LECTURES ON AMERICAN LITERATURE

THIRD EDITION

Justin Quinn (ed.)
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KAROLINUM

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NOTE ON THIRD EDITION

Justin Quinn

The first edition of this book, published in 2002, was intended to supplement our students' study of American literature. It soon became apparent that it was being used as a reference guide and introduction by other students in the Czech Republic. Although there are many textbooks that cover this material published in the US and the UK, it was clear that there was a need for a survey of this area that was inflected by the specificities of the Czech context.

This third edition aims to amplify that work, while also expanding and improving the general coverage. Readers will see significant changes in the way that the twentieth century is dealt with. Much material has been added (especially on drama, popular culture, and the contemporary period), old material has been updated, and individual chapters are less numerous and more capacious, in order to accommodate the multiple authorship of the text.

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The majority of the material up in 'Beginnings to 1914' was written by Martin Procházka with additions by David Robbins.

Justin Quinn wrote the material on twentieth-century poetry, Zora Neale Hurston, Willa Cather, John Updike, Jonathan Franzen, Don DeLillo, and Dirty Realism; the introductions to periods 1945–1970 (with contributions by Hana Ulmanová) and 1910–1930, and part of the section on Ralph Ellison.

Erik Roraback wrote the introduction to the period 1970–2000, the sections on Thomas Pynchon, Norman Mailer, Kurt Vonnegut, David Foster Wallace, Lydia Davis, and Gertrude Stein, part of the sections on Toni Morrison and Ralph Ellison.

Hana Ulmanová wrote the material on twentieth-century prose (with the exceptions of those passages noted here as written by other authors).

Pavla Veselá wrote the Introduction to the period 1930–1945, all the sections on Popular Culture, and the section on Marilynne Robinson.

Clare Wallace wrote the material on twentieth-century drama, and contributed to the Introduction to the period 1945–1970.

INTRODUCTION

Martin Procházka

One of the key problems of American literary histories is that of the unity of writing on the territory of the United States. To establish this unity simply on territorial principles is insufficient. To confine it within the boundaries of authoritative 'American traditions' delineated by critics and editors of anthologies is risky. An example of such an approach is Leon Howard's *Literature and the American Tradition*. In the conclusion of his book Howard gives a surprisingly vague definition of this tradition: 'a sort of intangible national quality in American literature and an under-the-surface source of that power which contemporary literature—and perhaps America itself—derives from the past' (1960: 329). It does not help much either to see American literature as a product of 'numerous individual imaginings' as Malcolm Bradbury and Richard Ruland do in their literary history *From Puritanism to Postmodernism* (1991: 9). To organize and explain these 'imaginings' one must establish mostly fictional narratives which necessarily enhance some and suppress others. For instance, Bradbury and Ruland quote Hugh Kenner who sees in American literature a conjunction of modernism in art and of the revolutionary development in modern technology (1991: 3).

A more productive approach has been pointed out by Sacvan Bercovitch in the introduction to yet unfinished *Cambridge History of American Literature*: to view American literature as a set of 'meanings and possibilities generated by competing ideologies, shifting realities and the confrontation of cultures' (1994: 6). In other words, we must accept that American literature is never homogeneous (in the twentieth century there are distinct traditions of Southern, Jewish, African-American, Native American, and Latino literatures), that it develops from different cultural centers (see the following chapter) and that it is affected by changes unprecedented in Europe (the existence of the 'frontier,' the expansion to the West, but also the issue of slavery).

Though the authors of these lectures accept that 'American literary history is no longer the history of a certain, agreed-upon group of American masterworks' (Bercovitch, 1994: 2), they have selected literary texts which illustrate some most important features of the literary—and, in some cases, also broader, cultural—developments on the territory of the United States from the foundation of the first English colonies to the first decade of the twentieth-first century. While the older literature is discussed by Martin Procházka and David Robbins in the form of a selective and interpretive historical survey, twentieth-century writing is viewed from different angles, according to its main genres, cultural and ethnic differences. This also determines the structure of this book: after the first part, dealing with the major literary and cultural developments before 1914, sections on twentieth-century poetry, prose, and drama, and on major developments in post-1950 fiction follow.

AMERICAN LITERATURE: BEGINNINGS TO 1914

Martin Procházka and David Robbins

1 HISTORICAL INFLUENCES & DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

American literature did not grow peacefully and unproblematically from English roots, although many colonists who settled along the northeastern Atlantic coast were of English origin. Their writing was shaped by many influences, especially by the encounter with the alien reality of the American continent and by religious dissent.

Alien Reality of the New World

For the first settlers, this reality was Janus-faced—both an earthly paradise and a hell full of terrible creatures. They were exposed to the severity of the climate, to famine and to diseases. As intruders seizing the lands of Native Americans (Indians), they were involved in cruel fights and even wars. The extreme conditions suffered by the first colonists and the hardships endured by frontiersmen, backwoodsmen, and settlers in the Midwest and the Far West gave birth to a set of cultural values based chiefly on individualism and self-reliance. These values shaped the heroes (especially of popular literature) and themes of the search for freedom, justice, prosperity, and adventure.

Another result of the encounter with this alien reality was the emphasis on nature in early American notions of culture and society. While the natural environment represented an alternative, it was often also represented as a counterpart to European civilization, laws, customs, and traditions, and it was believed that human beings were free to pursue happiness even beyond the boundaries of the civilized world and its laws. These are the important aspects of the American myth of the frontier. As many critics agree, some early American political leaders, as well as many writers, accepted the 'frontier […] as the only definition of American utopia' (Williams 1969: 68).

Religious Dissent

The appearance of dissenting groups (soon called the Puritans) that either separated themselves entirely from the Church of England or strove to reform it from within was an indication of profound changes in religious consciousness as well as in the overall spiritual climate of the age. The traditional (i.e., Catholic) foundations of spiritual authority (hierarchy of prelates and fixed rituals codified for instance in the Book of Common Prayer), which the

half-reformed Church of England had to reinforce, were disputed by the adherents of Martin Luther and, more frequently, by the followers of the Swiss reformer, John Calvin.

During the reign of Elizabeth I (1558–1603), religious persecution had been directed mainly against the Catholics as potential political enemies of the Crown (adherents of Spain and France). But the situation changed with the ascension of James Stuart to the English throne (1603). The Catholics, defeated after the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot in 1605, ceased to be the chief enemy of the state. Later in his reign, James I started to negotiate with Spain, the leading power of the Catholic world, and his son Charles I even harbored Catholic sympathies. After 1605, the rage of the religious as well as secular authorities was aimed against the Puritans. This persecution (led mainly by episcopal courts) caused some groups—for instance the Pilgrim Fathers—to seek spiritual freedom in the New World. Because of their efforts to leave the Church of England these radical Puritans were called Separatists.

In the Puritan colony established in 1630 on the shores of Massachusetts Bay, one of the most influential streams of thought—both in its own time and subsequently—was that of the followers of Boston's most influential preacher, John Cotton. These 'antinomians' rejected, even more strongly than most Puritans, the authority of tradition, ritual, canonical text, and institutional authority in favor of the potential for sudden and spontaneous redemption through the personal authority and judgment of each believer, in his personal and intimate experience with the divine. They, therefore, did not feel bound by conventional moral or social regulations and limits, if their authentic personal experience guided them beyond those boundaries. They even argued that the Hebraic covenant for collective communal responsibility for its righteousness could be authentically upheld in this way only, and not through the imposition of religious or moral imperatives by ecclesiastical authorities. One should not exaggerate the influence of such Puritan antinomianism, since, even in Massachusetts Bay, non-Puritan settlers outnumbered Puritans roughly two to one; but it would be a significant oversight to underemphasize that influence over the long term.

Many Puritans regarded America as the Promised Land, the land of Canaan, to which God once led Moses and the Jews from their Egyptian captivity. They also referred to it as the New Jerusalem or 'the City on the Hill,' that is, a city created by God for the redeemed Christians after the Last Judgement, or the new church announced by Christ in his first sermon. Thus, America (originally just New England), became a synonym for a community of spiritually regenerated people whose mission was the spreading of salvation, and later of freedom throughout the entire world.

Events, beliefs, and figures of speech connected with religious dissent mark the origins of important features of American literature: along with resistance to European traditions, the Puritan 'read' the events of life and phenomena of nature as signs (symbols) of the sacred (Biblical) history, or saw them as promises of a utopia to come. The best known modern expression for these utopias is the 'American dream,' which is used to describe the most diverse expectations of the settlers seeking a new life, and of the poor striving for riches and social status. The roots of this transformation of the religious utopias in eighteenth-century American have been traced by Sacvan Bercovitch (1993: 162ff).

In addition to these features, which, along with a multiculturalism that was limited but, compared with Europe, unusually comprehensive, appeared even in the early history of American culture, there are further traits, namely polycentrism and, later on (with the growing number of immigrants from Europe, Latin America and Asia, and changing attitudes to other races), multiculturalism and ethnicity.

Polycentrism

In contrast to England where nearly all literary life has been concentrated in London since the Elizabethan age, literature in the North American colonies and the US originated and developed in a number of cultural centers. Many of them, such as New York, New Orleans, Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, became crossroads of diverse cultural traditions: British, North American, African-American, Jewish, Caribbean, Creole, Latin American (Latino), Mexican (Chicano) and East and South Asian.

The earliest and most important literary center was the Boston area, where the oldest institution of higher education in the US, Harvard College, was founded in 1636. The literature of New England is known for its Puritan origins and heritage, and, since the 1830s, also for Transcendentalism, a specific form of American Romanticism. New England culture originated in Massachusetts: apart from the Boston area (where the first settlement of the Pilgrim Fathers, Plymouth Plantation was founded in 1620) literature was also cultivated (from the mid-eighteenth century) in the western part of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, in the valley of the Connecticut River, around Springfield. Other early literary centers were the so-called Providence Plantations (later Rhode Island) established in the 1630s by the settlers who had been exiled from Massachusetts Bay. In the beginning of the eighteenth century, we also see literary history starting up in Connecticut: first in New Haven, where another widely known college, Yale, was founded at that time, and later in Hartford, which at the end of the eighteenth century became the home of a group of writers called Connecticut Wits.

During the eighteenth century the originally Dutch colony of New Amsterdam was transformed into New York by dynamic British settlers. From the latter half of the century New York was an important center of theater and publishing. Literary life in New York was given a boost in the 1810s and 1820s by the Knickerbocker Group of writers around Washington Irving, and by James Fenimore Cooper. At that time New York became the most important literary city in the US connected with the life and works of Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, and many later writers. From the 1890s, Greenwich Village, a district of lower Manhattan (close to New York University), has been famous for its bohemian life and unconventional literary magazines. About two decades later, modern African-American literature originated in Harlem in the movement called the 'Harlem Renaissance.'

Before New York, the cultural capital of the US was Philadelphia in Pennsylvania, which, since its foundation in 1682 by the Quaker William Penn, became a refuge for diverse religious sects persecuted by the Puritans. In the latter half of the eighteenth century Philadelphia became a center of the American Enlightenment (mainly thanks to the influence of Benjamin Franklin) and also a political center where two Continental Congresses convened in the Independence Hall and where the Declaration of Independence was adopted. At that time, Philadelphia was a more important publishing center than New York, attracting many writers, for instance Thomas Paine, Philip Freneau, Charles Brockden Brown, Hugh Henry Brackenridge, and later Edgar Allan Poe and Walt Whitman.

Literature in the colonial South was mostly cultivated in small societies such as the Tuesday Club (1754–56) in Annapolis, Maryland. Similar clubs, such as the Russell's Bookstore Group in Charleston, South Carolina (1850–60), were also established in the nineteenth century before the Civil War. But these were rather isolated activities. Literature in the old South, like education, was a matter of gentlemanly leisure, and had a little or nothing in common with public life. Thomas Jefferson, a Virginian who championed public education and the

leading role of intellectuals ('natural aristocrats') in the post-revolutionary society, was an exception.

Before the Civil War the only literary centers in the South were Charleston, South Carolina, and Richmond, Virginia. In the former city, *The Southern Review* (1828–32; another journal of the same name appeared in Baltimore, Maryland between 1867–79, and, in the twentieth century in Baton Rouge, Louisiana) was published by Hugh S. Legaré, and *The Southern Literary Journal and Monthly Magazine* (1835–38) printed contributions by the leading antebellum Southern author, William Gilmore Simms. Richmond, where *Southern Literary Messenger* (1834–64; renewed between 1939–44) was published, became important mainly because of Edgar Allan Poe. The postbellum (post-Civil War) period of the South saw the development of the specific regionalist, 'local color' school in an ethnically diverse New Orleans, Louisiana, a city which had an antebellum tradition of romantic French literature influenced by Chateaubriand. As early as 1837, a local paper in English, the *New Orleans Picayune* (a local word for a penny-coin) was founded. Toward the end of the nineteenth century it was printing the fiction of George Washington Cable, the leader of the local color movement concerned with the life and culture of local Creoles. The most important author of this movement became Kate Chopin. Other local color literature dealing mainly with African-American folklore was produced in Atlanta, Georgia, where Joel Chandler Harris, the author of famous *Uncle Remus* collections (1881–1906) and novels from the South in the time of Reconstruction, joined the staff of the newspaper the *Atlanta Constitution* (1868–).

Modern Southern literature was created by William Faulkner who transformed his birthplace of Oxford, Mississippi, into Jefferson, the center of the imaginary Yoknapatawpha [yoknapaˈto:fa] County, where the stories of many of his novels take place. An important local center was Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, where a group of authors and critics including Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and John Crowe Ransom gathered in the 1920s around *The Fugitive*, a bimonthly literary magazine.

Toward the end of nineteenth century life in the Midwest, especially in the Prairie region (nowadays the eastern part of the Dakotas, and the states of Illinois, Wisconsin, Missouri, Michigan, Indiana, Kansas, Nebraska, and Ohio) started to attract the attention of many authors, among them the novelists Edward Eggleston, Booth Tarkington, Hamlin Garland, Zona Gale, Willa Cather, and the poet James Whitcomb Riley. At the beginning of the twentieth century the so-called Chicago School emerged, including Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, and Sherwood Anderson. Chicago also became the scene of a poetic movement in the 1910s and 1920s sometimes named the Chicago Renaissance, including Edgar Lee Masters, Carl Sandburg, and Vachel Lindsay.

After 1848 when California became part of the US, and the Gold Rush attracted a great number of people from the east, San Francisco emerged as the first and most important literary center on the Pacific coast. It saw the literary beginnings of Samuel Langhorne Clemens (who later started to write under the pseudonym 'Mark Twain') and other authors (e.g., the short story writer Bret Harte, the fiction writer and poet Ambrose Bierce, and the poet Joaquin Miller) connected with the tradition of a 'tall tale,' a folk narrative of the settlers and gold miners in the Far West. San Francisco authors also include the Scotsman Robert Louis Stevenson and especially Frank Norris, the author of naturalist fiction. Jack London, another writer connected with naturalism, became known not only because of his animal stories from the Klondike, but also for many works of fiction inspired by his childhood, youth, and mature life in the San Francisco Bay Area. Most earlier authors from San Francisco contributed to

two local periodicals *The Golden Era* and *Overland Monthly* (established 1852 and 1868, respectively).

Since its foundation in 1868 the University of California at Berkeley has influenced intellectual life in the Bay Area. However, the most important literary development in the twentieth century, which brought San Francisco worldwide fame was the emergence of the Beat Movement in the 1950s. The center of the movement was a bookstore named City Lights run by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, a major beat poet, and the publisher of the manifesto of the Beat generation, the poem *Howl* by Allen Ginsberg. Other important beat authors were Gregory Corso, and the novelist Jack Kerouac; close to them were William Burroughs, Kenneth Rexroth, and Henry Miller. Due to the last mentioned author and the Nietzschean poet Robinson Jeffers, another place, Big Sur, a mountainous stretch of rugged Pacific coast south of Carmel, became famous as a literary setting, and also a small but highly interesting center of cultural life.

In the 1920s Hollywood emerged as the largest center of movie production in the world, attracting numerous novelists and dramatists who wrote for film, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Theodore Dreiser, Maxwell Anderson, Nathanael West, and many others. Some of them, for instance Fitzgerald and West, made Hollywood the scene of their writings.

Multiculturalism and Ethnicity

In contrast to polycentrism, which was one of the oldest features of American literature, multiculturalism, beyond the white protestant community, has developed rather slowly. The pluralistic notion of the equality and coexistence of many different cultures was accepted (but by no means generally and without tensions or frictions) only during the last three decades of the twentieth century.

Nonetheless, since the very beginning, the settlement of America was multiethnic. Even the first colonists were a 'mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, German, and Swedes. From this promiscuous breed, that race now called Americans have arisen' (Crèvecoeur 1994: 474). These ethnicities, however, did not simply live separately next to each other; instead they mixed their customs, national identities, and linguistic heritages in a 'strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country.' Not unusual was 'a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations. He is an American, who leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds' (Crèvecoeur 1994: 476). Under these circumstances, the general condition of accommodation was common renunciation of cultural authority sites and of (the possibility of) cultural valorization.

Such fluidity of identity grew partly out of the kind of frontier utilitarianism necessitated by conditions in the American colonies. Potential marriage partners were lacking, as were the skills of almost all trades and professions. As Benjamin Franklin notes: '[In] America, […] people do not inquire concerning a Stranger, What is he? but, What can he do?' (Franklin 1994: 357).

J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur (actually Michel-Guillaume Jean de C., 1735–1813) was the first writer to deal with the question of multiculturalism in the third letter of his *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782). According to him, any European 'becomes an American by

being received in the broad lap of our *Alma Mater* [literally 'feeding, nurturing mother']. Here the individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men whose labors and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world' (Crèvecoeur 1994: 374). Crèvecoeur believed that America was a fertile land capable of providing sufficient food for all immigrants. In addition, he emphasized the transformative function of the new society where European hierarchies and subservience were replaced by freedom and equality. Therefore he envisioned the fertile land and the free society of the New World functioning as a melting pot in which a new human race, the Americans, would be produced: people acting 'on new principles,' having 'new ideas' and 'new opinions' (Crèvecoeur 1994: 374). This transformation would be accompanied, Crèvecoeur imagined, by the gradual disappearance of religious sectarianism and growing 'indifference' (376) among believers and their churches. In this way, Crèvecoeur thought, a uniform nation could be molded.

It must be added that, despite his utopian expectations, Crèvecoeur was very sensitive to the imperfections of the new society: to class differences recreated by the republican government, to slavery and to the cruel treatment of African Americans, and even to the cultural decay of the frontiersmen. In the conclusion of the *Letters*, Crèvecoeur envisions a solution to contemporary conflicts and tensions in a retreat from the allegedly free society: his farmer-hero seeks safety among the Indians and makes all efforts to live according to the rhythms of nature. Consequently, the notion of America as melting pot was replaced by the desire for harmony between nature and culture, which is best characterized by the life of Native Americans. This orientation of Crèvecoeur's thought moves it even farther from specific problems of multiculturalism in America.

Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* were influential mainly in Europe. They created a demand for things American, and increased the immigration to the US. (In the US, Crèvecoeur's notion of America as a melting pot of cultures was revisited, revived, and reconstructed, in various ways, in the mid-nineteenth century by Ralph Waldo Emerson and other thinkers.) Of course, much greater numbers of emigrants were driven across the Atlantic by the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, and the Irish Potato Famine of the 1840s. Because of this influx, xenophobia against poor settlers from abroad culminated between the 1830s and the 1850s, and it has often reappeared. One of the chief causes of the anti-immigrant sentiments were fears of Irish Catholicism, and later also resistance toward non-Anglophone emigrants from Italy, Scandinavia, Central and Eastern Europe. As a result, the culture of European immigrants was ostracized for a long period, and conformity with the ethnic type of White Anglo-Saxon Protestant was the necessary condition for acceptance. Since this time, however, the abbreviation for the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) has become a term of abuse. In their efforts between 1850 and 1920 to cultivate economic advantage and cultural acceptance by the dominant protestant ethnicities of themselves and of later-arriving non-protestant ethnic groups, politically savvy elements of the Catholic Irish community introduced new forms of 'northern' racism against African-American refugees from the American South.

It was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that there were signs of interest in immigrant life in American literature (i.e., in the novels of Willa Cather). From the 1920s on the works of immigrants written in other languages than English, for instance the novel trilogy *Giants in the Earth, Peder Victorious, Their Fathers' God* (1927–31) by a Norwegian settler in Minnesota, Ole Edvart Rölvaag (1876–1931), have been discovered and translated into English. Yiddish literature, pioneered by émigrés from the Ukraine, Poland, and Russia,