

from *The Cycle of American Literature* (1955)

Robert E. Spiller

THE CYCLE

Valid literary history must concern itself chiefly with major authors, but it must deal with them...in provable context. Therefore the first task of the new American literary historian was to discover which were or are the major American authors...

If there is one idea that most major American authors have in common, it is the belief that life is organic; and the American literary historian can do no better than to adopt for his study an organic view of history. The individual organism follows the circular pattern of life; it has a beginning, a life cycle, and an end. This simple structure may be discovered in the structure of a poem, in the biography of an author, in the rise and fall of a local or particular cultural movement, or in the over-all evolution of a national literature. The historian's task is to discover the cycles, by which his literature is determined both in general scheme and in detail. American literature, when reviewed in terms of its major authors and from the vantage point of the period of its greatest achievement, the twentieth century, reveals such a cyclic rhythm.

The basic theme for this rhythm is also the central historical fact of the American experiment: the removal of a mature and sophisticated civilization--that of Western Europe--to a primitive continent ideally suited to its needs and virtually unexploited of its apparently infinite natural resources. The American expansion to the West, and the impact in turn of the newly formed civilization on its parent, set the circular pattern for the whole story. On the level of symbolic illumination, the literary historian must disclose the vast and intricate pattern of this unfolding cycle, perhaps not yet completed, but firmly defined by its varied recurrences through four centuries.

When applied to the story of American literature as a whole, this cyclic theory discloses not only a single organic movement, but at least two secondary cycles as well: the literary movement which developed from the Eastern seaboard as a center, and culminated with the great Romantic writers of the mid-nineteenth century; and that which grew out of the conquest of the continent and is now rounding its full cycle in the twentieth century. When applied to the individual work, the same theory supplies a formula for measuring the aesthetic distance of a poem or play or novel from its origins in some phase of American experience....

The historian...takes his position in the present and looks backward over the past. His is the task of reorganizing experience so that its larger meanings are revealed rather than that of repeating history in all its details. He must select, omit, and reorganize from the great mass of available data so that a coherent view of the total literary culture can emerge. The broad contours of a landscape and the organic pattern of its hills and valleys can be seen only from a height at which some details are obscured and others take on meaningful relationships because of the angle of vision of the observer. The writing of history, like other forms of art, requires aesthetic distance before it can claim perspective....

PREVIOUS LITERARY HISTORY

The theory of literary history which was most generally held during the nineteenth century proposed that, because almost all of the literature produced by citizens of the United States was written in the English language, and because literature is expression and can presumably be best described by the language in which it is expressed, American literature is, and always will be a branch of English literature. The consequence of this theory was that undue emphasis was placed on the Colonial period, on that part of the United States which most successfully preserved its British characteristics, New England, and on those authors, like Irving, Longfellow, Lowell, and Howells, who discovered ways of using American "materials" without greatly violating British proprieties.

Writers like Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Mark Twain, and Theodore Dreiser, who were more deeply American than any of the other group, were dismissed either as evidence of a cruder stage in cultural development or as curiosities. Thus an American Romantic movement could be clearly distinguished as evolving from the imitative beginnings of Irving, Cooper, and Bryant, and culminating in the poetry of the bearded sages of the Cambridge group. Thereafter came the "Gilded Age," a deterioration into "Realism" and "pessimism" [Naturalism], and a literature of the twentieth century that was described as close to degenerate in both inspiration and form. Literary histories which are firmly rooted in this misleading theory are still produced and sold by the thousands of copies in the United States and elsewhere.

The first successful challenge to this theory--not counting the pioneer work of Moses Coit Tyler--came in 1927 with V. L. Parrington's version of a widespread movement in historical writing which was then attempting to retell the record of the past in terms of economic and other forms of environmental determinism. The literary historian of this school owed his ultimate debt to Taine, Hegel, and Marx, but as an American and a democrat he recognized the social philosophies of none of these masters, taking from them only the method of relating literary expression directly and simply to the life which it expressed.

American schools began to use "Literature and Life" readers instead of the old "Belles-Lettres" varieties, while scholars in the universities and journalists outside began a process of reevaluation of both major and minor American authors... The result was a new pattern of American literary history that succeeded in rediscovering such writers as Freneau, Thoreau, and Melville; in giving more sympathetic recognition to Whitman and Mark Twain; in showing just what was American in such writers as Henry James; and in arousing widespread interest in humor, local color, Realism, folk ballads and legends, and in minor authors who were faithful to their materials and reflected the ideas and moods of their times. Under this dispensation the literature of the late nineteenth century and of the years that followed could at least be regarded without prejudice, and awarded laurels for its vigor and its authenticity, even though at times it seemed to lose its character as art.

The pendulum had again swung too far. So great was the value assigned, under this theory, to accuracy of record that the best literature seemed to be merely that which struck closest to the facts. Imagination was crowded aside by political and social data, and American literary history threatened to become no more than a history of documentation; often, as even in the case of Parrington, the documentation of a specific theory of social and political development. Ironically, major authors like Poe, Dickinson, and Henry James, who in one way or another were above or outside the obvious data of American life, seemed irrelevant and alien, at the same time that others, like Cooper, Melville, and Mark Twain, were gaining a new dimension. Although this theory made possible an *American literary history*, it threatened to make *literary* history as such an anomaly. In its most extreme form it even accepted the Marxian formula and imposed a schematic dogma that was not too different from the "socialist realism" of the dictatorships [Compare the philistine political correctness of the 1980s-present].

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