

LECTURES ON AMERICAN LITERATURE

THIRD EDITION

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Lectures on American Literature

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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.

*

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 America 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 [yoknapa'to: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 Rølvaag (1876–1931), have been discovered and translated into English. Yiddish literature, pioneered by émigrés from the Ukraine, Poland, and Russia,

developed from the beginning of the last century, but its leading authors, such as Sholom Aleichem (Solomon Rabinowicz, 1859–1916), and later Isaac Bashevis Singer (1981 Nobel Prize winner), became popular only after World War II, together with the birth of a specific American-Jewish literature, initiated by Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and others. Building on the stylistic and rhetorical strategies pioneered by Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and W. E. B. DuBois, the Harlem Renaissance writers of the 1920s transformed the awareness of African-American literature. By some, the ethnic and cultural autonomy of African Americans was affirmed, along with their acceptance of modern civilization, and the influences of the French avant-garde.

After 1945, new developments in American society, especially the effects of the immigration from East and South Asia, Mexico, and other Latin American countries, and the cultural emancipation of Indians, marked the appearance of Asian, Chicano, Latino, and Native-American writing.

Since the 1970s, American multiculturalism has been an important force of transformation in American literature. Apart from cultural specificity, individual identity and the problems of gender and sex have become increasingly important literary themes. Now, American notions of multiculturalism have also incorporated women, gay and lesbian literature, and various forms of ethnicity. In other words, increasing attention is being paid to groups which were marginal or marginalized in traditional, patriarchal, authoritarian and white society.

However, ethnicity still remains a problematic term in American culture. As Werner Sollors shows, the word *ethnic* originally meant ‘heathen,’ ‘non-Israelite,’ ‘non-Christian.’ So was it used and understood at the dawn of modern European and American culture. For instance, the American Indians were referred to as ‘ethnics,’ because their customs were not in keeping with the Puritan notions of Christian morals (Sollors 1986: 25–26). The other usage of the word was established only in the mid-nineteenth century when *ethnic* started to be understood as ‘peculiar to race and nation’ (25).

While most European states had developed mainly *ethnocentric* systems of government, US notions of ethnicity and nationality are distinctly *polycentric*, based on the belief that ‘every discrete people is entitled to be free from foreign domination’ (Millican 1990: 42). This has not only been practiced in foreign policy, but has also influenced twentieth-century US notions of ethnicity.

But ethnicity is hardly of the same nature as nationhood or political representation. Since the 1940s, ethnic tension and struggle in the US have been changing the meaning of the word. One of the first attempts to define ethnicity in this new setting emphasizes belonging to the ethnic group against ‘foreign birth.’ It also adds that a person may be considered a member of such a group even against her or his own will. Later American theories of ethnicity, for instance that of the Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth (b. 1928), are concerned with ethnic boundaries (which are ‘mental, cultural, social, moral, aesthetic, but not necessarily territorial’ [Sollors 1986: 27]) and with markers of these boundaries. These boundaries are not territorial, but they are coincident with the criteria of membership in the group and exclusion from it. The identity of an ethnic group does not, at least primarily, have cultural, let alone historical, basis.

Recently, opinions were voiced that ethnicity cannot be distinguished by its contents at all but that it is mainly ‘a matter of the importance that individuals ascribe to it, including, of course, scholars and intellectuals.’ In contrast to achieved or inscribed ethnicity (i.e., the ethnic label given to the individual in society), ascribed ethnicity became a factor of forming

specific cultural, ethnic and religious groups. It made many originally conformist individuals re-define their own identity and join a specific group (i.e., Black Muslim, Black Feminists, etc.). This development caused some anthropologists to claim that 'marks of [ethnic] identity' were 'in a very important sense empty symbols' (Sollors 1986: 35). On the other hand, liberalist approaches to ethnicity are often problematized by the presence of the often unmentionable category of race. Sometimes, the term 'ethnic' is used as a euphemism for the heavily charged word 'racial.' But it is also true that race can be looked upon as 'one aspect of ethnicity' (39). Despite the muddled meaning of the term, themes of ethnicity and race have become prominent features of American literature after 1945. This can be illustrated by numerous texts including *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, the poetry of Amiri Baraka, the novels of Toni Morrison, *Sophie's Choice* by William Styron, and many others.

2 PERIODIZATION OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

The encounter with the New World and religious dissent shaped the first works of colonial literature (1588–1776). The former date refers to the publication of *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* by Thomas Hariot (c. 1560–1621) describing the first English colony in North America called Roanoke according to its site, an island off the coast of North Carolina. The latter date marks the beginning of the American War of Independence. Most works of this period prove that writing in American settlements had already its own specificity different from the first literary attempts in other British colonies, such as Canada or Australia.

The ‘declarations of independence’ from Britain, its government, religion, and cultural traditions, as well as the first efforts to express American cultural identity characterize the literature of the American Revolution and the Early Republic (1776–1823). In the first half of this period Americans demonstrated the political, more precisely democratic, meaning of literature: it was the time of The Republic of Letters. The most important text of this period was the series of essays entitled *The Federalist* (1787), which greatly facilitated the adoption of the US Constitution. In the latter half of this period, the first genuinely American novels were published—by Hugh Henry Brackenridge (1748–1816) and Charles Brockden Brown (1770–1810). The latter author also became the first professional American writer to make his living by writing novels. The end of the Early Republic saw the rise of the international reputation of Washington Irving (1783–1859), the first widely translated American writer. Apart from the traditional cultural and literary centers that had been developing since colonial times, such as Boston and New England, New York, Philadelphia, Annapolis, Maryland, and Richmond, Virginia, literary life also started to flourish in the western territories. The first center of journalism and literature in the newly settled territories was Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

The following period of American Romanticism (1820s–1860s) was not only a time when American Literature received formative impulses from Europe (from English and German literature, philosophy and aesthetic thought—Scott, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Carlyle, Kant, Goethe, German Classical Philosophy and German Romantics, for instance Ludwig Tieck), it was also the period of the emergence of a genuinely American literature: the essays, prose, and poetry of the Transcendentalists (Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller), the tales and novels of Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864), which dealt with the colonial past, and the late Romantic novels of Herman Melville (1819–1891), which significantly modified several basic American themes. In this period we also mark the beginnings of Southern literature in the works of William Gilmore Simms (1806–1870) and Edgar Allan Poe

(1809–1849). The latter author greatly influenced French Symbolism and Surrealism. The Abolitionist movement drew attention to the problem of slavery, and the first African-American authors appeared, for instance Frederick Douglass (c. 1818–1895). Interaction, positive and negative, with the Abolitionist movement also motivated the first organized efforts of an American women's rights movement, two of whose most influential writers were Margaret Fuller (1810–1850) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902). The works of Walt Whitman (1819–1892) and Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) were written at the close of this period and are often presented as anticipating literary Modernism.

The period after the Civil War was marked by enormous demographic, social, and economic changes. The rapid development of capitalism in the north, the settlement of the Far West and what was referred to as the Reconstruction of the South (the slow and painful changes of its political and economic structure) were the prelude to the fast economic growth and the deepening of social differences. This period (1865 to the turn of the century) received its name from the novel by Mark Twain (1835–1910) and Charles Dudley Warner (1829–1900), *The Gilded Age* (1873) because of the central importance of gold and new standards of luxury introduced by the *nouveaux riches*. It saw the rise of new fiction and satire based on the popular literary forms of the tall tale (Mark Twain, Bret Harte), the social novel of William Dean Howells (1837–1920), the psychological fiction of Henry James (1843–1916) with the international theme of the encounter of Americans with European traditions and cultures and Europeans with American reality, and the literature of American Naturalism (Norris, Crane, Dreiser). This period was also marked by the boom of regionalist writing, called *local color*, which produced not only works focused on a specific region and its local life, but also marked the beginnings of independent women fiction in the works of Kate Chopin (1851–1904), Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935), Willa Cather (1873–1947), and Edith Wharton (1862–1937). While at least one of the principal black voices (Booker T. Washington, 1856–1915) continued to be characterized by rhetoric that valorized the values of American 'white' society, the post-Civil War period also brought new influences—especially folklore—into African-American literature. With the development of the local color school, new literary centers sprang up, especially on the Pacific Coast (San Francisco) and also in the South (New Orleans, Atlanta).

The tumultuous period from the turn of the century to the early 1920s was dominated by the growth of Modernism. In the poetry of Ezra Pound (1885–1972) and T. S. Eliot (1888–1965), American Modernism became firmly linked with European developments in France and Britain. It also absorbed oriental influences from Chinese and Japanese literature. Imagism, launched by Ezra Pound, became an international Anglo-American movement, complemented by Vorticism in Britain. Also other developments, the so-called Chicago Renaissance (Sandburg, Masters, Lindsay) and the modern short story of Sherwood Anderson (1876–1941) were influenced by modernist poetics. The impulses of Modernism also shaped the most significant movement in African-American literature, the Harlem Renaissance led by the poet and prose writer Langston Hughes (1902–1967). The period of Modernism saw also the rise of modern American drama (Eugene O'Neill [1888–1953]) which soon won international acclaim.

Modernist literature was a great inspiration for the authors of the next stage of American literary history between the wars. The most significant group, which was in close contact with European cultural development, were the Expatriates (or, the Lost Generation of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Stein). Another important development in the '20s was the fiction of William

Faulkner (1897–1962), which laid the foundations for modern Southern literature. Also Faulkner's beginnings were influenced by Modernism (Joyce, T. S. Eliot). Another important development was the transformation of a social novel, into polyphonic fiction dealing with a great number of varieties of social life and merging numerous genres and styles. These features are significant in the monumental trilogy of the novels of John Dos Passos (1896–1970), *USA* (1930–1936). The '30s were the time of economic depression and of the development of Marxist and left-wing literature, the best novel of social protest being *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck.

Literature after World War II is marked not only by regional diversity, but by growing ethnic differences (the most important ethnic development is Jewish literature). There are new developments in African-American literature (black Muslim, black lesbian writers) and in other ethnic literatures (Chicano and Latino, East Asian, Native American, etc.). In addition, one should not overlook the persistent production of Hawthornian romances, by both Modernist writers like Scott Fitzgerald and 'postmodernists' such as Thomas Pynchon and Tom Robbins.

3 EARLIEST MONUMENTS OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

Introduction

Before the arrival of the English-speaking colonists, the indigenous inhabitants of North America had a rich oral tradition. Their tales were closely related to images and symbols in the form of petroglyphs (rock or stone carvings) and other graphic traces. However, there are no records of these stories before 1623, when Gabriel Sagard, a French Franciscan missionary, took down the first of the twenty-five versions of the Iroquois myth of the creation of the world. In 1694, a Spanish colonel Juan Manje recorded the creation story of the Akimel O'odham (or Pima) Indians in Arizona. The first transcript and translation of the Iroquois myth (*Norton 5*: 54ff) was published in 1827 by a Tuscarora, named David Cusick (before 1800–1840). The *Walam Olum* (Red Record, Red Score) an alleged pictographic record of Delaware (or Lenape) creation and deluge myths and migration narratives dated before 1600 BCE, is most probably a forgery made by Constantine Samuel Rafinesque (1783–1840), a botanist, antiquarian and polymath, and based on his study of Egyptian hieroglyph, Mayan script and Chinese characters. Today, Native Americans are divided about the authenticity of this document: while it is no longer endorsed by the Delaware Indians, the Lenape Nation of Pennsylvania believes it to be authentic.

The beginnings of the literature of the English-speaking colonists can be traced to the English settlement of two areas on the East coast of North America, now called Virginia and Massachusetts. The first printed account by Thomas Hariot (c. 1560–1621), an important Elizabethan astronomer, mathematician, and translator, appeared in 1588 as *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*. Hariot tried to make up for all the failures of the first English colony of Roanoke (situated on the eponymous island south of Chesapeake Bay). The disastrous moments of the colonization, including the disappearance of 114 settlers from the second Roanoke colony between 1587 and 1589, had been described in earlier reports, letters and journals¹ by Arthur Barlowe (1584), Ralph Lane (1586), and especially John White (c. 1540–c. 1593), the governor of the second Roanoke colony. In contrast to these writers, Hariot emphasized the extraordinary fertility of the land and the technological advantage of Europeans over Native Americans. To conquer this earthly paradise the colonists should only

¹ All these accounts were published by Richard Hakluyt (c. 1552–1616) in the first edition of his comprehensive work *The Principal Navigations, Voyages and Discoveries of the English Nation* (1589).

persuade the natives by their technology and reasoning that the Christian God was omnipotent and that they were his chosen people sharing his divine power.

The main purpose of Hariot's report is to promote colonization. Therefore its first part contains a description of all commodities that the new land can yield and the second part catalogues all agricultural plants grown by the Native Americans and discusses their possible uses. The last part deals with the life of the natives and their culture, including religion. All this is accompanied by Theodore de Bry's (1528–1598) engravings made according to [the] colored drawings by John White. While these drawings are precise in details, the general shapes and postures of the Native Americans are highly stylized. A comparative study of White's drawings and paintings has shown that he made no considerable difference between the postures of imaginary characters like Ancient Britons or Picts and those of the Indians. Although Hariot's account is full of humanistic respect in his relation to the Native Americans and even shows admiration for some of their technological skills ('The way they build boats in Virginia is very wonderful. For although they completely lack any iron tools, they can make boats as good as ours' Lorant 1965: 249), his whole report is a typical early modern colonial text in which the discourse of representation is firmly tied to those of appropriation and exchange of commodities.

Other historians trace the origin of colonial literature to a later report, *A True Relation*, written in 1608 by one of the founders of the colony at Jamestown in Chesapeake Bay, Virginia, Captain John Smith (1580–1631). His writings became a principal source of information for the later settlers in the area to the north of Virginia, called the New England (today's states of Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine). In 1620, anti-Anglican Calvinist religious Separatists, who called themselves Pilgrims and were later designated as the 'Pilgrim Fathers,' established the Plymouth Plantation in southeastern Massachusetts. The colony of Massachusetts Bay (nowadays the Boston area) was founded in 1630 by another, much larger, group of Puritans led by John Winthrop (1588–1649). The latter venture was not motivated by purely religious concerns as was that of the Pilgrims. Commercial involvement of the Massachusetts Bay Company played a strong role in it.

The utopian features of the first New England religious settlements underwent an acid test in the clash with other ways of life and beliefs. Apart from occasional skirmishes with the Indians, the first settlers quarreled mainly among themselves. Discord and tension is to be found widely in the *General History of Virginia* (1624) by John Smith, but a major conflict arose in 1628 between the Pilgrims and the inhabitants of the Merrymount (or Ma-re Mount) settlement, which, at 35 kilometers' distance, was perhaps too close to Plymouth Plantation. More than a clash of territorial ambitions or economic interests, however, this confrontation manifested a conflict of two cultures, the light-hearted, witty and potentially pagan Cavaliers, represented by the owner of Merrymount Thomas Morton (c. 1579–1647), and the serious, spiritual, but also greatly intolerant Pilgrims.² Pilgrim and Puritan hostility to the first settlers of different moral and religious persuasions, as well as to the Indians, is often mentioned in the writings of Roger Williams (c. 1603–1683), the founder of the Rhode Island colony (originally known as Providence Plantations), which became a model of religious tolerance not only among Christians, but also between them and the Jews or the Indians.

² If William Bradford's history is to be believed, the use of military power against Morton and his subsequent deportation to England had different reasons. The main source of Morton's profit was the fur trade, namely the exchange of beaver skins for guns. According to Bradford, Morton even taught the Indians to shoot and handle gunpowder. No doubt this caused the fears of the Puritans who tried to keep the guns away from the Indians in order to control them better.

General History of Virginia

John Smith's narrative remains one of the most important sources on the early English settlement of North America. Its author was originally a mercenary who fought the Turks in the ranks of the Austrian army. He was captured and enslaved, but managed to escape. On his way home via Russia and Eastern Europe, he befriended the King of Poland. In 1606 Smith became interested in the scheme of the London Trading Company to establish a permanent colony in America. The purpose of this project was financial profit, rather than the professed aim of spreading Christianity among the Indians.

After a stop at the Canary Islands, Smith was accused of mutiny and imprisoned during the latter half of the voyage. Only later when the settlers found him an indispensable food provider, organizer and a stalwart soldier well acquainted with strategies of survival, was he cleared of all accusations and received financial compensation. In 1608 Smith became the president of the council governing the Jamestown colony and later he was elected a governor. The colonists' trust in him might have been due to his aggressive treatment of the Indians, whom he managed to bring 'in such fear and obedience, as his very name would sufficiently fright them.' (Smith was an admirer of Cortés, the Spanish conquistador who uprooted the Aztec state and brutally massacred the inhabitants of its capital Tenochtitlan.) In spite of his important position in the colony, Smith had to return to England for medical treatment of a wound caused by a gunpowder explosion.

In 1614 Smith explored the northern part of the Atlantic coast of what is today Massachusetts and Maine. His maps and *A Description of New England* (1616) did a good service to the Puritan settlers of Massachusetts in 1620 and 1630, but the Pilgrims refused Smith's offer to lead their group. Nevertheless, Smith did not give up and started to plan his own expedition which would be better prepared and organized than the Jamestown colony. In view of this he published *Advertisements for the Unexperienced Planters of New England* (1631), but death prevented him from realizing his plans.

The General History of Virginia is a remarkable work beyond being an early source of colonial history. Firstly, because the foregoings give a trustworthy description of the predicament of the first settlers who brought their own bad habits into the New World. Smith speaks of the 'sins' the colonists committed even when the scarcity of supplies had made their drinking or gluttony impossible. On arrival in the Promised Land the colonists were exposed to the severity of climate, infectious diseases and the resistance of the Indians. Smith's account amply demonstrates the general feature of early American colonies, namely that the survival of settlers largely depended on the foods produced by mostly hostile Indians, and not on their own agricultural produce. To survive meant to cheat or rob the Indians, who then became a permanent menace.

The second important feature of Smith's account is a permanent misunderstanding between the Indians and the colonists. Both the Algonquin tribes led by the great chief, Powhatan (the name given by Smith to the chief is actually the name of the whole confederacy of these tribes living on the territory of the states of Virginia and Maryland), and the colonists, interpreted the events during their encounters differently and their misunderstandings led to a permanent crisis. One example was the robbery of the Indian 'idol' called Okee. The seeming friendliness of the Indians after this incident ('singing and dancing in sign of friendship') is interpreted as the transformation of the savages caused by the power of Christian God. Another instance of misunderstanding occurs when Smith is captured by the Indians during one of his

exploratory trips. Hoping to ransom himself, Smith gives ‘a round ivory double compass’ to one of the chiefs (whom he significantly calls a ‘king’). He then thinks to have impressed the Indians by his knowledge of the universe:

But when he demonstrated by the globe-like jewel the roundness of the earth and skies, the sphere [i.e., orbit] of the sun, moon and stars, and how the sun did chase the night round about the world continually, the greatness of the land and sea, the diversity of nations, variety of complexions and how we were to them antipodes and many other such like matters, they all stood as amazed with admiration.

Notwithstanding, within a hour after, they tied him to a tree, and as many as could stand about him prepared to shoot him, but the King holding up the compass in this hand, they all laid down their bows and arrows and in triumphant manner led him to Orapaks [i.e., to the village of Chief Powhatan, called ‘the Emperor’ by Smith]... (Norton 3 1: 17)

Though Smith is first treated well by Powhatan, he is soon in danger again. His superior technology and knowledge (representative of Western civilization) does not impress the Indians as much as he expected.

What really saved Smith from execution in Powhatan’s village can hardly be inferred from his texts. However, the important fact is that his account of the intervention of Powhatan’s daughter Pocahontas (c. 1595–1617, real name Matoaka) does not appear in his earlier works (mainly *The True Relation*) written immediately after the incident. The dramatic scene of the execution interrupted by the intervention of Pocahontas may easily be an apocryphal or fictionalized account. Powerful enough, it originated the first American love romance:

two great stones were brought before Powhatan; then as many as could, laid hands on him, dragged him to them, and thereon laid his head and being ready with their clubs to beat out brains, Pocahontas, the King’s dearest daughter, when no entreaty could prevail, got his head in her arms and laid her own upon his to save him from death [...] (Norton 1: 20)

Up to this, the narrative is quite chaotic and filled with descriptions of hardships of the colonists, their skirmishes with the Indians and the ‘devilish’ Indian rituals. But here it gains some order and clarity with the appearance of Pocahontas, who becomes the first American heroine. Rather than a character, she is a personification not only of Indian submissiveness,³ but also of the fertility of the land, and of divine mercy when she brings a great quantity of corn to Jamestown and saves the colonists from starvation. Significantly, Smith connects her with the good Christian God: ‘Thus from numb death our good God sent relief / The sweet assuager of all other grief’ (Norton 3 1: 21). However, Pocahontas’ further fate differed greatly from the role ascribed to her by Smith. She was captured by the colonists, kept as a hostage, converted to Christianity and sent to England as the wife of John Rolfe, the first importer of tobacco to Europe. She died in England several years later in religious ecstasy. Notwithstanding her end, she became an inspiration for many American novelists, poets, and dramatists

³ This important allegorical dimension of Pocahontas has been demonstrated by Myra Jehlen: ‘In the modern Western tradition emerging in Smith’s time, the romantic love of a woman for a man [...] entails the woman’s selfabandonment; in the legend of Pocahontas, the Indian, *cast as a woman*, abandons herself *and herself* to white manhood. Powhatan’s humiliation is more than military’ (Bercovitch 1994: 70; my emphasis).

(for instance, for Hart Crane in his long poem *The Bridge* [1930]). Her story points to the third important feature of early American writing: the interpenetration of history and fiction.

Last but not least, Smith's history and other first accounts of American colonization are remarkable for their narrative strategies. Though varied, some of them are narrated in the third person (as the *General History*), making the author the hero of his narratives. Other accounts are in the first person, but they refer to the author in an oblique way, for instance, as to 'mine host' (in Thomas Morton's *New English Canaan*, 1624). The pure first-person narrative can be found only in the narratives written by the Calvinist Separatists and Puritans, as in William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation*, but even here the focus is on the pronoun *they*, which designates the Calvinist religious community.

Of Plymouth Plantation

Whereas Smith's *General History* now appears as an attempt to give a *semblance of objectivity* to subjective experience and justification to the acts of an adventurer, William Bradford's (1590–1657) account of the first Puritan settlement, *Of Plymouth Plantation* (1630–46), constructs the collective experience of a dissenting group and transforms it into a general myth which gives a clear religious purpose to the colonization of America.

The reasons of Bradford's mythmaking are evident from his experiences with the trials and tribulations of the small Calvinist Separatist community which used to meet in the house of William Brewster in Scrooby, Nottinghamshire. Like other similar groups (one of them, led by the preacher John Smith, is mentioned in Bradford's history), this congregation refused to attend the services of the Church of England and to use the Book of Common Prayer. Most important, however, was their repudiation of church hierarchy. They believed that no ordained priests, rectors, or even bishops were necessary to mediate between them and their God. According to them, the relationship between the Christian and his God was established in the form of a *covenant* (that is, the contract made by God first with Adam and then renewed with Moses and by Christ's sacrifice). Because of the individual nature of the covenant, the congregation was understood as a community of individuals who were free to choose their elders (the most virtuous, zealous, learned, and authoritative members of the group) and elect their ministers (clergymen of Calvinist and reformist inclination). This belief, which subverted the foundations of the state (or 'established') church, became the main cause of the persecution of both Separatists and Puritans (the latter determined to reform the Church of England from within) during the reign of James I.

In 1607, a year after Bradford at the age of sixteen joined the group, the members decided to emigrate to Holland to avoid relentless and increasing persecution. (For a detailed account of this period see Vančura 1965: 28–58.) Here they found themselves in isolation, with limited means to make a living, forced to work hard and burden their children with toil, some of whom became crippled or even died. Other children fled from their parents and accepted the 'loose manners' of the place, to which the Separatists strongly objected. Bradford complains of the secular way of the life of the Dutch, for instance of their failure 'to keep the Sabbath Day,' that is, to take part in all religious ceremonies, and to refrain from drinking and sex on Sundays.

Economic difficulties, fears that the community would disperse or lose religious zeal and anxious expectations of another war with Catholic Spain (the truce between the Dutch

Republic and Spain came to an end in 1620) made the Pilgrims search for a permanent solution to their predicament: the New World offered them hope of this. Although they obtained a royal 'patent' for lands in Virginia, their ship, the Mayflower, landed after a long and tempestuous voyage much more to the north, at Cape Cod on the coast of the territory which later became Massachusetts. Because the ship was in a bad state and because of impending winter storms the Pilgrims decided, after an abortive attempt to sail to the south, to stay at this place, and on 11 November 1620 (21 November, according to our calendar), 41 representatives of 101 settlers signed a document called The Mayflower Compact whereby they declared themselves 'a Civil Body Politic,' that is, a self-governing entity, able to 'enact, constitute and frame such just and equal Laws, Ordinances, Acts, Constitutions, and Offices [...], as shall be thought most meet [i.e., proper, suitable] and convenient for the general good of the Colony' (*Norton* 3 1: 67). The political autonomy of the new colony, which, according to the Compact, could elect governors (Bradford became the second governor), was reluctantly accepted by the English authorities and served as a model for other colonies until 1691 when Plymouth Plantation was integrated into the colony of Massachusetts (from 1641 it had been connected with other colonies by a multilateral treaty). The most important feature of the Mayflower Compact was that it was not a formal political constitution but an agreement made by the members of a religious community. This explains the virtual identity of the religious and secular government in the seventeenth-century Calvinist Separatist and Puritan colonies which became later known as theocracy (religious government).

Although the Pilgrims had laid the foundations of their political autonomy, their struggle was not yet over. They were exposed to severe winters and attacks of Indians. Despite the availability of food and water, half of the group died of scurvy and contagious diseases during the first winter. Their condition also deteriorated because most of them were not able to build houses. Only during the following summer (of 1621) did they start to cultivate land, build a village, and gather a good stock of meat for the winter. Their harvest was celebrated by the First Thanksgiving. News of their success soon spread to England. The first source was the so-called *Mourt's Relation* (1622), an anonymous pamphlet describing the events since the arrival of the Mayflower to Cape Cod 'in a mostly matter-of-fact tone and with a good deal of concrete detail' (Bercovitch 1994: 84).⁴ Together with a more optimistic account which appeared in 1624 under the title *Good News from New England* (the authorship of John Winslow is now doubted), this pamphlet could well have been the reason for the arrival of many more people in Massachusetts, so that the total number of inhabitants of the English colonies in America reached two thousand in 1625.

Even a brief survey of the first part of the Pilgrims' story reveals the strong literary and mythopoeic potential that was developed in the retrospective narrative which Bradford started to write ten years after his arrival in America. For the period of the earliest days of the settlement he employed *Mourt's Relation*, which he significantly adapted. What were the major changes leading to the creation of the Pilgrim (and later Puritan) myth of the New World?

First, many concrete details given in Bradford's sources, mainly descriptions of landscape and vegetation as well as of the behavior, settlements and culture of the Indians, do not appear

⁴ Although the editors of *The Norton Anthology* maintain that George Mourt was 'Bradford's brother-in-law,' more recent sources, e.g., *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, vol. 1, point out that the pamphlet was called after 'George Morton, who saw it through the press' (Bercovitch 1994: 84). Vančura (1965: 64, 68) who is influenced by older approaches, attributes *Mourt's Relation* directly to Bradford and Edward Winslow, who alternated with Bradford as governor of the colony.