

# *The Making of American Literature*

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with only his strength and Providence for guides. With him began a new emphasis upon an old theme in literature, the theme of cutting loose and faring forth, renewed, under the powerful influence of a fresh continent for civilized man. It has provided, ever since those first days, a strong current in our native literature, whose other flow has come from a nostalgia for the rich culture of Europe, so much of which was perforce left behind.

It is not surprising that our own writers in the first three centuries of New World history were more often purveyors of this nostalgia than recorders of the new warmth of the American imagination kindling in novel scenes. They believed that their mission was to be importers and middlemen for America of this European culture. They encouraged nostalgia, even while spreading civilization, and they were often insensitive to the effect upon the imagination of the new subject matter of experience developing upon this continent with extraordinary rapidity and force.

Yet the literature of the new nation was to be shaped more by a hope for the future than by a clinging to the past. Observers from across the seas have noted from the beginning the buoyancy of our writing, its richness in spiritual conflicts, carried in such great writers as Poe and Melville to the bounds, and beyond the bounds, of neuroticism. They have been impressed by the vigorous self-assertion, expressed in the lesser men

THE literary history of this nation began when the first settler from abroad of sensitive mind paused in his adventure long enough to feel that he was under a different sky, breathing new air, and that a New World was all before him

as naive pride. The slow emergence of an articulate racial mixture—a race of races as Whitman called it—had deeply interested them, for this was an experience not known in Europe since the Roman Empire; and they have seen that the remark of Michel Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur, one of our most sympathetic immigrants, was true: English dogs after two or three generations in the new land became in habits and experience American, and so it was with men and with literature.

The first historians of American literature wrote of it as if they were describing English flowers and trees transplanted into a new environment. A later school discovered its democratic, psychological, and economic differentiations, but in their zeal for argument and their eagerness to establish our originality, they often left unemphasized the timeless values in our writing. The Jeffersons, the Mark Twains, the Whitmans, emerged from



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the criticism of these historians with new depths of national significance; the Poes, the Hawthornes, and all writers who were primarily artists lost definition whenever their merits did not depend upon the peculiar circumstances of American history.

The time has now come, and the materials of research and criticism are available, to strike a balance which should make possible a new and truer picture of our literary tradition.

IT is, of course, quite possible, and indeed necessary, to write of American literature in terms of its European, and especially its British, sources. That was the way in which Longfellow viewed our literature, the way in which Howells seems to have felt that it could be best understood. It was the approach of teachers, critics, and historians in general until our 1920's. From the academic point of view, American literature was simply a hoped-for extension of the great literature of the English-speaking peoples. And so it is, and such a history, as far as it goes, is entirely valid. Even the radical Walt Whitman insisted that in this new continent we should absorb, not discard, our European past. We could not discard it, if we wished to do so. The progenitors of our literature are in a European and usually in an Anglo-Saxon past. Chaucer, Shakespeare, the folk ballads, the great religious literature of the English seventeenth century are as deep in our ancestral strain as in the genealogy of modern British writing. The English eighteenth century, English romanticism, the English novel of character, and all later and vital English literature have a family resemblance to ours, and a family influence, with which any other source for the American imagination outside our own terrain is by comparison weak indeed. A history of American literature exclusively in terms of democracy or the frontier is as false as is a history of American writing as a colonial extension. There is a blending of elements in our culture as



—Frank W. Peers.

There is the "shrewd saintliness of Emerson, who spiritualized expansion" . . .

inevitable in a newspaper editorial as in "John Brown's Body" or the "Song of Myself."

Obviously, our literature is a *transported* European culture, bringing with it the richness of its sources in the classic world, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance. Obviously, the roots of our literary culture reach down into British literature which itself has absorbed so long and so much. Yet it is equally true that our literature is a *transformed* literary culture. It has been written in a new continent, and under conditions definitely and impressively different in the vast majority of instances from the circumstances of Great Britain, or of Europe in general. Slowly, yet inevitably, it has found its own accent, as has American speech. But the divergence has been much greater than between American and British habits in the use of the English language, because literature is speech made expressive of values, and the values, the expectations, the experience of life in America have been different from the beginning, with a difference that would continue to increase were it not for the influence of America upon Europe, now beginning to make itself strongly felt.

**P**ROGRESS, for example, as a concept may have little general validity but whether we call it progress or change or development, increasing power and vitality are extraordinarily characteristic of the American nineteenth century. Never in history has nature been so rapidly and so extensively altered by the efforts of man in so brief a time. Never has conquest resulted in a more vigorous development of initiative, individualism, self-reliance, and demands for freedom. Never have the defeats which preceded and accompanied this conquest

of nature led to more surprising frustration, decadence, sterility, and dull standardization. All this is in American literature, and the causes of both our successes and our failures are implicit, and often explicit, in our early national books. James Fenimore Cooper, for us, is more significant than Sir Walter Scott, although it is only rarely that he equals him as a novelist. Melville and Whitman mean more to the American and are more revealing for our own times than Thackeray and Wordsworth, although the English writers may have more often mastered their themes.

The mobility of the Americans throughout their history has been another transforming factor in their life, and therefore in their literature. They moved across a continent, and continue to move, from habit as much as necessity. And, although their speech is English and their political and social organization largely Anglo-Saxon, they have assimilated millions whose cultural background was not English at all. Tradition in America is not the same as tradition in Europe. Our national tradition has been acquired by study and by imitation as often as by childhood inheritance of an environment. Thus the relation of what is called the American way of life, which really means the American way of thinking and feeling, to the national unity is extremely important. It is our national unity—which does not, and cannot, depend upon blood or upon race or upon inherited tendencies. Thus very naturally our literature, which is a record of our experience, has been deeply, often subconsciously, aware of its responsibility in the making of a nation from a complex of races in voluntary union. It has been an inquiring, an exploratory literature from the beginning—asking questions of the New World, challenging the effects of sudden release and expansion upon the spiritual nature, delighting in adventure, whether along the Indian borders, or on the Mississippi, or in the trek across the continent, easily elated in a Whitman, easily depressed in a Hawthorne or Poe. All this has been transforming, and has given to American writing, even to American style, qualities which no merely Aristotelian criticism, no study of literary influences from abroad, can explain. Our contemporary literature, which, from comic strip to epic poem, is the adult education of most Americans, is to be rightly understood only by those who have followed the history of this American tradition.

**T**HE reader who is neither a critic nor a specialist in scholarship is probably more interested in the litera-



. . . "and Emily Dickinson, who saw eternity through the windows of Amherst."

ture itself than in the vast historical changes which it reflects. Fortunately for him, American literature is old as well as new and not merely in a state of becoming. Our national history is already long enough to have had its periods of maturing when the imagination has come to fruit. We do not have to leave him confused and bored by writing in which imagination is only half-formed and half-worded. We are not dependent upon the topical and the timely, the imitative or the unconsciously intuitive, upon the half-gods of journalism, or the sprawlings or conventions of experimental or commercialized fiction. These are all in the background, but we have had a sufficiency of great writers representative of whatever in our history could at that time and by them be put into the forms of art. The approach can now be made through the varied and extensive experience of a national culture on its way, but the objective of a history must be to record and explain the great men and women who have made this culture speak to the imagination. Literature as they have written it is any writing in which esthetic, emotional, or intellectual values are made articulate by excellent expression. It must be the record of man made enduring by the right words in the right order. It is a feeling or thought which, by some inner necessity, has created for itself a form. Literature can be used, and has been magnificently used by Americans, in the service of history, of science, of religion, or of political propaganda. It has no sharp boundaries, and passes through broad margins from art into instruction or argument. The writing or speech of a culture such as ours which has been so closely bound to the needs of a rapidly growing, democratic nation,

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**Personal History.** P. T. Barnum's "*Struggles and Triumphs*" of 1873 is surely number one among neglected American classics. Barnum pithily describes his memoirs as "recollections of what I have been, and seen, and done," and continues: "It is the . . . review of almost half a century of work and struggle . . . the story of which is blended with amusing anecdotes, funny passages, felicitous jokes, captivating narratives, novel experiences, and remarkable interviews." This might be a partial description of Elliot Paul's latest book, reviewed here. Whether he knows it or not, Mr. Paul has revived a lusty American tradition, largely Western in origin. His book reminds one not only of Barnum, but of Davey Crockett, George Washington Harris, Artemus Ward, Mark Twain himself in his Western moods. Look over last year's "*Native American Humor*," edited by James R. Aswell, and see if you don't agree.

## Trembles in Montana

A GHOST TOWN ON THE YELLOWSTONE. By Elliot Paul. New York: Random House. 1948. 341 pp. \$3.50.

Reviewed by STANLEY VESTAL

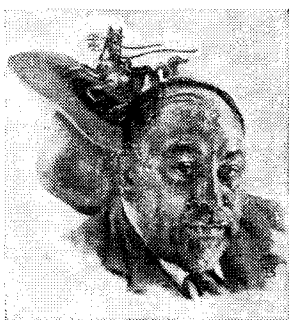
ELLIOT PAUL is noted for his books about places. His "Life and Death of a Spanish Town," and his book of memoirs of a New England boyhood, "Linden on the Saugus Branch," are both fine of their kind, and "The Last Time I Saw Paris" needs no bush. He is a grand storyteller who can in a single chapter make the reader feel that he thoroughly knows and is at ease with two dozen new characters at once. His latest book, "A Ghost Town on the Yellowstone," is based on several adventurous months he spent in the American Northwest, and is centered on the story of a town and its people in Montana at the beginning of this century—a town named with the French word *trembles* after the quaking aspens there.

That Montana town of which he writes had a varied, though small, population—Chinese, Blackfeet and Sioux Indians, saloonkeepers, scissor-bills, "soiled doves," ranchers, cowpunchers, railroad men, contractors, Wobblies, Bohunks, several English clergymen and a Roman Catholic priest, gamblers, murderers, bandits, rapists, dicks, foolish women and stupid men, and among these a great many likable, amusing, and delightful people.

There is the colorful figure of a second-rate actor—perpetually at liberty—Alanson La Rue, whose wife had innocently committed bigamy with the barber during one of her husband's prolonged absences. La Rue delicately compelled his wife to return to him and every day submitted his jugular vein—as well as his beard—to the

tender mercies of the livid barber's razor. Between shaves, he recited Shakespeare and Joe Miller to the local school.

We share the author's amusement at the agonies of Cora, the Mennonite farm girl—for whom La Rue had bought a lottery ticket—when she finds six matched sapphires in the crop of the prize turkey, and was put to her prayers on bread and water over the beauty of the sapphires and La Rue's elegant manners.



**THE AUTHOR:** Elliot Paul is big and bearded and lives with gusto. In 1907, aged sixteen, he shunned a ceremonious sheepskin at Malden, Mass., High for woollier adventure in Montana with the U. S. Reclamation Service, recalled in "A Ghost Town on the Yellowstone." The next year he dismissed further formal education at the University of Maine to be irrigation surveyor in Idaho and Wyoming. "What I Like About the South," just finished, reminisces about Louisville in 1909. He was building a high dam near Boise in 1910, will add that to his autobiographical items on

the Grand Account Series. Along with youthful memories of the Massachusetts Legislature reported for a state syndicate; World War I sergeantship; the Paris expatriate paper *transition* he founded in 1927 and co-edited, and Madrid, with the Republican Interior Department. Also to be accounted for are "bohemian life on Beacon Hill" and Hollywood, where since 1940 he wrote scripts for "A Woman's Face," "Rhapsody in Blue," the documentary "Our Russian Front," among others ("The difficulties can't be exaggerated"). He has had eighteen books published: impressionistic novels and gay whodunits, last year's New England boyhood recollections "Linden on the Saugus Branch"; "The Last Time I Saw Paris," a valentine to the days when—and after—he was AP Ruhr correspondent, then *Chicago Tribune* and *New York Herald* literary editor (1925-26, 1930); "The Life and Death of a Spanish Town," idyllic, civil-war-demolished Santa Eulalia in the Balearics, He's a pianist, accordionist, and novacordist, has played boogie-woogie to bravos at New York's Cafe Society Downtown, likes bebop but doesn't attempt it. "I never felt very much at home in California," he admits from a Rhode Island retreat. "My No. 1 choice is Madrid—without Franco." He avoids material ties, is happiest eating, drinking, and "doing what seems best at the spur of the moment. . . . I don't limit myself in any way."

—R. G.

The author occasionally feels free to interpret his materials with a frank insouciance which inspires confidence in his understanding of what he has witnessed. His interest in his former fellow-townsmen is a continuing one, and he tells us in the end what has become of those he can trace, quite in the manner of a Victorian novel. Yet we find these asides quite engaging, because they are so true and genuine. We feel that Elliot Paul is not just concocting so many pages of another book.

Not infrequently the author spots his own narrative with saucy bits quoted from the local papers of Trembles. And indeed his book at times seems perfectly adapted to readers who can't absorb anything longer than a short piece in a tabloid. The book will certainly appeal strongly to what one may call the vaudeville mind—the kind of mind that lacks powers of concentration and prefers a new sensation and a new subject every five minutes.

Yet the author has enough philosophy behind his puppets to give the more deliberate reader plenty of food for thought and for thoughtful feeling. Elliot Paul has more than tolerance—ignoble word. He has compassion. And in this he truly reflects the Plains—the West—the last frontier—where humor was generally good humor, and satire to this day has never