



SPHERE HISTORY  
OF LITERATURE

**American  
Literature  
to 1900**

EDITED BY  
**MARCUS  
CUNLIFFE**

I712.064/M322

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LITERATURE  
TO 1900

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SPHERE REFERENCE

First published in Great Britain in 1973 by  
Sphere Books Ltd,  
27 Wrights Lane  
London W8 5TZ  
Revised and republished 1986  
This paperback edition 1987  
© Sphere Books 1973, 1986



Sphere Reference

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Set in Linotron Ehrhardt

Printed in Great Britain by  
Collins, Glasgow

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## SPHERE HISTORY OF LITERATURE

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\*This series was first published in the 1970s. Volumes marked with an asterisk have been revised and were republished in 1986. Some material has been reworked or replaced and some new material has been added. The bibliographies have been updated. Volumes 3,6,9 and 10 will be revised and republished in 1987. Volumes 5 and 7 are entirely new and will be published in 1988.

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AMERICAN  
LITERATURE  
TO 1900

## INTRODUCTION

Around 1900, the terminal point of this volume, not many literary historians in Europe or the United States would have been prepared to argue that there was such a thing as *an* American literature, or that the literature so far produced in America was worth an extensive analysis. Able American authors were conceded to exist. But they tended to be treated as men of individual merit – contributors (as Matthew Arnold saw it) to ‘one great literature – English literature’. Their Americanness, in such a context, was generally viewed as a matter of geography rather than of cultural psychology.

Today the picture looks very different. The achievements of American writers during the twentieth century have made their nation’s literature known throughout the world. Interest in American imaginative expression has as a result reached back into pre-twentieth-century eras. Authors such as Melville and Emily Dickinson, little known or forgotten in their own day, have acquired imposing posthumous reputations.

Possibly, as a few essays in this volume hint, the tendency has gone too far. In other words, American scholars may now overvalue that which was once undervalued, exaggerating the self-consciously native or national aspects of colonial and nineteenth-century culture. That is a matter for debate. What is beyond question is that this literature, less maturely rich than the contemporaneous national cultures of western Europe, has its own varied and often surprising riches, and that they intrigue other people as well as Americans. Indeed a majority of the essays in this volume happen to be by scholars who are not American, though all have a first-hand acquaintance with the United States. (By the same token, the American contributors to the volume have all made extended stays in Europe.) Britain, France, Ireland and Italy are represented; and, such is the relatively new-found prestige of American literature, authors could have been selected from a dozen countries.

The idea beyond the volume was however not to offer a foreigner’s viewpoint on the United States, but simply to gather a diversity of informed opinions. The authors are agreed in being

fascinated by American literature. No other common element has been proposed. They divide the field between them, both in the sense that their essays cumulatively 'cover' it, and in their variety of concerns and assessments. In one or two instances the approach may seem iconoclastic, or to quarrel with judgments ventured elsewhere in the volume. This seemed entirely desirable to the editor: *nothing is more dreary than a compilation of politely modulated approval.*

The volume is designed to stand on its own. The same editor is however responsible for a companion volume of essays on American literature since 1900. Taken together, the two provide a quite comprehensive view of nearly four centuries of the English written word in the new world.

Postscript: These essays were written in the 1970s. They, and the attendant bibliographies, have been revised for the new edition of *American Literature to 1900*. More extensive revision and amplification has been applied to the companion volume in the series, *American Literature since 1900* (1987).

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THE CONDITIONS OF AN  
AMERICAN LITERATURE

Marcus Cunliffe

*Nationalism and Culture*

Before the United States became politically independent there was literature *in* America. Viewed in retrospect, this was already showing some signs of a special American tone, or series of regional tones, notably in the general awareness of the symbolic power of the idea of a pristine Adamic new world, and in the desire to record the particular quality of some particular place – the New England township, perhaps, or the river-plantation society of the South, or the life of the back-country farmer. But these beginnings were modest and embryonic. In the high-spirited journal of Sarah Kemble Knight, for instance, who travelled in adventurous discomfort from Boston to New York in 1704, there is a vividly fresh response to the scenes around her. But it is as much a traveller's as a native's response. The reality before her may be that of mysterious tree silhouettes in some eerie night-time corner of the woods: her imagination, perhaps for comfort, turns these shapes into the rooftops of a metropolis such as London, which in fact she has never seen. Her dreams, or fears, are not wholly engaged by the real elements of the American landscape. Divided, conjectural imaginings formed in the American mind long after political independence was secured. To define and develop a literature of America was, as several essays in this volume reveal, a protracted and perplexing task.

One continuing curiosity of the American search for a cultural identity is that the extreme alternative conceptions on which the search must be based were themselves European. The Mexican historian Edmundo O'Gorman, in *The Invention of America* (1961), denies that the New World was ever 'discovered' – and not merely because the aboriginal 'Indians' had 'discovered' it thousands of years before Columbus. His point is that the realization of the

existence of the American hemisphere came as a profound shock to European cosmographers. They had already established that the world consisted of three continents, the God-ordained trinity of Europe, Asia and Africa. When it became clear that Columbus and other explorers had stumbled upon a fourth continent the whole map of human knowledge had to be redrawn, literally and metaphysically. Did the new continent resemble known regions, so that it could be accommodated within the familiar categories, or was it quite different? Were the natives of America a branch of some race already accounted for, or were they men apart? They were pagans: were they beyond redemption? Why had God waited so long to disclose America to the rest of mankind?

Two very different sets of answers were offered to these questions in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – above all in the speculative, would-be scientific temper of the eighteenth century. One reshaping of cosmology encouraged the view that the late discovery of America was a providential blessing. America enshrined a principle of boundlessness, of new starts and new hopes for the human race. Its aborigines were unspoiled – noble savages – and in those beneficent new world climes the white settler too might experience a rebirth into innocence, simplicity, brotherhood. Rightly perceived, primitivism restored man to his primal sweetness. The golden age, the pre-corrupt stage of human history, might miraculously have been brought within reach of latter-day sensibility.

On the whole, and with important qualifications, this optimistic explanation of the significance of America was – understandably enough – the one that commended itself to the inhabitants of the thirteen British colonies that became the United States. One of the most celebrated hymns to American wholesomeness and opportunity came in the *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), by the Frenchman J. Hector St John de Crèvecoeur, who had established himself as a farmer in New York state during the 1760s. When the Revolution destroyed his hypothesized Eden, he still snatched at a further illusion. Driven out from his farm he could seek refuge among the wigwags of America's first citizens: the Indians, uncursed by civilized passions, would allow him to dwell in peace among them. And with the successful conclusion of the revolutionary war it was easy to insist, as generations of American authors did, that their country enshrined a special principle of decent Quakerish equality. Indeed, as the first successful revolutionaries of the new world, the citizens of the United States

annexed to their nation the whole assembly of optimistic, earthly-paradise legends that had been associated with the entire American hemisphere. In part perhaps this was an accident of nomenclature. 'The United States of America' was a remarkably imprecise name for a new nation, lacking a geographical location. To the irritation of some of the other nations of the new world (including the United States of Mexico), the citizens of the USA became known all-inclusively as 'Americans'. Whatever the reason, then, the United States acquired a symbolic penumbra. It seemed in some eyes to stand for more than a mere nation; and this penumbra was ideologically enlarged through the Declaration of Independence (1776), the Constitution of 1787, and a quantity of subsequent manifestoes, political, nationalist and cultural.

There was however an opposite, pessimistic set of explanations as to the significance of the new world, most fully expounded by certain French *philosophes*, among them Buffon, De Pauw, and the Abbé Raynal. In sum, this view asserted that the new continent was not regeneratively but degeneratively primitive. Possibly through the humidity of the climate (the exact explanation differed), animal and human life in America were asserted to be backward and puny. There were no horses in America, until the coming of the Spanish *conquistadores*. No animals had been satisfactorily domesticated. The natives, it was said, were precocious but short-lived, deficient in sexual appetite and other human essentials. Raynal and a number of his contemporaries contended that this blight had transmitted itself to the white settlers and their livestock: they became smaller and less robust than was the case in the old world.

The degeneracy argument soon lost scientific sanction, in the face of abundant evidence to the contrary. Yet it survived in other forms: for example, as a conviction that there was something meagre, even tainted, in the American atmosphere. However much the Americans might boast of the rising glories of their land, they would always remain culturally stunted in relation to the mother-continent of Europe. America's literary products must necessarily be either derivative, even plagiaristic, or else uncouth, bizarre Caliban-cries. So here too the United States seemed to embody all the dark, pessimistic aspects that had also been associated with the whole hemisphere. The new nation came into a heritage of large extremes.

Each view, the clamantly optimistic and the bitterly pessimistic, figured within the American cultural scene, as writers debated the possibilities and the actualities of their situation. But the duality was

more commonly expressed in other ways. One impulse led the Americans to repudiate their European heritage and to stress the American environment. Such an emphasis seemed to them imperative if they were to express a genuine national consciousness. In the late eighteenth century every people aware of its nationhood – for instance, the Germans and the Russians – was busy exploring its remote past, in order to recover the bardic origins of this sentiment. The Americans likewise wished to define themselves culturally by defining their roots. But the most ancient roots lay in Europe, especially in Britain; and there was something not altogether convincing, in the contentions of Thomas Jefferson and other American founding fathers, that they represented the true spirit of Anglo-Saxon England, from which the English had departed. On the other hand, Jefferson and other Americans had no easier job in relating themselves to their hemispheric heritage in the shape of the American Indians.

The Indian was potentially a powerful and beautiful symbol of the new nation. He was an authentic inhabitant, proud, brave and endowed with an often moving eloquence of understatement – as in the famous speech of Logan (1774) cited in Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*: 'There runs not a drop of my blood in the veins of any living creature. This called on me for revenge. I have sought it: I have killed many: I have fully glutted my vengeance. For my country, I rejoice at the beams of peace. But do not harbor a thought that mine is the joy of fear. Logan never felt fear. He will not turn on his heel to save his life. Who is there to mourn for Logan? Not one.' Cooper's Leatherstocking tales and Longfellow's *Hiawatha* showed that for literary purposes the Indian could be as significant an archetype as Beowulf or Tristan: a theme interestingly explored, in the 1840s, by the Southern litterateur William Gilmore Simms. Yet the potential could not be realized – at least not until the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> For the Indian was an enemy, or an encumbrance, rather than an exemplar. He could be admired, but only in defeat. He stood for an outmoded evolutionary stage: the hunter must inevitably yield to the farmer in the march of white progress. 'To live by tilling is *more humano*', wrote Hugh Henry Brackenridge of Pennsylvania in 1782, 'by hunting is *more bestiarum* [in the manner of the beasts]. I would as soon admit a right in the buffalo to grant lands, as in Killbuck, the Big Cat, the Big Dog, or any of the ragged wretches that are called chiefs and sachems.' In

<sup>1</sup> See Leslie Fiedler, *The Return of the Vanishing American* (New York, Stein and Day, 1969; London, Cape, 1969).

1855, in an admittedly severe review, a Boston newspaper reproached Longfellow for having perpetrated *Hiamatha*: 'We cannot but express a regret that our own pet national poet should not have selected as the theme of his muse something higher and better than the silly legends of the savage aborigines.' In short, nostalgia and supersession were the most that could be made of the quintessential American. The doom of the Indian was the price paid for progress. At that time it could not be seen as perhaps too big a price; and, in any case, it was a price not paid by the white American but by his sacrificed victim.

There were other available symbols of American nationalism – military heroes, statesmen and so on. George Washington, the commander-in-chief of the Revolution and subsequently the nation's first president, was a supremely satisfactory embodiment of American courage and integrity. In the half century after independence, there was fashioned an American ideology based on growth, movement, piety and republican democracy. Innumerable articles and editorials called for a culture appropriate to this creed, frequently picturing the culture of the old world as an insidious influence to be overthrown. 'The vital principle of an American national literature must be democracy,' declared the newly established *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* in 1837. 'Our mind is enslaved to the past and present literature of England.'

But the 'quest for nationality' remained difficult. It was all very well to extol the democratic purity of American life, and to decry the aristocratic and indelicate features of European literature. The traditional subjects of imaginative literature – love, war, chivalry, tragic grandeur, social entanglement – were deficient in the United States; and however much writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne might take patriotic pride in the plainer texture of their native scene, they could not escape the feeling that their opportunities *as writers* were correspondingly reduced. They recognized yet chafed under a didactic obligation to speak well of America, to cast a clear vote for democracy, to be programmatic – in ways somewhat anticipatory of the later ideological imperatives of post-1917 Russia.

Even here, though, it was not possible to reach agreement as to what precisely was being attempted. A national literature was needed to help form a national character: that is, to provide Americans with first-hand descriptions of themselves, and with desirable modes of thought and feeling. But another aim was emulative: to prove to themselves and to Europeans that the new nation was 'civilized', and so capable of producing poets, novelists,

scholars and artists who could match or even surpass those of the old world. The one endeavour, in itself rather hypothetical, emphasized a literature *of* America. The other, assuming that culture was universal and that America must ultimately be judged not according to its own rules but in the world-arena, postulated a level of *polite* culture: in other words, a literature *in* America that might or might not be specifically American in its outlook. The two needs co-existed, and competed, giving rise to a controversy that dragged on intermittently throughout the nineteenth century. The 'nationalists', including the Young America movement in the 1840s, could be accused of chauvinism. The 'universalists' could be accused of snobbishness and excessive deference to Europe.

The division between the two outlooks was rarely clear-cut. Longfellow, for example, was a 'universalist' to the extent that he owned a deep allegiance to the Europe of Dante, Shakespeare and Milton. But he also deliberately contributed, through *Hiawatha* and other poems, to the stock of native American themes. Walt Whitman, especially in his younger days, was almost blatantly a rooter for the USA; yet he came to believe

those convictions are now strongly temper'd. . . . I see that this world of the West. . . . fuses inseparably with the East, and with all, as time does – the ever new, yet old, old human race – 'the same subject continued', as the novels of our grandfathers had it for chapter heads.

Eventually such doubleness would be a source of strength, or at least of fruitful tension. But for much of the nineteenth century it engendered a nagging anxiety that could neither be ignored nor resolved. For every American author who travelled abroad, unless he promptly returned, there was the uneasy thought that he might somehow be betraying America, no matter how staunchly he upheld his native land in the presence of foreigners. The evolution of a national culture was an acutely if inevitably self-conscious affair. To go abroad in the cause of America's advancement was to risk setting America back: one meaning of 'national culture' cancelled out the other.

### *The Conditions of Authorship*

Another way of putting this is to say that America, while cherishing a belief in its progressive moral superiority to Europe, lagged behind culturally, and that this discrepancy placed particular strains upon the American ideology which – mingled as ideologies usually

are with grosser considerations – insisted that knowledge should be accessible to all, and that claims to professional expertness were ‘aristocratic’. These were in truth arguable propositions within the context of a would-be open democratic society. Thomas Jefferson, the economist Henry C. Carey, and Jacksonian radicals such as William Leggett were among those who at one time or another upheld the notion of a free trade in ideas. Why, they asked, should authors seek in effect to impede access to words and images in the common stock? If Eli Whitney’s cotton-gin was not protected by patent, why should a play or a book be given such preference. Was not education a universal democratic right – a natural right, according to Horace Mann of Massachusetts? The case was contested by an increasing number of American authors – Washington Irving, W. C. Bryant, J. G. Whittier, R. W. Emerson, Mark Twain. Congress remained largely indifferent to their pleas, despite its general readiness to protect other forms of property. The grand conception of a spiritually and literally free flow of information was used to justify a profitable traffic in pirated European literature (again one is reminded of Soviet Russia, which in the twentieth century also refused to be bound by the publishing conventions of the rest of the world). In other words, the United States refused until 1891 to participate in an international copyright agreement. The traffic was two-way. Many an American book, including the prodigiously successful *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) of Harriet Beecher Stowe, was pirated by unscrupulous British publishers, who paid no royalties to the hapless authors.<sup>1</sup> But since the greater volume of literature flowed westward out of Europe, the major effect was exerted upon rather than from the United States. British authors, notably Charles Dickens, protested vigorously at what they took to be sheer theft, and many of their American counterparts joined with them in urging a reform – to no avail. For Dickens and other Europeans the loss was merely financial: as American editorialists sanctimoniously reminded him, his reputation was nationwide in the United States thanks to the flood of instantaneous cheap reprints of his novels. But American authors suffered loss both in purse and in pride. With less grand reputations than their European contemporaries, they were in any case fighting to stake a claim to recognition. Since their books had to receive a royalty in

<sup>1</sup> ‘There is an American lady living at Hartford, Connecticut, whom the United States has permitted to be robbed of \$200,000. Her name is Harriet Beecher Stowe.’ James Parton, ‘International Copyright’, *Atlantic Monthly*, October 1867.



the United States, they were at a fatal disadvantage in comparison with royaltyless publications. In the early 1840s, when conditions were aggravated by a severe financial depression, a Disraeli novel could be bought for half the price of one by James Fenimore Cooper; in a cheap edition, it was possible to buy a new Dickens novel for ten cents as against fifty cents for a new Cooper.

American authors were in other respects too made to feel the humiliation of dependence upon the old world, and of the neglect or parochialism of their countrymen. To establish their British copyright, and attempt to gain an income, they were under a strong inducement to secure prior publication of their works in London – as for example with Herman Melville's first books. This in turn reinforced the tendency of American readers to set their standards by those of the old world: to wait until European critics had pronounced an opinion on an American author before taking him seriously at home. And since prestige was determined by European criteria, there was an added pull upon the American writer to actually domicile himself in Europe, as Washington Irving and Cooper and Nathaniel Hawthorne did for long periods.

In Europe, among other things, they might enjoy the status of a profession, and the firm professionalism that was beginning to characterize the publishing industry. By 1820, when Irving was discovering the intoxication of popular success in London, American publishing appeared hopelessly ineffectual, in spite of the heroic efforts of one or two pioneers such as Mathew Carey of Philadelphia. No American publisher could command a nationwide market. Lacking in capital, the majority shared publication with other firms in several different cities. The result was a patchwork of spheres of influence, with a particular publisher and a particular city striving to establish a trading monopoly within a region. This corresponded to the hinterland of the city's whole economic pattern. William A. Charvat, the historian of American publishing, points out that up to 1850 these economic considerations gave New York and Philadelphia a bigger publishing region than Boston; before then, most of the work of New England authors was published outside New England. In Britain the mechanisms of publicity and reviewing were highly developed. Retail prices were firmly set and maintained; books were widely advertised and effectively distributed; book reviews, in comparison with the scene in America, generally appeared ample, mature and high-toned. In the United States, up to mid-century, books were wretchedly mis-handled in these professional departments. The author himself was