Annette T. Rubinstein

AMERICAN LITERATURE ROOT AND FLOWER

Significant Poets, Novelists & Dramatists
1775—1955

VOLUME I

美国文学源流

AMERICAN LITERATURE

ROOT AND FLOWER

Significant Dramatists 1775–1955

Volume I

by

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The Great Tradition in English Literature:
From Shakespeare to Shaw

Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press
Beijing

Published in 1988 by

Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press
19 Xisanhuan Beilu, Beijing, China

In Memory of

Marc, Charles, Arthur

Three Beloved Comrades

who

spent their lives all too quickly

in

the never ending struggle

for

human freedom

PREFACE

This book was, in immediate terms, initiated by a delightful group of young Chinese men and women with whom I re-explored the field of American literature in 1982–1983. During that school year I taught American and English literature at the Beijing Institute of Foreign Languages, now the Beijing Foreign Studies University. The advanced students and instructors there, as well as similar groups in Beijing University and other institutions of higher education at which I lectured that winter, were all using my critical history, *The Great Tradition in English Literature: From Shakespeare to Shaw*. They demanded a companion volume for American studies.

I had for twenty years been promising American and European colleagues such a book, and was by then adept at plausible postponements. But my Chinese friends returned to the attack week after week with such polite persistence that it finally became easier to surrender than to resist.

There are already many fine studies of individual authors written from a similar social–aesthetic viewpoint; for example F. O. Matthiessen's *Theodore Dreiser* and Newton Arvin's *Nathaniel Hawthorne*. There are also a few good books which analyze brief periods or specific movements with a concern for both historical causation and literary quality. But there is to my knowledge no other over-all survey which critically considers our developing literature in relation to the culture out of which it grew and the political-economic scene it reflected and, often, affected.

In this account of American novels, poetry and drama from the revolution through the Second World War I have used biograpical as well as historical material, combined with an intensive consideration of certain individual works, to present what seems to me the significant content of the whole. Every important work is, I believe, deeply rooted in the life of the writer's own time whether in affirmative or adversary terms, whether consciously or unconsciously, whether expressed realistically or symbolically. The greater and more individual the writer, the

more profoundly that writer speaks for others while speaking for himself or herself. As Van Wyck Brooks said in his seminal work, *America's Coming of Age*: "The more deeply and urgently you feel the pressure of society, the more deeply and consciously and fruitfully you become yourself."

The writers selected for substantial consideration in these pages are, with very few exceptions, those commonly included in traditional histories of American literature. However a number who are ordinarily presented at some length are here treated only briefly for reasons indicated in the specific discussions themselves. Limitations of space have precluded any extended treatment of some valuable secondary figures, although many of these are mentioned and even quoted.

The book proceeds chronologically with one important exception. While black writers are referred to throughout in their own periods there is also a special chapter tracing the history of black literature in the United States from the oral folk tales and songs of slavery to the mid-twentieth century.

In that chapter, as elsewhere, I have included many of the informal comments made by writers about their contemporaries. I believe that readers can relate much more humanly and realistically to the great figures of the past when they understand how directly these related to each other, how intimately concerned they were with each other's ideas, whether in agreement or disagreement.

Another unconventional feature here is the frequent indication and even citation of diametrically opposed judgments by respected critics who differ substantially with each other or myself about the merit, or even the meaning, of specific works. It is, I think, important for students to realize that sometimes well qualified scholars can arrive at such different conclusions. This realization encourages one to think independently and assess honestly one's own reaction to a work of art. For the foreign reader it is also valuable in bringing the American cultural scene more vividly into view.

Finally, I have used an unusual amount of summary and direct quotation from important works by major writers. It has always seemed to me absurd to discuss unilaterally, so to speak, material that readers have no opportunity to sample for themselves. One might as well offer a menu instead of a meal and expect one's guests to develop a taste for the dishes listed there. Limited as the bits and pieces here presented necessarily are, even a slight acquaintance with an author's own work may well create an

appetite for more. I have therefore taken every occasion in these pages to let my old friends speak for themselves, hoping they will thus make many new friends in China and elsewhere.

Acknowledgements

Writing is a lonely business and long distance writers are especially appreciative of the sustained comradely interest which helps to temper their solitude. I am therefore extremely grateful for such support from my friend in Beijing, Marcia Marks, as well as my friends in the United States, Louis Harap, Irving Kaplan and Dorothy Markey, for their careful reading of chapter after chapter throughout the past three years.

My dear sister and brother, RuthJean Eisenbud and Irwin Rhodes, have consistently offered sharp criticism, good advice and warm encouragement.

The intelligent cooperation of two conscientious word processors, Mary Adams and Martha Herbert, has been invaluable in expediting the work and my nephew, Robert Rhodes, has generously spent precious time, energy and expertise far beyond any call of family duty to bring it to a happy ending.

I must also thank Malcolm Cowley and his publishers at Viking Penguin for their generous permission to use an extravagant number of quotations from his book, *The Literary Situation*.

Finally I wish to express my deep gratitude for the unfailing patience and personal concern of editors of Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. Their meticulous, knowledgeable and sensitive copy editing is truly extraordinary, and a major contribution to whatever merit this book may claim.

The author

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CHAPTER I

AMERICAN, NOT ENGLISH, LITERATURE

SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES

Today when American films, thrillers and best sellers are flooding Asian as well as European markets, and when Mickey Mouse or Donald Duck is at least as well known in Latin America as the Tres Cochinitos (the three little pigs), or Conejo Blas (the white rabbit), it may seem superfluous to insist on the literary independence of the United States, past or present. And truly, the influence of American literature has now also sped eastward across the Atlantic so that the second half of the twentieth century has seen a growing rapprochement. The differences between literature in Europe and the United States are today little more fundamental or consistent than those between, for example, Germany and Italy or France and England.

It is none the less true that the entire early consideration of our greatest nineteenth century writers — who were almost invariably appreciated in England long before they were recognized at home — and much of the non-specialist approach to them in our schools even today ignores essential differences. This blurs not only their literary significance but also their relation to, and our understanding of, the peculiar development of life in the United States.

That has indeed been the theme of a large number of such interesting critiques, written since the early nineteen-fifties, as Richard Chase's *The American Novel and Its Tradition* and Ibn Hassan's *Radical Innocence*. But there has been remarkably little awareness of these discussions by the general reader or in the teaching of American literature on an undergraduate level, the level where most non-specialists form their basic attitudes.

We must therefore begin this survey of American literature (from the

revolution through the Second World War) with some discussion of the factors which, from the very outset, shaped a recognizably new literature in the new nation. For it was a new literature despite its unquestioning use of English, the language the earliest settlers brought with them across the Atlantic.

The first important difference is simply stated. In a sense the development of North American literature reversed the history of every other national literature. Instead of beginning with folk tales and songs it began with abstractions and proceeded from philosophy to fiction.

The printing press had been re-invented in Europe by 1437 (its creation in China four centuries earlier was then unknown) and the early colonists were more generally literate than their countrymen at home. The colonies therefore developed no oral or folk literature, such as had characterized the first stages of English, French, German, Italian, Russian, Spanish and, indeed, all European, if not all world, culture. Furthermore, the influential Protestant work ethic, reinforced by the practical necessities of a hard pioneer life, inhibited the development of any reading matter designed simply for leisure-time entertainment. ("The Protestant work ethic" is further discussed below, but may be briefly defined here as the belief that work itself is a good in addition to what it achieves; that time saved by efficiency or good fortune should not be spent in leisure but in doing further work; that idleness is always immoral and likely to lead to even worse sin since "the devil finds work for idle hands to do".)

The pre-revolutionary writing in the colonies was, therefore, essentially of two kinds: (1) practical matter-of-fact accounts of farming, hunting, travel, etc. designed to inform people "at home" what life was like in the new world, and, often, to induce their immigration; (2) highly theoretical, generally polemical, discussions of religious questions.

These theological arguments were soon supplemented by political debates about the colonies' relations with the mother country. Those varied from abstract legalistic discussions to such effective hardhitting statements as Tom Paine's popular revolutionary pamphlet, *Common Sense* and Thomas Jefferson's draft of the Declaration of Independence.

In addition to this unique non-existence of any popular or folk literature, and the existence of a substantial body of widely read, highly theoretical writing, the accounts of personal experiences also differed from similar English reports. Even those colonists simply recounting their person-

al experiences wrote in an unusually self–conscious and explicit manner. They knew they were not talking to neighbors but reporting to people at a distance, people altogether ignorant of the circumstances of their lives. Finally, there was also a vitally important philosophy, characteristic of life in the United States which differentiated, in degree at least, its culture and therefore its literature from that of Europe.

As early as 1831 a French observer, Alex de Tocqueville, wrote a most perceptive book, *Democracy in the United States*, brilliantly summarizing the results of his yearlong travels there. He begins the third chapter headed "Individualisme" by saying that "individualism is a novel expression to which a novel idea has given birth." What was this idea which de Tocqueville found uniquely pervasive in the life of the young republic, and where did it come from?

De Tocqueville goes on to explain it with, apparently, some ambivalence. In other passages he stresses the practical advantages of initiative and independence, both associated with individualism. But here he says:

> Individualism is a mature and calm feeling which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of fellow–creatures; . . . Aristocracy had made a chain of all the members of a community, from the peasant to the king; democracy breaks that chain, and severs every link of it. . . . Thus not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants, and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back forever upon himself alone, and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart.

Six years later a young American scholar, Ralph Waldo Emerson, used the term, evidently already familiar enough to need no explanation, in an address at Harvard College. He said, with unqualified approbation:

> Another sign of the times. . . is the new importance given to the single person. Everything that tends to insulate the individual — to surround him with barriers of natural respect, so that each man shall feel the world is his, and man shall treat with man as a sovereign state with a sovereign state — tends to true union as well as greatness.

Certainly individualism did not originate in the United States, nor was it confined to that young nation. It was an intrinsic part of the philosophy of the bourgeois revolution having, perhaps, its clearest and most mature early expression in sixteenth century Elizabethan England. There an unusual coincidence of Renaissance humanism and the Protestant reformation gave it an extraordinary many–sided character and enormous power — the power which fueled Shakespeare's extraordinary genius and that of his gigantic contemporaries. But it developed far more rapidly and spread far more easily on the newly settled American continent.

As the word itself implies, the philosophy of individualism stressed the importance of the single man or woman rather than that of the community or class or even family. Without any idea of social equality early bourgeois development nevertheless necessitated acceptance of, and emphasis on, the idea of social mobility. The change from the static caste nature of feudal society to the fluid class nature of a bourgeois world meant that individuals could, and should, attempt to rise rather than resigning themselves to those circumstances into which they were born.

The older Catholic religion placed great emphasis on man's duty to fill well the position in which God had placed him, however humble it might be, trusting he would then be rewarded with an exalted station in heaven. This attitude was admirably adapted to promote the stability of the feudal caste system with its impassable barriers between peasant and noble, between serf and lord. But with the increasing importance of the cities and the men of the cities — the bourgeoisie who were neither peasant nor noble but craftsmen, merchants, lawyers, money–lenders — this attitude hindered progress, barred the way to newly developed means of expanding production, perpetuated anachronistic laws and customs which limited trade and discouraged the increase of scientific knowledge.

In the newer Protestant religion of the bourgeoisie emphasis was accordingly shifted to man's duty to make the utmost practical use of the talents and opportunities with which his God had provided him. He was no longer supposed to content himself with the life that had sufficed his father.

There were two important corollaries to this emphasis on the duty of ambition rather than on that of resignation. The first was the great importance of self–denying, even ascetic, hard work. A good man should eschew

all sensuous indulgence or vain display in order to make possible a continual increase in, and more profitable and productive use of, his worldly goods. In the New England colonies the powerful theocratic religious leaders themselves set the example with their plain bare wooden churches, their prohibition of rich vestments and musical instruments, their suppression of traditional religious festivals, their restriction of non–productive holidays to the weekly Sabbath and a very few other holy days, on which pleasure was as strictly forbidden as work.

The second corollary was an acceptance of the idea that, though God's ways were inscrutable and it was impossible to know with certainty who were His elect — that is, who would be admitted to everlasting bliss in heaven — the most reliable evidence of His approval of any individual or group was His favoring their enterprises on earth. Therefore those who prospered on earth and succeeded in amassing worldly goods, especially if they used those goods to create and amass more, were probably the ones destined for heaven. The successful were thus doubly entitled to respect from less fortunate compatriots.

Perhaps the term "the elect", used by similar puritanical Protestant sects in England as well as in the colonies, merits special notice. In the older Christian religion the Catholic Church had no idea of limiting the number of places in heaven. Even those who did not deserve to go there immediately would probably be admitted after undergoing some period of penance and purification in purgatory. Since men were urged to resignation there was no need to encourage strenuous competition by limiting the number of rewards. Almost anyone could, if he observed the rules of the church (which, of course, included obedience to, and respect for, his superiors), expect happiness after death. In fact, the poorer a man was, the more likely he was to be compensated in the after life; the church thus attempted to minimize envy and resentment of the upper class by stressing that "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the gates of heaven."

But the early bourgeois Protestant religion, needing to encourage the utmost use of energy, intelligence and ambition, had to develop a philosophy which stressed competition as well as hard work. Life was seen as a race with the greatest prizes, not only on earth but also in heaven, reserved for the few who won. This gave great urgency to each man's attempt to outstrip his fellows. It also made it more difficult for him to blame them if

they defeated him by ruthless means or took unkind advantage of his failure. Resentment at the successful "elect" would, in effect, mean disrespect for the God who had chosen them and blessed their efforts. The failure had only himself to blame and felt guilty rather than wronged. Mark Twain commented on this still pervasive American attitude a hundred years after the revolution, saying: "Everywhere in the world poverty is inconvenient, but only in the United States is it also a disgrace."

Long after the specific religious beliefs, the legal powers of the prosperous church elders and the dominant position of the early clergymen had vanished, this equation of virtue with success continued to exert a special influence in the United States. (In the late nineteenth century this attitude was re-enforced for a less religious age by widespread acceptance of the philosophy of "Social Darwinism". That was the idea that Darwin's biological theory of evolution through "the survival of the fittest" meant that the weak and unsuccessful deserved to starve while the strong and successful were entitled to all they could get. Of course this approval of ruthless individualism was also increasingly important in England, where "Social Darwinism" had originated, as well as in the rest of the bourgeois world.)

The Protestant Reformation itself had originated in Europe, and was mature in England by the time the first Puritan settlers left to colonize the new world. The bourgeois revolution, of which it was an important part, had also developed there. Why then did its central philosophy of individualism immediately become so much more dominant in North America than elsewhere?

The answer is as obvious as the question. In Europe the new attitude had to vie for position, for mastery of men's minds, with a dense long established culture, old religious beliefs, and the often still-existing material circumstances that had shaped, and been shaped by, these.

The Anglo-Catholic Church in England (later called the Episcopal Church in other countries) had replaced the Pope by the King as its head, but had retained the internal structure, and many of the old customs, of the Church of Rome. The feudal nobility had been defeated and largely dispossessed, but great respect for the aristocracy, still using the old titles of nobility, continued to influence the English people. Wealth was important but inherited wealth was more respected than a self-made for-