

## LITERARY ANTHOLOGIES AND THE MAKING OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

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### ABSTRACT

Literary anthologies are publicly available and historically significant bodies of writing, not only because they present a fine collection of the nation's belles lettres and artistic tendencies at a certain time in cultural history but also because they represent national and social interests, which characterize imaginary totalities of art, conveying the notion of cultural evolution and hierarchy. The historical, and to a great extent political, significance of anthologies merely lies in the selection processes during which the intellectual elite deemed worthy of being collected and handed down to the next generations as cultural heritage. This paper, therefore, will discuss the significance of anthologies and literary selections in the making of American literary tradition. The discussion will necessarily focus on the ideological and political decision making procedures that intersect and intervene with the literary production and consumption networks. It will be further stated that literary canons often refuse to stay as monolithic structures but instead they endlessly circulate and perpetually modify themselves in accordance with the current ideas and inclinations of the readers and shifting power hierarchies and changing the criteria for selection can't mean in any way overthrowing the canon and ideology because each and every paradigmatic selection reinstitutes the process of canon formation and power relations that are strongly embedded in the process of production and consumption of art. Consequently, it will be shown that selection of texts as the linguistic capital never represents a consensus of a community of readers or literary elites but it is a product of power relations that created the hegemony of educational institutions, publishing houses and literary intelligentsia. American literary tradition, in this context, was shaped under the leadership of New England intelligentsia derived from historical and political functions of the region dominated by Puritan culture and values. The American character in literature, therefore, became a continuum of Puritan nativism and elitism, which was apparently a political and ideological project that aimed to establish a form of government, laws, private manners and pursuits and a certain type of people.

**Keywords:** Literary Anthologies, American Literature, Canon Formation, Ideology

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## EDEBİYAT ANTOLOJİLERİ VE AMERİKAN EDEBİYATININ İNŞASI

### ÖZET

Edebiyat antolojileri, tarihsel ve kültürel olarak önemli bir yere sahip kamusal metin derlemeleridir. Yalnızca bir ulusun "edebi zevkini" ve sanatsal gelişimini temsil etmezler aynı zamanda, kültürel hiyerarşinin hayali genelleştirmelerini betimleyen ulusal ve toplumsal çıkarlarının da temsilidirler. Antolojilerin tarihsel, ve bu sebeple dolaylı olarak da ideolojik önemli, entelektüel seçkinlerin derlemeye ve bir sonraki nesle aktarmaya uygun gördükleri eserlerin seçiminin hangi ölçütlere göre yapılacağı belirlenmesinde yatar. Bu makale, bu bağlamda, Amerikan edebi geleneğinin oluşumunda antolojilerin ve edebi seçkilerin önemini tartışacaktır. Bu tartışma kaçınılmaz olarak edebi üretim ve tüketim süreçleri ile kesişen ve bu süreçleri biçimlendiren ideolojik ve politik karar verme süreçlerine odaklanacaktır. Tartışmanın ilerleyen bölümlerinde, edebi geleneğin/geleneklerin bütüncül bir yapı arz etmediği, daha ziyade toplumsal ve kültürel dinamiklerin değişen yapısı ile birlikte kendini değişen koşullara uydurduğu tartışılacaktır. Bu nedenle, edebi geleneğin oluşumu, okur ve aydınların seçim ölçütleri ve dünya görüşleri doğrultusunda vücut bulmuş statik bir süreç olarak değil, daha ziyade sürekli değişen ve kendini yenileyen hegemonik iktidar yapısının bir yansıması olarak ele alınacaktır. Bu tartışmaların ışığında, Amerikan edebiyat geleneğinin kuruluşunda, Püriten New England aydınlarının etkisinin yıllar içinde nasıl biçimlendiği, değiştiği, ve yeni koşullara uyum göstererek varlığını gösterdiği farklı kuramcılar ve edebiyat eleştirmenlerinin metinlerinden alıntılarla ortaya konacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Edebi Antolojiler, Amerikan Edebiyatı, Edebi Geleneğin Oluşumu, İdeoloji

Literary anthologies are publicly available and historically significant bodies of writing, not only because they present a fine collection of the nation's belles lettres and artistic tendencies at a certain time in cultural history but also because they represent certain national and social interests, which characterize imaginary totalities of art, conveying the notion of cultural evolution and hierarchy. The historical, and to a great extent political, significance of anthologies merely lies in the selection processes during which the intellectual elite deemed works of literature worthy of being collected and handed down to the next generations as cultural heritage. Whether they are early canonical Hebrew scriptures or the Victorian collections of fine art, the major criteria of selecting literary texts to be read and taught in public have often been based on a struggle to gain power over the signification processes rather than the aesthetic or pedagogical preferences. Anthologies and literary selections, therefore, mirror the dominant social order that affirm and sustain aesthetic forms and hierarchies besides creating and reforming canonical constructions, establishing literary

culture, and helping institutionalize the national culture and language (Mujica, 1997, p. 203-4). Based upon an ethnocentric and homogenous set of norms and values, literary anthologies are not meant to voice a nation's intellectual history and heritage but instead to serve as a way of dehistoricizing and tranquilizing the cultural legacy. Construction of literary anthologies, in this sense, begins with a process of elimination and restructuring historical and textual contexts.

The primary concern underlying the nature of selection was an attempt to discipline the reading activity and manipulate the possible interpretations so as to monopolize diversification and classification of the meaning. Scholarly elites have characteristically been both the operator and the receiver of ideology, which reflects upon the selection, sacralization and institutional evaluation of literature and textual signification (Foucault, 1995, p. 5). Universities have served as the major agents in the circulation and accumulation of particular forms of cultural capital, and any definition of teaching literature intersects with the political realm because "teaching as a profession is part of the system of reproduction for a society highly dependent upon its agents' abilities to hierarchize and discriminate by way of recognizing, reading and 'appreciating' various legitimated cultural marks and symptoms" (Smith, 2001, p.165). Historically, the fundamentals of academy were based on two basic premises: measuring consistency and conventionality and reinforcing the hermeneutical referentiality in accordance with the hierarchical construction of the aesthetic authorities. The idea of university as the generator of the aesthetic and critical meanings and norms started even before Plato who believed that schools and education were the sole means of creating humble citizens dedicated to the truth based on the texts of philosophy refined from linguistic and fictitious deviations. The Roman Catholic Church took a similar view of the world as signs. The world as a text, God's book, was full of messages set out for Christians to read. The need to find ways of bringing the Jewish Old Testament into harmony with the New Testament and Christ's own method of using allegories drove Christians to closely read the Bible to interpret. The only criterion limiting possible interpretations was Augustine's "principle of charity" according to which all interpretations had to be consistent with Christian teaching, the idea that originated the roots of modern canon. Despite relative secularization of education and the diversification of literary understandings and critical perspectives, it is obvious that the project of literature education was the hermeneutical monopolization of knowledge and justification of hegemony.

However modern and "democratic" the educational environment could be, education of literature and critical theory widely functioned within the same mechanisms as the scholastic medieval universities until recently for the reason that education remained as a question of how knowledge was

produced and how subject positions were constructed in historical and political ways as well as how educators constructed the ideological and political positions from which they spoke (Myrsiades and Myrsiades, 1994, p. viii). Literary canon and canonization of literary knowledge including both texts and theories reduced scholarly knowledge to the sterility of technical know-how, masking the fact that educational system, as a state apparatus, needed people who were unaware that they were constituted by existing social arrangements such as race, class, gender, and religion (Zavarzadeh and Morton, 1994, p.90). Therefore, reading as an intellectual activity became a mere apparatus of state ideology and focused on the moral questions and stylistic features and evaded questions about their ideological and political functions as artistic creations.

The first literary collections in America, however, obviously lacked an intellectual power and ideological perspective that were truly American in spirit and formation. Both the model and the measure of the national intellectual heritage reflected the English canon dominated by essentially white and male poets. Puritan elitism of the content, exclusion of all alien elements including racial, ethnic, cultural and religious, and particularly sexist and nationalist discourse of the American texts indeed were rooted in the British canon to a great extent, so “the assumption that American culture and literature was a branch of English writing prevented national aesthetic forms from emerging for a long time” (Shumway, 1994, p.124). The seemingly religious character of the Puritan belles lettres, indeed, concealed the ideological and cultural significations, and the collections of American writing were treated as officially historical documents of American civilization, which was confined to the hands of a small number of intellectual elites in Connecticut and Massachusetts. The New England intellectuals revived the study of theology, classical literature, history and modern European hermeneutics and integrated historically anachronical and philosophically controversial elements with American pragmatism. They stimulated the study of Bible as a literary and historical document rather than as a flawless and unquestionable holy scripture. The textual approach of literature they inherited from ecclesiastical tradition perfectly fit into the secular aesthetics of New Englanders based on the premise that writing was self-awareness and calling (berufsmäßig) to serve better to the Godly society, and that a self-accomplished man proved his worthiness and influence for the community by writing about the world around him (Ferguson, 1986, p.2).

Until the mid-19th century, almost nothing memorable in fiction and drama had appeared in American literature except some lyrical poetry under the crushing influence of Anglo-Saxon theological aesthetics. Although all writing was regarded as sacred having a divine privilege for a long time in the history of humanity, with the advent of publishing facilities and relative

democratization of literacy among American people, reading and writing lost its mysterious inaccessibility and became a favorite pastime activity. Concentrated especially in the Boston area, hundreds of practicing fiction writers were spread throughout every New England state, some of whom even became professional artists, earning their living from literature (Buell, 1986, p.23).

Accordingly, literary collections of American literature played a crucial role in creating a popular literature against the high literature adopted by the educational institutions. Indeed, the publication of anthologies and literary collections were mostly carried out by journalists or magazine editors in the nineteenth century and anthologies were printed for the sake of gaining more readers and publicity for the authors. Inevitably, literary anthologies and collections were characterized by the norms and traditions of journalism, rather than those of academy. American literature was not clearly distinguished from journalism, and the literary culture of American civilization was founded upon the only literary institutions of the nineteenth century: magazines and publishing houses. Literature as a field of study was not included in the curricula until the late nineteenth century and literary research and criticism as a scholarly activity was a minor aspect of the literary environment in the universities. Apparently, the professors of language and literature understood literary grains of emerging American nation quite differently from the magazine critics and editors, and they had very little in common with them with regard to “inventing a usable past” and conveying it to the future.

Though Boston and New England were still the centers of intellectual elitism, New York gradually became the national center of literary production, which pointed out the fact that the selection criteria that drew the line between literary and popular writing and high and low culture were determined in line with the needs and structure of the mass market. In other words, the development of a national literature in America heavily relied on the changes in the publishing industry rather than in the origins of authors or aesthetic values. John Seely Hart's *Manual of American Literature*, for instance, was published in 1872 with the purpose of suggesting a biographical dictionary and encyclopedic samples of poems and prose of American authors for both the public reader and the academia (Csicsila, 2004, p.2). Among many other similar examples compiled with financial concerns, Hart's *Manual* was a distinctive collection of factual data and biography while lacking historical and interpretive information from a critical perspective. It was apparently intended to be as inclusive as possible so as to introduce the products of American writers which were submitted to the magazines and journals for publication.

Literary critics and literary historians pursued a critical methodology in the formation of American literary anthologies. Two-volume *Literary History of American Revolution* was published in 1878 by Moses Coit Tyler as an early example of the literary study beyond biography and fact gathering. The second generation anthologies attempted to conduct a critical and comparative analyses of the works included for the next fifty years. The works of American writers were considered to be historical documents that would represent the building stones of American cultural milieu. They were generally designed for classrooms of newly emerging departments of literature, which approached American literature as a selection of the characteristically distinctive material of American intellectual achievement.

The new tendency of critical readings, on the other hand, did not bring a revolutionary transformation in the content and structure. The literary anthologies at the turn of the century were still author-oriented collections of sample texts and greatly excluded the texts which did not have authors. Only the writings of the institutionally affiliated and culturally recognized authors were appreciated, and needless to say, there was no room for ethnically, racially or sexually diverse texts or folk tales, legends, and songs. Based on an Orientalist assumption that oral literature was primitive and unsophisticated and, therefore, had to be converted into written language within certain aesthetic and formal traditions, non-Western forms of literature, oral or written, were not accredited as a valid form of art (Guillory, 1993, p.68). Imposing certain forms of language and forms, American canon also reinforced a hermeneutical assumption that poets were original geniuses who were gifted with the divine mystery of creativity and art, an attitude that successfully combined British neo-classicism and Puritan elitism. Accordingly, literary collections of the nineteenth century not only functioned as a set of inherited rhetorical or poetic practices but also they delineated the future borders of literary production and significations in accordance with the lineage of “the founding fathers of the American canon” (Gorak, 1991, p.55). T.S. Eliot’s emphasis on tradition as a bridge between the past and the future at this point highlighted the role of literary collections, defining the heritage of American civilization and sustaining the aesthetic order that stood on the shoulders of giants.

The emphasis on the order and tradition beginning from the early years of the republic through the post Civil War era was repeatedly associated with the construction and preservation of an American civilization, merely focusing on determining the fundamental characteristics of a literature as the expression of American people. The debate over a national literary language and form stormed the American literary culture, which was also a struggle about how national identity and ideology were to be constructed. American literary criticism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was functioning on political grounds rather than aesthetics and apparently was

more concerned with issues of identity and community and less with issues of form. Edgar Allan Poe (1999) referred to the political grains of American literature in his *Marginalia* and remarked that “that an American should confine himself to American themes or even prefer them is rather a political than a literary idea, and at best is a questionable point” (25).

On the other hand, some others already celebrated the idea of a national literature. Margaret Fuller (1999), for instance, was boasting of “the journals which monthly, weekly, daily send their messages to every corner of this great land, and form at present the only efficient instrument for the general education of the people” (45). For Fuller (1999), American literature was addressing America rather than Americans (47). Cornelius Mathews (1999) went one step further and claimed that “history shows that wealth, power, science, and literature, all follow in the train of numbers, general intelligence and freedom. The same causes which transferred the civilization from the banks of Egypt must carry it to the shores of America” (60). Mathews (1999) represented a majority of writers and critics of the time who full-heartedly believed that

the literature of a country should reflect the physical, moral and intellectual aspects of the nation. Other nations and later ages should look to the writers of the land for the lineaments of its people, and to trace the influence of institutions, of civil and religious polity, upon the condition, the manners and the happiness of individuals, and upon the strength, the power, and the permanency of the state. The literature of a people should be its written thought, uttered ‘out of abundance of its heart’, and exhibiting its interior as well as its exterior life (62).

Editors of the literary anthologies of American literature looked for selections that pictured the American way in all its characteristics and literature, in this sense, became a mere tool of illustrating intellectual, sociological or national tendencies of the scholars. Franklin B. Synder and Edward D. Synder edited *A Book of American Literature* in 1927 with a view to reflect the evolutions of American national thought and civilization in different eras. Similarly, editors Norman Forster and Jay B. Hubbell openly underlined their motivation in compiling their anthologies as inventing a usable past and elucidating historical and social development of American civilization (Csicsila, 2004, p.10). The definitions of American civilization as sampled in the anthologies belonged to the literary critics and scholars who called for an appreciation and recognition of literature as an art form, a demand that primarily served to bolster their position and power in building up an American civilization, if ever possible.

The main criteria of literary criticism in 1920's were fundamentally connected with the potential of writers for representing the American character. While the aesthetic criticism related the prominent figures of American literature, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Poe, Twain and Hawthorne, to a more universal and artistic lineage (Whitman was suggesting seeking a national literature based on national archetypes in *Democratic Vistas*), the nationalist and moralist grain emphasized the Americanism and the American character in the works of these writers. However, both the aesthetic wing and the nationalist wing critics agreed that literature was an expression of the collective mind of a nation and considered "the tradition and the canon" as an evidence of the nation's success or failure as the successor of the great civilizations of history. Literature of any kind, according to the literary critics of the time, always had a historical and national dimension in both its production and consumption. It was the national character that gave a literary work a cultural value. The literary anthologies combined the aesthetic and nationalist functions of literature in their claim to be the representative of a civilization since a civilization by definition was considered to produce literature of high aesthetic value.

Nevertheless, one problem was that the United States of the 1920's lacked such a unified experience of being a nation and civilization. American culture as a project apparently failed to produce a transnational civilization and imposed a racist, sexist and moralist Anglo-Saxon elitism. So how could literature possibly "invent a usable past", a tradition to unite the nation and carry it away into the future? An ancient way of accomplishing this was to use education and schools whose significance and efficiency were proved in creating nation states by dissolving feudal bonds of local cultures and reattaching personal loyalty to an imaginary unity of nation (Guillory, 1993, p.42). The history of Western modernity, especially that of the United States, was the history of creating a nation out of desperate immigrants, slaves and native peoples who were urged to leave their authentic culture and traditions behind particularly through education and acculturation. The schools of America were the nation's line of defense for many and therefore should teach Americanism. The classroom texts and collections of literary works were regarded as the tools of raising a nationalistic self-consciousness. Literary imagination, creativity and spirituality were illustrated to symbolize the character of Anglo-Saxon civilization, which suggests that the "philistines" should be refined and elevated through teaching the Western aesthetics. Such an Arnoldian perspective demanded from literary texts to reflect social and cultural assets of a society and also reshaped and manipulated them so as to prevent cultural anarchy that could be produced by the deviant un-American masses. Accordingly, the Arnoldian influence over the intellectual realm of the

American academy sought for the ways to manufacture an imaginary cultural unity through appreciation of the literary texts. This tendency, indeed, started with the foundation of the Modern Language Association of America in 1883 and reached its peak with The Cambridge History of American Literature that excluded all native and non-English works of literature and only included "imaginative works of great value" produced by Anglo-Saxon (almost all male) writers (Shumway, 1994, p.130).

It seems quite reasonable to assume that the selection suggested by The Cambridge History of American Literature shared an ideological standpoint that the educated elite openly assumed the right to impose over "the barbarian everyone else" whose cultural literacy and heritage they brought from their homelands were totally disregarded to a great extent. The tendency for dominant bourgeois intellectuals in American academy to map out the limits of a nation was not associated only with racial and ethnic prejudices. Although women writers, for instance, had produced fine pieces of literature since the very early days of New England colonies, they were never allowed to make public appearances until the 19<sup>th</sup> century when they were allowed to edit gift books and womanish magazines but not "serious" literary journals or collections. As a matter of fact, the structure of the male marketplace and editorial power networks isolated them as limited contributors than editors, reinforcing the Victorian domesticity and encouraging the women writers to write about their immediate surroundings but nothing more (Buell, 1986, p.54). Moreover, social classes and class conflicts were one of the taboo topics, and even when social criticism of "special American conditions" could find a niche in the literary collections, it did not take laborers and class conflicts as their subject. Naturalist or realist writing was evaluated in terms of their aesthetic value or philosophical references, but it was never considered as the representation of a struggle between the rulers and subordinate classes. While it is true that access to the works of art has always remained as a significant form of class distinction and teaching literature as the appropriate sense of taste has reinforced bourgeois culture, bourgeois intellectuals of the American academy did their best to keep class conflicts out of the classroom, turning this attitude as a fundamental element of the imaginary concept of American nation along with racism and sexism. Therefore, the process of selecting texts was considered as a way of manufacturing consent and legitimizing the bourgeois norms. The title chosen for one of the prominent anthologies of the time, The Reinterpretation of American Literature, not only referred to the interpretations of the readings of the texts and their writers but also redefining American culture and history as a whole. The Reinterpretation of American Literature, like other literary collections and journals of the 1920's, suggested a kind of hochsprache, a literary language of the elites that claimed its supremacy over not only the written language and linguistic

traditions but also the spoken, everyday language and culture (Guillory, 1993, p.71), a language erasing all differences and transforming cultural diversity into “the brave new world of a melting pot”. The collections of literature and critical theory have meant the teaching of an imaginary aesthetic and political order in which people of different racial, ethnic, religious or political origins were not able to discover the reflection of their cultural images (Guillory, 1993, p.7).

It may be suggested that formation and production of literary anthologies and canonical norms cannot be associated with ideological forces only, and it can equally be true. Ideology and hegemonic power relations cannot characterize the whole process of selection and evaluation of literary texts, and there may be some aesthetic concerns that guide the scholars in all ages while selecting literary texts and writers to be carried into the next generations. But on the other hand, a pure aesthetic and philosophical approach to the selection procedures like that of Frank Kermode will remain as naïve attempts to underestimate the significance of the modes of literary production and hegemonic constructions. As opposed to Kermode who believed that canon formation may be considered as a matter of fine taste or individual pleasure, it seems more reasonable to assume that the field of literary study has never been a domain of cultural production with clear-cut definitions and predefined magical remedies; in contrast, it varies in respect to the demands and prerequisites of zeitgeist and ideological formations. Literary texts are historical documents rather than products of the fancy imagination of the authors, and that decodification of historical and ideological heritage that any text has taken over is only possible through a criticism of cultural and historical functions of these texts.

On the other hand, decodification and transformation of the literary curricula and the revision of literary history apparently will certainly demand for developing multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi gender and multi-class new anthologies which are intended to unmask racial, social, political and ideological biases (Gottesman,1984, p.69). The Heath Anthology of American Literature, for instance, has been hailed as an attempt to achieve such a diversity and multicultural perspective that raises the voices of the civil rights movements and egalitarian politics in postwar American culture. Furthermore, 1991 edition of Prentice Hall Anthology is known to focus strongly upon the connections between American literature and its historical, political, economic, religious, intellectual and international contexts (Csicsila, 2004, p.14).

However, it must be kept in mind that literary canons often refuse to stay as monolithic structures, but instead they endlessly circulate and perpetually modify themselves in accordance with the current ideas and inclinations of the readers and shifting power hierarchies. Changing the

criteria for selection cannot mean in any way overthrowing the canon and ideology because each and every paradigmatic selection reinstitutes the process of canon formation and power relations that are strongly embedded in the process of production and consumption of art. Canonicity does not stem from the individual works compiled in the anthologies but instead interrelations of the texts to one another, particularly to those which are not included in the collection (Lerer, 2003, p.1252). It would be reasonable to remind once again that selection of texts as the linguistic capital never represents a consensus of a community of readers or literary elites but it is a product of power relations that created the hegemony of educational institutions, publishing houses and literary intelligentsia. American literary tradition, in this context, was shaped under the leadership of New England intelligentsia, which was derived not from a more developed state of artistic discipline but from historical and political functions of the region dominated by Puritan culture and values. The American character in literature, therefore, became a continuum of Puritan nativism and elitism, which was apparently a political and ideological project that aimed to establish a form of government, laws, private manners and pursuits and a certain type of people. This project was reflected and characterized by literary collections and anthologies through institutionalizing and commercializing the norms of artistic production that, in turn, was supposed to bolster the hegemonic constructions as well.

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