A History of American Literature

美国文学史

By

童明著

TOMING

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Introduction

Writing A History of American Literature has been an extraordinary experience for me insofar as I have been keenly aware that the book is meant especially for "you," readers in China and in other parts of Asia. To visualize "you" in my mind is not difficult. After all we share China (and Asia) as our cultural home and we share the interest in exploring the literature of a leading Western country. I was born and raised in China and left it in my twenties to pursue graduate studies in the United States. Since then I have been living there and for nine years I have been a professor at an American university, teaching American and European literature. You now know the reason why I value this book so highly. As we Chinese say, an army maintained for a thousand days is used for a single moment. For me, this is the moment. It is the moment when all the years of my learning and teaching overseas could be presented in a systematic fashion to a readership so dear to my heart.

Many of you who read this book, I imagine, have specialized interests in American literature and culture. You are scholars of American literature. Many of you are students taking classes in American literature. Many others are not necessarily specialized in the field, but you can read in English and you do like the subject area and would like to learn something about American culture from the book. Yes, the book is also meant for you. After all, the literary history of a country is also its spiritual history. I wrote the book visualizing all of you and imagining your different needs. You are my source of inspiration. I hope you will like this book and find it useful.

To explain the book's usefulness to you, I anticipate two questions you might raise. How is this book different from other books on the same subject? What features in this book are user-friendly? (Or, how do I use this book?) Of course, the two questions are related.

Because of several factors, this might be the first book of its kind, namely, this is a comprehensive survey of American literature that is written in English, by a Chinese scholar living in the U.S., for readers in China and Asia, and is published in China. This means that my approach should be somewhat different from other surveys. In the United States, there are two general approaches. One approach is to compile a reading anthology that includes selected works of major writers in various time periods; for each writer there is a brief introductory essay which provides information about author but not any specific analysis of texts; it is expected that the student will read the selected texts on his/her own. The other approach is to give a 400-some-page narrative of American literary history; such a narrative is often quite comprehensive in coverage but, again, does not offer detailed analysis of texts. Neither approach combines the evaluation of literary development with specific interpretation of major works. Neither meets the needs of Chinese and Asian readers. Besides, a Chinese/Asian perspective very rarely informs the selections and analyses in these approaches.

In comparison, our book, A History of American Literature, has the following characteristics:

• In addition to covering the major trends and authors in all historical periods, A History offers synopses and analyses of selected works of major writers. These analyses are meant to offer precise introductions to the aesthetic, cultural and historical values of the authors and their works. In the case of a major author's major work, the analysis can be as detailed as a brief interpretive essay. Depending on your needs, you can read the book as a complete story of American literature from the beginning to the present. Or you can use it as a reading companion, reading specific sections in it thoroughly while you are taking (or teaching) a class in American literature or while you are reading a given author or authors on your own.

- A History adopts a perspective sensitive to the global views of Chinese and Asian readers. I adopt a narrative point of view that is double. I speak as an "insider" or as someone intimate with the cultural and intellectual currents in the United States. I also speak as an "outsider," an Asian looking at the development of American literature with both appreciation and critical distance. This duality is consistent with my position, shared with many American scholars, that the roots of American literature are multicultural, not just British. Thus, I begin the survey focusing on the multicultural roots and continue with attentiveness to the richly diverse and interwoven textures of American literary history. In particular, I give due emphasis to American authors who have learned, borrowed or incorporated Asian cultural heritage into their literary creations. I also include anecdotes and events of special interest to Chinese readers, whether they are about Columbus, Franklin, Whitman, Arthur Miller or others. More importantly, I give special (though not comprehensive) emphasis to Asian American writers and diaspora writers.
- How American literature is perceived and surveyed has changed significantly in the United States since the late 1970s. In addition to being sensitive to the needs of Chinese and Asian readers, the perspective of the book has absorbed the wisdom of deconstruction, postcolonial criticism and studies in globalization. As a result, the narrative by design, selection and emphasis challenges those who perceive or assess American literature and culture from within the U.S. national boundaries. Whenever appropriate, the book explores the international and intercultural dimensions of American literature.
- So far, surveys of American literary history, whether published in China or in the United States, either stop shortly after the 1960s or tend to be too brief about contemporary developments. Our book extends the search to include the most vibrant authors in recent decades. Some contemporary writers included here have

never been included in any comprehensive surveys. Some others I have updated with new information. The final chapter, focused on diasporic writers and the effects of globalization on American literature, represents a new perspective that is now gaining momentum in the American academia.

Indeed, most of the information in the book is not new and nor should it be. Any survey of American literature has to be solidly built upon previous studies. This book is no exception. In writing this book, I consulted voluminous sources and included many of my own lecture notes that reflect the dialogical situations in the American classroom. Writing the book from start to finish was so energetic and exciting a process that it seemed to me at times that the book was writing itself. Still, some features are carefully planned. Here are some user-friendly features that you should know:

- The book is divided into five parts for five major historical periods. With the exception of Part 1, the first chapter in each of the following parts Parts 2, 3, 4 and 5 offers a panoramic view of a given period, defining important operating terms and explaining the characteristic trends in historical, aesthetic and philosophical terms. For example, Chapter 21, which is the first chapter for Part 5, includes four sections: "The Period: A Narrative in Two Parts"; "Existentialism"; "Postmodernism"; "Theory and Deconstruction." These sections together provide an analysis of the conditions that give rise to the diversity of American literature from 1945 to the 21st century. In short, these "first" chapters can be read as individual essays on such general themes as American Romanticism, American Realism, American Modernism and Diversified American Literature since 1945.
- As it is unavoidable in a book of this scope and this length, a few writers receive only a passing mention. Some of the writers you know are perhaps not included. However, in the case of each of the major writers included, there is ample information of his/her life, assessment of his/her accomplishment, the author's own terms

of references that readers should know, the author's stylistic hall-mark and aesthetic contribution, the major works, and some sample works analyzed in some detail. The narrative order in each case may vary. For example, biographical information may be presented first in one case but last in another. The life story of one author is described in detail but in another case only minimal attention is given to the life. It all depends on necessity. Each writer is presented in a narrative I consider to be most befitting to the case.

- Part 1, "Early American Literature," discusses 26 writers. Part 2, "American Romanticism," covers 14 writers. Part 3, "American Realism," includes specific information/analysis of 14 writers. Part 4, "American Modernism," engages 21 writers. And Part 5, "American Literature Diversified," provides up-to-date information for as many as 39 writers. No significant question in any period is left out. Yet, the book tilts in emphasis towards modern and contemporary trends. Much of what is provided in Part 5 is new, not only in China but also in the United States.
- The "Chronology of Historical Events" does not appear to be directly relevant to the literary events discussed in the book. However, much of what is needed to understand a literary text is often only implied or assumed in that text and the reader has to locate those assumptions and implications in a specific historical context. Thus, the "Chronology" is one of the tools with which you can invoke the historical imagination.
- "Selected Bibliography" is meant as a list of further readings.

I am a reader before I am a writer. As one reader to another reader, let me wish you a happy reading adventure. Bon voyage!

December 5, 2001



Toming (pen name, a.k.a. Liu Junl was born in China and received his education in China, England and the United States. He got his Ph.D. from University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Currently, he is Associate Professor in the Department of English at California State University, Los Angeles where he teaches American literature, European literature and Theory. He has published widely on issues related to American literature and to Asian diaspora in American academic forums. In addition to his academic accomplishment, Toming also worked as a translator at the Secretariat of the United Nations in the early 1980s.

Contents

Introduction iii

Part 1 Early American Literature: Colonial Period to 1815

- 1 The Literature of the New World 3
- 2 The Literature of Colonial America: 1620 1763 12
- 3 Literature and the American Revolution: 1764 1815 39

Part 2 American Romanticism: 1815 — 1865

- 4 The Age of American Romanticism 65
- 5 Early Romanticism 69
- 6 Transcendentalism and Symbolic Representation 86
- 7 Interrogating Innocence 101
- 8 Whitman and Dickinson 120
- 9 A House Divided: Writing against Slavery 132

Part 3 American Realism: 1865 — 1914

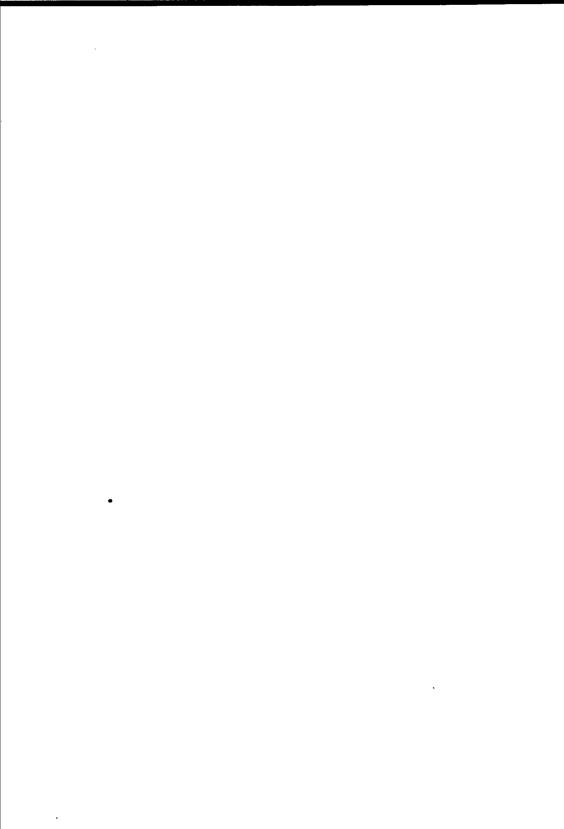
- 10 The Age of Realism 141
- 11 Regional and Local Color Writing 145
- 12 Henry James and William Dean Howells 154
- 13 Literary Naturalism 164
- 14 Women Writing on the Woman Question 173

American Modernism: 1914 — 1945 Modernism in the American Grain 16 The Evolution of Modernism American Modernism in Europe 17 224 18 Modern Fiction between the Wars 19 Modern American Poetry 247 African American Literature and Modernism 20 Part 5 American Literature Diversified: From 1945 to the 21st Century Literature Diversified under New Conditions 21 269 American Theatre: Three Major Playwrights 280 Major Fiction Writers: 1945 till 1960s 24 Poetic Tendencies since 1945 25 Fictional Inclinations since the 1960s 327 26 Contemporary Multiethnic Literature 336 27 Globalization of American Literature: Diasporic Writers 354 Selected Bibliography 377

Index 399

Chronology of Historical Events

PART 1 EARLY AMERICAN LITERATURE: COLONIAL PERIOD TO 1815



DISCOVERIES OF AMERICA

"America," when it is used as a reference to "the New World," is inclusive of North and South Americas. When we say "American literature" in this book, we mean the body of literature created in the United States, which is in North America. However, while the nationhood of the United States may be traced to the American Revolution, the cultural—indeed, multicultural—roots of the United States are to be found in the various explorations of the New World. Thus, when we begin a history of American literature with those exploration writings related to the discoveries of America, we begin with a historical time when the United States was not yet founded and with an "America" in the broader sense.

Who discovered America? The credit often goes to Christopher Columbus. The moment when the new continent was "discovered" is said to be as exact as 2:00 a.m., Friday, October 12, 1492 when Columbus recorded how he spotted the land. Yet Columbus' reputation as the discoverer of the New World is highly ironic because he really thought that he had reached Asia. As it might be of interest to Chinese readers, the story of Columbus is related to the larger European myth of China several centuries ago. When Columbus set sail from Spain on August 3, 1492, he was looking for a convenient sea passage to the Orient, or, more specifically, a passage to the land of Kublai Khan as Marco Polo had described it in his thirteenth century travelogues. He was so convinced that he had reached the land described by Marco Polo that in the four voyages he made to the New World between 1492 and 1502, he interpreted everything he saw

according to his pre-established view of what Asia should look like.

Another noteworthy discoverer of America as a distinctly new region is the Florentine navigator Amerigo Vespucci. It is in the story of Vespucci that the New World became "America." Vespucci sailed to Brazil in 1501 under the Portuguese flag and he noted: "we arrived at a new land which ... we observed to be a continent." In 1503 his book Mundus Novus (The New World) was in print and was more widely circulated than anything written by Columbus. A German geographer, Martin Waldseemuler, found Vespucci's work when he was preparing a new edition of the world's map. It was he who decided that the new land should be named after its finder: Amerigo. On his 1507 world map, this German geographer marked the new territory — what he called the "fourth part" of the world following Europe, Africa, and Asia — as "America." Vespucci as an explorer, however, is not without controversy. For instance, he fabricated the story that he had made a 1497 voyage during which he found the Southern American continent. It is quite possible that he made up the story to beat Columbus as the first discoverer.

At any rate, it was Vespucci's writings and Waldseemuller's map that made Europeans aware of the "fourth part" of the world. The Europeans then understood that Columbus' description of the New World as a string of Asian islands was quite misleading. To the New World called "America" European settlers gradually came.

As long as we are considering the "origin" of America, we cannot forget that those who first discovered America were not Europeans but indigenous people. According to one theory, the indigenous people, some 12, 000 years ago, were Asian hunters who crossed the land bridge that is now the Bering Strait. But at least some of the indigenous people must have *always* lived in America, as we might surmise from their creation narratives. Since much of the European exploration literature is informed by the Judeo-Christian account of creation from Genesis in the Bible, it is important that we compare that to the creation narratives from the cultures of the indigenous people.

If we pause to consider why it is necessary to begin the history of American literature with these (and other) discoveries, we may find these reasons. First, that the discoveries are so diverse in their cultural and historical situations that we are reminded that what is "American" — a ques-

tion which is repeatedly raised and debated—cannot be defined from the perspective of a single culture. Cultural pluralism is a norm in the United States today, but this belief is rooted in the diverse origins of America and it grew more vigorous with succeeding waves of immigrants from different continents of the world, including Asia. There is, of course, the view that insofar as English has become the predominant American language, American literature must be defined with its British sources of origin. Our counter argument is this: American English consists of many cultural strains; it evolved as people of different national and cultural backgrounds came to America, discovered America in their own terms, and added their own linguistic and cultural attributes to the English language in America.

Even if we only focus on the European colonial experience in the New World, we would still question the conventional view that Captain John Smith (1580 — 1631), an English man, was the first *American* writer. We know that at least the Spanish had *preceded* the English in arriving in the New World and in creating a New World literature. By the mid-18th century, Spain's influence extended to all areas west of Mississippi and south of the Oregon country as well as Florida and territories south of Tennessee. Then, there was the French influence, which was in the Northeast, the Midwest and throughout Canada. The Dutch were also involved in the colonization of the New World. They controlled Manhattan Island along with the fertile Hudson Valley.¹

Another reason why we begin American literary history with discoveries is that discovery or exploration has become part of the American spirit. The 19th century American writer Thoreau, in *The Maine Woods*, said it well that America is *always* in the process of being discovered. After the Age of Exploration, many American writers continued the spirit of discovery in that they pursued a world that is always new and exciting. Thus, the discovery gained metaphysical and metaphorical significance. In that sense, the discovery of America was not only the pursuit in the New World but also of the new in the world.

¹ The Dutch cultural presence in connection with the American life is reflected in Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* (1925) where Nick Carraway the narrator finally links the tragic story of Gatsby with the American dream by reflecting on "Dutch sailors eyes" on "a fresh, green breast of the New World."

NATIVE AMERICAN ORAL LITERATURE

The term "Indian" ("los Indios") was, in fact, a misnomer. Columbus used the word at first to refer to the peoples he found in the Bahamas in October 1492, because, until his death, Columbus thought he had discovered Asia. Ethnographers today call the peoples who were in North America before the European settlement "Native Americans," although many Native Americans today call themselves "American Indians." The native peoples had traditions antedating Christianity and European social organizations. Two most advanced civilizations—the Maya and the Aztec —had once been great empires. By the time the Spanish arrived in Americas, the Maya civilization, already in the decline, had invented systems of writing, mathematics and a calendar. But the majority of native cultures were sustained through the oral tradition. Historical records indicate that the destruction of the ancient civilizations in the hands of the Spanish was severe; that natives in areas taken over by the English, French and Dutch fared somewhat better although the changes imposed by the European settlers were no less traumatic.

When Native Americans first became aware of the European civilization through their "contact" (a neutralized word employed sometimes by historians) with the Europeans, they were more than ten million in population and they represented a wide variety of cultures with different ancestries, different structures for distributing authority and responsibility, and different economic systems. These tribal cultures spoke more than 350 languages and they had developed genre systems such as speech, chant, and song. Today, two million of their descendants live in the United States, and in regions north of America, approximately 200 languages are still in use. For students of American literature, some knowledge of the native oral literature is indispensable in that this oral tradition is the very foundation of native written literature in the 20th century.

Since most Native American stories were orally passed on, these tales then have a performance dimension: they are not only "told" but also "sung" as chants and songs. They are also dramatized in ritual dances. Ritual dances are often based on tribal tales that tell of places far off or of geographical locations only the tribal audience would know. Many of

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