

EARLY
AMERICAN
LITERATURE

A COMPARATIST APPROACH

A. Owen Aldridge

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PREFACE

AMERICAN LITERATURE as a separate entity in the university curriculum does not have a long history. Indeed, in a realistic sense, it can be said to have come of age as an academic discipline between the two World Wars almost concomitantly with comparative literature. The journal *Revue de littérature comparée* was founded in 1924; *American Literature*, in 1929. The consideration of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a major segment or independent dimension of American letters represents an even later development.

Until very recently comparative literature as practiced both in Europe and the United States has been strongly oriented toward Europe. In the formative years of this discipline, comparatists paid scant attention to either Anglo-American or Ibero-American authors, and European literary historians made no effort to distinguish between the two groups. Even now this bias toward the European continent is revealed in a project of the International Comparative Literature Association for a series of volumes to represent a comparative history of literatures in European languages. It is not surprising that in projects of this kind the literatures of the Americas should be treated as mere appendages to European letters. History, however, indicates recurring relationships on a triangular basis; that is, the presence of various waves of influence and resemblance joining serious writing in Anglo-America, Ibero-America, and Europe. Even in the period before 1800, each of the Americas made substantial contributions to universal literature.

While comparatists, on one hand, have tended to over-

look the Western Hemisphere, scholars of Anglo-American literature have exercised a related selectivity by concentrating upon American authors to the neglect of relationships with the rest of the world. Paradoxically, they have shown least interest in Latin America, particularly in regard to the period before 1800. My purpose in this book is twofold: to draw the attention of comparatists to the vitality of literary activity in the Western Hemisphere during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, an activity which in part borrowed from European sources and came to be reflected in subsequent European productions; and to suggest to specialists in early American literature that their subject matter does not represent an isolated, provincial phenomenon, but one that responded to the same influences, concerns, and idiosyncrasies affecting or accompanying other literatures of the period.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

OF THE ESSAYS in this book, three have never before been published in any form. The five others are based in varying degrees upon one or more of the following previously published articles: "Polly Baker and Boccaccio" in *Annali dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale*, Sezione Romanza, 14 (1971): 5-18; "Paine and Dickinson" in *Early American Literature* 11 (1976): 125-38; "Thomas Paine in Latin-America" in *Early American Literature* 3 (1969): 139-47; "The Vogue of Thomas Paine in Argentina," *Actes du VIème Congrès Internationale de Littérature Comparée* (Stuttgart, 1975), pp. 281-85; "The Concept of Ancients and Moderns in the Federal Period" in *Classical Traditions in Early America*, ed. John W. Eadie, pp. 99-118 (Ann Arbor, 1976); "The Enlightenment in the Americas" in *Proceedings of the 7th Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association*, 2 vols. (Stuttgart, 1979), 1: 59-67.

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ONE

INTRODUCTION

THE THEME of national consciousness, a concept that came into being immediately after the American Revolution, has been widely discussed in the literary history of North America. This patriotic spirit, as it flourished in the early years of the republic, may be interpreted as either the expression of a cultural identity distinct from that of England and, consequently, a salutary development, or, conversely, as an induced insensitivity to the rest of the world and, therefore, a deplorable example of intellectual insularity. Even before the period of 1776, the American people existed, according to Thomas Paine, "at a distance from, and unacquainted with the world." A staunch patriot at the turn of the eighteenth century, Jedidiah Morse, held the same opinion. "Before the Revolution," he maintained in the preface to his *American Universal Geography* (1793), "Americans seldom pretended to write or to think for themselves. We humbly received from Great Britain our laws, our manners, our books, and our modes of thinking; and our youth were educated as the subjects of the British king, rather than as the citizens of a free and independent republic." The accusations of insularity made during the colonial and federal periods have never been adequately investigated to determine whether they are true or false. The political part of Morse's statement must stand without contradiction, but the notions of complete literary dependence upon England cannot be supported. Ideas and styles of writing entered America from continental Eu-

rope as well as from Great Britain. Most historians of American literature, however, seem to be unaware that there is a problem to be clarified and are quite content indiscriminately to accept all works written in English in the Northern Hemisphere prior to Washington Irving as being products of Anglo-Saxon culture exclusively.

Two complementary, but, nevertheless, contrary explanations have been offered for the long-standing acceptance of this notion of British intellectual domination. First of all, both Europeans and Americans, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, took for granted that any belletristic work produced in the American colonies (in either the English, Spanish or Portuguese languages) was an inherent part of the literature of the mother country. Although the colonial literatures were obviously outgrowths or transplants from the original stock, they were moreover regarded as integral parts of the culture of the nation from which they derived. A work produced, for example, in the English hegemony of America—that is, in the English literary zone, to borrow a term from Soviet literary criticism—would automatically be considered a part of English literature. Its nationality would be conferred by the same process as the birthright of its author.

From the perspective of colonial times, both nationality and birthright were indeed English, but the practice of classifying American writers as part of English literature continued in England and Europe after the American Revolution and throughout the nineteenth century. Major authors in the United States such as Whitman, Twain, and James, for example, were customarily classified under the rubric of English letters. It has been only since World War II that European universities have carved separate niches in their curricula for North American and Latin American literatures. Logically, geographical or political difference should not constitute a sufficient reason for separating the literature of the United States from that of England.

Only fundamental differences in language and culture warrant distinct categories. Swiss language and culture, for example, are so close to French on one side and German on the other that the Swiss authors Rousseau and Dürrenmatt are customarily treated as belonging to French literature and German literature respectively. Cultural differences between the United States and England justify the present method of setting apart the literatures of the two nations, but cultural differences have always been present and were perhaps even more pronounced in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries than in our day. There is no question that political independence led Americans to proclaim their literary production as separate from English early in the nineteenth century, but the rest of the world had an insufficient knowledge of American writing to observe the distinction. At the present time when early American literature is being studied more seriously and more extensively than ever before, evidence is constantly being adduced to erode the opinion that the writing of the eastern seaboard in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century America was a product of British culture alone.

A second explanation, other than the colonial heritage, of why the relations between early American writers and Europe have been neglected may be found in a theory of ethnic roots. This is the view, based ultimately on a biological theory of the influence of climate upon human character, that the soil and other physical features of the American continent established the national identity or autonomy of its literature. The concept is exemplified in a passage from Paine's *Rights of Man* rhapsodically affirming his belief that the grandeur of the landscape inspires sublime concepts and promotes artistic creation. Other aspects of the landscape are presumed to impart specifically "American" characteristics to literature. The concept of topographical influence exists also in Europe,

but it has not been taken seriously since the Romantic period. In Latin America, literary criticism is still dominated by notions of what is termed the telluric foundations of its literature, that is, effects of soil, climate, scenery, and, to some extent, racial strains.

Earth, blood and birthright are undoubtedly significant elements in the development of every national literature, but these elements are supplemented by the historical contribution of major writers from other literatures. However remote they may seem, Dante, Erasmus, Rabelais, and Cervantes as well as Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton constitute the heritage of the colonial and later literature of North America. Thomas Paine's comment in *Common Sense* about racial strains could be applied to literary production as well: "Europe and not England is the parent country." Obviously from the linguistic perspective, American and English literature are essentially a unit, but from the point of view of culture they are distinct. The circumstance that American and English literatures share the same language is no justification for failing to recognize, or for not investigating, similarities of a different kind between American and continental literatures. If English writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have been studied comparatively, that is, in relation to their counterparts on the continent, the same method might profitably be applied to American authors of the same chronological period. One may believe that the literature of the English colonies derived its basic materials from the mother country or that it acquired some of its distinct characteristics from the New World environment and still accept the premise that many American writings resemble those of other countries and that many American and European authors have come into contact with each other's works.

As early as 1830, pioneer literary critic William Ellery Channing advocated study of relationships of this kind.

In an essay "On National Literature" in the *Christian Examiner*, Channing earnestly recommended "a more extensive acquaintance with the intellectual labors of continental Europe." The reading of his countrymen, Channing felt, was "confined too much to English books, and especially to the more recent publications of Great Britain." Channing urged, moreover, that "we ought to know the different modes of viewing and discussing great subjects in different nations" and we "should be able to compare the writings of the highest minds in a great variety of circumstances." This awareness of European letters he specifically proposed as a means of fostering "our own intellectual independence and activity." In other words, Channing actually prescribed what is now known as the comparative method of literary study as a means of promoting American letters. At the same time he considered that it "would be better to admit no books from abroad than to make them substitutes for our own intellectual activity." The America of his time, he felt, needed a literature of its own both to counteract and to appreciate imported ones. The reverse is just as applicable in the twentieth century—that students of American literature need a knowledge of relevant foreign works as an aid for the understanding of domestic ones.

The major omission from Channing's prescription for literary study is any reference to parallel developments in Latin America. This deficiency is excusable in Channing's essay since at the time he was writing, technology had not sufficiently advanced to permit general awareness in either Anglo-America or Latin America of literary activity in the other hemisphere. Today, however, readers of book reviews in any major newspaper of the United States are regularly apprised of literary activities in Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina. Unfortunately the process has not worked retrospectively. Even though the literature of the United States in many ways has more in common with the lit-

eratures of other American nations than with those in Europe, few scholars have taken the trouble to investigate parallels, influences, and other relationships. Linguistic and cultural resemblances cause the literatures of Latin America ordinarily to be associated with those of Spain and Portugal, and the literature of the United States to be associated with that of England. Belletristic connections among the various American nations, however, are just as close as those between any American and any European literature. The periods of conquest, colonization, revolution, expansion, and national consciousness draw the writings of the American nations together in a historical framework just as movements of greater esthetic intensity such as neoclassicism, Romanticism, and realism provide them with links of another kind with each other and with their European forebears.

One of the major topics treated by comparatists has been the problem of tracing and defining the various literary movements and periods, five of which touched both North and South America between 1635 and 1810: The Renaissance, the baroque, neoclassicism, the Enlightenment, and Romanticism. Students of national literatures have relatively little difficulty in assigning chronological limits to these movements or periods, merely placing them in consecutive order and allowing for overlapping on either side. When several literatures are considered together, however, the chronological limits of a movement in one literature do not necessarily coincide with those in another. The Renaissance, for example, began in Italy in the thirteenth century, but did not have a major influence in England until the sixteenth. Neoclassicism also had its origins in Italy (in the sixteenth century), reached its zenith in France in the seventeenth century, but did not dominate in England until the eighteenth. Until very recently, scholars have paid scant attention to the effect of any of these movements on American literature except

for Romanticism. Even then the emphasis has been on the quest for American nationality, which neoclassicism is "supposed to have hindered" and Romanticism "to have promoted."¹ The conscious efforts in America at the turn of the eighteenth century to promote independence from European literary traditions parallel those of Herder and other Europeans to glorify folklore and ethnic writing. The great difference is that in Europe critics looked almost reverently to the past; in America they looked rhapsodically toward the future.

Paradoxically, scholars of American literature have given more attention to the European antecedents of New World Romanticism and to parallels between European and American manifestations of Romanticism, a movement that presumably encouraged independence and individualism, than to the origins and manifestations of the Renaissance, the baroque, and neoclassicism, movements that placed a premium upon convention and imitation. In actuality, all of these European movements had repercussions in America. The effects of some critical theories that originated in Italy and Spain may be discernible in poetry written in colonial Virginia or Massachusetts, and certain elements of colonial neoclassicism have as much in common with French as with English traditions. Eighteenth-century American literature represents much more than the infiltration of the rhetorical art of Pope and Johnson into the milieu of New England Puritanism. Neoclassicism and the Enlightenment were not exclusively Anglo-Saxon, and they embraced much of European culture before being felt in America. Neoclassicism, moreover, did not reach its apex in the New World until after the creation of the United States, when it had been completely superseded by Romanticism in England, France,

¹ William L. Hedges, "Toward a Theory of American Literature, 1765-1800," *Early American Literature* 4 (1969): 5.

and Germany. Indeed, neoclassicism flourished so late in the United States that it coexisted with many elements of Romanticism, sometimes in the work of a single author.

The theory that Colonial American literature was an outgrowth of English, or even of English and continental together, suggests not only an intellectual dependence of the colony upon the metropole but also a colonial cultural lag. A major critic of early American poetry, Harold Jantz, accepts these assumptions for the eighteenth century, but not the seventeenth. He argues that "American literature was to an unusual degree independent during its first hundred years" and that "only after the 1720's or '30's does it become a more fully dependent, a genuinely colonial literature, imitating the approved homeland models."² Jantz establishes this hypothesis upon the purely political grounds that the early settlers of Massachusetts and Connecticut created model societies based on Puritan ideals and that many of their leaders were later recalled to England to serve in the Cromwellian government. Because of their political experience, the colonies could be considered temporarily ahead of the mother country instead of lagging behind. A weakness of this theory is that it applies only to the New England colonies. An even greater weakness is that it fails to account for the disparity in literary production between the English colonies and those of Spain. The latter in the first half of the seventeenth century boasted a brilliant concentration of poets, chroniclers, and diarists far exceeding the modest talents of those to the north. It is hard to see, moreover, why there should have been a greater degree of literary independence in the early years of the North American colonies than a century later when they had accumulated a larger and more diverse

² "American Baroque," in *Discoveries & Considerations*, ed. Calvin Israel (Albany, 1976), p. 8.