

THE CYCLE
OF
AMERICAN LITERATURE

An Essay in Historical Criticism

by

ROBERT E. SPILLER



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The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end. It is the highest emblem in the cipher of the world.

—EMERSON

PREFACE

A new edition of *The Cycle of American Literature* is prompted mainly by time because time itself is history. More than a decade has passed since its first appearance and, in the interval, the world has changed in many and profound ways; but there has been no attempt to revise the story here told. An essay in historical criticism is not mere chronicle, and nothing has happened to suggest that this interpretation of our literary past is any more or less valid than it was in 1955.

The book was written in the remote and concentrated quiet of a Vermont valley when the eight-year experience of planning, writing, and editing the *Literary History of the United States* was still fresh in memory. It is the distillation in one mind of the knowledge and wisdom of the fifty-five scholar-contributors to that larger work and it could only have been written in that moment of synthesis.

This edition might be called the third: the original, published by The Macmillan Company in 1955, which gave the book such acceptance as it may claim, the inexpensive Mentor paperback of the next year which swung on the revolving racks of newsstands from Hong Kong to Hamburg for a decade, and now an edition which is still reasonably inexpensive but somewhat more substantial. But no one knows how many other editions there have been, including translations into Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Italian, Arabic, Swedish, the Indian, and other languages, nor how many hundreds of thousands of copies have been distributed by book and news agencies of many continents.

The only changes in this edition are the correction of a few minor but persistent errors, the noting of terminal dates where they have occurred, and the addition of an epilogue which attempts to round out the story already told rather than to venture into the alluring morass of prophesy.

Robert E. Spiller

Philadelphia, Pa.
May, 1967

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

THERE seems now to be little doubt in the minds of critics at home and abroad that the United States has produced, during the twentieth century, a distinctive literature, worthy to take its place with the great literatures of other times and other peoples. There is no similar agreement on the reasons for this, or for the apparently sudden cultural maturity of a people which, throughout nearly two centuries of political independence, has thought of itself as heterogeneous and derivative in its racial and cultural make-up. American writings of the past quarter-century give evidence of a literary renaissance which could come only from a long tradition and a unified culture. This literary renaissance, the second to occur in the United States, must have both a history and a pattern of relationships within itself. As yet it has not been clearly defined or understood, because literary historians have failed to comprehend it as an organic whole.

The theory of literary history which was most generally held during the nineteenth century proposed that, because almost all of the literature produced by citizens of the United States was written in the English language, and because literature is expression and can presumably be best described by the language in which it is expressed, American literature is, and always will be, a branch of English literature. The consequence of this theory was that undue emphasis was placed on the Colonial period, on that part of the United States which most successfully preserved its British characteristics, New England, and on those authors, like Irving, Longfellow, Lowell, and Howells, who discovered ways of using American "materials" without greatly violating British proprieties. Writers like Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Mark Twain, and

Theodore Dreiser, who were more deeply American than any of the other group, were dismissed either as evidences of a cruder stage in cultural development or as curiosities. Thus an American romantic movement could be clearly distinguished as evolving from the imitative beginnings of Irving, Cooper, and Bryant, and culminating in the poetry of the bearded sages of the Cambridge group. Thereafter came the "Gilded Age," a deterioration into "realism" and "pessimism," and a literature in the twentieth century that was described as close to degenerate in both inspiration and form. Literary histories which are firmly rooted in this misleading theory are still produced and sold by the thousands of copies in the United States and elsewhere.

The first successful challenge to this theory—not counting the pioneer work of Moses Coit Tyler—came in 1927 with V. L. Partridge's *Main Currents in American Thought*, the literary historian's version of a widespread movement in historical writing which was then attempting to retell the record of the past in terms of economic and other forms of environmental determinism. The literary historian of this school owed his ultimate debt to Taine, Hegel, and Marx, but as an American and a democrat he recognized the social philosophies of none of these masters, taking from them only the method of relating literary expression directly and simply to the life which it expressed. American schools began to use "Literature and Life" readers instead of the old "Belles-Lettres" varieties, while scholars in the universities and journalists outside began a process of reevaluation of both major and minor American authors and their works. The result was a new pattern of American literary history that succeeded in rediscovering such writers as Fréneau, Thoreau, and Melville; in giving more sympathetic recognition to Whitman and Mark Twain; in showing just what was American in such writers as Henry James; and in arousing widespread interest in humor, local color, realism, folk ballads and legends, and in minor authors who were faithful to their materials and reflected the ideas and moods of their times. Under this dispensation the literature of the late nineteenth century and of the years that followed could at least be regarded without prejudice, and awarded laurels for its vigor and its authenticity, even though at times it seemed to lose its character as art.

The pendulum had again swung too far. So great was the value assigned, under this theory, to accuracy of record that the best

literature seemed to be merely that which struck closest to the facts. Imagination was crowded aside by political and social data, and American literary history threatened to become no more than a history of documentation; often, as even in the case of Parrington, the documentation of a specific theory of social and political development. Ironically, major authors like Poe, Dickinson, and Henry James, who in one way or another were above or outside the obvious data of American life, seemed irrelevant and alien, at the same time that others, like Cooper, Melville, and Mark Twain, were gaining a new dimension. Although this theory made possible an *American* literary history, it threatened to make *literary* history as such an anomaly. In its most extreme form it even accepted the Marxian formula and imposed a schematic dogma that was not too different from the "socialist realism" of the dictatorships.

An escape into pure aesthetic analysis, which many critics then proposed, was not the resolution of this dilemma. It was rather an acknowledgment of failure by the literary historian, a confession that he had lost faith in the continuity of life and the organic principle of its expression in art. There was no good reason why, with the old prejudices cleared away and the relationship between American literature and American life clearly established, the real literary history of the United States could not begin to take shape.

The writer of this new history must first recognize that the major author, even though he becomes major by rising above his times or otherwise alienating himself from his society, is nevertheless the specific product of his times and of his society, and probably their most profound expression. Literature, therefore, has a relationship to social and intellectual history, not as documentation, but as symbolic illumination. Valid literary history must concern itself chiefly with major authors, but it must deal with them, both directly and indirectly, in provable context. Therefore the first task of the new American literary historian was to discover which were or are the major American authors, and not to be misled by the fact that some of them denied their country and became expatriates, others lashed out against it with satire or overt denunciations, or escaped from it into dreams and fantasies. These are merely varying forms of relationship between the writer and his materials.

The rational view of history, which deals only with logical sequences of cause and effect, is inadequate to deal with relationships such as these. If there is one idea that most major American

authors have in common, it is the belief that life is organic; and the American literary historian can do no better than to adopt for his study an organic view of history. The individual organism follows the circular pattern of life; it has a beginning, a life cycle, and an end. This simple principle may be discovered in the structure of a poem, in the biography of an author, in the rise and fall of a local or particular cultural movement, or in the over-all evolution of a national literature. The historian's task is to discover the cycle, or cycles, by which his literature is determined both in general scheme and in detail. American literature, when reviewed in terms of its major authors and from the vantage point of the period of its greatest achievement, the twentieth century, reveals such a cyclic rhythm.

The basic theme for this rhythm is also the central historical fact of the American experiment: the removal of a mature and sophisticated civilization—that of Western Europe—to a primitive continent ideally suited to its needs and virtually unexploited of its apparently infinite natural resources. The American expansion to the West, and the impact in turn of the newly formed civilization on its parent, set the circular pattern for the whole story. On the level of symbolic illumination, the literary historian must disclose the vast and intricate pattern of this unfolding cycle, perhaps not yet completed, but firmly defined by its varied recurrences through four centuries.

When applied to the story of American literature as a whole, this cyclic theory discloses not only a single organic movement, but at least two secondary cycles as well: the literary movement which developed from the Eastern seaboard as a center, and culminated with the great romantic writers of the mid-nineteenth century; and that which grew out of the conquest of the continent and is now rounding its full cycle in the twentieth century. When applied to the individual work, the same theory supplies a formula for measuring the aesthetic distance of a poem or play or novel from its origins in some phase of American experience. The letter home comes first, then the debate on religion or philosophy, then the imitative work of art, and finally the original and organic expression of the new life. Thus the process of cultural growth into art is endlessly repeated as a civilization moves forward in time.

The historian of this process, on the other hand, takes his position in the present and looks backward over the past. His is the task

of reorganizing experience so that its larger meanings are revealed, rather than that of repeating history in all its details. He must select, omit, and reorganize from the great mass of available data so that a coherent view of the total literary culture can emerge. The broad contours of a landscape and the organic pattern of its hills and valleys can be seen only from a height at which some details are obscured and others take on meaningful relationships because of the angle of vision of the observer. The writing of history, like other forms of art, requires aesthetic distance before it can claim perspective.

This book is an essay toward such a singleness of vision. It is also and inescapably a by-product of the shared experience of editing the *Literary History of the United States*. Ideas and methods which in that project could be used only as implements of organization can here take full control because one person alone is responsible for them. The editors and contributors of that ambitious work need not be implicated in the methods and conclusions of this lesser one by a simple acknowledgment of so long and intimate an association. That several of them cared enough to read this manuscript with keen and helpful advice—in particular, Willard Thorp, Thomas H. Johnson, and Sculley Bradley—does not lessen the debt. The manuscript also owes much to the scrutiny of my wife, Mary S. Spiller, and of Thomas J. Johnston, Sigmund Skard and other friends who read all or parts of it.

Robert E. Spiller

SWARTHMORE, PA.

March 15, 1955

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THE FIRST FRONTIER

MOST of the literature of the United States is written in the English language, much of it by men and women whose forebears came from the British Isles; yet the first man from Western Europe to write home about his adventures in the New World was not an Englishman, nor was the land he discovered a part of the continental United States. Even so, the famous *Columbus Letter* (1493) sets the form and the point of view of the earliest American literature. In a far country, man's immediate impulse is to tell his distant friends of what he finds and how he fares. Columbus, a Genoese in the service of the Spanish King Ferdinand, wrote to the Royal Treasurer, "Because my undertakings have attained success, I know that it will be pleasing to you." Here was the beginning of the written record of the American adventure.

It has been said that the settlement of America was a by-product of the unsettlement of Europe, for both events took place during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Then it was that the great

mercantile powers of Spain, France, Holland, and Britain emerged from the combinations of feudal baronies that had kept the Middle Ages in a state of local and constant warfare; that Protestant reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin finally broke the authority of the medieval church-state that had dominated Europe since the fall of Rome, that the spirit of inquiry and enjoyment of the senses aroused man to his greatest age of art and learning. By 1600 Italy had its paintings and sculpture, Holland its learned skeptics and scholars, and England the great plays of Shakespeare. The horizons of the spirit and of the known geographical world expanded together. Shakespeare, the man of thought, and Columbus, the man of action—there is a parallel in the contrasting gifts of these two pioneers. The civilization of Western Europe virtually exploded of its own inner energy in the century 1500–1600, and one wave from that explosion swept over the undiscovered seas and lands to the west.

Other "letters home" reported most of the subsequent voyages of the explorers who followed during this and the next century. The empires of Spain and Portugal followed the course charted by the Genoese sailor, skirting the Gulf coast and the Caribbean Sea, centering in Mexico, and fanning out along the California coast, over the great plains to the north, and southward into Brazil and Peru. France's explorers and priests followed the course of the St. Lawrence River and the Great Lakes, and then went down the Mississippi River to cross the Spanish routes at New Orleans. British, Dutch, and Swedes came finally to settle on the fertile Atlantic coastal plain, and, held back by the mountain wall, to build the most stable of all colonial societies. In these two hundred years American literature, though little more than the report of Western European culture on the move, was as cosmopolitan as it was ever to be again.

Except for a few sturdy volumes like William Bradford's *Of Plimoth Plantation* (undertaken in 1630, first published in 1856), much of the writing left by these early explorers and settlers makes rather dreary reading today for anyone not interested in the history of probably the greatest single migration of civilization on record. Writers sought mainly to justify their own enterprises, to take possession of the new lands, riches, and peoples for the monarchs who had sponsored their undertakings, and to describe geographic and economic conditions in order to help those who were to follow them.

The temptation to belittle hardships and to overstate the possibilities of the future was great. The records of the Spanish Coronado, the French Father Hennepin, and the British adventurer Captain John Smith tell much the same story of lands rich in natural resources and peopled by strange and primitive tribes.

Forests many hundreds of years old greeted these men from Europe upon their arrival, and the elaborate trappings of their own warriors or priests contrasted sharply with the nakedness of the "savages" they meet. But these apparently primitive natives, in spite of their childlike gullibility, were the outer fringes of the ancient civilization that included the Mayas, Aztecs, and Incas, centered far to the south and west in Mexico and Peru. The people whom the white man called Indians because he thought that the land he had reached was ancient India were the nomadic descendants of rich and powerful Mongoloid races which had migrated many centuries earlier from Asia. They had probably come by way of the Bering Strait, but they had long since built their major cities and temples in the more hospitable regions nearer the Equator and had then spread out over two continents.

These men of the forest were equally unprepared for the impatient idealism that sought to convert them to Christianity and for the greed that clutched hungrily at their gold and their land. Because they were pushed back, despoiled, and exploited for three hundred years, their part in American literature is more a hint of what might have been than a record of what actually was. It seems to be a law of nature that any species will rapidly become extinct when confronted with a sudden change in environment or with a new foe whose ways it does not understand. The fact that the American Indian retreated and suffered is not necessarily an evidence of his inferiority. He left an indelible stamp upon the imagination of his conqueror. The Indian was an individualist not because he was in revolt but because he had accepted his place in the physical universe, and with it his place in his own limited society. To the white invaders he was an obstacle to be removed, but to their imaginations he often symbolized the nobility man could achieve by living openly with nature.

In describing him, the Europeans used only black or white, with no shading; and little is left of the Indian's own account of life because his poetry and prose existed only in oral tradition. He had no written record other than pictographs, and his conqueror was

not usually interested, at the time, in writing down his thoughts and feelings for him. The stoic calm of his few reported speeches and poems gives only a hint of the rich culture that was so soon forgotten.

Early descriptions of the Indian and his life by the white man are on the whole favorable, with the exception of some of the narratives of captivity. Columbus speaks of the gentleness and timidity of those he encountered on the island of San Salvador, and John Smith makes King Powhatan and his daughter Pocahontas into reasoning human beings. The French friars and the Spanish conquistadors report friendly relations except where the explorers were drawn into the internecine wars of the natives. Puritan, Moravian, and Quaker missionaries of a slightly later date were inclined to take sides in such differences, and in this way helped to cultivate the myth of the very good and the very bad Indians who found their way into later romances. Usually the Europeans were not as much interested in studying the Indian and his civilization as they were in converting him to Christianity or in using him for their own ends, and they were likely to read into his character the traits they wished to find. It was the Indian of the white man's imagination rather than the Indian of historical fact who finally became an important part of the usable past of American literature.

During the seventeenth century the Spanish and French spread out over the entire American west from the ice fields to the Equator, while the British firmly established themselves on the thin strip of the Atlantic coast. This small area of fertile land was left relatively unmolested for two centuries to develop a new civilization composed of almost all the elements thrown off by a seething Europe. French, Dutch, Scots-Irish, Welsh, and Swedes were gradually absorbed into the dominant British group. Anglicans and Roman Catholics mingled with the dissenting sects whom they had caused to emigrate, and they thus brought to the New World the full spectrum of religious beliefs and practices they had known in the Old. The solid mercantile and farming middle classes of England and Northern Europe comprised the bulk of the migrants, but there were also lords and indentured servants, Dutch patroons, and Negro slaves.

One of the miracles of history is that, by 1700, this new land had become so solid and homogeneous an association of colonies, owing fealty to the British king, mainly Protestant in religion, ag-

ricultural in economy, and English in speech. Differences from this pattern of culture, where they continued to exist, were subordinated. Former aristocrats joined with the enterprising bourgeoisie to establish a half dozen and more thriving seaport towns, to lay out acres of fertile farms, and to build the ships that were to circle the globe. Diversity within unity was from the start the shaping characteristic of the new people, their land, and ultimately their literature. Man's hunger, divided to serve both his physical and his spiritual needs, created on the continent of North America a civilization that was similarly divided because it offered tempting satisfactions on both the higher and the lower levels. The chance to create a new order that would reflect divine goodness was made to seem possible by an infinity of material resources which could as well feed the lowest desires. Perhaps in the beginning of American civilization can be found a clue to the incongruous mixture of naïve idealism and crude materialism that produced in later years a literature of beauty, irony, affirmation, and despair. The violence of twentieth century American literature owes much to the energy and the contrasts in its cultural origins.

