
WANTED: UNEMPLOYED WRITERS

TO STUDY AMERICAN LITERARY PROBLEMS

by C. Hartley Grattan

It is no part of my purpose to barge into the preserves of the well-informed and dictate to them how they shall work fields they are already assiduously cultivating. I do not even pretend to write an exhaustive study of my subject and I have no doubt that many readers of this piece will be able to offer suggestions for its elaboration. But I should like to place before intelligent readers some of the many problems in American literature that cry out for intelligent handling. The problems are various in nature, ranging from syntheses and interpretations to narrowly intensive investigations; and so the field is open to students of all temperaments, philosophical, fact-grubbing—even to the literary detective. Perhaps some of the problems are not to be solved, though that should be, to the adventurous, an incentive rather than a deterrent to action. That so much should remain to be done when so vast a machinery of research is constantly in operation may amaze the uninformed, but it certainly does not startle the judicious, who are only too well aware of the tendency of the “research trust” to turn instinctively to the unilluminating and the ludicrous.

The broader aspects of the subject have been effectively treated in *The Reinterpretation of American Literature*, edited by Norman Foerster and written by Professor Foerster and his associates, Professors Pattee,

Hubbell, Jones, Murdock, Kaufman, Partridge, Schlesinger and Clark. Although these men deal with different topics they are in general agreement on one broad conclusion: that the literary history of America needs to be rewritten, even though *The Cambridge History of American Literature* is less than fifteen years old.

Professor Foerster emphasizes his view that practically the whole of America's literary development has taken place under the aegis of Romanticism. Professor Kaufman takes up Romanticism in detail and attempts to isolate some of its characteristics with reference to specific writers, pointing to the necessity of intensive studies of this sort. As to what the characteristic Romantic ideas are Professor Kaufman writes: “Let us say that it includes a recovery of the past as an effort to broaden emotional and imaginative outlooks; the revolt against tradition and authority in whatever area of human concern; humanitarian sympathy including new interests in humble life and assertion of individual rights; a fresh perception of nature; the renaissance of wonder; and in general an ascendancy of feeling and imagination”.

Now the task of isolating these ideas in our major writers will illuminate many obscure points, and will also bring into the picture many forgotten authors whose books have served as fuel to better minds. This

brings us around to Professor Schlesinger's proposal that historians of literature become in a sense social historians and consider the psychological significance of esthetically worthless books in the formation of mass opinions and tastes. He points out that popular education gave a reading ability to large numbers; that technicolour changes were responsible for the wide distribution of printed matter; and that it was on this popular culture that the finer spirits perforce erected their works and reputations. Emerson was able to lecture to the masses even if he could not sell his books in large quantities, showing a link between the highest thought and the plebeian mind. Furthermore, many readers progressed up from McGuffey's readers to Emerson; and so perhaps an analysis of McGuffey's works will give us insight into the vagaries of American taste in the period of their popularity. Again, we know that Hawthorne wrote for the "annuals" and "gift-books" but we do not carry in our minds any clear realization of what company he was keeping. This field has been worked over once but can profitably be gone into again. (It is amusing to note that the annual, transmogrified, has survived into our day: *The American Caravan*.)

The connections between classic writers and the socio-cultural situation in which they worked is a large topic with endless possibilities. Professor Schlesinger points out that no one has yet measured the influence of Noah Webster and his dictionaries and spelling books. Some information on this point can be found in Professor George Philip Krapp's *The English Language in America*. A monograph on Webster would not be amiss. To depart from Professor Schlesinger's suggestions, let us note that a recent study of Mrs. Sigourney (*Mrs. Sigourney: The Sweet Singer of Hartford* by G. S. Haight) revealed the extraordinary badness of her poetry and the fact that she was important enough for Poe to solicit her con-

tributions to *Graham's*. We have long realized that Poe worked in an environment of "scribbling females", as Hawthorne called them. We have known too little about them, and Mrs. Sigourney offers the information entertainingly. We know too little about Poe's acquaintance with the occult and pseudo-psychological literature which flourished in his time. A little light is cast upon this subject in S. Foster Damon's *Thomas Holley Chivers*. Indeed Professor Damon's monograph suggests that here is a rich and amusing field open to someone. We have long laughed at the great variety of religious and other cults which have flourished in this country but we know almost nothing about the connections between these cults and the intellectuals. If the faddists and cultists of Poe's day seem idiotic to posterity, how is a free mind to view the connections established by contemporary American literary lights with Orage, Gurdjieff and Keyserling? This weakness for the vague and the "mystical" is a permanent part of the American mind, and if Poe wrote *Eureka* in jumbled accents, Waldo Frank has written *The Rediscovery of America* in mud with a blunt stick.

To return to *The Reinterpretation*, let us consider the question of the frontier. Professor Hubbell deals incisively with this topic both as subject-matter and as an influence. The former is the easiest to study, but we have as yet but one major general contribution to the field, R. L. Rusk's *Literature of the Middle Western Frontier* and one study of a particular figure, John Donald Wade's *Augustus Baldwin Longstreet*. There is a plethora of material for future students. Study of it will help us to understand various major and minor American writers. For instance, the formative years of Mark Twain are as yet inadequately understood, but a drive in the right direction was made by Franklin J. Meine's anthology, *Tall Tales of the Southwest*. There is every reason to believe that Mark Twain's roots are to be found entwined in these tales. A revolutionary con-

tribution to the understanding of Twain will be made when the subject is adequately investigated. Fortunately Mr. Bernard de Voto has in preparation a study which will perhaps clear up the question shortly. The matter of the influence of the frontier is more difficult. We have, in this field, L. L. Hazard's *The Frontier in American Literature*, a somewhat overdrawn but suggestive book, and a handful of dogmatic generalizations. The Brooks-Mumford school of critics is particularly apt to write down the frontier influence as uniformly bad, and certain aspects of the philosophy of William James have been written about as frontier in origin in condemnatory accents. Is the frontier influence to be dismissed as pernicious? We do not know positively. There is need for intensive work on the nature of the frontier psychology and of the reverberations of the frontier attitude in the more settled parts of the country. It may just be that as an *influence* the frontier was a leavening factor of immense value.

If Mr. Foerster's generalization to the effect that American literary history is a matter of European culture and American environment is true, then Howard Mumford Jones's paper on "The European Background" is profoundly important. Professor Jones has contributed one volume in this field, *America and French Culture*, and promises more. The topic, however, is inexhaustible: America and German culture (a large part of the background of the New England renaissance), America and Russian culture (I merely suggest: the Russian writers as introduced by Henry James, Howells and others), the large topic of America and British culture, and so on endlessly. A valuable contribution to this field is F. I. Carpenter's *Emerson and Asia*. A recent attempt to discuss the interaction of Western and Eastern ideas in the writings of Lafcadio Hearn, *Blue Ghost* by Jean Temple, was unfortunately a failure. The task, a fascinating and difficult one, remains open.

I think we may rest here without laying claim to having exhausted the suggestions embodied in *The Reinterpretation of American Literature* which I have thus far used as a touchstone. The careful reader will find the book a mine of stated and implied ideas for serious students to work out.

So if these wide fields, vague in outline, rather overwhelm the prospective student, perhaps some of the following topics will appeal to him. There is still no comprehensive history of American literary criticism, nor is there a serviceable anthology of criticism. *The Cambridge History* does not treat the subject as a separate division of literature. Professor Foerster's two volumes, *American Criticism* and *Toward Standards*, do no more than break the ground. The first is a study in the literary ideas of Poe, Emerson, Lowell and Whitman. The second is a survey of some of the critics of the last few years to serve as a background for an advocacy of humanism. Mr. Foerster has also contributed an anthology to this field which is far from being comprehensive or even representative, even taken together with William Morton Payne's volume (published in 1904). Here is a job, or two jobs for one man, which will open up a virgin territory. The writer who undertakes it will need a fine flair for knowing where to look and an infinite capacity for burrowing in old periodicals. An allied task is the preparation of a history of dramatic criticism, with an accompanying anthology, to set beside Arthur Hobson Quinn's history of the American drama. To be done intelligently, the work must be undertaken by a student with as exhaustive a knowledge of the drama in America as that possessed by Professor Quinn.

An equally difficult task is the writing of a history of American taste which directly ties up with two topics mentioned above: the effect of writers of non-esthetic significance upon the socio-literary environment, and the influence of European judgments on American reading habits and judgments, as

well as the significance of European writers in forming American taste for similar or derived work by American hands. What effect did Longfellow's adventures in translating European poetry have on the development of poetic taste in America? Did Howells, by advancing Russian, Spanish and Italian realists, prepare American taste for a stronger realism than his own? Did the introduction of Zola prepare a public for Frank Norris's attempts to localize Zola's methods? These matters working from the top down. On the other hand, working from the bottom up, such matters as the continuous appeal of sentimental literature such as that of Ik Marvel and George William Curtis (in *Prue and I*). How far were the writers of "tall tales" preparing the way for Mark Twain's realism? What about the Kathleen Norrises of history and their cultural influence? And so on. As to the effect of European judgments, we have the well-known case of Poe. Can this whole matter be treated historically with profit? What is the significance of the fact that foreign critics give Upton Sinclair a higher rating than is granted him by his critical fellow countrymen? And will it be found that writers like Longfellow and Lowell and Howells and Huneker and Percival Pollard assume a much larger place in a history of American literary taste than in a history of American literature guided by high critical standards?

There is need for a history of religious influences in American literature. (By the way, how about the influence of religion on American literary taste?) Thomas Cuming Hall in his *The Religious Background of American Culture* touches upon this topic, concluding that: "Hence it may be adduced, as an evidence of the relatively secular character of American literature, that except Hawthorne no American writer has lit up a whole religious tradition in fiction, as George Eliot has done in England or Walter Scott in Scotland, not to speak of Goldsmith or Anthony Trollope". Is it true that Amer-

ican literature is relatively secular? Is there not a constant and pervasive religious strain? Has not literature reflected the fact that America has been an "officially" religious country ever since the passing of the deistical political Fathers? There is no exhaustive study upon which to base an authoritative opinion. Neither is there any study of the treatment of religious matters by American writers, in fiction, say. Are there four or five decent novels about religious life like Harold Frederic's *Damnation of Theron Ware* and the Bierce-Danzinger-Voss *Monk and the Hangman's Daughter* immersed in a morass of things like Georgie Sheldon's Christian Science tracts and the violent diatribes against the Mormons? It would be interesting to know.

II

Sufficient has been said to show the ambitious student that he need never worry about having enough to do. Of course I ignore the economic question and assume that provision on that score will have been made before the work is undertaken, for obviously some of these jobs will never be rewarded in dollars and cents. It is unfortunately true that many of us perceive the tasks but never undertake them because of the butcher, the baker and the electric light company. But there are plenty of smaller tasks that can be undertaken by hard-pressed writers, and even the large ones I have indicated are sometimes accomplished in a spirit of do-and-dare-come-what-may with surprising economic rewards. Far be it from me to suggest that the best work in criticism and literary history is done by the economically secure, but a measure of freedom is indispensable if the work is not to be hurried and inadequate. In any case, the beginner usually finds it profitable to cultivate a small garden before undertaking a quarter-section.

Some of these small gardens may now be indicated. There are many well-established

writers whose lives have been written *in extenso* who are in need of restudy. There is room for a reworking of the material on John Greenleaf Whittier. A good deal of new information has come to light since he was last treated in a comprehensive manner, and we see him more clearly than his immediate successors. With a national perspective we can isolate in his works those New Englandish elements that mark him out as the founder of a school of writing which includes Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman and Robert Frost. There is need also for a complete reworking of the material on William Cullen Bryant—a book which will present the whole man, not just the poet. It is difficult now to imagine what this new Bryant will be like; we have considered him so long as the author of “Thanatopsis”, and not at all as the editor of one of the most important newspapers in America. The general outlines of his political opinions are well known, but we need to have him tied up with the social situation in which he was a partisan and critic. Until this is done we shall have but half the man. Who knows but that his reputation as a poet will diminish, and that it may turn out that Hawthorne was right in discovering in his face only “the bitter brilliance of a newspaper editor”?

James Russell Lowell offers a similar task. His political writing is better known than Bryant's, but until the whole man is presented we shall not be able to understand him. To be sure Lowell's reputation as a critic is decidedly on the down grade in spite of the efforts of the humanists to rescue him as an ancestor of their outlook. His poetry becomes less and less important from year to year and his “Biglow Papers” have been almost entirely handed over to the students of philology and political opinion. There is, as yet, no completely satisfactory life of Longfellow. Herbert Gorman's attempt to present him in the modern manner was a success so far as the modern manner goes;

that is, the book was very entertaining; but as criticism it contributed nothing, for even the central idea was borrowed from Margaret Fuller.

So one could go on, enumerating the major and minor figures of the accepted canon. The official biographies become less and less satisfactory as the years pass and the material which occasionally finds its way into print only increases our impatience for a thorough reworking of the whole matter. It is perhaps fortunate that Poe never had a pompous official biographer, for the obvious injustice done him by his first commemorator inspired a later generation to look thoroughly into the matter, with the result that Poe biography is in fairly good order today. The diligence of scholars is still bringing new matter to light and, as I remarked earlier, we still need material on his background. With Walt Whitman the case is the same. Hardly a year passes without some contribution to source material being made, but Professor Holloway's *Whitman* is a very satisfying job from the standpoint of presenting the cold facts of his long career.

It is no part of my desire to review all the lives and times in existence and if I have paused over some of them it is to indicate that it is a rare figure to whom the aspiring student cannot address himself without finding some rewarding task. And even if he finds that laborious academic scholars are publishing findings in the learned journals, in M.A. and Ph.D. theses, there is still the task of reducing the material to literary form for the benefit of the intelligent reading public, to say nothing of the republic of scholars who are too inexorably driven by other duties to read every line in the learned media.

Let me, therefore, depart from even so specialized problems as lives and times and list a dozen items out of many that could be cited which demand investigation of a more or less minute sort. I shall briefly annotate each suggestion.

1. Henry James. Some skilful detective work needs to be done to clear up the question of Henry James's real attitude toward the United States, especially the matter of his suppressed desire to return and "live his life over again" here. A detective also should find ample opportunity to exercise his talents in investigating James's relations with women.

2. Lafcadio Hearn. There is the large and wide-open question of Hearn's years between his departure from Europe and his arrival in Cincinnati. Must this period always remain blank in his biography?

3. James Russell Lowell. Someone should address himself to a study of the influence of Lowell's first wife. The results would make a valuable paper and be useful to the prospective biographer.

4. Emily Dickinson. In spite of the flood of books on Emily Dickinson it is hardly necessary to say more than that the mystery is as much a mystery as ever and there is still room for a good detective to exercise his talents. To some crotchety readers her reputation remains a dark mystery.

5. Walt Whitman. Did Whitman have any children? Was he homosexual? I have on my shelves an interesting little book on this latter question, *Walt Whitman's Anomaly*, by W. C. Rivers, but the evidence seems strained.

6. Ambrose Bierce. No one has yet solved the mystery of Bierce's disappearance. Not so long ago I received a telegram from a friend in El Paso who was in touch with a Mexican military man who believed that he could clear it up, but as yet no documents have been produced to support this. What became of Bierce's autobiography? Perhaps this is an insoluble mystery; the document may never have existed. Lastly, there are still Bierce letters floating around. A labor of love would be to hunt down every one and publish a complete collection.

7. Jack London. There is no satisfactory biography of London and little prospect that one will be written in the present generation. There is, however, the question of his suicide. Upton Sinclair believes he did commit suicide. Is this indisputable? It has never been thoroughly threshed out.

8. Harold Frederic. Frederic wrote fourteen books, though but two are ever mentioned, *The Damnation of Theron Ware* and *Seth's Brother's Wife*. The former is one of the very few respectable treatments of religious life in American fiction. The latter is taken by Professor Parrington as an important document in the history of American realism. Someone should study all of Frederic's books as well as his life in an effort to determine his exact place in American literary history. Is it possible that but two of his books are of importance? And as a person, must he remain a shadowy epigrammatist flitting in the background of Thomas Beer's *Stephen Crane*?

9. Joaquin Miller. There is no satisfactory biographical study of Miller. The tangles of his life will require great skill to unravel; he was a furious mystifier and extremely careless with the truth.

10. Frank Norris. Little or no work has been done on Norris's biography, though his importance in the history of American fiction is generally conceded. In the elaborate collected edition there is Charles Caldwell Dobie's important biographical essay (Introduction to Volume VII) and some illuminating remarks by Charles Norris, but no systematic study. The material is scattered through innumerable books and magazines, but one presumes that the most valuable material is in Charles Norris's hands.

11. Bret Harte. Harte's whole life needs to be restudied, but in the meanwhile it might prove interesting to go into the matter of his improvidence and the wails about money matters which deface his letters; his alleged

drunkenness in the early days of his stay in the East, touched upon in the letters of William Dean Howells; his staying in England when he was severely critical of such men as Henry James and James Russell Lowell for their alleged Anglophilism.

12. David Graham Phillips. Phillips is in a fair way to pass into literary history as the author of *Susan Lennox: Her Fall and Rise*, the first American study of a prostitute. This book has given him a reputation abroad that is not endorsed by his countrymen. A careful study of him would result in a colorful book quite apart from the literary judgment on his work, for his career was gaudy and he came to his death by assassination. Who has possession of his papers? From Phillips the writer might well go into a history of the muckraking period. The material is abundant; many of the actors are still alive; and right now many of the participants are publishing autobiographies.

Addenda. There is always room for short notes on the numerous one-book-authors in American literature. What can be said about W. C. Morrow, author of *The Ape, the Idiot and Other People*? Or of John W. deForest, author of *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty*, whose work W. D. Howells admired?

If none of these tasks appeals, there is the large field of editing open to writers of scholarly inclinations. There is no comprehensive series of reprints in the field of American letters. Partly this is due to the lack of any serious understanding of what should legitimately find a place in such a series. Most of those which have been undertaken have included standard classics already available in the collected works of various authors or in innumerable school-book editions. This multiplication of volumes is not a particularly praiseworthy activity. Most of the series that have promised well have been discontinued by the publishers for lack of a market. If someone could solve the prob-

lem of how to produce reprints in such a fashion that the publishers would not lose money, they would confer a boon on all concerned. Perhaps the solution will be a subsidized collection put out by one of the university presses. Some very fine series have been projected, but since they have failed in mid-career the student does not profit at all. For instance, I have the major part of one series on my shelves and find that the following interesting projected reprints have not appeared and are not likely to appear*:

Magnolia Christi Americana by Cotton Mather.

The Jack Downing Letters.

A New Home, Who'll Follow? by Caroline Kirkland.

Tales and Letters from the West by James Hall.

Peter Cartwright's Autobiography.

Another projected series was to be finely printed, but ended after the publication of one item, Kenneth Murdock's edition of *The Day of Doom*, by Michael Wigglesworth. Some interesting items proposed were a selection from Herman Melville's poetry and selections from Bronson Alcott's Orphic sayings. Without tools the scholar cannot do his work, and without easily available texts literary history is just so much learned lumber.

An excellent tool for workers in American literature is the quarterly journal, *American Literature*. This periodical provides a medium for short studies of particular problems. Without making any invidious distinctions one may cite as of particular interest to the general reader the following articles: "Early Criticism of Emily Dickinson", by Anna Mary Wells; "Ambrose Bierce and the Civil War", by Napier Wilt; and "Mark Twain Juvenilia", by Minnie Brashear. In addition to articles and reviews the journal prints a list of articles on American literature appearing in current periodicals and a

*Also announced in this series and never produced was Timothy Flint's *Recollections*. I am happy to say that I have prepared an edition of this book for the *Americana Deserta* series (Knopf).

list of research in progress. Both of these features are of immense value.

A knowledge of what is being done will prevent any unnecessary duplication of effort, yet the field is so uncultivated that it is extremely unlikely that any precise duplication will take place. Without attempting to review all that is in progress, mention should surely be made of the work of Stanley T. Williams on Washington Irving, of Thomas Ollive Mabbott on Poe and related figures, of Robert E. Spiller and others on Cooper, of Harry Hayden Clark on Freneau and of Tremaine McDowell on William Cullen Bryant. Equally important is the fact that theses are being written on such minor figures as Kate Chopin, John Howard Payne (whose papers revealed the love passage between Washington Irving and Mary Shelley), Fitz-James O'Brien and F. Marion Crawford. Why not tackle Edgar Saltus (the existing biography is worthless, *Edgar Saltus, The Man* by Marie Saltus) or Frank Stockton?

After all, none of the tasks I have mentioned is anything more than preliminary to the great task, which is the production of a reliable and comprehensive history of American letters. As every schoolboy knows, there are more histories of American literature available than one cares to count, and most of them are pretty poor from any angle, but particularly weak in perspective. Professor F. L. Pattee, echoing H. L. Mencken, who echoed—whom?—has pointed out that we need a radical revision of our fundamental outlines. We do, but it is hard to defeat tradition and no really revolutionary work has thus far appeared. I fear that Professor Pattee's forthcoming comprehensive work won't please all hands. Pattee is diligent, but his critical judgments are erratic, and his ability to err on well-known (as distinguished from debatable or obscure) facts is simply amazing, as one may discover by consulting the notes in his anthology, *Century Readings in American Literature*. He has several times

radically revised his judgments, as will appear if one looks at his treatment of Henry James in *American Literature Since 1870* and in *The Development of the American Short Story*. The same goes for his successive treatments of Ambrose Bierce. And of course the letter printed in Walter Neale's *Life of Ambrose Bierce* is a terrible give away. It appears that Pattee tends to follow the drift of popular critical opinion, as if to indicate that he elected authors to a place in his pantheon on the basis of majority vote. Neither will Professor Parrington's three volumes long remain standard, for his judgments of the more purely literary figures are partisan in the extreme. Parrington's work will stand for many years as a major contribution to the history of American thought, but I hardly expect it to stand long as a history of American literature. Yet it is only by such efforts as his (and Professor Pattee's) that we will finally arrive at an adequate outline of the development of American letters.

To many workers in the field this is the final objective and a sufficient one. I would take a larger view and keep before the young scholars the ideal of a comprehensive culture history of the United States which would attempt to set before the reader in a series of volumes the complete story of American intellectual life. On such a task many hands will have to coöperate until one powerful mind takes up all the special contributions and welds them into a living whole. Is it too much to imagine that some day America will produce a man capable of drawing together the threads being spun by the literary research workers, the students of American architecture, of the plastic and graphic arts and the historians of philosophy and science? Is it too much to expect that in a happy future the work of Parrington, Mumford, La Follette, Riley and (but where is the historian of American science?) will finally be available in one majestic story, grounded in sociological and economic facts and made luminous by penetrating intelligence?

TWO SONNETS

by Marie Luhrs

I

Their hair is on the wind, rain on their hair,
Now cool and washed and beautiful they turn
Their faces up. The sun begins to burn
And breathes in swirls of mist to clear the air.
Lightly they live and simply as a mouse;
They drink the stream, gnaw cherries to the bone,
And lay their heads upon a green, soft stone,
But there is no more living in the house.
They have the reputation of the fauns
That hoof the earth, yet think and dream like men,
The reputation of the leprechauns
That move under the spread boughs of the glen.
They are cast out and feared—creatures apart
Who have the shine of rain and sun at heart.

II

Whether they move shadowed by wood or stone
Or in the shadow underneath a tree,
They move together, make no word or tone
Unheeding of another's words or free.
They turn the soil up in their need of bread,
They dance together in their need of play,
They lie in love after the flare of day,
And one by one they crowd the heaped-up dead.
Yet from the hot-limbed contacts of desire,
Or from the breaking of the hard-packed soil,
They have no flame to match each other's fire
And no companionship for all their toil.
Body to body, weary moan with moan—
Each one who crowds the world is there alone.