

# READING AMERICA

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ESSAYS • ON  
AMERICAN  
LITERATURE

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DENIS  
DONOGHUE

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*Essays on American Literature*

DENIS DONOGHUE

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## INTRODUCTION

Near the end of this book I quote a few lines from John Ashbery's poem "Many Wagons Ago":

*How easily we could spell if we could follow,  
Like thread looped through the eye of a needle,  
The grooves of light. It resists. But we stay behind, among them,  
The injured, the adored.*

The dictionaries say that to spell means to read something slowly and with difficulty, taking first steps in construing. The O.E.D. cites a sentence from Thackeray's *Pendennis*: "He was spelling the paper, with the help of his lips." In Ashbery's poem "spell" is like a zero in mathematics, its force depends upon what goes with it. Presumably it means to make some connections, to establish relations, however tentative, between one person and another, short of defining the relations. Thread looped through the eye of a needle doesn't need to prescribe anything, it trusts to the decisive power of the needle and the hand and mind that direct it. It is a question of how incised a relation should be. Harold Rosenberg remarked, in *The Tradition of the New*, that "lifting up a word and putting a space around it has been the conscious enterprise of serious French poetry since Baudelaire and Rimbaud." Ashbery is French in this attribute: the crucial words in his poetry are only sufficiently assertive to be there, to create a space for the mind's true business, which is to keep going. To spell is to

work through the process of reading: the process would end if a meaning were to be prescribed, but Ashbery has an interest in postponing the end and enjoying the freedom the interval provides.

Reading comes after spelling: it moves more quickly, jumps a few gaps, takes some signs for granted. One of the consequences of literary theory in the past ten or fifteen years has been to assign to the reader some of the mystery traditionally vested in the author. Reader-response theory seems to me a tautology: it proposes to give polemical force to the self-evident proposition that a reader reads a poem, say, pretty much as he wishes. So much depends upon the context of interests upon which his reading of this poem intervenes. While the dictionaries say that to read means to decipher, discern, interpret, or construe, and imply that there is something, a document, waiting to be construed, modern theories of reading have dissolved the apparent objectivity of what is to be read in favour of the subjectivity of the reader and the fluidity of the reading process.

The idea of lifting up a word and putting a space around it is congenial to such theories because it is based upon a spatial analogy, specifically upon the way in which people look at modern paintings in which there is much diction but no syntax. I find the idea congenial, too, but for a different reason. I have written a good deal about American literature, especially in my *Connoisseurs of Chaos*, *The Ordinary Universe*, *The Sovereign Ghost*, and *Thieves of Fire*, but in each case the context, I now think, was peremptory, it forced the authors I wrote about to obey, or to seem to obey, the terms of discourse I prescribed for them. In *Connoisseurs of Chaos* I wrote about the poetries of Whitman, Tuckerman, Melville, Dickinson, Robinson, Frost, Stevens, J. V. Cunningham, Robert Lowell, Theodore Roethke, and—in the second edition—Elizabeth Bishop. I construed those poets in a severe context. The subtitle of the book was *Ideas of Order in Modern American Poetry*. The relation between order and the anarchy that threatens to subvert it imposed fairly strict limits upon the freedom with which I read the poems. In *The Ordinary Universe* the American writers I discussed—Henry James, William Carlos Williams, Saul Bellow, and Marianne Moore among them—were again curtailed by my concern for the relation between the poetic imagination and the ordinary world it often proposes to transcend. In *Thieves of Fire* Melville appears as an example of a type of imagination I call Promethean, but I was more interested in describing the type, and the overreaching motive

it exemplifies, than in doing full justice to the writers—Milton, Blake, Melville, D. H. Lawrence—I used to clarify it. In *The Sovereign Ghost* the chapter on *The Waste Land* is perhaps decently free from the obligation of illustrating a thesis, but not as free as I would now wish.

The present selection from my uncollected essays and reviews on American themes is not, of course, without a context, but the context in each case is as loosely defined as it could well be. In several cases I was writing for a magazine—*The New York Review of Books*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The New Statesman*—whose readers were, I trusted, interested in American literature but not at the cost of their other interests. In some cases there was the different pleasure of writing for readers—of *Salmagundi*, *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, *The Hudson Review*, *Sewanee Review*, *The Southern Review*—whose interests were likely to be literary to begin with and to give a literary tone to their social, political, and moral observances. I hoped that the variety of such readerships would protect me from the danger of being pedantic in questions of theory.

The title of the book is not as outlandish as it may seem. In the Introduction to the revised edition of *Connoisseurs of Chaos* I have described my experience of American literature and the first steps I took to read it, in Dublin, before I ever had occasion to visit the United States. My relation to American literature, like my presence in the United States, is that of a “resident alien”: I feel I hold the Green Card in both capacities. The literature is, I assume, an epitome of the society that has provoked it, and may be read on that understanding. I read it by spelling it, a little at a time. Sometimes—as on April 15, 1986, the dreadful day of President Reagan’s bombing attack on Benghazi and Tripoli—I’m sure I don’t understand anything of America, and can only stare at it in dismay. But when I read Wallace Stevens’s “The Course of a Particular,” I feel not entirely blank about it.

Reading these essays and reviews again, I appreciate afresh the particular debts I owe to R. P. Blackmur and Kenneth Burke. Blackmur helped me to gain access to the literature where it counted most, in the detail of poems and novels. He was not always right. His essay on *Moby-Dick*—the supreme work of American literature, as I now think—needs to be completed and corrected by thinking of all the things its obliquity prevented Blackmur from saying. But Blackmur’s sense of the modern American poets and how they might be read was extraordinarily

acute. As for Burke: his relation to American literature is intermittent and opportunistic. Even more than Blackmur, he is an American writer: his novel *Towards a Better Life* is unique, yet typically American in the demented dance of its sentences. His *Counter-Statement* is the first American book of criticism I recall reading, and it still strikes me as fulfilling the glowing possibility that a book of criticism may also be a work of art.

An alternative title for my book would be "With the Help of My Lips." Or "Lipreading as a Second Language."

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# ESSAYS



## AMERICA IN THEORY

**I**n April 1975 a conference on American Studies was held at the Schloss Leopoldskron in Salzburg as the first act in a celebration of the bicentennial of the American Revolution. It was arranged by the European Association for American Studies, the American Studies Association, and the Salzburg Seminar in American Studies. Our theme was “the impact of the U.S.A. and Europe upon each other.” Four further conferences were held within a few months, in Lagos, Tokyo, Tehran, and San Antonio. The intention in those events was “to provide full critical analyses of the United States.”

The conference at Salzburg did not engage in much analysis, but it began and ended with incidents worth recalling. In the first, Andrew Sinclair left the Great Hall of the Schloss in protest against what he called “the sad and terrible words” delivered by Gordon Wood in his opening address, which Mr. Sinclair declared “a travesty.” The protest seemed to me dramatic but obscure. Sinclair couldn’t have expected Professor Wood to beg Europe’s forgiveness for the crimes of the American government, or to denounce Richard Nixon according to ethical criteria exemplified by Che Guevara. Wood’s address seemed to me acceptable, especially in its implication—I recall this just as vividly as Sinclair’s protest—that

American administrations must reconsider their involvement in the lives of others.

The second incident was not dramatic, but memorable in its way. Robert Forrey, coordinator for the Bicentennial Committee on International Conferences of Americanists, suggested at a plenary discussion of "The Future of American Studies" that we should examine the relation between American money and the development of American Studies in Europe. It was not clear to me whether he had in mind that those who paid the piper should have the privilege of calling the tune; or that we should examine more generally the relation between tunes and patronage. A Scandinavian scholar welcomed the suggestion, made a few remarks about money and power, and was squashed by one of his senior colleagues who accused him of borrowing more books than anyone else from the American Library, an institution entirely dependent upon American dollars. The question was dropped.

I mention Mr. Forrey's suggestion and Mr. Sinclair's protest only to remark that the academic pursuit of themes in American Studies can't be neutral or disinterested. You think you are talking about an American novel, but before you are well begun you find yourself reflecting on the exercise of power in the world. This doesn't happen when you talk about *Ulysses*. In Europe, we have at least intermittently adverted to the fact that our part in American Studies is implicated in a network of sentiments and purposes partly our own, no doubt, but at least equally the concern of diplomats and officers of the State Department. An entirely reputable academic interest has been furthered—sponsored, indeed—by other motives: American foreign policy, the spasmodic rhetoric of the cold war, the self-consciousness of American society. The relations between these motives are matters for argument and definition: they are not beyond the reach of syntax. It is absurd to suggest that scholars should turn away from their academic interests lest they find themselves corrupted by American hospitality, the embrace of the State Department, the Library of Congress, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the United States Information Service. But the relation between scholarship and money and power is an issue in American Studies, whereas it is not an issue in, say, Irish Studies, a pursuit in which worldly temptations are few.

I shall mention another occasion, and then move beyond these preliminaries.

On October 19, 1957, Lionel Trilling gave a lecture at the University of the South on "English Literature and American Education," in which he complained that American undergraduates were no longer interested in English literature, and had turned their sole attention to themselves and to the history and literature of America. Trilling was dismayed by this inclination—he took it as a sign of provincialism—and by the significance of its having happened so recently. He mentioned that in 1930 Carl Van Doren had given up his Columbia University lectures on American literature since the Civil War, and that it was only in 1944 that the university found it necessary to provide a new course on the subject.

The year 1944 marks pretty accurately, not indeed the beginning of the academic study of American history and literature, but the establishment of American Studies as an officially sponsored activity in Europe and elsewhere. In Germany, immediately after the war, the American government undertook a severe programme of "denazification," but it was soon abandoned in favour of more affable forms of persuasion, including the provision of democratic images and motifs for a people long deprived of them. American Studies in Europe became a significant part of that programme.

I have referred to these episodes as an indication of the context in which many European scholars have come to think of America through its history and literature. But for another reason, too. I recall from Salzburg and other similar occasions that in the European gatherings of Americanists we were especially concerned with two related considerations. The first was the idea that there was something sufficiently identifiable to be called "the American experience," whatever forms its description might take. The historical source of the experience was a matter of endless dispute: it might be attributed, we argued, to the Frontier, or to New England Puritanism and covenant theology, to democracy, Transcendentalism, slavery, the divisions of North and South, utopian sentiment, the Indians, Unitarianism, immigration, the idea of America as Redeemer Nation, or to what Reinhold Niebuhr once called "the ironic incongruity between our illusions and the realities which we experience." America, after all, is one of the few countries in which a sense of a particular destiny was prescribed at its origin: if this is true, the relation between origin and aftermath must be peculiarly tense. We interpret an origin as if it marked a principle. A country characterized by its origin has its proper destiny already inscribed. All it can do in the meantime is

live up to that destiny or renounce it. In 1823 Emerson thought that life in America had been spared the corruptions which beset every other country. Surely this sentiment was worth pondering. And so forth: in Europe we discussed these origins, these destinies, as if we had to comprehend them or give up the hope of reading an American novel.

The second consideration arose from the first. We thought that what we needed was a theory of American life, and that we must begin with a theory of American literature. It should be a paradigm, a little story, or a simple formula legal enough to hold the multitudinous detail in place and yet flexible enough to admit further detail. I recall, too, that the working theory most regularly invoked was derived from the famous chapter of Henry James's monograph on Hawthorne in which James reflects upon the alleged thinness of the social and public life available to Hawthorne, and named several of the European institutions missing from the American scene. We were gratified to think that American life, so demonstrably affluent, was chiefly to be understood as marked by a disability, and that we had James's warrant for proceeding on that assumption. The most arduous instances of American literature were responses to penury of relations. We did not inquire how James came to think himself justified in patronizing Hawthorne for the impoverished character of his "contemplative saunterings and reveries." Nor did we pursue the consequence of James's saying, in *Notes of a Son and Brother*, that Hawthorne "proved to what a use American matter could be put by an American hand," and that he showed how "an American could be an artist, one of the finest, without 'going outside' about it . . . ; quite in fact as if Hawthorne had become one just by being American enough." Perhaps it amounted to a major concession on James's part. But it was clear that he didn't think the commitment of an American artist to being American enough would turn him into a great artist—a Balzac, to be specific—or that it would suffice for the largest ambition. There was always a further achievement which would have to be approached in a different way, and presumably by the addition of perceptions necessarily European.

It is my impression that European scholars in American Studies didn't pursue the question beyond the point where James had left it. I don't recall that we stayed with it even long enough to take sides in the argument on the point between James and Howells. James, we knew, had Cooper and indeed Hawthorne himself on his side, but Howells was sufficiently American to insist, in his review of James's monograph, that

the catalogue of civic institutions which James listed as deplorably missing from Hawthorne's America still left "the whole of human life remaining, and a social structure presenting the only fresh and novel opportunities left to fiction, opportunities manifold and inexhaustible."

I recall, too, not understanding what T. S. Eliot meant by saying, in one of his essays on James, that "it is the final perfection, the consummation of an American to become, not an Englishman, but a European—something which no born European, no person of any European nationality, can become." I assumed that James came close to making himself a European by making himself an Englishman entirely at ease among the French; and that Eliot was content with the minor achievement of making himself a sort of Englishman, with some critical recourse to the values he deemed to issue from "the mind of Europe."

I don't say that the question of "the American experience" held us back from the daily business of reading American books; but that we read them tentatively and felt the lack of an enabling theory which would make sense of them. A theory might not, indeed, make sense of them, but it would indicate what kind of sense we should look out for. So the scholarly books we especially valued were those which offered to arrange the literature in advance of particular need. All we asked was that we be given an idea of American experience by analogy, perhaps, with the idea of a university we could learn from Newman. The idea would be based upon high examples of the literature, but it would hold out further possibilities and keep us alert to them.

In the event, the scholarly books we resorted to numbered about ten. I recall that at Salzburg we referred with particular respect to Perry Miller's *The New England Mind* (1939) and *Errand into the Wilderness* (1956), F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* (1941), Alfred Kazin's *On Native Grounds* (1942), Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* (1950), Trilling's *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), Charles Feidelson's *Symbolism and American Literature* (1953), R. W. B. Lewis's *The American Adam* (1955), Richard Chase's *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957), Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1959), Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), Richard Poirier's *A World Elsewhere* (1966), and Quentin Anderson's *The Imperial Self* (1971). These were the books we took as indicating that American experience was indeed exceptional, and that it was best understood as involving a refusal, upon principle, of the values derived from history and society. The American hero, these books encour-



aged us to see, enters into fellowship with nature—with a continent barely domesticated, still in its essence a wilderness—to forestall the constraints that in every other respect would be enforced by considerations of politics and economics, money and greed. Acting upon Emerson's distinction between the “biographical ego” and the “grand spiritual ego,” the American Adam regards his biographical ego as a mere bundle of circumstances, the victim of crass conditions: his essential self is spiritual, and it finds its true place in the wilderness. Indeed, Richard Poirier's book uses such words as “environment,” “place,” and “world” as pure tropes: they have nothing to do with places in which one might live, and everything to do with the resources of language, they are figures within the space of a vocabulary. Poirier distinguishes “between works that create through language an essentially imaginative environment for the hero and works that mirror an environment already accredited by history and society.” The first are likely to be American, the second European and, mostly, English or French.

The differences among these several works of scholarship are real, and I should allow for them. But their similarities are even more striking. Indeed, the theory they imply has been augmented by more recent work. I am thinking of Quentin Anderson's “Practical and Visionary Americans” (*The American Scholar*, Summer 1976), some recent essays by Nina Baym and Annette Kolodny, and the work Irving Howe has done in the spirit of his “Anarchy and Authority in American Literature,” a chapter of his *Decline of the New* (1971), which I'm afraid we neglected at Salzburg. Perhaps I should say a word or two about these to show that they are indeed compatible with a theory I shall then try to name.

Howe maintains that the deepest desire in American literature is to be rid of every authority except that of the individual self, and he asks, in dismay, how and why American readers have made the unprecedented demand upon their writers that they create values “quite apart from either tradition or insurgency.” American readers ask to see created a realm of values they wouldn't dream of living in or acting upon; values deliberately conceived at a distance from any world in which those readers might live. Quentin Anderson's essay proposes to explain the demonic element in American literature as responding to an appalling disaffection in American society. The disaffection arises, he believes, “from a projection of the loathing felt by individuals for a part of themselves”—the part that goes along willingly enough with acquisition