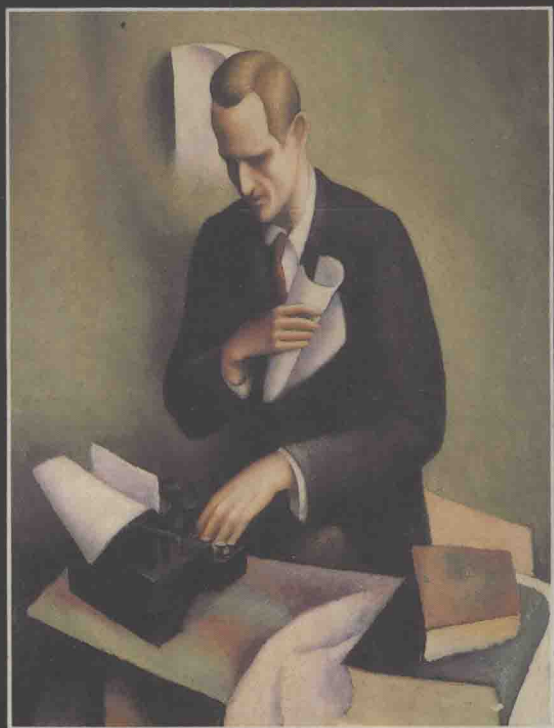


FROM
PURITANISM
TO
POSTMODERNISM

A HISTORY
OF AMERICAN
LITERATURE



RICHARD RULAND
MALCOLM BRADBURY

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These are the Gardens of the Desert, these
The unshorn fields, boundless and beautiful,
For which the speech of England has no name . . .
—WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT

Why should not we also enjoy an original
relation to the universe?

. . . America is a poem in our eyes. . . .
—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

And things are as I think they are
And say they are on the blue guitar.
—WALLACE STEVENS

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PREFACE

At the start of his book *A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writers* (1975), the American critic Hugh Kenner performs a characteristic and flamboyant act of critical magic. He links two elements in the history of the modern world that are independently celebrated, but not usually seen to be connected. One is the flight of the Wright brothers at Kitty Hawk in 1903, the first real powered flight and yet another demonstration of the way American technological know-how was rapidly changing the twentieth-century universe. The other is a work of fiction started the next year, in which the artist is portrayed as a modern flier, Stephen Dedalus. The book is, of course, James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, about a Modernist artist who soars on imaginary wings into the unknown arts, breaking with home, family, Catholic religion and his Irish nation in the process. We usually consider Joyce one of the great rootless, expatriate artists of an art of modern rootlessness, which we call Modernism. In fact one of the marks of modern writing, George Steiner has said, is that it is a writing unplaced and "unhoused." But Kenner has a different point, and suggests that Modernism did actually find a happy home. Linking American technological modernity and international Modernism, he sees a new kind of kinship being constructed. He says of the Wright brothers: "Their Dedalian deed on the North Carolina shore may be accounted the first American input into the great imaginative enterprise on which artists were to collaborate for half a century." The Wrights set the new century's modern imagination soaring; when it landed again, it landed in America.

As Kenner admits, the Modern movement did not at first shake the American soul. But a collaboration between European Modernists and American Moderns did eventually develop—first in expatriate London and Paris during the years before the First World War, then when American soldiers and fliers came to Europe to fight it, then again in the expatriate Paris of the 1920s. As European avant-garde experiments and America's Modern expectations joined, the point came when it was no longer necessary for Americans to go to or depend on Europe. Gertrude Stein said that Modernism really began in America but went to Paris to happen. Extending this bold act of appropriation, Kenner argues that, as an American renaissance flowered at home, a distinctive American Modernism grew up. Modernism's "doctrine of perception . . . seems peculiarly adapted to the American weather," he says, adding, "which fact explains why, from Pound's early days until now, modern poetry in whatever country has so unmistakably American an impress." The idea that all Modern literature is American, whether it is or not, extends through Kenner's fascinating book. On European soil, he is saying, the Modern movement was born, but it appeared unrooted. In the United States it found what it needed, a "homemade world," where it could grow in what William Carlos Williams called "the American grain." Then it could be re-exported to its origins as an approved twentieth-century product. Later history reinforced this exchange, as Modernist writers, painters and musicians fled to the United States from Nazism in the 1930s. So Bauhaus became Our House, or at least our Seagram Building, Pablo Picasso somehow translated into Paloma Picasso, and when something called Postmodernism came along everyone thought it was American—even though its writers had names like Borges, Nabokov, Calvino and Eco.

This appropriation of the new and innovative in art into an idea of American literature is not new. When the eighteenth-century Bishop Berkeley wished to celebrate the potential of colonial America, he told it that the arts naturally traveled westward: "Westward the course of Empire takes its way." A similar assumption dominated the thought of American thinkers in the years after the American Revolution. In *Pierre* (1852), Herman Melville saw Americans as history's own avant-garde, advancing into the world of untried things. When a hundred

years ago Walt Whitman introduced later editions of *Leaves of Grass* with his essay "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads" (1889), he emphasized that since the United States was the great force of material and democratic change in the world, it therefore must create a great modern literature: "For all these new and evolutionary facts, meanings, purposes," he explained, "new poetic messages, new forms and expressions, are inevitable." Gertrude Stein similarly declared the United States—with its historyless history, its novelty and innovation, its space-time continuum, its plenitude and its emptiness—the natural home of "the new composition." This was not simply an American idea: Europeans held it too. Philosophers from Berkeley to Hegel to Sartre to Baudrillard, poets from Goldsmith to Coleridge to Mayakovsky to Auden, novelists from Chateaubriand to Kafka and Nabokov, painters from Tiepolo to Picasso, felt it. As D. H. Lawrence insisted in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, published in 1923 when not just Americans but Europeans were rethinking the American tradition,

Two bodies of modern literature seem to me to come to the real verge: the Russian and the American. . . . The furthest frenzies of French modernism or futurism have not yet reached the pitch of extreme consciousness that Poe, Melville, Hawthorne, Whitman reached. The Europeans were all *trying* to be extreme. The great Americans I mention just were it.

The idea that American literature was destined to become not only an expression of American identity but the great modern literature—and therefore more than simply an American literature—has long had great power.

But matters were never so easy. Just two hundred years ago, when Americans had just completed their Revolution and were proudly feeling their identity as the First New Nation, when the Romantic revolution was developing across the West, and when with the French Revolution the calendar itself seemed to begin again, there was American writing, but there was no American literature. What existed, in those fervent years when Americans began to contemplate a great historical and transcontinental destiny, was a *desire* for one—a novel literature, that would express the spirit of independence, democracy

and nationhood. "America must be as independent in *literature* as she is in *politics*—as famous for *arts* as for *arms*," announced Noah Webster, the great American dictionary-maker and patriot, expressing a powerful popular sentiment. But other voices sounded caution—not the least of them Philip Freneau, a poet-patriot who had fought in the Revolution and celebrated the "Rising Glory of America." He warned that political independence from Europe was not the same thing as artistic independence: "the first was accomplished in about seven years, the latter will not be completely effected, perhaps, in as many centuries."

A hundred years ago, and a hundred years after Noah Webster's hopeful appeal to the coming of American literature, was another revolutionary time; the ends of centuries, including our own, often are. The modern Industrial Revolution that had begun in the wake of the other revolutions a hundred years earlier was transforming all values, religious, scientific and political. A sense of modernizing change swept the Western world; in fact, this is the moment from which we can best date the modern revolution in arts and ideas, from the emergence of scientific principles of relativity, technological developments that generated new power systems like electricity and new communications systems like the streetcar and the automobile, new intellectual systems like psychology. Ibsen and Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Zola, Freud and Bergson were transforming fundamental Western ideas. Now the great transcontinental and industrialized United States was in imperial mood, outstripping the output of Germany and Great Britain combined and looking confidently forward to the role of world power and technological superforce in the coming twentieth century, which many were already naming "the American Century." Like Webster before him, Walt Whitman declared that in this new world "new poetic messages, new forms and expressions, are inevitable." But where were they?

Between 1888 and 1890, Edmund Clarence Stedman and E. M. Hutchinson compiled their eleven-volume *Library of American Literature*, from colonial times to the present. It appeared comprehensive, but the contents made it clear what its editors considered American literature to be. It was nothing like the view we have of it today; indeed it was, as Longfellow had called it, a branch of English literature. Its

major authors were Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, William Cullen Bryant, Longfellow, Lowell, Whittier, Oliver Wendell Holmes, a largely New England pantheon. Melville—he died in 1891—was all but forgotten. Whitman—he died in 1892—was granted small recognition. Poe was a morbid castoff of German Romanticism, Hawthorne wrote rills from the town pump, Thoreau was a misanthrope. The realist and local-color movements which had dominated American writing since the Civil War were hardly acknowledged. What was seen as American literature was effectively what came to be called “the Genteel Tradition.” What, then, lay beyond the Genteel Tradition? In 1890 William Dean Howells, the “Dean” of American letters, having just moved to New York from Boston, where he had edited the magisterial *Atlantic Monthly*, published his novel *A Hazard of New Fortunes*—a very ’90s title. Henry James published *The Tragic Muse*, and his brother, William, the Harvard philosopher and pragmatist, came out with *The Principles of Psychology*, exploring many of the ideas about the importance of consciousness that would preoccupy modern minds. Thought, consciousness, James explained, did not function in a logical chain and therefore needed to be described in a new language: “A ‘river’ or a ‘stream’ are the metaphors by which it [consciousness] is most naturally described,” he wrote, and so gave us a notion, a “stream-of-consciousness,” which would help unlock our understanding of the modern fiction that was to come. William James wrote exultantly to William Howells: “The year which shall have witnessed the apparition of your *Hazard of New Fortunes*, of Harry’s *Tragic Muse*, and of my *Psychology* will indeed be a memorable one in American literature.” His words seem prophetic now, for the 1890s saw, in America as in Europe, a fundamental change of mood. But still there was no certainty about the direction of that coming literature.

So we must look later yet for the coming of that imperial confidence about American literature that informs Hugh Kenner’s book. By the First World War there was still searching doubt about the value of the American past or indeed of the American literary present. “The present is a void and the American writer floats in that void because the past that survives in the common mind is a past without living value,” complained the critic Van Wyck Brooks in 1918; “But is this the only possible past? If we need another past so badly, is it incon-

ceivable that we might discover one, that we might even invent one?" This invention of the American literary past was a significant enterprise of the 1920s, when American writing went through a remarkable modern flowering and made its international impact. Not only D. H. Lawrence but many American writers and critics undertook the task of devising a viable American literary tradition. The past that they constructed was a very different one—not a "Genteel Tradition" any longer (that was the enemy), but a literature that indeed went to the "real verge." Once-major writers became minor, and once-minor writers like Melville, Hawthorne and "our cousin Mr. Poe" became major. Writers seeking a new tradition, a fresh ABC of reading, as Pound called it, looked everywhere, at the American, the European, the Chinese and Japanese past and present. As the very American T. S. Eliot explained in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), tradition cannot be inherited; "if you want it you must obtain it by great labour."

Constructing a usable literary past for contemporary writers became one of the great projects of American fiction-making—and America's fiction included American criticism. During the 1930s, for obvious reasons in a time of political activism, it was chiefly the socioeconomic past of American literature that critics reconstructed. In the 1940s, as war came and American ideals had to be reenergized, books like F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* (1941) and Alfred Kazin's *On Native Grounds* (1942) began to insist increasingly that there was an encompassing American tradition made on American soil which had passed beyond inherited forms to construct a novel American imagination. In the 1950s, in the age of rising American confidence as its role as world power increased, works like Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* (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) and Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960) sought for distinctive American themes, myths, languages and psychic motifs with the means of modern criticism and the conviction that there was a major tradition to be recovered and explored. As American writers grew famous across a world that sought to understand American values, a very American literature rose from the interpretation of American beliefs and Amer-

ican dreams, American theologies and American democratic ideologies, American landscapes and American institutions, American ideas of mission and destiny, the achievements of what was now seen as unmistakably a “homemade world.”

These, of course, were versions, critical myths. Leslie Fiedler described his *Love and Death in the American Novel* as itself an American novel, and so it was—a fine one. All literary histories are critical fictions. But, because the needs of the American present have so often dictated the interpretations of the American literary past, to make it “usable,” American literary history is more fictional than most—one reason, perhaps, why the Modernist spirit with its own sense of being historyless in history found America such a natural home. As the critic Percy Boynton observed in 1927: “Criticism in America is implicitly an attempt by each critic to make of America the kind of country he [now we would add “she”] would like, which in every case is a better country than it is today.” At present there is something closely resembling chaos again—creative chaos, we may hope. We live or have lately lived in an age of Postmodern deconstructions, in which more energy has been put into demythologizing interpretive myths than constructing them. Earlier canonizations have led to a rage for decanonization as the desire to challenge the usable past of the moderns has become dominant. Some of this energy comes from writers who are seeking, as they should and must, to construct a new history, often a multiethnic or a more fully gendered one. Some comes from critics enjoying the lush fruits of an age of critical hyperactivity. The current flurry of theoretical debate suggests a Reformation revisited, not unrelated to the Great Awakening of the 1960s. Today there is no doubt that the map of the Postmodern world is itself changing fast. And so, of course, will its critical fictions.

As Hugh Kenner’s book suggests, anxieties of influence, appropriations of tradition, have always abounded in American writing. Writers always seek to construct the history they would most like to have. Trying to do untried things, Herman Melville conferred Shakespearean powers on his recent friend Nathaniel Hawthorne (“Some may start to read of Shakespeare and Hawthorne on the same page”). A dedication to Hawthorne then graced Melville’s own *Moby-Dick*—and so Melville appropriated the new Shakespearean heritage back to

himself. Melville was soon to be forgotten, but was recovered in the 1920s; he suddenly became a heritage again, for Hart Crane and so on to Charles Olson and many, many more. The transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, seeking the new American Poet, found Walt Whitman and hailed him "at the beginning of a great career." Whitman sought to be the grand encompassing poet of the new America that Emerson saw in prospect, but found his reputation highest in Europe; he also died in relative neglect. It was not until the Modern movement that his "new messages" began to be fully read, and poets like Ezra Pound undertook their pacts with him ("I have detested you long enough"). Henry James made an antecedent of Hawthorne, though also of the great European realists like Balzac and Flaubert. Then Gertrude Stein, Pound and Eliot made an antecedent of James, just as later poets made antecedents of Pound and Eliot. Sherwood Anderson made an antecedent of Stein and led Hemingway, Fitzgerald and Faulkner to her. In the 1940s these three went through their own period of obscurity, until in the 1950s they too became antecedents, two of them with Nobel Prizes, fit to enter the boxing ring with Norman Mailer.

This constantly renewing search, this constructing and defacing of literary monuments, this borrowing and assimilating and intertextualizing, shows us one way in which literary traditions are constructed—from the inside, by writers themselves. The process resembles what Ezra Pound loved to call the *paideuma*, the cultural distillation the artist needs to create his work. Pound tried to write the *paideuma* into his modern epic poem *The Cantos*, his "portable substitute for the British Museum" (later American poets have usually used the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian). T. S. Eliot described this constructive process in a different way when he said:

The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; in order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered . . . and this in conformity between the old and the new.

These were the Modernist versions of what we have come to call (in Harold Bloom's phrase) "the anxiety of influence," the process by

which writers both construct and deconstruct traditions for themselves, though of course in doing that they also change the views and values of contemporary critics.

American literature is indeed preeminently a modern literature, one reason why the many anthologies devoted to it are frequently divided into two volumes on different chronological scales—one dealing with the vast period since settlement in 1620, the second with the last powerful hundred years. This helps explain why, perhaps more than most literatures, American literary history is frequently dominated by the interpretations modern writers make of their predecessors. No wonder we can find so many variants of the history of American writing. A look back at older versions shows how elaborate the construct, and how massive the reversals, can be. In *The Rediscovery of American Literature* (1967) one of the present authors has illustrated how any discussion of American literature draws on long-standing speculation as old as the settlement of America from Europe itself, shaped by large questions about the nature of American experience, the American land and landscape, American national identity and the nature of language and expression in the presumed “New World.” The heterogenous elaboration of literary theories collected in his *The Native Muse* (1972) and *A Storied Land* (1976) makes clear that literary discussion is never a continuous, steady flow, but an eddy of currents which shift us from one concern to another and back again in new weather with relit landscape. They also show how obsessive the idea of the “American-ness” of American literature has been; indeed few major literatures have been as preoccupied with the idea of nationality. Yet just as the question “What then is the American, this new man?” was troubling when Crèvecoeur posed it in 1782, so it remains ambiguous and above all arguable to this day.

If we are today in a period of high argument about American origins and directions, we contend as well about the whole philosophy of literary interpretation. What we have best learned to do is multiply our questions. Is American literature writing about Americans, or by them, or even, as in Kenner’s book, literature whose very spirit makes it neo-American? Where are the limits of that literature, the edges of writing, the suitable frames in which we can set it, the aesthetic values by which we judge it? What is a canon, what is a tradition, what is an

intertextual sequence, and how subversive might these be of the idea of literary continuity? Is a reading of literature simply the sum total of the readings that various selected texts (dubiously selected, many would say) have generated? What do we mean by American, by literature, by history? Literary history must always present a more tangled web than social, political or economic history, because in the end it is always bound up with complex subjective artistic judgments and with strong human and creative emotions. A political historian may know who was President of the United States in 1810 with far more certainty than a literary historian can “know” whether Ahab is mad or Whitman a great poet. Historians can analyze Lincoln’s presidency to establish his impact on the nation with far more confidence than we can present the writings of Melville or Twain as culturally central, demonstrative of their time or of lasting value to the imagination. The fact remains that we must go with some vision of literature and history or we will simply not go at all.

We are also in a time when contemporary American writers are especially conscious of the need to reconstruct traditions for themselves: when the different ethnic groups must recover their own origins, when women writers deconstruct male fictions in the quest for a female literary past, when Modernism is over and Postmodernism is slipping behind us as we move toward a turn of the millennium and an artistic phase for which we have as yet no name. We live too in an age of rapid communications and vast, indeed parodic, cultural assimilation, where the boundaries of nations are no longer the boundaries of taste, perception or ideas. The world map of influence is changing all the time. New technologies transform the conditions of writing, the nature and transmission of the sign; new historical aspirations shape our sense of an impending era, and scientific possibilities energize us to new types of thought and new models for artistic form. As American culture has grown ever more fluid and various, its historical singularity has diminished in a world which has ever-increasing access to many things once considered part of a purely American dream. The twenty-first century offers its own prospects and its own fears, and writers are already beginning to find language for them. The modernity of Kitty Hawk and Stephen Dedalus is now a long way in the past, and our

imaginative fictions will have to define themselves afresh while at the same time making or holding to a guiding tradition.

Our own book is no less a fiction than any other. We have thought of it as a story in two senses—our own tale of a nation's literature, and the fable a country told itself as it tried to understand its own becoming in writing. The nation called itself America, and the rest of the world has called it America too, even though its land mass is only part of the northern section of the world's Western Hemisphere. For the authors, this book is one way to impose an order on 350 years of writing in what is now the United States, an order that enables a vast range of written material to stand on a single narrative continuum. It is also one version of the story that material tells, the America summoned into being by the numberless imaginations that have striven to find words and forms for new experiences, or familiar experiences encountered during new times in a new landscape. Ours is an introductory version, but we have aimed to inform it with the view that art is to be defined broadly, with a complex existence in its social, ideological and historical situation. Equally important has been the value of maintaining an international perspective; American literature, despite all its endeavor for a native distinctiveness, has remained part of a broad Western tradition, from which it has drawn at least some of its usable past, to whose present it has always contributed. Now, by virtue not only of its quality but its modern resonance, and indeed America's own power of influence and distribution as well as its possession of a world language, American literature more than ever exists for more people than simply the Americans. It is part of, and does much to shape, the writing of literature through much of the contemporary world. That is part of its power and an essential part of its interest.

One of the advantages of a collaborated book is a width of perspective, a breadth of methods and interpretations, a mix of critical attitudes and a dialogic way of writing. The authors come from the two sides of the Atlantic, and offer, as it were, both an internal and an international view. Malcolm Bradbury is a novelist and professor of American Studies at the University of East Anglia in Norwich,

England, who has written widely on American literature; he initiated the project, and in the first instance contributed much of the discussion of the Modern period and of the novel. Richard Ruland, professor of English and American literature at Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri, lectures and writes about American poetry, literary history and literary criticism; he initially contributed most of the discussion of the colonial period, nineteenth-century poetry, modern poetry and drama, and criticism. Dialogue, interchange and travel over the years created the final text, as did changing theories and events over the period of the writing. Both of us have borne it in mind that the end of the twentieth century has been marked by a vast change in the ideological map, as many of the theories and attitudes fixed by the era of the cold war have begun to collapse and many modern critical assumptions have been, indeed still are, in process of transformation and dissolution. As we have said, there can be little doubt that the last decade of the twentieth century will be as transformative and revolutionary as the close of earlier centuries, in which patterns of thought and art changed radically. Writers' views of the world will change, as will reigning critical fictions. But, if our Post-Postmodern situation has served to remind us that there are never final answers, we will nonetheless continue to wonder what American literature is, and try to construct some useful story of it.

The vision is ours. Of course it is also the sum of the experience won from the writers we have read and admired, the works that have stimulated and guided our sense of creative discovery, the accumulated readers who have used and so remade and rewritten those books, the teachers who taught us, the colleagues we have talked with, the students we have taught and learned from. From time to time both authors have made use of, and amended, some of our previous discussions of American literature in various books and periodicals. Besides those who have worked with us in the general and ever-extending debate about the history and nature of American writing, we should acknowledge some very particular debts: to the Fulbright and Guggenheim fellowship programs that brought the American author to Britain for extended stays and to those whose hospitality made this collaboration possible; to Janice Price (who first proposed this project), to Helen McNeil (who played a valuable part in the planning), Norman Holmes