Literature In America

LITERATURE IN

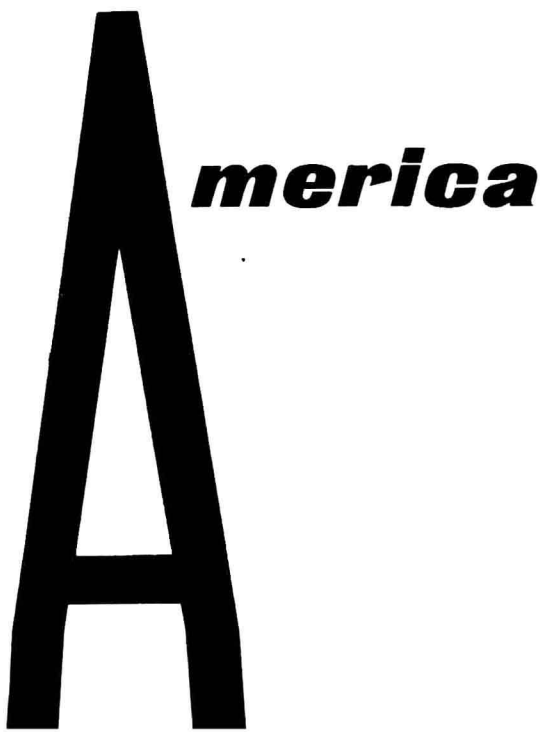
GLOUCESTER, MASS.
PETER SMITH
1973

an anthology of

literary criticism selected

and introduced by

PHILIP RAHV



Philip Rahv

Philip Rahv, the editor of LITERATURE IN AMERICA, is presently Visiting Professor of Comparative Literature at Brandeis University. He is one of the founders of *The Partisan Review*, the author of *Image and Idea, The Discovery of Europe*, and a forthcoming study of Dostoevsky.

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AN ORIGINAL MERIDIAN BOOK
First published by Meridian Books, Inc. September 1957
First printing August 1957
Second printing May 1958
Third printing April 1960

Library of Congress catalog card number: 57-10840

ISBN: 0-8446-2776-3

Reprinted, 1973, by Permission of
WORLD PUBLISHING
Times Mirror

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Foreword

This anthology is not a collection of critical "gems" or of aesthetic judgments pure and simple, nor is it meant to represent American criticism in toto or even to exhibit its finest achievements as a self-defined medium of writing regulated by methods of its own and pursuing standards of value proper to itself. Such criticism, though written by Americans, is under no obligation to deal with American authors or it may deal with them from a purely literary standpoint, without significantly touching upon their native affiliations, background, qualities and meanings. Critical work of that type, however excellent in itself, is necessarily excluded by the principle of selection I have exercised in this book, this principle being that of concentrating only upon those observations and analyses of American writers and writing in which the emphasis, as a whole or in part, is on national characteristics and relation to the national experience. Thus every item in this collection has been chosen with an eye to what it contributes to our understanding of the literary process at work under New World conditions.

Some of the pieces, such as the two essays, so directly contradictory of each other, on "Nationality in Literature" (by E. A. Duyckinck and James Russell Lowell respectively), I have included chiefly for documentary reasons, illustrating the highly controversial character which the very notion of an *American* literature assumed

even as late as 1847, in the very period when our literature entered into its state of high germination, readying itself for the production within a few years of some of its greatest works, such as *The Scarlet Letter, Representative Men, Leaves of Grass,* and *Moby Dick.* Most of the other pieces in this volume are evaluative in intent, defining the creative accomplishment or failure, as the case may be, of our writers in the light of their response to the multiple challenges of American life. When, in the essay re-printed in this book, Randall Jarrell finds it possible to say of three poets so strongly marked in their individual traits as W. C. Williams, Marianne Moore, and Wallace Stevens, that "their reproduction of things, in their empirical gaiety, its clear abstract refinement of presentation, has something peculiarly and paradoxically American about it," he defines at one stroke the theme and unifying idea of this anthology.

There has been an immense amount of writing, both here and abroad, on the subject of American literature in which it is approached precisely from the standpoint of its essential Americanness, and I may add that the main difficulty that confronted me as an anthologist was this luxuriant abundance of material, a veritable *embarras de richesse.* Because of inevitable restrictions of space I was forced to exclude a good many fine and perspicuous statements. Inevitably, too, the stress in my selection has been on essays treating those American writers whose importance is inseparable from their native bias and/or integral use of indigenous materials.

The organization of the anthology is, I trust, apparent. No artificial separation of the contents into parts or sections seemed justified or feasible. I have chosen rather to organize the selections chronologically, interposing where it was relevant the assessments of later critics. Thus Cooper's essay on *American Literature* is followed by D. H. Lawrence's discussion of Cooper; as is Emerson's by that of John Jay Chapman.

P. R.

New York, April 15, 1957

Introduction: THE NATIVE BIAS

"Characteristically American" is the phrase that crops up with virtually compulsive regularity in a good many of the texts assembled in this volume. Inevitably it occurs and recurs in all the intensive discussions of the prospects and condition of the national letters conducted since the earliest years of the Republic. Quite often the phrase carries with it the suggestion that the user of it is far from certain in his own mind as to what the "characteristically American" actually comes to and that he is in fact looking to the literary expression of his countrymen to provide him with the key to the enigma. Thus it would seem that one of the principal functions of literature in America has been to serve as a vademecum of Americanness, if not of Americanism. The latter term has by now acquired an unction compelling its surrender to the politicians; it is with Americanness, a category more existential than political, that our writers and critics have been concerned.

There is little to be wondered at in the uncertainty that has prevailed from the start as to the actual constituents of the "characteristically American." Henry James saw complexity in the very fate of being an American, and among the recognitions that this complexity entails is the fact that as a national entity we are uniquely composed of diverse and sometimes clashing ethnic and regional strains. Even more important is the fact that as a nation we are

afloat in history without moorings in pre-history. Americans have no organic past, only ambiguous memories of European derivations. The decisive factor in the forming of American civilization, as one cultural historian put it, is that "the American community had a beginning at a particular moment in history in contrast with the traditional communities that, far from having a precise historical origin, rose out of the bottomless darkness of time in that epoch of pre-history which is history, if at all, only in its latent and undeveloped stage."• Hence American society has the startling look about it of a human artifact, constructed for specific socio-political and economic purposes in a given period, a period well known and thoroughly documented. It is a society established on contractual rather than traditional foundations, the very existence of which makes for the impression that in the New World the legend of the "social contract" has finally been brought to visible life. And this very perceptibility, so to speak, of the national origins is not the least of the elements making for a profound sense of the problematical in the American awareness of cultural identity.

This sense of the problematical, this sense of always verging on a definition yet somehow missing it, enters significantly into many of the critical approaches that Americans have made to their own literature—approaches tending to turn into a search for America that takes on the aura of a spiritual adventure or mythic quest. Now the problematical is surely not so far apart from the fascinating; and the more committed minds among those who embarked on this search form a vital band of native spokesmen to whom the American character presents itself as a fascinating problem. The effects of this fascination, of this tall measure of devotion, are writ large in our criticism. Most of the famous testaments of our cultural history owe to it their verve in undertaking successively fresh appraisals of the national experience. Its operation is everywhere manifest in such works as Emerson's "American Scholar," Whitman's various prefaces and *Democratic Vistas,* James's biography of Hawthorne, Adams's *Education,* the letters and essays of Randolph Bourne, and the books full of passionate indictment that Van Wyck Brooks issued year after year before the change of front made evident in his *Makers and Finders* series. Yet even this voluminous record of filio-pietistic indulgence is quickened and given its rationale by the lasting fascination with the American character,

• *F. G. Friedmann, "America: A Country without a Pre-History,"* Partisan Review, *March-April 1952.*

a fascination which continues to serve at once as the goad and the charm of even such relatively late and sober-minded studies as F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* and Alfred Kazin's *On Native Grounds*. In the latter work Mr. Kazin alludes with insight to some of the consequences of this absorbing commitment on the part of American critics when he observes that "from Emerson and Thoreau to Mencken and Brooks, criticism has been the great American lay philosophy, the intellectual carryall. It had been a study of literature inherently concerned with ideals of citizenship, and often less a study of literary texts than a search for some imperative moral order within which American writing could live and grow. . . . It has even been the secret intermediary . . . between literature and society in America."

Among the earliest tasks that American critics set for themselves was that of locating and defining the differences between American and European writing. All through the past century and, in fact, until the renaissance that transformed the American literary consciousness in the earlier part of this century, this effort at definition met with resistance from the more genteel and agreeable writers and critics. These worthies, from Irving and Lowell to Brownell and Woodberry, entertained expurgated notions of the creative life, and they were unable to countenance "the snapping asunder," in Poe's phrase, "of the leading strings of our British Grandmamma." This prolonged resistance is to be explained by the fear of learning that the differences between the literature of the Old and the New World were indeed acute and real. "It is hard to hear a new voice," wrote D. H. Lawrence, "as hard as it is to listen to a new language; and there is a new voice in the old American classics." This new feeling originated in the psychic shift that occurred in the movement to the Western hemisphere. Lawrence called it a displacement, adding that "displacements hurt. This hurts. So we try to tie it up, like a cut finger, to put a rag round it." Whitman and Emerson exalted in the displacement; Hawthorne brooded about it and made what he could of it by searching for its beginnings in the annals of New England; Melville was heroic in his striving to do it justice but soon suffered a breakdown because he could not sustain the pitch of intensity at which he expended himself. A more easeful or complacent reaction was evolved by Longfellow, Lowell, Holmes and the other distinguished authors of a tame reflective literature. They recoiled in paleface fashion from the tensions and hazards of the fresh experience thrown up by the dynamism of American life; and in so far as this experience came within their purview at all they saw it in its crude, exposed state, judging it to be unfit for imaginative treatment.

Barrett Wendell, the Harvard professor who published *A Literary History of America* in 1900, was among the foremost exponents of the Genteel Tradition and one of those luminaries of the academy in America who could not bring themselves to treat American writers as anything but poor relations of the towering British figures to whom they looked up with reverence.• Yet even so, though ignoring Melville and disdaining Whitman in his book, Wendell somehow hit upon the formula that accounts for the feebleness that affects us so discouragingly in studying the pre-modern period in American letters. (It has become habitual among us to regard Melville and Whitman as the representative creative types of that period. But this view indicates a loss of perspective on the past, for both were signally unsuccessful in gaining the esteem of the public of their time and in influencing the creative practice of their contemporaries. Whitman survived by making a fight of it, while Melville went under, his best work scarcely known.) Wendell's formula is that this literature is in essence "a record of the national inexperience," and its "refinement of temper, conscientious sense of form and instinctive disregard of actual fact" are its most characteristic traits. Thus he accurately noted, though with no objecion on his part, the overriding fault—that of innocuousness—against which Melville warned in declaring that "the visible world of experience . . . is that procreative thing which impregnates the Muses." And if a novelist like Howells is virtually unread today, then surely it is because of the lack in him of "that procreative thing." Hence the failure of the recent efforts to stage his "revival." Evidently the absence of the "procreative thing" cannot be made up for by the clarity of design of his fiction and by the considerable intelligence and attractiveness of the personality that informs it. It is plain that whatever interest we may have in Howells today is not actual but falls somewhere on the borderline between the historical and and the antiquarian; that is equally true of Longfellow, Whittier, Simms and others whose names are still honored in the textbooks. Now modern American literature has attempted to overcome the fault so fatal to Howells and his prede-

• *In his* Days of the Phoenix *(1957), Van Wyck Brooks recalls that even as late as 1920, when American writing had come to seem important, it was "still ignored in academic circles where Thackeray and Tennyson were treated as twin kings of our literature and all the American writers as poor relations. It was regarded as 'a pale and obedient provincial cousin about which the less said the better,' in the phrase of Ernest Boyd, and Christian Gauss at Princeton, as Edmund Wilson pointed out, chimed in with Woodberry at Columbia and Wendell at Harvard."*

cessors by at long last seizing upon what the native genius had long been deprived of, by finding, in other words, its major stimulus in the urge toward and immersion in experience.• American writers were able to accomplish this transformation, however, not merely by accepting experience in all its indigenousness but also by overturning the tradition of the palefaces and by frequently making the most, in true redskin fashion, of experience precisely in its crude, exposed state, thus turning what had long been taken as a defect into a virtue. The law of over-compensation is as operative in art as in life.

It seems to me that it is only by facing up to the fact of the enfeeblement of the greater part of the older American literature by its negative relation to experience that we can properly evaluate the complaint against the native environment typically voiced by so many of the worst as well as the best of our nineteenth-century writers. Let us attend only to the best of them, noting the virtual identity of the terms in which they state the case against their country's capacity to provide them with imaginative substance. There is Cooper, for instance, asserting back in 1828 that among the main obstacles against which the native writer has to contend is sheer "poverty of materials." "There is scarcely an ore which contributes to the wealth of the author, that is found, here, in veins in rich as in Europe. There are no annals for the historian; no follies (beyond the most vulgar and commonplace) for the satirist; no manners for the dramatist; no obscure fictions for the writer of romance . . . nor any of the rich auxiliaries of poetry . . . no costume for the peasant . . . no wig for the judge, no baton for the general, no diadem for the magistrate."• This complaint is substantially repeated by Hawthorne some three decades later in his preface to *The Marble Faun,* where he remarks upon the difficulty of "writing a romance about a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a commonplace prosperity, in broad and simple daylight, as is happily the case with our dear native land." James, quoting these words in his biography of Hawthorne, is powerfully moved to enlarge upon them, and it is

• *As I argue in the essay re-printed in this collection, the true initiators of the line of modernity in American writing are Whitman and James because both adopted a positive approach to experience, even while defining its value and content in diametrically opposite ways. Hence the specifically modern in the national letters cannot be said to have had its start, as is usually assumed, in this century, with the onset of the "new" poetry and the movement toward realism in fiction.*

• *See Cooper's essay "American Literature" in this volume.*

at this point in his book that the famous passage comes in ("No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army," etc., etc.) enumerating the items of high civilization absent from American life. It is important to observe that James's version, by stretching Hawthorne's statement to the limit, no longer refers to "romance" alone but to artistic creation in general. Essentially he is duplicating Cooper's complaint in a more elaborate and conscious manner; and where Cooper speaks of "the poverty of materials" available to the American writer, James speaks of "the paucity of ingredients."

The justice and pathos of this standing complaint have been more or less recognized by our critics and historians of letters. No doubt it is justified in so far as we cannot but accept in some sense the Jamesian dictum that it takes "an accumulation of history and custom . . . to form a suggestion for the novelist." But there is none the less a fallacy in the argument so strikingly concurred in by Cooper, Hawthorne, and James. For what they are saying, intrinsically, is that it is impossible to write European literature in America; the necessary ingredients are missing. And so they were if we are thinking in terms of a Walter Scott romance or a Jane Austen novel or the poems of Byron; no part of the United States was then a center of high civilization. Still, what is wrong is the tacit assumption that the ingredients are of a fixed kind, given once and for all. But is it really true that the relationship between literature and high civilization is so completely binding? If that were strictly the case, we would be utterly at a loss to explain the appearance in backward Russia, and so early in the nineteenth century at that, of so great a poet as Pushkin and a master of narrative-prose like Gogol. Whitman's "Song of Myself" is in no sense a poem of high civilization, but it is a magnificent poem nevertheless. Is it not more to the point to acknowledge that the genuinely new and venturesome in literary art emerges from a fresh selection of the materials at hand, from an assimilation, that is, to imaginative forms of that which life newly offers but which the conventions of past literature are too rigid to let through? And in the earlier as well as the latter part of the nineteenth century, life in America certainly offered sufficient experience for imaginative treatment, though not the sort of experience marked by richness and complexity of historical reference and safely certified for literary use by the past conventions of authorship. Actually, in creating the character of Leatherstocking, Cooper did break through those conventions; as Lowell wrote in his *Fable for Critics*: "He has drawn you one character, though, that is new/ One wildflower he's plucked that is wet with the dew/ Of this fresh western