

American Literature Before 1880

Robert Lawson-Peebles



Longman Literature in English Series

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Editors' Preface

The multi-volume Longman Literature in English Series provides students of literature with a critical introduction to the major genres in their historical and cultural context. Each volume gives a coherent account of a clearly defined area, and the series, when complete, will offer a practical and comprehensive guide to literature written in English from Anglo-Saxon times to the present. The aim of the series as a whole is to show that the most valuable and stimulating approach to the study of literature is that based upon awareness of the relations between literary forms and their historical contexts. Thus the areas covered by most of the separate volumes are defined by period and genre. Each volume offers new and informed ways of reading literary works, and provides guidance for further reading in an extensive reference section.

In recent years, the nature of English studies has been questioned in a number of increasingly radical ways. The very terms employed to define a series of this kind – period, genre, history, context, canon – have become the focus of extensive critical debate, which has necessarily influenced in varying degrees the successive volumes published since 1985. But however fierce the debate, it rages around the traditional terms and concepts.

As well as studies on all periods of English and American literature, the series includes books on criticism and literary theory and on the intellectual and cultural context. A comprehensive series of this kind must of course include other literatures written in English, and therefore a group of volumes deals with Irish and Scottish literature, and the literatures of India, Africa, the Caribbean, Australia and Canada. The forty-seven volumes of the series cover the following areas: Pre-Renaissance English Literature, English Poetry, English Drama, English Fiction, English Prose, Criticism and Literary Theory, Intellectual and Cultural Context, American Literature, Other Literatures in English.

David Carroll
Chris Walsh
Michael Wheeler

Acknowledgements

It was almost too late when I found the *History of the United States from 986 to 1905*. Its striking title was due to the excitement that one of its authors, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, felt when he, in turn, had come across *Antiquitates Americanae* (1837) and concluded that his account of American history was incomplete unless he included the Norse legends of Vinland. It was a relief to have my conviction confirmed that a book about the earlier forms of American literature would have to discuss the Vinland sagas. Indeed, my work on this book has been inspired from the outset by the belief that the Europeans imagined America before they found it – and certainly long before the Puritans landed at Plymouth Rock. I am glad that Michael Wheeler and Chris Walsh, the two series editors I have dealt with, were willing to go along with this belief, and the additional time and word-length that it inevitably involved. The dozen years that I have been working on the book have been increasingly challenged by university administration. I am especially grateful to the present Head of Exeter's School of English, Helen Taylor, for plucking me, at a crucial moment in the book's creation, from underneath piles of undergraduate application forms. I have been fortunate to be helped by the staff and book stocks of Exeter University Library, the Huntington Library in California and the British Library in London.

Usually of help, too, was my promiscuous labyrinth of files (no filing system, this one) into which, from earliest undergraduate days, went notes on books, conversations, and those anfractuous nocturnal brainwaves that I wanted to retrieve in the morning. If any part of the book has withstood the best efforts of my excellent copy-editor, Barbara Massam, it is because I have persisted beyond reason in a recovery attempt. The labyrinth allowed me to revive many conversations with teachers, friends, hosts, colleagues and students. The following, listed, as they say, in alphabetical order, may, if they are still on the planet, therefore hear echoes of their voices in the following pages: Sacvan Bercovitch, William Blazek, Malcolm Bradbury, Colin Brooks, William Boelhower, Lawrence Buell, Clive Bush, Richard Cheadle, Peter Conrad, Mark Davie, Karen Edwards, Emory Elliott, Stephen Fender, Anthony Fothergill, Wayne Franklin, G. M. Gidley, Paul Giles, Richard Gravil, Laurette Guest, Avril Henry, William Howarth, Cora Kaplan, Alberto Lena, Walton Litz, Karen Lystra, Susan Manning, Leo Marx, Bernard Mergen, Robert Middlekauff, Lee Clark Mitchell, Christopher Mulvey, David Murray, Peter New, Judith Newman, Francesca Orestano, Daniel Peck, Angelique Richardson, Martin Ridge, Paul Schlicke, Daniel Shea, Ann Swyerski, Douglas Tallack, Tony Tanner, Wil Verhoeven, Michael Wood, John Whitley and Larzer Ziff. It is not their fault if I have misinterpreted what they said. Fortunately, there have been a number of resources to hand to give the book a factual backbone;

I am thinking particularly of *The Oxford Companions to American History and Literature*, the *Annals of American Literature, 1602–1983*, and *American National Biography*.

My editors at Pearson, Heather McCallum, Casey Mein and Melanie Carter, have been willing to assist with a sympathy and patience that passeth all understanding. It is because I decided not to test their patience further that close readers of the Chronology will find that I have written little or nothing about a number of authors, amongst them Joel Barlow, Robert Montgomery Bird, Theodore and Timothy Dwight, Hannah Foster, James Kirke Paulding, Anna Seward, John Trumbull, Royall Tyler and Lydia and Jones Very.

The book is dedicated to my wife, who (with her computer) has suffered this book for a long time; and to the memory of Marcus Cunliffe, with the consciousness that he could, and did, do it better.

For Jenny Wigram
and
In Lasting Memory of Marcus Cunliffe (1922–1990)

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The Problem of American Literature

The case of Paul De Man

Man in the center of space, man whom nothing protects from the sky and the earth is no doubt closer to the essential than the European, who searches for a shelter among beautiful houses polished by history and among fields marked by ancestral labor. For he is in the midst of his own struggle . . .

(Paul De Man, 'The Temptation of Permanence')¹

As Paul De Man realised, America has always presented a great challenge to its inhabitants. Likewise, it is a great challenge to write an 'American literary history'. Its three terms will not let themselves be taken for granted. Take the first term. The landmass did not receive that European name 'America' until the beginning of the sixteenth century. The nation created in 1776 out of thirteen states occupied a fraction of the territory that it would occupy in 1912, when New Mexico and Arizona became the forty-seventh and forty-eighth states. By that time the interchangeability of the terms 'United States' and 'America,' easily assumed by US nationals, had long been the despair of those Continentals living outside US borders. In the middle of the twentieth century questions of terrestrial definition became even more complex. In 1952 Puerto Rico became a self-governing commonwealth associated with the United States although, as the Puerto Ricans in Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story* (1957) remarked, nobody seemed to know it. In 1959 Alaska became the first non-contiguous state to join the Union (it abuts Canada). Although it has the smallest population of any state, it occupies the largest space, more than twice the size of Texas although, again, Texans seem unaware of it. Also in 1959, Hawaii, a group of islands over two thousand miles west of San Francisco, complicated matters further by becoming the fiftieth state.

The question of citizenship is also complex. For Puerto Ricans it might be ambiguous. It has been even more ambiguous for Native Americans. For instance, from 1827 until 1906 the Cherokee nation had independent status, initially on its own land within the United States but for much of that period on land administered by the United States. There was little ambiguity about African-Americans. Forcibly transported to America, they had few rights in the Southern states where most lived. Abraham Lincoln signed the definitive Emancipation Proclamation in January 1863. It was a *de jure* decision, not enacted *de facto* until the conclusion of the Civil War in 1865; and then many African-Americans were denied the franchise until the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. No nation has more consistently worried about dissidents, to the extent that 'unAmerican' is a common term. In 1798 many conservatives were

concerned that the United States was being taken over by a group called the Illuminati. The problem disappeared when it became apparent that the Illuminati had been defunct for some years. Other problems were solved in a more brutal fashion. Some dissidents, like Emma Goldman, were deported; others, like Paul Robeson, were denied a passport; yet others, like John Brown or, more recently, Nicolo Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, were deprived of their lives. The citizens of the United States have not always been able to take their status on trust – which is one of the reasons why there is a greater display of patriotism there than in many countries. The titles of two well-known American histories sum up the difficulties of definition; it is (says Robert Wiebe) a ‘segmented society’, populated (according to Michael Kammen) by ‘people of paradox’. It is fortunate that the citizens of the United Kingdom have not yet added to the problems of American literary history by agreeing to become members of the fifty-first state.

Perhaps it is appropriate that ‘America’ should also be the site where the two other terms, ‘literary history’, have also come most under question. Here again the figure of Paul De Man is exemplary. He was one of a group of philosophers and literary critics who questioned the easy assumptions frequently made about the connection between texts and their contexts. While he did not deny that language could have a truth-function, he insisted that we attend closely to the charms embedded in a text’s rhetoric; for a text has an agenda which may or may not be related to the agenda it professes, or that its author thought it professed. De Man suggested that a text could create a spurious authority, and he wished to question it. This presents particularly acute problems for literary historians, who are trying to use texts to detect structures – *in* a past, which those texts may try to obscure, and *of* a past, from which literary historians are separated, more than anything, precisely by the analytical tools they are using. In other words, language has thrust us into a thicket of subjectivities, and we can only hack our way out by looking at it with the suspicion of an expert detective. As De Man put it:

To become good literary historians, we must remember that what we usually call literary history has little or nothing to do with literature and that what we call literary interpretation – provided only it is good interpretation – is in fact literary history.²

De Man died in 1983. In 1987 it was discovered that he had published articles between 1939 and 1943 in the Belgian press supportive of the Nazi cause. A hubbub ensued, in which De Man and his post-war work were declared unAmerican. Certainly, De Man’s early journalism is repugnant. However, the fate of his reputation reveals a number of ironies. There were numbers of Nazi sympathisers in the United States, some of them prominent. The nation only became officially anti-Nazi after 11 December 1941, when Germany declared war on the United States. The nation still contains neo-fascist groups. De Man had worked in the United States only from 1947; he may well have thought that he had left his pro-fascist past behind him in Europe. For the last few years of his life he had been one of the most respected

scholars in the country. This is appropriate, for De Man's literary criticism, which his detractors had labelled immoral and sympathetic to fascism, had at its heart a cursed sense of negation, which was deeply American in spirit. One of the most influential American writers, Ralph Waldo Emerson, when challenged by English friends to produce an American idea, produced 'the dogma of no-government'. Emerson believed that 'no truer American existed' than his friend Thoreau, and Thoreau had written a famous essay on the duty of civil disobedience. Yet there has been no suggestion that Emerson and Thoreau are unAmerican. This was the final and greatest irony. De Man's 1955 essay, 'The Temptation of Permanence', written in an Emersonian mood, had therefore been prophetic. The dream of permanence is merely a temptation, a temporary shelter from an unforgivingly essential, and essentially American, sky.³

A literary historian therefore embarks on an American literary history with a great deal of trepidation. How does one reveal, at one and the same time, 'the historicity of the text and the textuality of history', as Sacvan Bercovitch put it in his Introduction to *The Cambridge History of American Literature*? This chapter will attempt an answer by an extended discussion of some earlier American literary histories in relation to some elements of American history. The end of the timespan covered by this book is perhaps the safest place to begin. It brings into sharp focus issues of great concern to earlier American literature. It also raises questions about the American canon, which is sometimes more problematic than its English counterpart.

James, *Hawthorne*, and the problem

In 1879 Henry James published a book about his predecessor Nathaniel Hawthorne, whom he regarded as 'the most valuable example of the American genius'. James's view of this quality of American genius was set out in the opening chapter of the essay, where he developed an environmentally-based dialectic between space and time. He used images of horizontal vacuity to indicate what he called 'the large conditions of American life', and images of vertical accretion to indicate other conditions that America, in his view, largely lacked. The shortcomings were summed up by the word 'history', which, James believed:

as yet, has left in the United States but so thin and impalpable a deposit that we very soon touch the hard substratum of nature; and nature herself, in the western world, has the peculiarity of seeming rather crude and immature. The very air looks new and young; the light of the sun seems fresh and innocent, as if it knew as yet but few of the secrets of the world and none of the weariness of shining; the vegetation has the appearance of not having reached its majority.

Hawthorne, in contrast, was a mature bloom, 'deeply rooted in the soil'. James gave two reasons, both of them relating to history. First, Hawthorne shared his birthday with that of the United States. Born on 4 July 1804, Hawthorne, said James, was an 'unqualified and unflinching American' imbued

with the patriotic spirit to be found particularly on that day when 'the great Republic enjoys her acutest fit of self-consciousness'. James was right to believe that this coincidence was significant. From very early in US history the Declaration of Independence had become a quasi-religious document. Very few nations had made such an exact or grandiloquent début, and 4 July 1776 had started the US clock just as the birth date of Christ was deemed to have begun the Christian chronicle. Later on, the show businessman George M. Cohan and the great Jazz musician Louis Armstrong would insert themselves into national history by claiming 4 July as their birthday.

The second reason gave a particular tone to Hawthorne's Americanism. Hawthorne came from the only part of America, James believed, which possessed history of any depth. The United States dated back only to 1776. Hawthorne could trace his 'pedigree' a century and a half earlier, to 'primitive New England stock'. His Puritan ancestors had moved in the 1630s from England to Salem, Massachusetts, and the family had lived there ever since. Salem, to be sure, was 'dull' and 'provincial' – qualities that James would later, in *English Hours* (1905), also use to describe Samuel Johnson's home town of Lichfield, Staffordshire. But whereas James imagined that Lichfield turned Johnson's 'great intellectual appetite . . . sick with inanition', Salem was just the place for Hawthorne, because it 'has a physiognomy in which the past plays a more important part than the present'. It was, moreover, a dark past, heavily clouded with the Puritan consciousness of sin that Hawthorne would explore in his fiction.

Hawthorne contains an early reversal of that polarity, which would occupy James for much of his career, between a virtuous but superficial New World and a corrupt but sophisticated Old World. That polarity explains why James, whose appetites were Johnsonian rather than Hawthornian, had moved to Europe in 1875, and would complete *Hawthorne* in Paris. It also suggests why Hawthorne's 'beautiful, natural, original genius' was a lonely one. James equated history with society, and just as America, New England apart, lacked history, so its air was 'unthickened and undarkened by customs and institutions'. Right at the beginning of his text, James made it clear why he thought there was a shortage of literature in America. His predecessor, he said, 'has the advantage of pointing a great moral . . . that the flower of art blooms only where the soil is deep, that it needs a complex social machinery to set a writer in motion'.

James's use of natural metaphors gives his prose a comic subsoil. That subsoil comes to the surface as broad farce when James abandons figurative language in a later passage, which has become famous:

one might enumerate the items of high civilization, as it exists in other countries, which are absent from the texture of American life, until it should become a wonder to know what was left. No state, in the European sense of the word, and indeed barely a specific national name. No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, no old country-houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman

churches; no great Universities nor public schools – no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class – no Epsom nor Ascot!⁴

The final, extended yet incomplete, sentence is a spectacular example of an anaphoric structure made up entirely of noun phrases. It constructs a rhetoric of negation defining American social reality by a series of deviations from the elements that make up James's deliberately postcard creation of England. The rhetoric of negation was used by classical writers and had been employed by a number of American writers, including Hawthorne, but never at such a scale or to such comic effect. Like much comedy, the passage operates by extreme contrast. The contrast works thematically, counterpointing plenitude with desolation. It also works tonally, combining cynicism and utopianism. Indeed, we might say that it both looks back to the disdain of Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1714) and forward to the epic drive for totality of Georg Lukács' *The Theory of the Novel* (1920), creating in the process a virtuosic example of mock bourgeois epic.

But American readers at the time did not find it funny. *Hawthorne* rubbed nationalist sensibilities, and provoked a storm in the Boston and New York press. Critics and reviewers objected in particular to the term 'provincial', and started to suggest that James was defecting to America's old oppressor. James was rattled by the violence of the response. There is nothing more disconcerting to a comedian than a sally taken seriously, and James showed his feelings in a letter to his friend Thomas Sergeant Perry:

The hubbub produced by my poor little *Hawthorne* is most ridiculous; my father has sent me a great many notices, each one more abusive and more abject than the others. The vulgarity, ignorance, rabid vanity and general idiocy of them all is truly incredible. But I hold it a great piece of good fortune to have stirred up such a clatter. The whole episode projects a lurid light upon the state of American 'culture', and furnishes me with a hundred wonderful examples, where, before, I had only more or less vague impressions. Whatever might have been my own evidence for calling American taste 'provincial', my successors at least will have no excuse for not doing it.

Thereafter James's attitude to the country of his birth would be often contemptuous and usually distant. After two visits between 1881 and 1883 he did not go back to the United States until 1904, and his account of that particular visit, *The American Scene* (1907), was generally negative. Even Salem was disappointing.⁵

The contemporary history of book publishing adds a further dimension to this story. Multi-volume editions such as *Heroes of the Nations* and *English Men of Action* were popular in Britain at the time, and in 1878 Macmillan began *English Men of Letters*, edited by the writer and liberal politician John (later Lord) Morley (1838–1923). The venture was very successful, amounting to sixty-seven volumes by 1919, including G. K. Chesterton on Robert Browning and Anthony Trollope on Thackeray. An early attempt to get George Eliot to write on Shakespeare unfortunately came to nothing. Morley himself

contributed a volume on Edmund Burke (1729–97), the Whig politician who advocated conciliation rather than military action in response to the American Revolution. The Revolution, indeed, might not have happened as far as this establishment microcosm of English writing was concerned, for one of the earliest volumes in the series was *Hawthorne*. James wrote it for Macmillan against the wishes of Morley, who objected not on grounds of nationality but rather on those of quality. He thought that an earlier book of James's had been no more than 'honest scribble work'.

It might be thought provocative to include a book on an American novelist by another, émigré, American novelist in English Men of Letters. Two years later, in 1881, the Boston publishers Houghton Mifflin responded by starting their own series, American Men of Letters, edited by Charles Dudley Warner (1829–1900), the novelist and editor best remembered now for his collaboration in *The Gilded Age* (1873) with his friend and neighbour Mark Twain. A promotional leaflet promised that when it was completed, the series 'will form an admirable survey of all that is important and of historical influence in American literature, and will be . . . a creditable representation of the literary and critical ability of America to-day'.⁶ Warner himself wrote the first volume, on Washington Irving, and by 1904 the series comprised some twenty-two volumes, including books on Fenimore Cooper, Emerson, Longfellow and Thoreau, but not on Henry James. This adventure in literary nationalism had no impact on Macmillan's activities. In 1902 it began a second series of English Men of Letters, starting with Sir Leslie Stephen's *George Eliot*, and that year included a second American volume, on the Massachusetts poet John Greenleaf Whittier, this time by a Harvard-based American, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the mentor of another Massachusetts poet, Emily Dickinson. Unabashed, when Macmillan began a third, New Series in 1926, now edited by J. C. (later Sir John) Squire (1884–1958), their first four volumes gave equal prominence to English and American writing. The two English volumes were on Meredith and Swinburne. Englishmen this time wrote the two American volumes. John Freeman wrote *Melville*, only the second appreciation of Melville ever published, and John Bailey wrote *Whitman*.

The different approaches taken by the London and Boston publishers meant some overlap. Hawthorne, Poe, Emerson and Whitman were to be found both as English Men of Letters and American Men of Letters. Those different approaches also provided some unusual opportunities for enterprising writers. In the same year, 1902, that he published his biography of Whittier for the English Men of Letters series, Higginson published *Longfellow* in the American Men of Letters series. But he was outdone by the Massachusetts critic and poet George Woodberry (1855–1930), who wrote *Edgar Allan Poe* for American Men of Letters in 1885; then challenged Henry James in 1902 by writing *Nathaniel Hawthorne*, also for American Men of Letters; and completed a hat-trick by writing *Ralph Waldo Emerson* in 1907, but for English Men of Letters.

I have given this account of James's *Hawthorne* and its context because it highlights two sets of interrelated issues that must be handled by a history of

earlier American literature. One set of issues concerns the definition of terms in the titles of the two series. The century since the first appearance of English Men of Letters and American Men of Letters has thrown into question every term in those titles except the prepositions. One question concerns the final noun. John Morley and Macmillan considered a variety of titles for the series, including 'Great English Authors' and 'Masters of Literature'. The final term of the title on which they settled, 'Letters', allowed them to range well beyond imaginative literature into other fields, thus anticipating the analytical breadth of more recent critical theories like cultural materialism and new historicism. When Houghton Mifflin adopted the same phrase for their series, it allowed them to gather together a list of luminaries that gave them the additional advantage of appearing to refute James's critique of the thinness of American culture. The first list therefore included biographies of the lexicographer Noah Webster (1758–1843) and the Transcendentalist philosopher George Ripley (1802–80), the latter written by a Unitarian minister with the appropriately sonorous name of Octavius Brooks Frothingham (1822–95). Webster and Ripley will not feature significantly in this present history. The breadth suggested by the term 'Letters' will – and it should provide an answer to James's critique of the shallow American soil.

A second question concerns the noun of gender. Both publishers treated it as unproblematic, man embracing woman for this purpose, as it used to be said. English Men of Letters therefore contained volumes on Jane Austen, Fanny Burney, Maria Edgeworth, George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell. Margaret Fuller was the only woman to appear in American Men of Letters; and even then the book, written by the energetic Thomas Wentworth Higginson, was published under her married name of Margaret Fuller Ossoli. It can be argued that the inclusive treatment of the noun masked an inability to recognise a distinction between male and female writing, and a failure to give sufficient attention to the amount of material written by women. Feminist literary history has brought to light a range of American women's writing far greater in subject and extent than suggested by the lonely appearance of Fuller in American Men of Letters. Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) could be said to present the first thoroughgoing American feminist programme, yet appeared long after Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). Despite this, the following chapters of this book will show that women as writers and women as the subjects of writing have a more significant place in earlier American writing than in its English equivalent. Towards the end of this chapter I will try to explain why this should be so.

Third, the account of the two Men of Letters series suggests that the opening adjective for each was given a different meaning by each publisher. The adjective in the English Men of Letters series indicated language not nationality, while the adjective in American Men of Letters denoted nationality not language. Biographers like Higginson and Woodberry may have exploited the distinction, but it presented a particular problem for those trying to create a national literature for the United States. Noah Webster, fired with youthful patriotism after the revolution, attempted to create a separate American

language with the aim of assisting what he called ‘literary improvements’. With the exception of some orthographical changes to -or (instead of -our) and -ize (instead of -ise) suffixes, his project failed. That failure is reflected in an 1824 comment by Emerson: ‘The community of language with England has doubtless deprived us of that original characteristic literary growth that has ever accompanied, I apprehend, the first bursting of a nation from the bud.’⁷ It is perhaps as well that Emerson did not live to see himself included in English Men of Letters.

This brings us to the second set of issues highlighted by the two Men of Letters series. These concern the status of America within the transatlantic English-speaking community. Stephen Spender characterised the connection between the peoples on either side of the Atlantic as ‘love-hate relations’. This is an unstable condition that has rarely comforted the professional student of American literature, as Henry James discovered to his cost. James’s irritated response showed that he had not anticipated the offence generated by his urbane comedy, and seriously underestimated the emotional investment that many of his compatriots had in American literature. Those emotions are deep and potent because the status and contents of American literature have been the subject of debate for almost as long as its existence has been mooted. It is the subject of many questions, some of which have never been asked of English literature. Does American literature exist? If it exists, what is its relation with English literature? Is it simply a branch of English literature or does it have a separate identity? If it does, how is that identity defined? Does it have a special relation with the land after which it is named? To what extent does it reflect American politics? Has it been influenced by structures of class, race or gender that differ from those in Europe? How have non-English-speaking visitors to and inhabitants of the American continent impacted upon it? American literature has been the site of transnational, and sometimes translanguistic and transethnic, contestation. In consequence, it has never been taken for granted. It is an unsettled, often unsettling, literature. Hence the need, next, to survey American literary histories. The survey will show that different historians have asked different questions of American literature, and arrived at different answers – or decided that they cannot find any answers. Indeed, in the last few years some historians have suggested that American literature has been the object of so much debate because its major defining characteristic is instability. In a splintered postmodern western culture where there can be no answers, they feel that the characteristic of instability makes American literature the most important site to pose the most pressing literary and cultural questions.

The difficulty of American literary history

Until the revolution the little that was written about American literature tended to be confined to theory. For instance, Cotton Mather’s introduction to his *Psalterium Americanum* (1718) tried to justify a plain style which would serve