illuminating). Flaubert fares well, thanks to an essay by Dominick LaCapra on the trial which does indicate what Flaubert's contemporaries so signally failed to understand, though limitations of space make it more a series of conclusions than a fully fledged argument. Leo Bersani has written better pieces on Proust than the one he gives us here ("1922," an excessively clever ideological interpretation which does nothing to convey the unique flavor of Proust, and strikes me as quite misguided), Gerald Prince likewise conveys nothing of the flavor of the new novel of the fifties ("1953"), and going back to the eighteenth century, Aran Vartanian has impressed more than he does in his *Candide* essay "1759 January" (which has a woefully inadequate bibliography). Some contributions are disappointingly conventional (the Catholic novel, "1920").

Occasionally too, the writing falls flat, particularly in parts translated from a French original; the interesting survey of resistance literature ("1940-1944") is really quite poorly written. And it is a constant irritation that the abbreviation *Mme* should be given a superfluous period every time it occurs. Misprints are however astonishingly few (a wrong date on 273, "definite" for "definitive" on 387, "realist" for "realistic" on 1041—though that might be a mistranslation—the implication on 667 that thirty years elapsed between 1835 and 1857, the date 1761 for 1671 on 449, a word missing in the middle of 952 and again at the bottom of 979, and the description of the sonnet form on 172 which seems to have lost lines 9 and 10).

Under the date 1895, Antoine Compagnon writes a most penetrating assessment of Lanson's famous *History of French Literature* (coming some way to atoning for the curious attribution, in "1734," of a famous remark of Lanson's to a school-room anthology that, like many others, quotes it). Here the New salutes the Old, and enables us to see the interest, and importance, of understanding the history of Histories. When such a history comes to be written, this Harvard New History should have a distinguished place in the panorama.

Homi K. Bhabha, ed.
Nation and Narration
London: Routledge, 1990. Pp. 333
Reviewed by A. Knoenagel

The most significant political development of the last few years, the disintegration of the former East Bloc, has led to a surprisingly vigorous and violent re-suscitation of nationalism. The concept of "nation," which seemed so outdated in a world of proletarian or capitalist internationalism, suddenly emerged as one of the prime motivating factors in people's self-images but remained largely innocent of the insight that its very vagueness and arbitrariness renders it at least partially a fictional construct and hence problematic as an evaluative basis. Literary studies, even on the post-secondary level, have for decades been dominated by the concept that a nation-state generates, among other things, a specific literature characterized by national idiosyncrasies. Our literature departments are usually divided by countries, and even the progressive discipline known as Comparative Literature frequently debates texts as examples, even representations, of national literatures.

Nation and Narration, published shortly before the upsurge of nationalism, attempts to explore difficult territory: the fiction of "nation," the national fiction, the fiction of a national fiction. "If the ambivalent figure of the nation is a problem of its transitional history, its conceptual indeterminacy, its wavering between vocabularies, then what effect does this have on narratives and discourses that signify a sense of 'nationness'" (2).