

The Harper American Literature

Volume 1

Part Two

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The Literature of the American Renaissance 1836-1865

"Who Reads an American Book?"



Could literature and art, as defined by colonial standards, thrive in the new nation? Were they at all appropriate to the special political, social, and economic conditions Americans found and in turn created? How could the language and literary models of England be naturalized to these conditions? Was there a cultural counterpart to political independence? These were some of the issues confronting the men and women who became the writers of the American Renaissance.

"We have no distinct class of literati in our country," Thomas Jefferson had noted. "Every man is engaged in some industrious pursuit. . . . Few therefore of those who are qualified have leisure to write." Former President John Quincy Adams declared "that literature was, and in its nature must always be, aristocratic; that democracy of numbers and literature were self-contradictory." Democratic nations, said Alexis de Tocqueville after visiting Jacksonian America in 1831, "will habitually prefer the useful to the beautiful, and they will require that the beautiful should be useful." Americans were newspaper readers, he said, and they relied on newspapers to "maintain civilization." "The universal equality of conditions spreads a monotonous tint over all society," said his traveling companion, the novelist Gustave de Beaumont; he warned Europeans not to "look for poetry, literature, or fine arts in this country." When one of the proprietors of the *North*

American Review first read young William Cullen Bryant's blank verse, Wordsworthian "Thanatopsis" (1817), a poem subsequently hailed as the finest yet written in America, he assumed the author was British: "No one on this side of the Atlantic is capable of writing such verse."

Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper, both successful professional men of letters, believed they had overcome cultural and economic obstacles likely to discourage other native writers. Americans were supposedly too busy making money and taming the wilderness to have leisure for literary reading, but with a few notable exceptions, chiefly the work of Irving and Cooper, most of the books they did read were written in England. This was partly due to a shortsighted Copyright Act, passed by the First Congress in 1790, that granted protection only to citizens or residents of the United States. All others were fair game for "pirates," publishers of unauthorized editions. The act's implicit rejection of international copyright encouraged American book, magazine, and newspaper publishers to favor foreign authors, whose work they could get for nothing and bring out cheaply, thereby neglecting or exploiting native authors, to whom they had to pay royalties or fees. ("Who will give two dollars a volume for Prescott," asked the author of *The Conquest of Peru*, "when they can buy Macaulay for seventy-five cents?") Established authors like Irving and Cooper brought out their own books and paid publishers a commission to distribute them, while untested American authors simply took their chances. Harper & Brothers paid Richard Henry Dana, Jr., a total of \$250 for the copyright on his *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840), a best-seller that earned them about \$50,000 before their license ran out. Outspoken opponents of international copyright, Harper & Brothers soon became the largest publisher in the world, with over fifteen hundred titles in print by midcentury.

After 1836 Charles Dickens succeeded Sir Walter Scott as the most popular author of both hemispheres and, consequently, chief victim of the pirates. "Dickens' *American Notes* were received by us at eight o'clock on Sunday evening," the publishers of the weekly *New World* announced on November 12, 1842. "We printed them complete in a double extra number . . . and issued them at one o'clock on Monday—being precisely seventeen hours from the time 'the copy was put in hand.'" They predicted a sale of 400,000 copies, not one of which would earn Dickens a penny. "There must be an international copyright agreement," he had argued on his visit to the United States earlier that year. "It becomes the character of a great country; firstly, because it is justice; secondly, because without it you can never have, and keep, a literature of your own." (Half a century later an International Copyright Law finally stood on the statute books.)

As yet without the annals, traditions, and associations that nurtured Old World writers, the United States offered its own a "poverty of materials," Cooper said. "The weakest hand can extract a spark from the flint, but it would baffle the strength of a giant to attempt kindling a flame with a pudding-stone." Yet Cooper had a shrewd sense of the future. "The literature of the United States is a subject of the highest interest to the civilized world," he wrote, "for when it does begin to be felt, it will be felt with a force, a directness, and a common sense in its application, that has never yet been known. . . . I think the time for the experiment is getting near."

John L. O'Sullivan launched his grandly titled *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* in 1837 with a declaration of purpose: "The vital principle of our literature must be democracy. . . . All history is to be rewritten; political science and the whole scope of moral truth have to be reconsidered in the light of the democratic principle." Following its "manifest destiny," a resounding slogan that O'Sullivan coined, messianic "Young America" was "to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions" and also lead the world to salvation by the road of republicanism. In ideology as well as religion this was an evangelical age. "We Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our times," Herman Melville wrote in 1850. "We bear the ark of the liberties of the world. . . . In our youth is our strength; in our inexperience, our wisdom." Writing in praise of Hawthorne's *Mosses from an Old Manse*, he declared that "men not very much inferior to Shakespeare are this day being born on the banks of the Ohio."

Similar spread-eagle sentiments were voiced all through the period. They were undoubtedly good for morale, but they were not necessarily good for literature and criticism. "It is now the fashion to extol everything American," Cooper observed. "The country is filled, today, with the most profound provincial self-admiration." "We are becoming boisterous and arrogant in the pride of a too speedily assumed literary freedom," said Poe. "We get up a hue and cry about the necessity of encouraging native writers of merit—we blindly fancy that we can accomplish this by indiscriminate puffing of good, bad, and indifferent . . . and thus often find ourselves involved in the gross paradox of liking a stupid book the better, because, sure enough, its stupidity is American." Poe was a universalist rather than a nationalist. He developed a body of literary theory that drew upon many European sources, and he enjoyed a considerable reputation in England and Europe, particularly among Charles Baudelaire and the French Symbolists. As editor he anticipated the great magazine-reading audience that arrived in full force only after the Civil War. As poet and fiction writer he courted the public's favor—and from time to time won it to a spectacular degree. During the later 1840s Poe's raven, the dusky phantom of his most popular poem, was so celebrated that it vied with the eagle for the title of national bird.

In *Kavanagh: A Tale* (1849), Longfellow satirized the rant of the "Young America" movement. "We want a national literature commensurate with our mountains and rivers," one of his characters announces. "We want a national literature altogether shaggy and unshorn, that shall shake the earth, like a herd of buffaloes, thundering over the prairies!" It was clear that something more than bluster and false analogies was called for if the country were to have a culture in keeping with its political character. "It does not follow because many books are written by persons born in America that there exists an American literature," Margaret Fuller wrote in 1846. "Before such can exist, an original idea must animate this nation and fresh currents of life must call into life fresh thoughts along its shores."

There were several main issues in this ongoing discussion. One, whether America provided a favorable cultural climate for writers, artists, and intellectuals, was to be debated again and again, after the Civil War and especially during the 1920s. But a second issue, whether America was capable of making a literature of

its own fit to stand with the literatures of the Old World, simply ceased to exist. In retrospect one has only to point to two native poetic geniuses flourishing around midcentury, Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson (her poems, written mainly during the early 1860s, were not published until several years after her death in 1886). As for broad popularity, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow alone offered a sufficient rejoinder to the English wit Sydney Smith's gibe, "In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book?" London bookshops in 1852 displayed twenty different editions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. By 1856 this novel had sold nearly a million copies in the British Isles, had been translated into every European language, and was on its way to achieving a global popularity second only to that of the Bible. As for Longfellow, "No other poet has anything like your vogue," Hawthorne wrote to him from England in 1855, when Longfellow brought out *The Song of Hiawatha*, a long poem dealing with a native theme but treating it in accordance with the conventions of Norse epic. On publication day in 1858, Londoners bought some ten thousand copies of Longfellow's *The Courtship of Miles Standish*, another excursion into national legend. His reputation collapsed in the twentieth century, but his sculptured portrait, installed in the Poets' Corner at Westminster Abbey in 1884, two years after his death, continues to keep company with Chaucer, Spenser, and Shakespeare.

A wondrous half decade, 1850-1855, saw the publication of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of the Seven Gables*, Melville's *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, Thoreau's *Walden*, and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Together their short-term sales may not have exceeded that of any single now-forgotten domestic novel of the 1850s (Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*, for example, or Mrs. E. D. E. N. Southworth's *The Curse of Clifton*). Most of these American classics, as they are now seen to be, did not begin to receive their full due until the 1920s. Like all significant and lasting art, they are autonomous, self-contained, self-justifying, and even to some extent self-generated. Still, neither Hawthorne's books nor those of Melville, Thoreau, and Whitman could have emerged from any other country in any other century, nor did they happen overnight or in a vacuum. "It takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature," Henry James was to say. "It needs a complex social machinery to set a writer in motion."

"The Infinitude of the Private Man"

"There are always two parties," Emerson wrote, "the party of the Past and the party of the Future; the Establishment and the Movement." He and the Reverend Theodore Parker, another prominent spokesman for Transcendentalism, claimed it was not a concerted party or movement at all but a loose confederation of compatible souls. Having imbibed a distillate of Kant, Goethe, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Carlyle, and other philosophical and literary idealists, the Transcendentalists set about their business in a characteristically self-reliant way. Embroiled in a doctrinal controversy over Holy Communion, Emerson went through a personal crisis and resigned from the Unitarian ministry to follow a career as writer and lecturer. Parker continued in the ministry but exhausted himself in debates and reforms. Margaret Fuller published the first major

American feminist treatise, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, in 1845; the following year she went to Europe as foreign correspondent for Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune* and committed herself to the cause of Italian nationalism. Thoreau built his hut at Walden Pond, was jailed for refusing to pay a poll tax, and preached civil disobedience.

Transcendentalism had only a scant organizational existence. It began as an informal "club," first convened in 1836. It generated *The Dial*, a quarterly journal of "literature, philosophy, and religion," edited by Fuller and Emerson, which lasted only four years (1840–1844), never reached a circulation of over three hundred, and was frequently ridiculed for unballasted flights into the empyrean. And it inspired two experiments in cooperative living and high thinking near Boston: Brook Farm (1841–1847) and Fruitlands (1843). Yet, out of all proportion to these evidences, Transcendentalism, especially as channeled through Emerson, generated a significant reexamination of values even in those who derided it. Reversing the European historical order, the Transcendental "reformation," announcing a gospel of spiritual self-sufficiency, came before the literary "renaissance," an awakening, maturation, and release of radical energies.

The Transcendentalists set themselves against what they considered to be the materialism, rationalism, conformity, and played-out liberalism of American religion and society. The social reformer William Henry Channing recalled the movement as inspiring "a vague yet exalting conception of the godlike nature of the human spirit" and "a pilgrimage from the idolatrous world of creeds and rituals to the temple of the Living God in the soul." Ideas of God, right and wrong, and immortality were not matters of doctrine or theology but, according to Parker, "facts of consciousness given by the instinctive action of human nature itself." The Transcendentalists contemplated the actualities of life in the street, the mill, the farmhouse, and the marketplace and aimed to restore to the humblest persons and pursuits a measure of poetry, religious impulse, mystery, surprise, joy, and dread and a sense of wonder and oneness with the universe. "I have taught

Letter to the Church in Purchase Street

There is a class of persons who desire a reform in the prevailing philosophy of the day. These are called Transcendentalists, because they believe in an order of truths which transcends the sphere of the external sense. Their leading idea is the supremacy of mind over matter. Hence they maintain that the truth of religion does not depend on tradition, nor historical facts, but has an unerring witness in the soul. There is a light, they believe, which enlighteneth every man that cometh into the world; there is a faculty in all—the most degraded, the most ignorant, the most obscure—to perceive spiritual truth when distinctly presented; and the ultimate appeal on all moral questions is not to a jury of scholars, a hierarchy of divines, or the prescriptions of a creed, but to the common sense of the human race.

George Ripley (1840)

one doctrine," Emerson said, "the infinitude of the private man." "All Souls' Day" had dawned: Each and every person was at once priest, church, and Bible, "a part of eternity and immensity, a god walking in flesh." "So we saunter toward the Holy Land," Thoreau wrote, "till one day the sun shall shine more brightly than ever he has done, shall perchance shine into our minds and hearts, and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light, as warm and serene and golden as on a bankside in autumn."

Transcendentalism arrived as social and religious protest. The conservative theologian Andrews Norton denounced it as "the latest form of infidelity," an unassisted and therefore arrogant attempt to attain assurance "concerning the unseen, the eternal, the great objects of religion." By the 1870s much of Transcendentalism's radical force had become diluted, dissipated, and factional. Emerson's particular brand ended up buttressing the cult of success. "Money is, in its effects and laws, as beautiful as roses," he said. "Property keeps the accounts of the world, and is always moral." After the Civil War, princes of industry and finance quoted his advice, "Hitch your wagon to a star," and installed him in the pantheon of American practical philosophers along with Benjamin Franklin. But Transcendentalism, as Emerson articulated it during the 1830s and 1840s, deplored materialism. A religious, ethical, and aesthetic response to nationalism, a homegrown counterpart of European romanticism with elements drawn from Eastern philosophy, this "latest form of infidelity" proved to be the animating force without which, as Margaret Fuller said, there could be no "American literature."

Responses to *The American Scholar*

Out of the West comes a clear utterance, clearly recognizable as a *man's* voice, and I *have* a kinsman and brother: God be thanked for it! I could have *wept* to read that speech; the clear high melody of it went tingling through my heart. . . . My brave Emerson!

Thomas Carlyle (1837)

This grand oration was our intellectual Declaration of Independence. . . . No listener ever forgot that Address, and among all the noble utterances of the speaker it may be questioned if one ever contained more truth in language more like that of immediate inspiration.

Oliver Wendell Holmes (1885)

We were socially and intellectually moored to English thought, till Emerson cut the cable and gave us a chance at the dangers and glories of blue water. . . . His oration before the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Cambridge, some thirty years ago, was an event without any former parallel in our literary annals.

James Russell Lowell (1871)