

*An
introduction
to*

50

AMERICAN NOVELS

Ian Ousby

An Introduction to Fifty American Novels

Ian Ousby is a graduate of Cambridge and went from there via the Universities of Harvard (where he took his PhD) and Durham to the English Department of the University of Maryland where he is currently an Associate Professor. He is a keen reader of detective fiction and has also published *Bloodhounds of Heaven: The Detective in English Fiction from Godwin to Doyle* (Harvard, 1976).

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**An Introduction to
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Ian Ousby

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Introduction

Fifty, or even thirty years ago this book would probably not have been written. If it had, it would have needed to begin on a defensive and apologetic note. In the nineteenth century American fiction produced its full share of 'classics' – Melville's *Moby Dick*, Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and so forth. In the twentieth century American novelists began to receive international recognition: the award of the Nobel Prize to Sinclair Lewis in 1930 is an obvious example. Even in America itself intellectuals (let alone general readers) often approached their literature in a shame-faced or indifferent spirit. Irving Babbitt, the influential Harvard professor, was given to remarking that America was where Europe went when it died – an epigram hardly designed to encourage interest in American culture. In 1930 the Yale University Library still listed *Moby Dick* under 'Cetology' rather than 'American Literature'. Outside America the lack of respect for its fiction was even more striking. Sydney Smith's famous gibe ('In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book?') still echoed in English ears; and it was not uncommon to hear otherwise well-read men confess to an ignorance of Hawthorne or Melville without embarrassment.

Today, of course, the situation is very different. Most major American novels are widely available in cheaply priced editions and their study is assumed to be a natural part of the average American student's liberal education. On the scholarly level, the study of American literature has

assumed the proportions of a minor industry; it has traced a familiar success story from log cabin to Guggenheim grants. Its characteristic failure, indeed, is no longer the neglect of major figures but the endless exhumation of minor ones. Some American scholars are willing to proffer, say, William Gilmore Simms (whom this book does not mention anywhere else) as an important novelist. There is not merely a substantial body of scholarship and criticism about Edgar Allan Poe; there is a regular bi-annual journal, *Poe Studies*. In time there will no doubt be a *Dos Passos Newsletter* and even a *John Barth Newsletter*.

The emergence of 'American studies' began in the 1920s. Ironically enough it received its initial impetus from a book by an Englishman: D. H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923). Reaching out for new modes of expression in his own art, Lawrence responded eagerly to that new voice he detected in American writing:

We like to think of the old-fashioned American classics as children's books. Just childishness, on our part. The old American art-speech contains an alien quality, which belongs to the American continent and to nowhere else. But, of course, as long as we insist on reading the books as children's tales, we miss all that.

For all the quirkiness and dogmatism of many of its judgments, *Studies in Classic American Literature* remains probably the best general introduction to its subject. It has been profoundly influential; for example, most essays on Fenimore Cooper (including my own in this volume) are essentially elaborations of Lawrence's view.

After Lawrence the interpretation of American literature passed largely into the hands of Americans and academic scholars. Since the late 1920s there has been a steady flow of classic studies of American culture and fiction: V. L. Parrington's three-volume *Main Currents in American Thought* (1927-1930), Van Wyck Brooks' multi-volume *The Makers and Finders: A History of the Writer in America* (1936-1952), Perry Miller's *The New England Mind* (1939), F. O.

Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* (1941) and Richard Chase's *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957). Today much about these books seems dated, but none is of purely antiquarian interest. In fact, they still form the central core of any reading list with which the serious student of American fiction should equip himself.

They do not present a single or unanimous interpretation of the American novel. There have been, for example, continual clashes between the proponents of the 'genteel' school of fiction represented by Henry James and the 'frontier' school represented by Mark Twain. But by far the most serious divergence has centred on the rival merits of 'romance' and 'realism'. On the whole, earlier scholars like Parrington and Brooks saw the main and characteristic achievement of American fiction in the realist novels that began to appear after the Civil War: novels that deal with contemporary issues and with the individual in society. Later critics like Matthiessen and (in more extreme fashion) Chase placed their emphasis on writers of romance like Hawthorne and Melville – writers whose main preoccupation is with man alone or man and nature, rather than man and society.

For all their differences these pioneers of American criticism were undertaking a common task. To men like Parrington and Matthiessen the writing of literary history was not an academic exercise but an attempt at cultural (and sometimes even personal) self-definition. Like D. H. Lawrence they were intrigued by that 'alien quality' which America had introduced into world culture; their interest lay in analysing what F. R. Leavis has called 'the Americanness of American literature'. This, of course, is both inevitable and proper. Comparing English and American poetry Wallace Stevens remarked: 'We live in two different physical worlds and it is not nonsense to think that that matters.' Even the casual reader of American fiction will quickly find himself fascinated by the divergences from English and European traditions of the novel.

But this zealous attempt to identify the 'American voice'

in fiction can lead to distortion. It often assumes that the New World represents a sharp and absolute break with the Old. American writers are portrayed as completely cut off from older traditions, free to start anew by themselves. In historical terms, this is simply not the case. As the early sections of this book show, earlier American novelists like Charles Brockden Brown and Fenimore Cooper began as imitators of English fiction; only later did peculiarly American characteristics emerge. Even when this happened the American writer was not necessarily alienated from the European heritage. A figure like Mark Twain, so often praised as uniquely 'American' because of his frontier attitudes and his rich folk idiom, still shows identifiable affiliations with Dickens and the European realists. Complete cultural freedom was not only impossible; it was also undesirable. In his introduction to *Pudd'nhead Wilson* F. R. Leavis gives a typically acerbic, but in this case justified, rebuke to those Americanists who regard lack of connection with Europe as a virtue: 'Such an alienation could only be an impoverishment: no serious attempt has been made to show that any sequel to disinheritance could replace the heritage lost.'

The very terms 'Americanness' and 'American voice' can also carry the misleading implication that America is a uniform and homogeneous nation. Nothing in fact could be further from the truth. America's variety is often difficult for foreigners to appreciate. The English, in particular, are almost addicted to large-scale generalizations about America; they sometimes appear to envisage the country as one vast superhighway punctuated occasionally by gas stations, race riots, golf courses and skyscrapers. A look at the map can produce salutary results. It reminds us that Boston and Seattle are further apart than Boston and Rome, and that America's southern parts are in the tropical zone while, with the acquisition of Alaska, its northern territory comes close to the Arctic circle.

Such size inevitably creates diversity. Particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when communications

were of the most primitive sort, different communities naturally developed their own peculiar flavours. New England, Virginia, Missouri: these became the names not just of different places, but of subtly different attitudes to life. Regional divergences could be sharp enough to produce the sort of hostility shown in the Civil War. In cultural terms, the result was a literature where the inflections of regionalism were all-important. If the reader detects different notes in the work of Cooper, Hawthorne and Twain, he should remember that these are partly attributable to the fact that the first writer came from New York State, the second from Massachusetts and the third from Missouri. To call any one of these men more 'American' than the others would be mere parochialism. Faced with such variety the critic can only confess that there is no 'American voice' in fiction: there are American voices.

The growth of modern communications has inevitably destroyed much of the regional flavour of American life and culture. Yet its diversity has been guaranteed by the multifariousness of ethnic groups. The Red Indian, of course, was there before the white man arrived. He was succeeded by English, Dutch and French settlers – and black slaves. Their numbers were later swelled by successive influxes of Scandinavian, Irish, Italian, Russian Jewish, German Jewish, Puerto Rican and Mexican immigrants. The 'melting pot' theory of American society, beloved by so many generations of sociologists, stressed the country's ability to assimilate different racial stocks into a unified whole. But what is most likely to impress the observer of contemporary America is the ability of various ethnic groups to retain, as much as to lose, their distinctive heritages.

Of course, many of the standard generalizations about the distinctive quality of American fiction remain true. Early American novels, the products of primitive and recently established communities, tended to concentrate on abstract issues rather than those nuances of social structure which tend to obsess the English novelist. In formal terms this led to a love of symbolism and allegory instead of a detailed

fidelity to life's surface. This habit also created a preference for lonely, grand and unsociable heroes which has survived into current American fiction. When later American novelists turned towards realism, they often did so with a gritty inelegance that can, in English eyes, seem either engagingly frank or disconcertingly uncouth. Yet still the most important generalization about the American novel is that all generalizations have innumerable and important exceptions. It is a field of study that frustrates the seeker after easy truths, and rewards those who cherish variety and abundance. The reader of American fiction should bear in mind Robert Frost's warning in his poem about Christopher Columbus:

America is hard to see.
 Less partial witnesses than he
 In book on book have testified
 They could not see it from outside—
 Or inside either for that matter.
 We know the literary chatter.

A few words about the organization of this book. It is designed to be used in two ways. It may be read as a continuous whole by the student interested in the history of American fiction. But the individual sections can also be treated as self-contained units by the reader in search of information about a specific writer or work.

As with a party guest list, my inclusions and omissions are bound to offend somebody. My criteria of selection have been both aesthetic value and historical significance. I have dealt in detail with Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, for example, not because it exercised a great influence on succeeding writers or because it has attracted a great deal of critical attention; I do so simply because it is a very good novel. On the other hand, Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* is analysed individually because of its historical interest as the first American novel of any substance. These grounds seemed to justify its inclusion over, say, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* – a far better novel but one of

infinitely less importance in the development of American fiction.

It is inevitable that one should feel a book to be the sum of one's own errors and of other people's good advice. In particular I should like to thank Andrew Mylett, the most patient, encouraging and knowledgeable of editors. I would also thank Arthur Sale, who first introduced me to American literature, were it not for the fact that he is so often being acknowledged in books by his ex-students. It would be foolish to try putting my debt to Heather Dubrow into words.

