

TRANSATLANTIC IDENTITY AND THE QUESTION OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

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America has always been more than a simple geographical entity; Anglo-American experience, certainly since the early seventeenth century when colonization began in earnest, has been characterized by a quest for meaning, for a mythology of the land, which is integrally related to the rise of American literature. The representation of national identity in literary form is profoundly tied to the European culture against which American writers (even when they did not think of themselves as "American") have defined themselves in terms of their difference. And in anglophone America, from the earliest times until the recent recognition of America as a literary superpower, this relationship has been ambivalent. Two distinct voices have repeated a refrain throughout the history of American literature, the one calling for close links with a superior European culture, the other calling for cultural independence to match America's rising glory.

These polarized attitudes are represented quite clearly in the Puritan New World by the conflict between the Separatist Roger Williams and the non-Separatist John Cotton. Williams ridiculed the notion that a continuous relationship could exist between the North American colonies as the New Canaan, and Europe as the site of a kind of Babylonian apostasy. Williams rejects the biblical parallel used to legitimate this "special relationship" in favour of a radical disruption of relations between the metropolis and colonies. Williams argues that Babylon and Canaan, as images or representations of spiritual conditions, are to be found only in the spiritual realm and he attacks the attribution of narrow biblical meanings to material nations. The spiritual and the physical, Church and state, Old and New Worlds, all should be kept quite distinct in Williams' reckoning. Though Williams articulates the sense of separation

from the metropolis that later writers describe in heightened terms as alienation, it was the vision of America as a “city upon a hill”, a nation of perfected institutions (spiritual, political and cultural), that entered the mainstream of American culture as a powerful ideological image. And the resonance of this image only increased in the period through to the Revolution.

In the mid eighteenth century the concept of a distinctive national literature was transformed into an urgent desire. Revolutionary ambitions included aspirations towards a separate American literary tradition. And this desire was used as part of the revolutionary polemic: America needed to divorce itself from the decadence of British literary culture which was seen to be symptomatic of European decline. Noah Webster joined this project to translate patriotism into practical literary terms. His “speller”, begun in the closing stages of the revolutionary war, was intended to improve American literary as well as political institutions. The confederated states of the United States needed, in Webster’s view, a common English language that would be peculiarly American and free from British corruptions. Consistent, logical and simple rules for spelling and punctuation would replace a “common law” grammar corrupted by centuries of untutored usage. And new words would be coined for institutions brought into being by the revolutionary struggle.

But those in America who were producing imaginative literature found irresistible the tendency to look to Old World literary models and forms even as they sought a separate American literary development. For example, Royall Tyler in his play *The Contrast* (first performed in 1787) reworks the substance of Sheridan’s *School for Scandal* into an expression of American national identity whilst keeping the formal structure of the English play virtually intact. Ironically, the Restoration drama to which Sheridan’s play belongs represents a style much favoured by Royalists. Tyler’s imitation raises another pertinent point: the anachronism of American literature at this time, when a very considerable cultural time lag existed between London and the New World. Writers like Tyler and his contemporaries followed a European literary fashion that was grossly out of date. Though anachronistic from a formal or stylistic point of view, *The Contrast* was enormously popular with its American audiences.

Tyler uses the device of marriage to present a series of contrasts between frivolous, sophisticated, and corrupt Europhiles, on the one hand, and honest, plain speaking, patriotic Americans, on the other. Maria, the heroine, wants from her marriage happiness and a sense of personal integrity, independent of social forms. So she resists her father’s plan to marry her to the appropriately named Dimple van Dumpling, the fop who despises everything American as coarse and colonial, and mindlessly follows European fashion in all things. Maria would rather marry Manly, a veteran of the Revolution who personifies all that the new nation stands for. Manly’s eventual triumph over Dimple symbolizes the rising power of America as a land of rough individualism and unaffected honesty, in contrast to Europe which is seen to be a haven for snobs and idlers whose sophistication only thinly disguises their hypocrisy.

The Prologue to the play urges this interpretation upon us. We are asked:

Why should our thoughts to distant countries roam,
 When each refinement may be found at home?
 Who travels now to ape the rich or great,
 To deck an equipage and roll in state;
 To court the graces, or to dance with ease,
 Or by hypocrisy to strive to please?
 Our free-born ancestors such acts despis'd;
 Genuine sincerity alone they priz'd;
 Their minds, with honest emulation fir'd.
 To solid good—not ornament—aspir'd;
 Or if ambition rous'd a bolder flame,
 Stern virtue throve, where indolence was shame.¹

Joel Barlow, a contemporary of Tyler, takes quite literally this contrast between American and European tastes in his mock epic poem, *The Hasty Pudding*. Here, the depraved appetites of overly sophisticated European palates is represented as indigestible, particularly in comparison to the hearty simplicity of such native American dishes as the cornmeal mush known as hasty pudding. Following Benjamin Franklin, Barlow makes the case for simplicity of diet as a virtue exemplified by distinctive American cuisine. And those who would sneer at America's honest simplicity are condemned for their unnatural culinary corruptions of nature's bounty; they "mix the food by vicious rules of art, To kill the stomach and sink the heart".² In so doing they create phlegmatic citizens who reject social virtues just as they reject the virtues of simple tastes and manners. The plain style of American cuisine and of the American national character are presented as counterparts to the reformation of the corrupt political institutions of America's colonial past.

Nationalists like Barlow and his fellow poet Philip Freneau tended to represent American cultural development as an inevitable part of America's maturity as a world power, symbolized by the expansion of American civilization into the western territories. Earlier writers, such as William Byrd of Carolina, in his diary and particularly in his *History of the Dividing Line*, had similarly prophesied the development of American cultural greatness to match the tremendous abundance and beauty of the

1. Royall Tyler, *The Contrast* (orig. pub. 1790), rpt. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, ed. Nina Baym, et al. 2 vols (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Co, 1989), vol 1, p. 750.

2. Joel Barlow, *The Hasty Pudding* (1793), rpt. *Works*, ed. William K. Bottorff & Arthur L. Ford, 2 vols (Gainesville, FL: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1970), vol. 2, p. 92.

land. Freneau, though he was committed to the concept of a national literature that would be comparable to or, in fact, superior to that of Britain, was susceptible to periods of pessimism when he shared the view of skeptics who argued that any separation from the civilization of the metropolis would condemn American culture to lasting mediocrity. Given the prevailing utilitarian tone of public discourse at the time, this skeptical attitude seemed quite reasonable. The utilitarians are the subject of attack in Freneau's "An Author's Soliloquy" where the poet confesses that his greatest fear is not public criticism, "the surly critic's rage, The statesman's slight, the pedant's sneer"; what he most fears is that his work will not be read at all!³ Within the anti-intellectual atmosphere of post-Revolutionary America, Freneau observes that even public praise means little — with few people writing and fewer reading American poetry, there are no meaningful standards of literary value. Freneau compares himself detrimentally to the English poet laureate John Dryden,

Thrice happy DRYDEN, who could meet
Some rival bard on every street:
When all were bent on writing well,
It was some credit to excell ...⁴

This self-deprecating comparison with European writers by Americans who feel that they live in a nation that will not appreciate their literary efforts, is a refrain that repeats throughout American literary history.

In the early nineteenth century Washington Irving, the first American writer to achieve popularity in both America and England, and to be considered a writer of stature equal to European writers, expressed a profound sense of alienation from the rest of his society. America at the beginning of the nineteenth century was, in the view of Irving and others, too crude, too unclear about the future shape of its culture, too confused about what should be the relationship between culture and commerce, to produce serious literature. Like Freneau, Irving feared that his work would not be read, and he complained of feeling isolated and irrelevant as an American writer at a time when America refused to confront the need to develop a culture as fine as her new political system. He wrote, in 1812, in a review published in *Analectic Magazine*:

Unqualified for business, in a nation where everyone is busy; devoted to literature, where literary leisure is confounded with idleness; the man of letters

3. *The Miscellaneous Works of Philip Freneau* (Philadelphia, 1788), rpt. Philip M. Marsh, *The Works of Philip Freneau: A Critical Study* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1968), p. 52.

4. Freneau, *ibid.*

is almost an insulated being, with few to understand, less to value, and scarcely any to encourage his pursuits.⁵

Granted, this was written before the success of Irving's *Sketch Book* (1819), which was a bestseller, but still his sense of alienation from the culture surrounding him led Irving to spend seventeen of his most productive years in Europe and to use European literary models in his writing, thus opening to question the real "Americanness" of his work.

It was not until the 1850s that what is now recognized as the flowering of American literature occurred. The so-called "American Renaissance" marks the coming to maturity of American imaginative writing as a style distinctive yet on a par with the cultural productions of Europe. But the characterization of this literary period by F.O. Matthiessen, the critic who coined the phrase "American Renaissance", in effect makes a virtue of those deficiencies in American cultural life lamented by writers of the nineteenth century and earlier. For instance, Matthiessen sees all of the writers of the Renaissance — Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman — as sharing a hostility to contemporary materialism and the commodification of literature in particular and, in response, producing a kind of literature which is highly symbolic and allusive, drawing upon the traditions established by Puritan styles of rhetoric like typology.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, in the prefaces to his major works, set out the reasons why the American writer had to invent new literary forms: in the absence of long standing historical traditions, well developed systems of social manners and customs, in a landscape which does not reveal an archeology of human habitation, Hawthorne argued, it is impossible to write novels in the increasingly popular style of social realism. At the end of the century Henry James repeated the same argument: the American writer does not possess the raw materials of literary realism. Consequently, if the American is to write at all he must turn to the world of the emotions and spiritual realities, writing not novels but "romances" which bring together the fanciful and the authentic, the ideal and the real.

Prose writers like Hawthorne and Herman Melville were unable to produce novels in the mould of such popular British writers as Charles Dickens and Sir Walter Scott because America did not offer the stories or the settings and characters necessary for works of historical realism. Much to the dismay of contemporary audiences, Melville stopped writing the travel narratives that had gained him early popularity in favour of the symbolic and allusive romance form exemplified by *Moby Dick*. Melville

5. Washington Irving, "Review of *The Works of Robert Treat Paine*", *Analectic Magazine*, I, 252, rpt. *The Works of Washington Irving*, 11 vols., Vol. XI "Biographies and Miscellaneous Papers", collected by Pierre Irving (London: Bell & Daldy, 1867), p. 389.

paid dearly for this change in style, losing his audience in a storm of outraged popular taste. When Melville died, an obscure deputy inspector of customs in New York City, few people could recall that he had once been among America's foremost writers.

All the writers of the American Renaissance confronted the difficulty of pursuing the profession of writer in mid nineteenth-century America. "High" literature, particularly, did not carry sufficient value to earn for its writer a living. So the complaint that writers could not live by their writing alone together with the lament that America's lack of "civilization" posed an insurmountable obstacle to the development of a fully independent national literature reached something of a crescendo in the nineteenth century, when commercial interest began to appear as an active threat to America's infant literature. This was particularly the case as controversy over the question of copyright and the issue of an International Copyright Agreement, began to rage. In post-Civil War America publishing houses produced cheap paperback books, often in series, and packed their lists with as many popular books unprotected by American copyright as possible. This meant that well known European authors could be purchased and read for a fraction of the cost of American texts for which royalties had to be paid. The large scale piracy of foreign books meant that native writers were inevitably priced out of the market, making the profession of writer impossible for all those who did not possess independent means — or at least an income independent of writing.

Those who opposed the International Copyright Agreement argued that to make European works as expensive as their American counterparts would be to limit drastically the import of European literature into America and so limit the access of Americans to a sophisticated and powerful influence upon America's developing literary culture. In contrast, those who lobbied for a copyright agreement that would ensure financial equality for American and European writers argued that it was the volume of cheap foreign books entering America that created unfair competition and inhibited the development of a national American literature. The call for a distinctive national literature involved a demand that opportunities be fostered for those, as yet little known, American writers who would create an independent literary culture. The debate over copyright ended with the signing of the International Copyright Agreement in 1891, thus marking the triumph of American literary nationalism over commercial interest.

The style of writing produced by those like Hawthorne and Melville who perceived themselves as working within a cultural vacuum can be seen now from the perspective of the late twentieth century as establishing the basis for what has become the standard of contemporary "high" literature. The highly textured, imagistic and self-reflexive fictions of the American Renaissance stand as antecedents to the self-conscious and self-referential texts of contemporary "postmodernist" literature. Still there exists a relationship between America and Europe which is fraught with the disputed meaning of America, but now American writers look to Europe not to

measure the inadequacy of their culture but to measure the extent of their literary innovation. In the work of British writers like Julian Barnes, Graham Swift and D.M.Thomas, American writers find a mediocre imitation of their vital and innovative native literary tradition. The function of American literature is still, essentially, to define the meaning of America in relation to Europe but now that meaning is cast in terms that are self-assertive and no longer apologetic.