



Defining American Literature

THERE are two ways in which the literature of the United States may be defined in its relations to world literature, of which the first is important, yet does not go far beyond the obvious.

America is, after all, a transplanted Europe, and American literature is an articulation on this soil and under these skies of European (and to a slight but considerable extent, of Asiatic) ideas crossing the ocean in great waves of influence that beat into sensitive American minds.

In the earliest days of the Republic, for example, the intellectual currents set up by English Deism are strong; while a little later the Romantic Movement, which was transforming European emotions, flows in from every important source and colors American life from the seaboard to the frontier. If the sober thinkers, like Franklin, responded to the ideas of Deism, the novelists and essayists, such as Cooper, Irving, and later Hawthorne and Poe, react to the egoisms or the expansions of Romanticism and reproduce with strong American variations the romantic literature of Europe. Were there space, it would be easy to name dozens of specific European excitements of the intellect which set up by direct flow or an induced electricity new charges and new kinds of literature in America.

Viewed this way, American literature is a vigorous colonial product, responding and reacting from its own vitality to the cultural charges of the European power house.

But this, though a necessary preliminary, is the least interesting and least penetrating view of American literature. The waves from the mother countries were inevitable if books and the right men crossed the waters. But what happened to these waves in what was after all a new and strange environment, and what new waves of influence have rolled back?

The best summary perception of American literature will be had by those willing to forgo the general for the particular.

More can be learned from a few individuals and a few types of literary expression, than from a history of American writing. The definition of American literature which can be deduced from the characteristics and the influence of a few writers is much too narrow to cover American reading. Yet it is surely true that the traits of a national literature must be drawn not from what a nation reads but from what it creates.

I shall choose, therefore, for my analysis the work of four individuals and then, to get a broader base for generalization, shall add a tentative characterization of what may fairly be called the most vital mass literature of the Americans.

Emerson would have been an original, creative mind in any civilization, but it is not his originality, it is what his creative spirit made articulate for his country and his time that is important here. The current of European idealism in him rose through new springs. He was a scholar and a specialist in religion who lived in an expanding civilization. What in Europe and in his own Massachusetts was a revolt against dogma and against codes, what in America generally was crude energy, he transformed into a faith in the power of man to make each day a new beginning and into a confidence that good (which he did not too sharply define) was more fecund than evil (which he regarded as a wild beast that the superior man could inevitably subdue). He brought idealism to the frontier and offered it a continent. The comfort-seeking nineteenth century outmoded him, yet his ideas are coming home again in the area which twentieth century science has left open for religion.

Hawthorne is the perfect example of the metabolism of an American imagination at work upon a mood which did not originate here. He was a romanticist strongly attracted, like all that European generation, to history, but in strong skeptical revolt against the easy moral theories of the age of amelioration. The weakening chains of Calvinism, which had bound together the impulses of the American will to subdue a continent, left him unshackled, but brooding. He represents that karma from the moral uncertainty of the American past, which still creeps upon our long conflict between idealism and the pursuit of the dollar. Sin for him was the pathology of individuals in a country that had never reconciled its present with its past, or with its future. A little too soon and with bad models yet in a golden style, he wrote the tragedy of our Lincolns, our Wilsons, our Poes, and our Grants.

Thoreau also was a scholar, a first-rate scholar in the great classics of world civilization, if too much of a transcendentalist ever to become a scholar in the natural sciences where most of his energies were spent. He got his idea of the significance which lies behind facts from Emerson, and thus indirectly from the European idealists, but his application of it to the business of living was his own. Here he

was entirely himself, a deeply religious, intensely self-sufficient, and acutely suspicious Yankee. He saw life in a new country being swung from its natural vitalities of satisfying experience, into accumulation, its neck going under the burdens which had made life unendurable for all but the privileged in Europe. He saw economic experiments under way which left the essential out of account, which was that man should learn how to do what he really wanted. He saw the industrial revolution passing into the phase where it was to set new and one-sided standards of living. Against these world ideas, he put his own life which he lived as an experiment—and could so live it in a New England where intense individualism was still a pioneer virtue. He wrote a book on how he lived without either despising or yielding to the machine, and an essay on what he proposed to do if the dictators should proclaim the state more important than the individual soul.

Walt Whitman took all literature and all the brotherhood of man for his province. The first he read badly; the second he celebrated in its passing, not in its eternal, aspects. The *en masse*, the democrat, the noble workman, the sweaty pioneer he wrote of, were actors in only one scene of a great drama. They seemed to be the future to a mid-century American because democracy in a country with an unsettled West made them not only possible but types of success. It was with a vision differently conditioned, but equally short-sighted, that Marx saw his classless proletariat. What the Civil War left of Whitman's dream, the industrialization and exploitation of the United States ended. Yet he dreamed it so long and with such reality for his imagination to play upon, that his rough lines were able to break the conventions which still made poetry and all higher literature aristocratic. The American experiment in a society run for the benefit of the average man, which still continues from Jefferson to Roosevelt, got its heroic articulation from Whitman. And it was a rough, crude, vulgar heroism belonging to men who never forget their stomachs or their sexual organs, and so transferable to whatever in the future shall be the expression of the common people.

Last — journalism. The indisputable contribution of the American to world articulateness is journalism—a method of making news sensational, so that, like literature, it will appeal to the emotions. The excesses of sensationalism I am not concerned with here. My point, as far as America is concerned, is this: that the quickened intelligence of a pioneer country, the high recurrence of movement among its populations, and the interest in events in a continent which for three centuries has been in constant and rapid process of change, made the art of journalism as inevitable here as it was native to circumstance. In this there is no foreign

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Letters to the Editor: *Proposal to Publishers; Pretenders Then and Now*

See America First

SIR:—SRL editorializing May 15th; "... Proposal: Let the publisher forgo his annual trip to Europe ... get out into the American hinterland for a month and see what is being written there and who is writing it. ... Talk to the librarian, newspaper editor, to the bookseller. Find out who is writing books in the town. Get the young men and women in for cocktails. ..."

That is a grand idea. I'm all for it. Your publisher will come to Camden, New Jersey, no doubt. I am the bookseller he will see. If he will give me a cocktail, too, I will arrange to have the young men and women come up. I offer the following:

1. The author of a juvenile. The book is about George Washington—"Written so children will understand it." The author was too busy to make illustrations for it but a local sign painter did some for him on red cardboard. A Natural.

2. A poet. Her work is Dickens's "Christmas Carol" in verse. It rhymes.

3. Another poet (if I can find her). A Whitman admirer who came in last Summer in a trailer. She made frequent visits to Walt Whitman's house and wrote a 300-page poem in the manner of Walt Whitman about Mary Baker Eddy. She proves that Whitman thought like Mrs. Eddy—or maybe it was Mrs. Eddy who thought like Whitman. At any rate, it was a good poem. I did not know then that the publishers would come to Camden, so I sent her to The Macmillan Company. That ungracious outfit never so much as sent me a note of thanks.

4. The author of a mystery thriller in which the murderer is a sculptor. The corpse is covered with chromium plating and allowed to stand in the studio. The detectives think it is a statue and give up the search until* ... I cannot give away the plot. Your publisher will have to pay money for that one.

These are just a few of my long list. I am in a position to provide as many guests for his cocktail party as his hotel suite will accommodate. Please see to it that Camden is included in his itinerary.

JOSEPH PRAISSMAN.

Whitman Galleries,
Camden, N. J.

Out of Antioch

SIR:—An amateur of criticism and of history hesitates to carp at so well-informed a reviewer as Fletcher Pratt, but on reading Lion Feuchtwanger's "The Pretender," I cannot help feeling he has missed the point. His knowledge of ancient history seems prodigious—can it be that he has failed to keep up with modern history? I should not call "The Pretender" a *roman à cléf*, but surely there are analogies between its main events and characters and certain fantastic gentlemen and their doings in modern Europe. Do not the flooding of Apamea, the framed trial

* As Mr. Praissman may not know, this plot was used by no less a mystery writer than Dorothy Sayers, for a story in "Lord Peter Views the Body."—Editor.



"IT'S YOUR MUSE AGAIN."

of the Christians, the heroic behavior of John of Patmos at the trial, the night of proscriptions against the pretender's early friends—don't they remind Mr. Pratt of anything? Oh, come on, Mr. Pratt—guess! Surely you've seen Trebonius's picture in the papers, in all his medals and regalia, and the slave Knops twisted with his slave's hate, and even the stuffed toga Terence who only really exists before an audience. Come out of Antioch, Mr. Pratt, and read the morning paper!

HELEN RIPLEY NOYES.

Stamford, Conn.

"Heaven Born"

SIR:—I had a subscription with you which expired with the issue of April 17th. I have not renewed and yet I have received the April 24th issue. The lapse of subscription is intentional, because I do not like to grovel and your semi-new editor, Mr. DeVoto, is making me do so more and more. The climax came when he offered an offensive cover telephoto of the bastard son of a British prostitute, himself a criminal and expected to continue in that role, writing his memoirs and hailed by Rebecca West as a "heaven-born" writer—I don't think *that* heaven starts with a capital.

I have wondered why I have not liked to read Rebecca West—now I know. Why drag the British sewers for mental pabulum? But Rebecca West's "heaven-born" writer is only the worst of the procession. Many who have made your front page recently belong in the same class, though possibly not quite so low. True, there have also been many of real value and much interest to me, but slime is pernicious and it clings, and I prefer not to have it so inescapable when I want intelligent review.

So count me off as a subscriber—and I'm somewhat regretful too, for there is much that I like in S.R.L.

HELEN KLINE JAGGAR.

Burlingame, Cal.

"Nymph"

SIR:—As a college senior, hoping to enter publishing following graduation this June, I must take exception to your editorial of May 8, entitled "Nymph." The person whom you describe is, in my experience, quite non-existent. I know some editorial writers on college papers, and am more or less acquainted with six or seven hundred fairly representative college students. Among these I know of very few who could be even faintly identified with the egotistical and impractical fool of your editorial.

It is, no doubt, a severe tribulation to have to listen to a callow youngster tell one how to run one's business, and no one can be blamed for resenting it. But the college man, as I know him, though he may be inconsiderate, over-critical, and stuffed with too many good principles and not enough practical experience, applies the same hard tests to his own work as he does to the work of others.

GEORGE R. BACON.

Amherst College,
Amherst, Mass.

General John Bidwell

SIR:—I am engaged in the preparation of a biography of General John Bidwell, "prince of California pioneers." I should be grateful for information any of your readers might be able to give me on this subject.

JOHN L. NAYLON.

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Kansas City, Mo.