

AMERICAN CRITICISM

*A Study in Literary Theory from Poe
to the Present*

BY

NORMAN FOERSTER

Author of 'Nature in American Literature'



BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
The Riverside Press Cambridge

COPYRIGHT, 1928, BY NORMAN FOERSTER

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

The Riverside Press

CAMBRIDGE · MASSACHUSETTS

PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

Before we can have an American literature, we must have an American criticism. — LOWELL.

The criticism which alone can much help us for the future . . . is a criticism which regards Europe as being, for intellectual and spiritual purposes, one great confederation, bound to a joint action and working to a common result; and whose members have, for their proper outfit, a knowledge of Greek, Roman, and Eastern antiquity, and of one another. Special, local, and temporary advantages being put out of account, that modern nation will in the intellectual and spiritual sphere make most progress, which most thoroughly carries out this programme. — ARNOLD.

Those precious legacies — accumulations! They come to us from the far-off — from all eras, and all lands — from Egypt, and India, and Greece, and Rome — and along through the middle and later ages, in the grand monarchies of Europe — born under far different institutes and conditions from ours — but out of the old insight and inspiration of the same old humanity — the same old heart and brain — the same old countenance yearningly, pensively, looking forth. What we have to do to-day is to receive them cheerfully, and to give them ensemble, and a modern American and democratic physiognomy. — WHITMAN.

PREFACE

SINCE about the year 1912, and especially since the Great War, America has experienced a new self-consciousness. We have been increasingly eager, not only to reveal our present inadequacies, but also to understand and revalue our achievement in the past — particularly our literature. We have expressed ourselves in a literary criticism probably less perfunctory, more fresh and alert, more energetic and abundant, than that of any previous epoch in our three centuries of history. We have grown deeply interested in criticism itself, in criteria and methods, and also in the development of criticism in America: in the conditions that have shaped it, in the aims and temper of the critics, in the standards that they employed, and in the issues that they debated.

When the final volumes of the 'Cambridge History of American Literature' were published a few years after the war, the editors candidly admitted that 'the number of pioneer tasks still to be undertaken in the study of American literature was larger than could be entirely foreseen.' In a review of the work I ventured to point out, as one of the most important of the untried tasks, an account of the history of our literary criticism. After considering undertaking this task myself, I came to the conclusion that the time for it was not ripe; that before it could be carried out with anything like finality a number of monographs would have to be written on special periods and problems. I came to feel, also, that some of these limited studies would be of more immediate value than an historical survey. Among these studies I eventually selected a critical analysis of the literary creeds that have been most impressively set forth in this country. It seemed to me that if these creeds were thoroughly exam-

ined we might come to a better understanding of the dominant motives of our creative literature in the past.

Since light on the past is always light on the present and future, it seemed to me, furthermore, that a serious confrontation of the standards adopted in the nineteenth century might in some measure illuminate the chaos into which our criticism has fallen. Admittedly, there is a striking contrast between the standardization of our life in general and the absence of standards in our literature and our thinking about literature. In the main our critics appear to have abdicated their responsibility and privileges in favor of an open-mindedness that is with difficulty distinguished from vacuity. By so doing, they have given up their powers to the publishers and the editors, whose standards, being mainly commercial, are mainly low. Publishers and editors are chiefly concerned, not with what the public ought to want and the best of the public does want, but with what the majority want or are supposed to want. If the professional critics are to regain leadership, they will have to learn to be leaders rather than mere observers. So long as their open minds contain nothing but the passing winds of doctrine, so long as they dally with the fashions of the moment instead of putting on the armor of tried standards, they will be impotent to lead. It is a hopeful sign when a writer like Floyd Dell, in the concluding paragraph of his 'Intellectual Vagabondage, an Apology for the Intelligentsia,' looks forward to a younger generation that shall have the courage to formulate *conventions* (*italics his*). The paramount need of the times, in literary criticism as in other activities, is a convention (a 'coming-together') that shall wisely use and not willfully reject the traditions of the past. Upon the assertion, 'The dead writers are remote from us because we *know* so much more than they did,' the only sensible comment is that of T. S. Eliot: 'Precisely, and they are that which we know.' Perhaps we are beginning to suspect, as our interest in outlines and stories of philosophy,

science, history, etc., would seem to indicate, that 'that which we know' is never remote and irrelevant, but always present and serviceable.

I am indebted to several persons who have been so kind as to read portions of this book in manuscript or in proof-sheets; particularly Charles Cestre, Professor of American Literature and Civilization in the University of Paris; Friedrich Schoenemann, Lecturer in American Literature and Civilization in the University of Berlin; and Chester Penn Higby, Professor of Modern History in the University of Wisconsin. I am indebted to the editors of 'Studies in Philology' (1923, 1927) and 'Publications of the Modern Language Association' (1926) for permission to reprint three excerpts that first appeared in those journals and are now incorporated in this book; and in the Introduction I have sketched a rationale of American literary history similar to that which I first published in the preface of 'American Poetry and Prose' (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1925) and in an article in the 'Saturday Review of Literature' for April 3, 1926. Portions of the book were originally presented as lectures in the universities of Illinois (1926) and Munich and Berlin (1928).

NORMAN FOERSTER

INTRODUCTION

LITERARY criticism in America has not had the support of a native cultural tradition. The discovery of America provided a new setting, or theater, for European culture; the New World had everything to receive, nothing to give, in respect to the higher interests of humanity. Although the frontier soon began to transform Europeans into such Americans as Jefferson, Jackson, and Lincoln, the continuous influx of immigrants and of foreign ideas postponed indefinitely the achievement of a distinctive culture. Two hundred years after the settlement at Plymouth, Washington Irving still found America a land of youthful promise and preferred to let his imagination dwell upon 'the accumulated treasures of age' in the Old World. Even Emerson, who authoritatively declared our cultural independence, conceded in 1844 that Europe extended to the Alleghany Mountains. His disciple Whitman, in the same paradoxical manner, heralded with trumpet blasts the beginning of a new order, the fulfillment of which he left to the bards of a remote future. In our own time, three centuries after the Plymouth plantation, countless voices are crying that America has come of age, although all signs still point to the future. In a word, America has had no native tradition guiding her art and her criticism — no national background of ideas offering firm support to those who would rest upon the past, or firm resistance to those who would revolt. If our critics wish to be American, they must deploy in a vacuum.

Inevitably, therefore, our culture and our criticism have been mainly derivative. While the whole of the European tradition has been ours to draw upon at will, we have naturally tended to use most freely, in each of the periods of our

history, those streams of tendency which contemporary Europe itself was following. As Cotton Mather observed, the discovery of America nearly coincided with the Renaissance and the Reformation; of the two, however, the Reformation chanced to be much the stronger in determining the foundations of our culture. A transplanted Puritanism, contrasting oddly with the crudities of the frontier and the primitive culture of the aborigines, established in America a remarkable moral discipline and spiritual idealism. Supplemented in later times by other forms of dissent, the Puritan spirit became a leading factor in American life, American literature, American criticism.

As Puritanism was the great contribution of the seventeenth century, so was the Enlightenment the great contribution of the eighteenth. Jehovah became the absentee landlord of the deists; natural depravity was set aside for natural goodness; the moral discipline and spiritual idealism of the Puritans was followed by reliance upon common sense and reason. While Jonathan Edwards represented the surviving Puritan spirit, Franklin represented the worldly spirit of the new age. The interests and the thought of the eighteenth century produced the American Revolution, as in Europe they produced the French Revolution, and the Colonies became a self-conscious nation.

In the nineteenth century the national spirit, surpassing the bounds of the political realm, aspired to the creation of a national culture comparable with that of each of the great countries of Europe. This passion gave impetus to the literature of the century of Cooper, Poe, Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Longfellow, Whitman, Mark Twain, and Howells. While it is true that this literature had distinctively American elements because it faintly reflected the frontier frame of mind, the fact of primary importance is that it was dominated by the European tradition in its contemporary aspect. In the early decades of the century Europe was experiencing

the so-called Romantic Movement; its writers were concerned with revolt, feeling, imagination, ideality, genius, the ego, nature, the national past. To a nation like the United States, eager to exploit its selfhood, the romantic break with tradition offered a favorable opportunity that was soon recognized. Romantically we insisted upon the value of our own experience — and imitated the romanticism of Britain and Germany. The Puritans subsided into distant ancestors, the reasonable school of Pope fell into contempt and oblivion, and throughout the country literary taste was plainly romantic. New England Transcendentalism — ‘romanticism on Puritan soil’ — imitated Wordsworth, Coleridge, the young Carlyle, and the Germans; while even at the Middle Western frontier scarcely a verse-maker escaped the influence of Scott and Byron. After the movement had passed its *Blütezeit*, and our major authors had done their best work, a host of lesser romantics like Taylor and Stoddard kept the romantic tradition in power.

As this high-strung cult of feeling and intuition relaxed, vitality passed into those elements of experience that romanticism had tended to slight. Ethical restraint and convention once more became popular; an America founded in Puritanism offered a favorable soil for the staid middle-class morality that flourished here a little later than in Victorian England. And the common sense and rationalism of the eighteenth century reasserted themselves in the scientific spirit of the period after the Civil War, when the growth of natural knowledge altered our minds as the Industrial Revolution altered our landscapes. In America as in Europe, romanticism was succeeded by realism. The quest of reality had also actuated the romantics, who had sought it in the ‘ideal’ as opposed to the ‘actual.’ It was this rejected actual to which the new writers devoted themselves, observing and representing it under the inspiration of the scientific spirit. Walt Whitman, obedient to both the romantic and the real-

istic impulse, marks the passage from the old movement to the new; the future belonged, in his time, to Howells, James, Mrs. Wharton, Stephen Crane, and the writers of the present century.

These various streams of tendency have determined the course of American speculation on the nature and function of literature. In our speculation as a whole, the issues most commonly debated are:

1. What is the relation of literature to morality?
2. What is the relation of literature to reality?
3. What is the relation of American literature to the national spirit?

Since American literary history is in the main a history of the rise and development of the Romantic Movement in the New World, we shall naturally find that the most impressive answers to these questions, prior to the twentieth century, have been formulated by leaders in that movement: Poe, Emerson, Lowell, and Whitman.

AMERICAN CRITICISM

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	xiii
I. POE	1
II. EMERSON	52
III. LOWELL	111
IV. WHITMAN	157
V. THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: CONCLUSION	223
INDEX	263

AMERICAN CRITICISM



CHAPTER I

POE

§ 1

WITH his usual critical acumen, Poe saw that a people's literature may be provincial in either of two opposite ways. At the beginning of his essay on Drake's overrated poem 'The Culprit Fay,' he wrote an analysis of the state of American criticism which to this day may be read with profit. First, there is the older type of provincialism: a servile respect for European opinion. 'That an American book could, by any possibility, be worthy perusal, was an idea by no means extensively prevalent in the land; and if we were induced to read at all the productions of our native writers, it was only after repeated assurances from England that such productions were not altogether contemptible.' This cringing form of provincialism, however, as Poe is careful to point out, is related with an important virtue — a due respect for what is really superior. It would be folly, he says, to place ourselves on a level with the mature nations of Europe, 'the earliest steps of whose children are among the groves of magnificently endowed Academies, and whose innumerable men of leisure, and of consequent learning, drink daily from those august fountains of inspiration which burst around them everywhere from out the tombs of their immortal dead, and from out their hoary and trophied monuments of chivalry and song.' Of this sustaining power of the past, it must be

admitted, Poe himself had but a dim understanding.¹ The second and opposite form of provincialism, prominent in Poe's day and still too common, is a blindly patriotic sense of our own importance. We may look down, as well as up; may be 'snobbishly arrogant' as well as 'snobbishly mean,' as Thackeray said in 'Punch.' Declaring that 'We are becoming boisterous and arrogant in the pride of a too speedily assumed literary freedom,' Poe bids his readers not to 'forget, in the puerile inflation of vanity, that *the world* is the true theatre of the biblical histrio. . . . So far from being ashamed of the many disgraceful literary failures to which our own inordinate vanities and misapplied patriotism have lately given birth, and so far from deeply lamenting that these daily puerilities are of home manufacture, we adhere pertinaciously to our original blindly conceived idea, and thus often find ourselves involved in the gross paradox of liking a stupid book the better, because, sure enough, its stupidity is American.'

Making it his task to wage incessant warfare against these two forms of provincialism, especially the superficially patriotic form, Poe wrote more criticism than any other kind of composition, and became known in his own time chiefly as a literary critic. In place of the idols that he cast down, he set up the ideal of adherence to principles, 'the purest rules of Art,' discovered by philosophical analysis. He did not hesitate to assume the existence of absolute, universal principles, fixed in the nature of literature and in the mind of a rightly thinking man, though he recognized the extreme difficulty of stating them. Words cannot hem in the spiritual nature of poetry, he says, for the intangible necessarily eludes defini-

¹ 'He read books of contemporary fame, especially such English books as were reprinted in Philadelphia, and magazines and newspapers, for which he always showed avidity; he had little familiarity at any time with literature earlier than Byron, and never showed love or devotion to great masters of the past. He had, in the narrowest sense, a contemporaneous mind, the instincts of the journalist, the magazine writer.' (Woodberry, *Life*, I, 132.)

tion; yet definitions are requisite in human discussion — and Poe never hesitates to define. In 1831, when he had scarce attained manhood, he set forth his poetical creed in the 'Letter to B——' prefacing his own poems, and again and again, in the years that followed, he repeated it with remarkable consistency. Seeking to avoid the conventional rules, whether classic or romantic, and at the same time merely personal preferences and antipathies, he aimed at a criticism that should be both impersonal and deductive and therefore valid. Whether an art or a science (he used both terms) he never doubted that criticism is or ought to be 'based immovably in nature,' on 'the laws of man's mind and heart,' upon which the arts themselves are based. Authority thus resides in principles not in persons, in reason not in precedent, in rationale not in rule. The rational critic will give praise to what has been well done; but he will look less at merit than at demerit, less at 'beauties' than at 'defects,' because it is the business of the critic to hold up as the model of excellence, not the good, nor even the best that has been done, but the best that can be — he must '*see the sun*, even although its orb be far below the ordinary horizon.'¹

To this rational method and this high standard Poe adhered with a faithfulness amazing in the America of the thirties and forties. While the great majority of our criticasters never

¹ Perhaps the best statement of his ideal in criticism is the following passage from his prospectus for *The Penn Magazine*: 'It shall be a leading object to assert in precept, and to maintain in practice, the rights, while in effect it demonstrates the advantages, of an absolutely independent criticism; — a criticism self-sustained; guiding itself only by the purest rules of Art; analyzing and urging these rules as it applies them; holding itself aloof from all personal bias; acknowledging no fear save that of outraging the right; yielding no point either to the vanity of the author, or to the assumptions of antique prejudice, or to the involute and anonymous cant of the Quarterlies, or to the arrogance of those organized *cliques* which, hanging like nightmares upon American literature, manufacture, at the nod of our principal booksellers, a pseudo-public-opinion by wholesale. . . . It will endeavor to support the general interests of the republic of letters, without reference to particular regions — regarding the world at large as the true audience of the author.' (Quoted, Woodberry, *op. cit.*, I, 274.)

saw the sun or mistook flashy meteors for the supreme luminary, while they judged in accordance with petty provincial instincts instead of sovereign reason, Poe held clearly before himself a lofty vision of the critical activity and pursued its dictates with a devotion that shows his possession of a passion for criticism as well as for poetry. Although he could be impatient, disdainful, and even as brutal as the Scotch reviewers whom he censured, he did not deserve the charge that he had the polemical rather than the critical temper. He had ground for his boast that in ten years' time he did not write a single critique either wholly destructive or wholly laudatory, or state a single opinion of importance without supporting it with some show of reason. He developed a theory of literary principles and applied it without shrinking from the fatigue of thought. Rejecting the essay form of the British reviews as an evasion of the critical task, he read his books carefully, analyzed them patiently, and generalized deliberately, despite the pressure of poverty and such temperamental handicaps as few writers in any age have labored against. For polemics as such he had little enough taste; but he guarded his literary principles with passion and had the reformer's zeal in seeking to make them prevail.

Poe derived his principles of criticism from his own conception of art, which may be studied indifferently in his creative or in his critical work: it is implicit in the one, explicit in the other. Frequently it is held as a reproach — as a mark of limitation — that his creation and his criticism are substantially the same. This may be regarded, however, as a great merit, not merely because it attests to his honesty, his fidelity to principle, but more especially because, as Poe himself says, it is the only proper relation of theory and practice — of that theory of literature which regulates the critical activity and that practice of literature which is the embodiment of theory. As an English critic of our own day puts it, literature is the consciousness of life and criticism is the con-