

American
Literature

The Makers and
the Making

VOLUME II

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Letter to the Reader

A number of years ago the three of us, friends of long standing, came together to plan a textbook on American literature. We set out to read the body of our literature, no small part of it by some of us for the first time, and to try to divest ourselves of preconceptions about it. As we read and reread it and discussed it among ourselves, we constantly discovered new ranges of meaning, new relationships, and new dimensions of interest. In fact, as we worked and talked, our notion of the book kept changing and expanding, and what the book now is we could not have remotely envisaged in our early discussions.

We were aware that we represented divergent personalities, interests, and degrees of specialization, but we hoped to make a virtue of these very differences. Different perspectives on an author might produce a portrait more nearly in the round. Somewhat contradictory judgments might not result in mere anemic compromises but might, in fact, stimulate further explorations and new insights. At the very least, our divergences could be mutually corrective: we could hope to eliminate the more obvious errors and the more shallow oversimplifications. But allowing for differences, it was plain that we shared a community of interests within which our occasional disagreements could be contained and might even prove to have positive value.

How shall we describe that community of interests? In the first place, we were not concerned to perpetuate any previously established pattern—nor to set up a new orthodoxy. Our method was inductive, and our mode of working was social; that is, we read and we talked. There was a certain

*How we began
work on this
book*

liberation in realizing that we could discover the nature and scale of our book only in the open-ended process of our own explorations.

*What we chose
and why*

From the beginning we had to ask ourselves, in what way was material to justify itself to us for inclusion and discussion? Literary quality would obviously be the primary consideration, but early on we agreed that our book was not to be simply a treasury of masterpieces. It would also concern itself with the origin and development of masterpieces and with the circumstances that might account for the failure, or partial failure, of other works. Thus on occasion we might include a work that we thought was, by absolute literary standards, second or third rate, provided it told us something about the background of some first-rate achievement or about the taste of a period, or had proved politically significant, or illustrated a temptation to which this or that author was peculiarly susceptible.

In addition to the distinction between good and bad work, or significant and insignificant, we were forced, in choosing our materials, to recognize a more radical distinction—the distinction between what one may call “primary” and “secondary” literature. By primary literature we mean writing that was printed and transmitted as formal literary art—in this book mainly fiction and poetry, though we do include three plays. By secondary literature we mean writing that, however “artful,” was regarded by the author as an instrument for achieving some extrinsic and nonliterary purpose—works such as essays, letters, travel writing, nature writing, diaries, philosophy, and history; or compositions that have basically survived by oral transmission or at least by reason of something like “folk consciousness.”

Though it does seem sensible in a book on American literature to put stress on works that make the formal claim to be literature, we have included a large amount of secondary literature as well, and perhaps we ought to say something about what may strike some readers as an unusual hospitality toward such work. In the first place, it is not always easy to draw a hard and fast line between primary and secondary literature. Works written to serve a nonliterary purpose may also have genuine literary qualities and may even embody a powerful imaginative vision. Jonathan Edwards’ “terror sermon” at Enfield, in 1740, was presumably delivered with the aim of bringing his listeners to religious conversion, but present-day readers—whether Christians or not—recognize it as a magnificent artistic creation: and in this book, in fact, we regard it chiefly, though not exclusively, at this level. There are, however, other types of composition, folk materials especially, which, though clearly secondary by reason of origin and transmission, spring basically or in considerable part from the artistic impulse and, as in the case of Appalachian ballads or Negro spirituals and the blues, may achieve great charm or power.

But there is a reason beyond intrinsic value for drawing heavily on sec-

ondary literature. It can often throw light on the creation of primary literature and may, in fact, have inspired or nourished it. For example, the muckraking literature of the 1890's can illuminate aspects of Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*; Theodore Dreiser's autobiography can tell us much about the impulse behind his fiction and the personal experiences that he incorporated into it; and behind Mark Twain lies a vast body of folk creation. Secondary literature often represents the raw experience on which the artist worked.

Literature, clearly, does not exist in a vacuum. It feeds on life and life feeds on it. Without a deep awareness of the complex relationship between the two, the reader cannot understand nor, in the full sense, appreciate literature—even literature rigorously contemplated as art. The keenest enjoyment of literature—and the most fruitful study of it—derives from a sense of the continuing dialectic between the formal aspects of art and the raw, undefined, and finally perhaps undefinable reality that is the stuff of art. By “dialectic” we here mean the interplay between the artist's drive toward his special conception of form and meaning and the resistance set up by the qualities, and even by the competing “meanings,” of his materials. In one sense, the interplay is a contest between two sets of forces. Even the truly great artist never, perhaps, wins absolutely—or if he does win a particular battle, he never wins the war. The conflict, fought next year and on fresh terrain, will go on and on, for reality is in some sense incorrigible, perhaps never to be fully conquered—fully encompassed and understood. Yet a *Moby-Dick* or *Scarlet Letter* is an individual victory. In our selections of primary literature we have meant to take account of such victories, great and small; but we have also tried to keep alive in the reader's mind—through our selections of secondary literature and through our own critical commentaries, many of which have to do with the writer's background and problems—a sense of the stubborn, cross-grained, and ultimately mysterious reality with which the artist is forced to wrestle.

As we have said, this book has come to be very different from our original notion of it. Though we began by thinking of an anthology with relatively brief introductions and headnotes, we found, as the work proceeded, that this plan would not accommodate a discussion of the urgent issues that kept arising. Eventually we found that we were being driven to write a history, though a history of a very special kind. To begin with, we always remembered that a work of literature is written by an individual, marked by his special personality and personal past, and that the literary work represents in a deep way the writer's attempt to confront and find meaning in his experience. But the individual writer, we also wanted to emphasize, exists in a certain milieu—the political and economic context, the social institu-

How we came
to see our
book as a
“history”

tions, the emotional and intellectual climate; and literature, as we have suggested, represents a continuing dialectic between the individual and his world. Thus, in one perspective at least, our book developed into a history of the American sensibility. But it remains peculiarly a *literary* history in that it characteristically takes into account aesthetic considerations and theories, the growth of literary modes, techniques, and forms, and the changes in literary tastes and fashions. Nor could such a history fail to recall, if only occasionally and sparingly, literary and intellectual currents emanating from Great Britain and Europe.

Yet our concern remained focused, naturally, on the American scene, and we became more and more urgently aware of what may be called thematic continuities in American history, which, in turn, become the basic and recurring themes of American literature. Here is a very informal list: America vs. Europe, relation of the past and the future to the present; East vs. West; the American "mission," the American Eden, and millennialism; apocalypse—the coming horror; the self vs. society, secession vs. unity, private intuition vs. collective wisdom; materialism vs. idealism; technology vs. nature (including human nature); poetry vs. science.

All of this sounds very ambitious and pretentious—even, perhaps, schematic and abstract. But our history is in fact informal and essayistic. It reflects the inductive process of reading, discussing, and working outward from the individual works of literature. Our historical commentary is constantly interrupted by a contemplation of particular poems and pieces of fiction. The reader is thus forced to return again and again, as we were, to the concrete literary documents. These are never merely "illustrations" of historical generalizations. If a literary work has any artistic value it will always reveal itself to be in excess of the historical comment, speaking to the reader in its own mode and living its own life. Though we trust that our commentaries will throw some light on the literature presented here, we are never allowed to forget that the literature presented is also lighting up history—is even changing history. In dealing with literature we have sought, above all, to give a sense of the "thingness" rather than the "aboutness"—we want the sense of "aboutness" in the end to return the reader to a richer experience of the literature itself.

Some critical approaches

In this book we have engaged in several kinds of literary criticism, and they can be best distinguished by referring to the "three R's" of criticism—the writer, the writing, and the reader. In a certain sense, a piece of writing can, indeed, be said to exist in itself, and can be examined more or less in its own terms. But it also exists in a shifting complex of relationships, each of which contributes in a subtle and sometimes mysterious way to the actuality—even the aesthetic actuality—of the work. A work, of course, is

created by an individual in his particular evolving world, but it is responded to variously, by readers of widely different backgrounds, and over successive generations. It has, too, its own literary ancestry, but it may, in its turn, exert influence on later work and, even, on general attitudes toward life.

We feel such relationships to be complex rather than simple, dynamic rather than static. As with the biographer's help we learn more about Hemingway's personal life, and with the historian's help more about the epoch he lived through, we may find ourselves perceiving more artistry and more richness of experience in, say, *A Farewell to Arms*. Melville was a good deal ahead of his time, imaginatively and as a literary technician; today *Moby-Dick* is understood so much more fully than it was a century ago that in some real sense it has become a different book. When Emily Dickinson's poems were first published in the 1890's, critical theory and literary taste were simply not ready to cope with them; but developments in criticism in the twenties and thirties of this century, the resulting return to favor of seventeenth-century English metaphysical verse, and a clearer grasp of the American romantic tradition prepared a generation of readers for whom it could almost be said that Dickinson's poetry had at last been born.

To such aspects as these we have tried to do some justice, but they do not exhaust the critical possibilities. There is, for instance, what is known as genre criticism, a mode much in fashion today and in certain quarters brilliantly practiced. In some respects, this approach develops out of formal criticism (which stresses the work, the writing), but genre criticism aims to identify and to define the literary work as a member of a special class rather than to evaluate it for itself. With genre study as a self-enclosed system we ourselves have here little to do; but some discrimination among literary forms has, of course, been an indispensable part of our job. We have pursued the distinction, somewhat anxiously debated in the early nineteenth century, between the "novel" and the "romance"; later, we have traced the ascendancy of romance fiction in the work of Hawthorne and Melville; and we have had a good deal to say about the realistic novel in its various states from Howells through Stephen Crane to Dreiser and beyond. In poetry, "imagism" and "symbolism" demanded discussion, and long ambitious poems, like Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, and Archibald MacLeish's *Conquistador*, required some reflection on the traditional epic and its availability as a genre to poets in our time.

As an example of the flexibility of critical treatment we have tried to maintain, take the case of Henry James's "The Jolly Corner." It is a kind of ghost story of 1909 in which a man (after half a lifetime's absence) returns to this country to inspect his property on a "jolly corner" in New York City, and, as he wanders through the house at night, finds that he is stalking a phantom figure who oddly and menacingly seems to resemble him. Immedi-

ately preceding the story is an editorial headnote that very briefly combines three different critical perspectives: first, with James's help it identifies the genre of the story—a ghost story of the kind James liked as being akin to the fairy tale; second, it relates the work to James's visit to the United States in 1904–5, his first view of his native country in more than two decades; and third, it offers a few analytic remarks and raises a question or two about the inner movement of the tale.

But the headnote, especially under the second and third topics, simply brings to focus certain issues treated in more detail elsewhere in the section on James. For the second topic, there is considerable biographical material in the general introduction to James, material that will allow the student to locate the story in the larger frame of James's life. He will find there a discussion of James's slowly worked out and fateful decision to expatriate himself and to pursue the life of art in England and on the Continent—an act whose consequences reverberated through the writing of "The Jolly Corner" and beyond it. The biographical account can also help the student to perceive the story as one moment in the unending process by which James sought to understand his own nature. One of the creative motives behind the story is, we suggest, James's deep suspicion that had he remained in America instead of becoming an expatriate he might have succumbed, in some degree at least, to the demoralizing materialism by which, as he saw it, the country was being consumed; and, as the headnote to "The Jolly Corner" indicates, we have provided, in a selection from *The American Scene*, a glimpse of the New York that the returning James found under the spell of rampant and disorderly greed. Furthermore, we have given a broader context to the world of New York by a discussion, in the preliminary note to the period 1861–1914, of the dominant values in America during the Gilded Age and the decades following.

James was an extraordinarily fascinating individual, and the relation of his work to his period is fascinating and complex; and in our space we have been able to do little more than suggest the biographical and social origins of "The Jolly Corner"; even so we have had to push on beyond those concerns, for, after all, the story itself is central to our interest. So we have tried to offer in the introduction a sufficient amount of analysis and commentary on style to allow the student to grasp the rich implications of the story and to arrive at some estimate of James as a literary craftsman.

We do not mean to suggest by this anatomy of the critical context of "The Jolly Corner" that there is a set pattern which we have followed in every case. There is, obviously, considerable difference in the scale of various treatments, in procedure and emphasis. In one case, we may have felt that the most useful thing we can say about a work in the headnote is to mention the historical event that inspired it; in another—say, a poem by Emily Dick-

inson—it might have seemed appropriate to limit comment to analysis of her unusual manner of punctuation or to point out the alternative verbal possibilities she can be shown to have contemplated; in still a third, the point worth making may be the work's place in some particularly American literary tradition.

The introductions to authors vary in much the same way as do those to individual works. Whittier, for instance, requires us to look more closely at the politics of his time (in particular, the antislavery movement) than does Edwin Arlington Robinson or Hart Crane. Henry James was, in his own phrase, "that obstinate finality," an artist: the growth of his art and of James himself as a personage in the world of letters occupies much of the James section. William Faulkner has clearly emerged as one of the towering figures in American literary history and would undoubtedly warrant the elaborate separate treatment accorded to Hawthorne, Melville, Mark Twain, and Dreiser; yet, in our view, Faulkner can best be understood and appreciated within the long and mixed tradition of southern writing, and he appears accordingly as the climax of two related sections, the first of which goes back as early as 1861. By the time we come to his work in the second of these sections, so much has been said about "the southern imagination" and southern culture and society that relatively few words are needed to introduce Faulkner himself, before getting on into the riches of his fiction.

How to handle the novel was one of our most vexing problems, and one for which, at various times, we considered different solutions. Of the American novels written before the Second World War, there are, we decided, nine necessary to a basic knowledge of American literature—though this is not to say that all nine can always be read in a single course. The novels are:

*A special
topic: the
novel*

The Scarlet Letter, by Hawthorne

Moby-Dick, by Melville

One of the several masterpieces by Henry James (*Portrait of a Lady*, *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Golden Bowl*)

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, by Twain

The Red Badge of Courage, by Crane

An American Tragedy, by Dreiser

The Great Gatsby, by Fitzgerald

The Sun Also Rises or *A Farewell to Arms*, by Hemingway

One of the several masterpieces by Faulkner (*The Sound and the Fury*, *Light in August*, *Absalom, Absalom!*)

The nine basic novels could not, of course, be accommodated in this work; they would run to more than 1,500,000 words—that is, to three-quarters of

the available space in our volumes. In addition to these nine items, there are also other novels with which, for a variety of reasons, we think the student should have more than a passing acquaintance:

The Leatherstocking cycle, by Cooper
Uncle Tom's Cabin, by Stowe
The Rise of Silas Lapham or *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, by Howells
Main Street or *Babbitt*, by Lewis
Look Homeward, Angel or *Of Time and the River*, by Wolfe
U.S.A., by Dos Passos
Miss Lonelyhearts or *The Day of the Locust*, by West
Studs Lonigan, by Farrell
The Grapes of Wrath, by Steinbeck
Native Son, by Wright

We realize, of course, that America has no more persuasive claim to literary eminence than its novelists. Yet to include even three or four novels (but which three or four?) would have severely restricted our use of other material that we felt to be of the utmost importance and that was readily adapted for our use and not always readily available elsewhere. So for complete texts of novels we are depending on the many available soft-cover editions, from among which the teacher can make his own selections. We have, however, provided here elaborate discussions and analyses of the nine novels we have named as basic, and somewhat more limited treatments of the novels on our second list, plus a few others besides.

In spite of the fact that a part of a novel cannot stand for the whole, we have sometimes, nevertheless, printed particular sections of a number of novels. We have done so for special reasons, trying to consider each case on its own merits. For instance, the Leatherstocking cycle is, we think, basic; but, clearly, the whole cycle could not be used in a course, nor does any one novel suggest the impact of the whole. So we have used key parts of each of the items in the cycle to give a sense of the structure and meaning of the whole. A teacher may wish, of course, to use one complete novel (and that, if time permits, would be highly desirable), but even so, he could scarcely expect one novel to stand for the cycle.

To take another kind of example, we have used a sequence from *An American Tragedy* that we regard not only as central to an understanding of that novel and of Dreiser's method, but as central to Dreiser's work in general. Even if a teacher should agree with us that *An American Tragedy* is basic, he might not, because of its length, want to require that his students read it; in which case, our selection, in conjunction with the critical