

The Literature of the United States

Marcus Cunliffe



Henry James Pound James
Hemingway Cooper
Mark Twain Thoreau Emerson
Walt Whitman William Faulkner
Hawthorne Melville Poe



PELICAN BOOKS

THE LITERATURE OF THE
UNITED STATES

Marcus Cunliffe, born in 1922, is Professor of American Studies at the University of Sussex. Educated at various places, including Oxford, wartime Sandhurst and Yale, he has been a lecturer and professor at Manchester University and a visiting professor at Harvard. His other books include an interpretative essay on George Washington, an account of the United States in the early nineteenth century, a survey of *The American Presidency*, and *Soldiers and Civilians: The Martial Spirit in America, 1775-1865*. His latest book is *Monarchy and the Americans* (1978).

MARCUS CUNLIFFE
THE LITERATURE OF THE
UNITED STATES



PENGUIN BOOKS

Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England
Penguin Books, 625 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10022, U.S.A.
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 2801 John Street, Markham, Ontario, Canada L3R 1B4
Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182-190 Wairau Road, Auckland 10, New Zealand

First published in Pelican Books 1954
Reprinted 1955
Reprinted with enlarged bibliography 1959
Second edition 1961
Reprinted 1963
Reprinted with revisions 1964
Third edition 1967
Reprinted with revisions 1968, 1970
Reprinted 1971, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1978

Copyright © Marcus Cunliffe, 1954, 1961, 1968, 1970

Made and printed in Great Britain
by Richard Clay (The Chaucer Press) Ltd,
Bungay, Suffolk
Set in Monotype Baskerville

Except in the United States of America
this book is sold subject to the condition
that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise
be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated
without the publisher's prior consent in any form of
binding or cover other than that in which it is
published and without a similar condition
including this condition being imposed
on the subsequent purchaser

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	7
Note on the Third Edition	9
Introduction	11
1. Colonial America	23
2. America and Europe – The Problems of Independence	39
3. Independence – The First Fruits (Irving, <u>Cooper</u> , Poe)	53
4. New England's Day (Emerson, <u>Thoreau</u> , Hawthorne)	81
5. Melville and Whitman	113
6. More New Englanders (The Brahmin Poets and Historians)	137
✓ 7. American Humour and the Rise of the West (Mark Twain)	157
8. Minor Key (Emily Dickinson and others)	179
9. Realism in American Prose (From Howells to Dreiser)	195
10. The Expatriates (Henry James, Edith Wharton, Henry Adams, Gertrude Stein)	225
11. The New Poetry	251
12. Fiction since World War I	273
13. The American Theatre	305
14. Poetry and Criticism since World War I	325
15. America and the Writer since 1945	351
Notes on Further Reading	379
Some Dates in American History	391
Index	397

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I WISH to thank the following authors (and publishers) for permission to quote from them: Louise Bogan and the Noonday Press (New York), for 'Several Voices out of a Cloud'; E. E. Cummings, *Collected Poems* (New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company); Eyre and Spottiswoode, *Selected Poems* of John Crowe Ransom and *Poems 1920-1945* of Allen Tate; Faber and Faber, *Collected Poems* of Marianne Moore and *Selected Poems* of Wallace Stevens; Princeton University Press, *The Poetical Works of Edward Taylor*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson, copyright 1939, Rocklands Editions, copyright 1943, Princeton U.P.; and William Carlos Williams and New Directions (Norfolk, Conn.), for 'The Red Wheelbarrow', etc.

NOTE ON THE THIRD EDITION

THIS book has been reprinted several times since it first appeared in 1954. Each time I took the opportunity to make minor changes and additions. I have now attempted a more extensive revision, partly because I am less ignorant of America than I once was and partly because I have changed my mind on certain authors, including Emerson. The final chapter is almost entirely new. The main problem remains one of compression. It would be easier, and more just to many good writers, to produce a book of twice the length.

Marcus Cunliffe
Brighton, England
June 1966

INTRODUCTION

As a small book on a large topic, this one has presented certain difficulties. There are scores of American writers who deserve at least a mention. But merely to list them all, with brief identifying comments, would be pointless: a good reference work like the *Oxford Companion to American Literature* does the job far more effectively. Instead, I have concentrated on a few authors, while uneasily aware that they are not the only pebbles on the beach. They have been chosen as the largest and/or most representative pebbles, with the result that others – Thomas Jefferson, Philip Freneau, William Cullen Bryant, Bayard Taylor, John G. Whittier, Upton Sinclair, Edna St Vincent Millay, Ellen Glasgow, and Conrad Aiken, to name only a few – are virtually or entirely ignored. However, my selection of authors has been fairly conventional, and so has the relative space allotted them, according to the current fashions in American literary history.

Here another difficulty arises. For though an American will recognize my arrangement and my remarks as orthodox, to the English reader they may seem a little odd, if he is not ready to accept my underlying assumptions. The first of these assumptions is that one can properly distinguish between English and American literature. Matthew Arnold thought otherwise:

I see advertised *The Primer of American Literature*. Imagine the face of Philip or Alexander at hearing of a Primer of Macedonian Literature! ... We are all contributors to one great literature – English literature.

But Arnold wrote eighty years ago, and even then his comparison was not very apt. In the widest sense, no doubt, there is only *literature*, a universal realm in which the writer struggles with his universally obstinate medium, language. But (as Arnold admits, in speaking of *English* literature) language is made up of languages; languages usually correspond to

national groups; and those national groups that have no language of their own invariably try to resurrect or to invent one. Their attempt has nothing to do with pure literature, if there is such a thing. It is often an ungainly, comic endeavour, as if one decided to abandon an old suitcase and, clutching its ignoble contents, walked through the streets in search of a new one, after most of the shops were shut. More than any other Europeans, the English, with their own ample and well-sewn luggage, have been unsympathetic to the American language plight (though not to that of nations nearer at hand; Arnold, for example, shows every sympathy for the language problems of Burns, to whom dialect came more easily than polite English). But to the Americans themselves the need to find a suitable literary container for their own experiences has been a serious matter. It is impossible to understand American literature fully unless this is understood to begin with. One reason why the Irish feel at home with Americans (apart from the fact that half Ireland emigrated to the United States) is that both nationalities have known what it is like to be governed *culturally* as well as politically from London.

The English reader may accept my assumption that there is such a thing as American literature, and concede that American writers, like the Irish, have managed surprisingly well with their mixed-up heritage. Yet he may still be worried about pure literary values (or at any rate English ones), and complain that in stressing the *American* qualities inherent in American literature there is a danger of cultural chauvinism. Americans, he might argue, harp on *American* humour, *American* democracy, and so on, as though they were American discoveries, virtues peculiar to the United States. They do the same, he may think, in respect to their vices: to anti-intellectualism, commercialism, and the like, which are characteristic of England also. Here I agree to some extent with my imaginary English reader. American literary historians are perhaps prone to view their own national scene too narrowly, mistaking prominence for uniqueness. They do over-praise their own literature, or certainly its minor

figures (though their graduate-school system is partly to blame. So voracious is its demand for raw materials that the supply is not enough to go round: the most trifling of essayists and most unmemorable of poetasters are seized upon to serve as subjects for doctoral dissertations, and be published subsequently. It is like the siege of Paris in the Franco-Prussian War, when even the mice and sparrows were taken for food). And Americans do swing from aggressive overpraise of their literature to an equally unfortunate, imitative deference. But then, the English themselves are somewhat insular in their literary appraisals. Moreover, in fields where they are not pre-eminent – e.g., in painting and music – they too alternate between boasting of native products and copying those of the Continent. How many English paintings try to look as though they were done in Paris; how many times have we read in articles that they really represent an ‘English tradition’ after all.

To speak of *American* literature, then, is not to assert that it is completely unlike that of Europe. Broadly speaking, America and Europe have kept step. At any given moment the traveller could find examples in both of the same architecture, the same styles in dress, the same books on the shelves. Ideas have crossed the Atlantic as freely as men and merchandise, though sometimes more slowly. When I refer to *American* habits, thoughts, etc., I intend some sort of qualification to precede the word, for frequently the difference between America and Europe (especially England) will be one of degree, sometimes only of a small degree. The amount of divergence is a subtle affair, liable to perplex the Englishman when he looks at America. He is looking at a country which in important senses grew out of his own, which in several ways still resembles his own – and which is yet a foreign country. There are odd overlappings and abrupt unfamiliarities; kinship yields to a sudden disjointure, as when we hail a person across the street, only to discover from his blank response that we have mistaken a stranger for a friend.

The English reader, that is, needs to make a double approach to American literature. He should come off a certain

English high horse, and, putting aside what seems to me a hereditary disdain, should look for common elements in his and in the American experience. The task will be easier if (like me) he is a native of industrial England. For those who live under the northern soot-pall, in the wilderness of factories and housing estates; whose ancestors came from villages of which the family has preserved no memory; who will probably move in a few years to another home, another town; who know the atmosphere of those bleak English landscapes so well evoked by W. H. Auden, where mill and mine squat among the moors, neither urban nor rural, recent and yet of archaeological antiquity: for millions of such people the time-scale, the undercurrent (however faint) of alienation, the knowledge of ugliness, are closer to the American experience than is the England of our Christmas-card suppositions. Bearing these things in mind, the English reader who enjoys, say, Arnold Bennett, will enjoy a similar insight in the novels of Theodore Dreiser.

But he will not be completely at home with them; and if he realizes their foreignness, and accepts it as a valid quality, he will begin to share a deeper appreciation of American writing. The same applies to such writers as Henry James and T. S. Eliot, who are so much less 'American' than Dreiser that they can be studied with little reference to their homeland. In their case, and in some comparable ones, I have not been particularly concerned with nationality. My dividing line has been arbitrary: thus, Eliot has little space devoted to him because his work is already well known on this side of the Atlantic. I would only maintain, of American expatriate authors, that a consideration of their American origins is an additional help to understanding them individually, and that a study of them is a help toward a fuller grasp of American literature as a whole.

In other words, American literature is to our eyes a curious amalgam of familiar and strange. America is, of course, an extension of Europe in Europe's expansionist phase. It has been peopled mainly by Europeans. The 'involuntary immigrants' – Negro slaves – from Africa are an exception, and

their presence has modified American society. But in general the United States was founded upon European, and especially British, precedents. Culturally speaking, America might be called a European colony. However, to say so is to draw attention to the complexity of the American scene. No other colony has been so heterogeneously populated, or so long politically independent of Europe. No other country whose origins lie in Europe has had so sharp an awareness of its cleavage from, and superiority to, the parent cultures. Running through American history, and therefore through American literature, is a double consciousness of Old World modes and New World possibilities. Yesterday has been dismissed and pined for: to-morrow has been invoked and dreaded. It has not been the most favourable of situations for the production of literature. As American, the writer has distrusted Europe; as writer, he has envied the riches available to his European counterpart. At any rate this was true of creative literature: the novel, the poem, and the play were for long inhibited in the United States. By and large, critical, historical, and polemical writing have flowed more easily from American pens.

Why this should have been so will perhaps emerge in the course of my account. The Calvinism of colonial New England has something to do with it. So, in a much wider context, has the whole process of settlement. Not all those who emigrated to America did so for exalted reasons. In colonial times some settlers were more attracted by trading prospects than by religion. In the nineteenth century some immigrants came in order to avoid military service in their homeland. But even so, the cumulative process had for most Americans a deep, almost mythological significance. Theodore Roosevelt said that whether those who came were called settlers or immigrants, they travelled steerage – the hard way. To transfer oneself and one's family across the ocean was a step not lightly taken. It was something of an act of faith, the beginning of a myth. In the mythology, Europe was associated with the past, with British redcoats at Concord, absentee landlords, dynastic pride: hunger, poverty, oppression.

America, by contrast, was the future: plenty, prosperity, freedom. Even to-day, the future is America's favourite tense; thus, a writer in the *New York Times Magazine* (27 July 1952) consoles his readers with the thought that 'in spite of everything, we still stand at the beginning of spring, and the point of dawn'. A European writer would not, I suspect, feel able to sound so auroral a note; in England the most we hope for is a 'new Elizabethan age' as good as the first one.

For much of its history America has been a busy, restless land, more interested in innovation than in conservation. Its people have been highly optimistic, setting great store by the ability of the individual to overcome obstacles.¹ The individual has had a *right* to expect success. Emerson, in a revealing phrase from his essay *Self-Reliance*, maintained that 'the nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner ... is the healthy attitude of human nature'. Or, as Melville said of the spoiled American overtaken by the Civil War, he thought himself 'Nature's Roman, never to be scourged'. Emerson's conviction has been widely shared in America, though Melville's disenchanted comment shows that it has never commanded total assent there. Various consequences of 'the healthy attitude' may be noted. When high expectations are thwarted, they are apt to throw the confident individual into the blackest pessimism. Optimism and pessimism mingle queerly in American writing: Mark Twain is a conspicuous example. Or, the individual tends to set himself up in a dramatic relationship to society – as anarchist, as nihilist, or even as a kind of Prometheus. One thinks here of Thoreau ('I am not the son of the engineer'); of the poet Robinson Jeffers ('Shine, Perishing Republic'); of Ernest Hemingway ('There was a war but we did not go to it any more'); and of Whitman, Thomas Wolfe, Henry Miller. One sees, too, the vulnerability of the American writer (despite his apparent detachment) to changes in the intellectual climate; in the

1. F. O. Matthiessen has pointed out (in *American Renaissance*, New York and Oxford, 1941, 5-6) that the first use of the word *individualism* occurs in the English translation of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, where it was coined to describe a novel state of affairs.