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The Faber Book of AMERICA

Edited by
Christopher Ricks and
William L. Vance

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And I ask all to try to forgive me
For being as over-elated
As if I had measured the country
And got the United States stated.

Robert Frost, 'A Record Stride'

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INTRODUCTION

'America'? Don't we mean 'the United States of America'? 'America' is a pair of subcontinents plus an isthmus.

The inhabitants of South America, of Central America and of that part of North America which is not the United States (Mexico and Canada, yes) are on occasion chagrined by the unmisgiving assumption that United States citizens own the words 'America' and 'Americans'. There has to be some political and even imperial pressure exerted by the fact of nomenclature. The Monroe Doctrine (that the Americas are America's 'backyard') may call upon the feeling, though not exactly the thought, that the name vindicates a claim. Citizens of the USA must often sense something odd in there not being a simple name for their citizenship. How cumbrous 'US citizen' feels in comparison with the relation of the French to France, of the Germans to Germany, of the English to England . . . Not that US citizens are alone in this. A world which had got into the way of using the name 'Russians' too loosely is at this very moment having to adapt itself to appreciating that a Russian is not interchangeable with any old citizen of what used to be the USSR. And bona fide Russians would do well to be sensitive to the dangers of imperialistic claim which have lurked in the name. What's in a name? An emanation.

Edgar Allan Poe had his own proposal in the matter:

> It is a thousand pities that the puny witticisms of a few professional objectors should have power to prevent, even for a year, the adoption of a name for our country. At present we have clearly none. There should be no hesitation about 'Appalachia'. In the first place, it is distinctive. 'America' is not and can never be made so.

Footnote by Poe: 'Mr Field, in a meeting of "The New York Historical Society", proposed that we take the name of "America", and bestow "Columbia" upon the Continent.' But it was not for the USA to 'bestow' a name upon a continent which was not its property. So Poe pressed on with his hopeful hopeless case:

> *We* may legislate as much as we please, and assume for our country whatever name we think right – but to us it will be no name, to any purpose for which a name is needed, unless we can take it away from

> the regions which employ it at present. South America is 'America', and will insist upon remaining so. In the second place, 'Appalachia' is indigenous, springing from one of the most magnificent and distinctive features of the country itself. Thirdly, in employing this word we do honour to the Aborigines, whom, hitherto, we have at all points unmercifully despoiled, assassinated, and dishonoured. Fourthly, the name is the suggestion of, perhaps, the most deservedly eminent among all the pioneers of American literature. It is but just that Mr Irving should name the land for which, in letters, he first established a name. The last, and by far the most truly important consideration of all, however, is the music of 'Appalachia' itself; nothing could be more sonorous, more liquid, or of fuller volume, while its length is just sufficient for dignity. How the guttural 'Alleghania' could ever have been preferred for a moment is difficult to conceive. I yet hope to find 'Appalachia' assumed.

All such hopes are doomed to be dashed. Formally it will continue to be 'the United States of America', and informally 'America'. The tension between the two is a fact of life and an incitement to the imagination. But at least this application of the word 'American' has been around a long time, and anyway no other nationality (as against continental denizenship) makes any claim to the word. Granted, *The Faber Book of America* is a tendentious title, and politic correctness (or cravenness) did at one stage suggest . . . *of the USA*, but something about the nature of the nation is apprehended in this very tendentiousness.

The closest thing to a neutral dubbing might have been Byron's 'English and Spanish Atlantides', but the phrase was not likely to catch on – despite Byron's acute understanding that what was at issue was the course of empire:

> Whenever an American requests to see me (which is *not* uncommon) I comply – firstly because I respect a people who acquired their freedom by firmness without excess – and secondly because these transatlantic visits 'few and far between' make me feel as if talking with posterity from the other side of the Styx. In a century or two the new English and Spanish Atlantides will be masters of the old countries in all probability – as Greece and Rome overcame their mother Asia in the older or earlier ages as they are called.

And now, as a century since Byron turns to two, the empire of the Atlantides faces the Pacific Rim.

'*E pluribus unum*': the aspiration to nationhood asks that from many

things there should come forth one. But it asks too the opposite: that from the one thing there come forth many.

This is an anthology of America, not of American literature – our happy brief was to seek and to dispose a range of writings which were not simply (or even necessarily) American but which were *about* America. The distinction is manifest in the contrast between the two great American poets of the nineteenth century: Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman. Every line of them both is indeflectibly American, and yet whereas almost every poem of Whitman's is in some way about America, to the point at which you find yourself contemplating 'the Whitman Book of America', very few of Dickinson's are, no less American though she is.

The editors of this present book have each of them undertaken separately something like this kind of work before, yet this enterprise has felt very different. It is a different story from an anthology of American literature or one of Victorian verse – not least in that it is not clear what, in the matter of America, could possibly count as a *story*. In the ordinary way, an anthologist is at once aided and circumscribed by the fact that half, say, of what will figure in the final selection was all along sure to figure. But no such confidence, such constraint, for good and ill, could ever be felt with a Book of America. It is clear that there could be a dozen such volumes, each of them knowledgeably unbigoted, in which scarcely a single item would be held in common. Oh, the Declaration of Independence perhaps – but for the rest? It is of the nature of the fecund contrarious history, the cultural dapple and squabble, the sheer scale of America and of its 'collideorscape', that no two anthologies of America need have anything much in common. *Ex uno plures*.

So that such an anthology confronts both its chance and its fate in the fact that America can itself be reasonably considered under the aspect of an anthology.

Philip James Bailey, in *Festus* (a poem which feels twice as big as America and a million times more tedious), took a genially humdrum view of this congeries of a nation:

> America, thou half-brother of the world;
> With something good and bad of every land.

Half-brother perhaps, but often fiercely resistant to any half-and-half-ness, anything which might endanger an entire commitment to union. 'There can be no fifty-fifty Americanism in this country,' insisted Theodore Roosevelt: 'there is room here for only 100 per cent Americanism, only for those who are American and nothing else.'

This is of a piece with religious fervour. The nation which sets itself to

separate Church from State, and which commits itself to religious freedom, yet has an oath of allegiance as one nation under God. Its currency has its divine right: In God We Trust. Israel Zangwill was sure that 'God is making the American.' But what about those of us who are atheists or agnostics?

'America is God's Crucible,' Zangwill urged dramatically, 'the great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming.' But since 1909 the Melting-Pot has itself suffered a certain meltdown. Assimilation has felt less and less distinguishable from a simulation. 'I am easily assimilated': so the immigrant sings – winsomely, sardonically – in the new world of Leonard Bernstein's replanting of Voltaire's *Candide*.

The diversity of geography, of climate, of races, nationalities and cultures, and the astonishing changes in political and social conditions in the semi-millennium from 1492 to 1992: these are the stuff of this book and could be the stuff of a score of utterly different books. Our earliest nameable author, the founder of Boston – John Winthrop – was born in 1588, just less than a century after Columbus's voyage. Among our most recent authors are a daughter of Chinese immigrants and a Chicano whose traditions through Mexico connect him with both the native peoples and the first Spanish explorers. The oldest town to appear in these pages – Ácoma – is one that long predates the voyages of Columbus.

We have tried to catch something of these diverse diversities by constituting the book mostly of short or shortish entries, not only because this obviously makes room for a lot more of them but also because of the opportunities for principled disagreement and for the glancing, the oblique and the suggestive in sequence and in perspective.

The ordering within the two sections 'Union' and 'Empire' is straightforward, chronological, since there a history can unfold; in the other sections, we hope to have achieved juxtapositions which are telling. So Henry James's vision of the sheer power of New York, of the abstracted but indubitable energy of its extravagance, is immediately followed by Rudyard Kipling's evocation, a century ago but unchanged today, of the potholes which make you lurch and the squalor which might make you retch. What we hope to gain through these and suchlike counterpointings is not only a sense of how a home-coming American, James, sees and shows different facets from those of the fascinated traveller, Kipling, but also a juxtaposition of the writers themselves – two great men of letters, alert and antagonistic. Or there is W. H. Auden's worldly-wise gratitude to, and dismay at, the poetry-reading round, 'On the Circuit', duly succeeded by Anthony Hecht's 'Application for a Grant', an entirely up-to-the-minute eye-on-the-main-chance plea which nevertheless takes a very long view of these implorings of patronage, since the poem is an adaptation or imitation, 'Freely from Horace'. Freely . . . ? Whereupon we revert for a moment to Auden, on 'The Al-

mighty Dollar'. Almighty enough for us to have glimpsed him just now 'On the Circuit'.

Within our own circuit, most of the items have their headings within quotation marks; this means that the item is excerpted, not complete, its heading being a brief quotation from within it. Headings without quotation marks are their authors' own titles, and the items they precede are complete except in the few cases where 'Excerpt' is noted in the source reference below the item. (These are occasions when an author's title was too good to lose.) Editorial glosses within the items are enclosed in square brackets.

The division of the book into nine sections is provisional, improvisatory – clearly much of what figures in one section, though it may be distinguishable from, is not distinct from much that is elsewhere. Questions of belief are questions of character seen under a different aspect, and both are not just expressed in culture but constitutive of it. A central belief or ideal – that of equality, crucial to a democracy – is of such importance in the contradictions and complexities of American history as to have generated an abundance of record and exhortation: hence a separate section. But a full index (a glossarial index, giving brief notes on persons, places, etc. mentioned in the text) is provided to make possible the reconstitution of different assemblings and of other angles or stories.

Stories: we have included some fiction (Mark Twain, Willa Cather, Sinclair Lewis) when it seized some crucial aspect of American life – the ways of a world, the expanse of a landscape, the contractions of earning a living. But we appreciate that much fiction, because of scale and context, does not lend itself well to our undertaking, and that there is a great deal of unignorable American fiction – such as would be sure to figure in a differently-angled anthology, one of American literature – which we have found ourselves unable to incorporate.

Aware that an anthology like this, being constituted of words, will tend to underrate all those achievements of which the medium is not words, we have tried to do right by such other aspects of American life, culture and history. The art of Whistler, and of Georgia O'Keeffe, though it is not reproduced, is represented here, as are the abstract expressionism of Robert Motherwell and the concrete expressiveness of the great painter-naturalist Audubon. Hollywood is revered and bantered here, and so is Disneyland, and something is heard of jazz, of the blues, of the music of Charles Ives, and of the Big Rock Candy Mountains. Meanwhile, even as someone sings, money talks.

Does all this make for something insufficiently celebratory of America? It is true that much of the writing here is critical – often sharply so – and this even from so great a celebrator of America as Walt Whitman. But criticism does not have to be disrespect and often constitutes an act of deep

respect. Great disappointment has to be proportionate to greatness. What America promised, and fulfilled for many people, is implied in what is criticized: its failures to be all it promised. Moreover, critical scrutiny is often more provocative and more penetrating than simple praise can be. Vigilance may be still more necessary today when the unmistakable failure of an alternative ideal on the other side of the world may foster too complacent a view of the American experience, the American model and even the American dream. And though there is much in this book that quizzes, mocks and excoriates some aspects of America, most of the book's items are by Americans themselves (such a tradition of criticism is itself proudly American) and none of them is mere snootiness.

One of Henry James's Americans, Christopher Newman from California, scented just such hauteur in a compatriot of his, back at the time when the United States felt more like a 'them' than an 'it':

> He had never been a very systematic patriot, but it vexed him to see the United States treated as little better than a vulgar smell in his friend's nostril, and he finally spoke up for them quite as if it had been Fourth of July, proclaiming that any American who ran them down ought to be carried home in irons and compelled to live in Boston – which for Newman was putting it very vindictively.
>
> *The American*, 1877, 1907

But then both of this book's editors, though only one of them is an American, live in Boston.

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