Outline of

AMERICAN LITERATURE

REVISED EDITION

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AMERICAN LITERATURE

REVISED EDITION

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CHAPTER 1

EARLY AMERICAN AND COLONIAL PERIOD TO 1776

American literature begins with the orally transmitted myths, legends, tales, and lyrics (always songs) of Indian cultures. There was no written literature among the more than 500 different Indian languages and tribal cultures that existed in North America before the first Europeans arrived. As a result, Native American oral literature is quite diverse. Narratives from quasi-nomadic hunting cultures like the Navaho are different from stories of settled agricultural tribes such as the pueblo-dwelling Acoma; the stories of northern lakeside dwellers such as the Ojibwa often differ radically from stories of desert tribes like the Hopi.

Tribes maintained their own religions — worshipping gods, animals, plants, or sacred persons. Systems of government ranged from democracies to councils of elders to theocracies. These tribal variations enter into the oral literature as well.

Still, it is possible to make a few generalizations. Indian stories, for example, glow with reverence for nature as a spiritual as well as physical mother. Nature is alive and endowed with spiritual forces; main characters may be animals or plants, often totems associated with a tribe, group, or individual. The closest to the Indian sense of holiness in later American literature is Ralph Waldo Emerson's transcendental "Over-Soul," which pervades all of life.

The Mexican tribes revered the divine Quetzalcoatl, a god of the Toltecs and Aztecs, and some tales of a high god or culture were told elsewhere. However, there are no long, standardized religious cycles about one supreme divinity. The closest equivalents to Old World spiritual narratives are often accounts of shamans' initiations and voyages. Apart from these, there are stories about culture heroes such as the Ojibwa tribe's Manabozho or the Navajo tribe's Coyote. These tricksters are treated with varying degrees of respect. In one tale they may act like heroes, while in another they may seem selfish or foolish. Although past authorities, such as the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung, have deprecated trickster tales as expressing the inferior, amoral side of the psyche, contemporary scholars — some of them Native Americans — point out that Odysseus and Prometheus, the revered Greek heroes, are essentially tricksters as well.

Examples of almost every oral genre can be found in American Indian literature: lyrics, chants, myths, fairy tales, humorous anecdotes, incantations, riddles, proverbs, epics, and legendary histories. Accounts of migrations and ancestors abound, as do vision or healing songs and tricksters' tales. Certain creation stories are particularly popular. In one well-known creation story, told with variations among many tribes, a turtle holds up the world. In a Cheyenne version, the creator, Maheo, has four chances to fashion the world from a watery universe. He sends four water birds diving to try to bring up earth from the bottom. The snow goose, loon, and mallard soar high into the sky and sweep down in a dive, but cannot reach bottom; but the little coot, who cannot fly, succeeds in bringing up some mud in his bill. Only one creature, humble Grandmother Turtle, is the right shape to support the mud world Maheo shapes on her shell — hence the Indian name for America, "Turtle Island."

The songs or poetry, like the narratives, range from the sacred to the light and humorous: There are lullabies, war chants, love songs, and

special songs for children's games, gambling, various chores, magic, or dance ceremonials. Generally the songs are repetitive. Short poem-songs given in dreams sometimes have the clear imagery and subtle mood associated with Japanese haiku or Eastern-influenced imagistic poetry. A Chippewa song runs:

A loon I thought it was
But it was
My love's
splashing oar.

Vision songs, often very short, are another distinctive form. Appearing in dreams or visions, sometimes with no warning, they may be healing, hunting, or love songs. Often they are personal, as in this Modoc song:

I
the song
I walk here.

Indian oral tradition and its relation to American literature as a whole is one of the richest and least explored topics in American studies. The Indian contribution to America is greater than is often believed. The hundreds of Indian words in everyday American English include "canoe," "tobacco," "potato," "moccasin," "moose," "persimmon," "raccoon," "tomahawk," and "totem." Contemporary Native American writing, discussed in chapter 8, also contains works of great beauty.

THE LITERATURE OF EXPLORATION

Had history taken a different turn, the United States easily could have been a part of the great Spanish or French overseas empires. Its present inhabitants might speak Spanish and form one nation with Mexico, or speak French and be joined with Canadian Francophone Quebec and Montreal.

Yet the earliest explorers of America were not English, Spanish, or French. The first European record of exploration in America is in a Scandinavian language. The Old Norse *Vinland Saga* recounts how the adventurous Leif Ericson and a band of wandering Norsemen settled briefly somewhere on the northeast coast of America — probably Nova Scotia, in Canada — in the first decade of the 11th century, almost 400 years before the next recorded European discovery of the New World.

The first known and sustained contact between the Americas and the rest of the world, however, began with the famous voyage of an Italian explorer, Christopher Columbus, funded by the Spanish rulers Ferdinand and Isabella. Columbus's journal in his "Epistola," printed in 1493, recounts the trip's drama — the terror of the men, who feared monsters and thought they might fall off the edge of the world; the near-mutiny; how Columbus faked the ships' logs so the men would not know how much farther they had travelled than anyone had gone before; and the first sighting of land as they neared America.

Bartolomé de las Casas is the richest source of information about the early contact between American Indians and Europeans. As a young priest he helped conquer Cuba. He transcribed Columbus's journal, and late in life wrote a long, vivid *History of the Indians* criticizing their enslavement by the Spanish.

Initial English attempts at colonization were disasters. The first colony was set up in 1585 at Roanoke, off the coast of North Carolina; all its colonists disappeared, and to this day legends are told about blue-eyed Croatan Indians of the area. The second colony was more permanent: Jamestown, established in 1607. It endured starvation, brutality, and misrule. However, the literature of the period paints America in glowing colors as the land of riches and opportunity. Accounts of the colonizations became world-renowned. The exploration of Roanoke was carefully recorded by Thomas Hariot in *A Brief and*

True Report of the New-Found Land of Virginia (1588). Hariot's book was quickly translated into Latin, French, and German; the text and pictures were made into engravings and widely republished for over 200 years.

The Jamestown colony's main record, the writings of Captain John Smith, one of its leaders, is the exact opposite of Hariot's accurate, scientific account. Smith was an incurable romantic, and he seems to have embroidered his adventures. To him we owe the famous story of the Indian maiden, Pocahontas. Whether fact or fiction, the tale is ingrained in the American historical imagination. The story recounts how Pocahontas, favorite daughter of Chief Powhatan, saved Captain Smith's life when he was a prisoner of the chief. Later, when the English persuaded Powhatan to give Pocahontas to them as a hostage, her gentleness, intelligence, and beauty impressed the English, and, in 1614, she married John Rolfe, an English gentleman. The marriage initiated an eight-year peace between the colonists and the Indians, ensuring the survival of the struggling new colony. Slavery started in 1619

In the 17th century, pirates, adventurers, and explorers opened the way to a second wave of permanent colonists, bringing their wives, children, farm implements, and craftsmen's tools. The early literature of exploration, made up of diaries, letters, travel journals, ships' logs, and reports to the explorers' financial backers — European rulers or, in mercantile England and Holland, joint stock companies — gradually was supplanted by records of the settled colonies. Because England eventually took possession of the North American colonies, the best-known and most-anthologized colonial literature is English. As American minority literature continues to flower in the 20th century and American life becomes increasingly multicultural, scholars are rediscovering the importance of the continent's mixed ethnic heritage. Although the story of literature now turns to the English accounts, it is important to recognize its richly cosmopolitan beginnings.

The colony of Ronaoke

THE COLONIAL PERIOD IN NEW ENGLAND

It is likely that no other colonists in the history of the world were as intellectual as the Puritans. Between 1630 and 1690, there were as many university graduates in the northeastern section of the United States, known as New England, as in the mother country — an astounding fact when one considers that most educated people of the time were aristocrats who were unwilling to risk their lives in wilderness conditions. The self-made and often self-educated Puritans were notable exceptions. They wanted education to understand and execute God's will as they established their colonies throughout New England.

The Puritan definition of good writing was that which brought home a full awareness of the importance of worshipping God and of the spiritual dangers that the soul faced on Earth. Puritan style varied enormously — from complex metaphysical poetry to homely journals and crushingly pedantic religious history. Whatever the style or genre, certain themes remained constant. Life was seen as a test; failure led to eternal damnation and hellfire, and success to heavenly bliss. This world was an arena of constant battle between the forces of God and the forces of Satan, a formidable enemy with many disguises. Many Puritans excitedly awaited the "millennium," when Jesus would return to Earth, end human misery, and inaugurate 1,000 years of peace and prosperity.

Scholars have long pointed out the link between Puritanism and capitalism: Both rest on ambition, hard work, and an intense striving for success. Although individual Puritans could not know, in strict theological terms, whether they were "saved" and among the elect who would go to heaven, Puritans tended to feel that earthly

Painting courtesy Smithsonian Institution

"The First Thanksgiving," a painting by J.L.G. Ferris, depicts America's early settlers and Native Americans celebrating a bountiful harvest.

success was a sign of election. Wealth and status were sought not only for themselves, but as welcome reassurances of spiritual health and promises of eternal life.

Moreover, the concept of stewardship encouraged success. The Puritans interpreted all things and events as symbols with deeper spiritual meanings, and felt that in advancing their own profit and their community's well-being, they were also furthering God's plans. They did not draw lines of distinction between the secular and religious spheres: All of life was an expression of the divine will — a belief that later resurfaces in Transcendentalism.

In recording ordinary events to reveal their spiritual meaning, Puritan authors commonly cited the Bible, chapter and verse. History was a symbolic religious panorama leading to the Puritan triumph over the New World and to God's kingdom on Earth.

The first Puritan colonists who settled New England exemplified the seriousness of Reformation Christianity. Known as the "Pilgrims," they were a small group of believers who had migrated from England to Holland — even then known for its religious tolerance — in 1608, during a time of persecutions.

Like most Puritans, they interpreted the Bible literally. They read and acted on the text of the Second Book of Corinthians — "Come out from among them and be ye separate, saith the Lord." Despairing of purifying the Church of England from within, "Separatists" formed underground "covenanted" churches that swore loyalty to the group instead of the king. Seen as traitors to the king as well as heretics damned to hell, they were often persecuted. Their separation took them ultimately to the New World.

William Bradford (1590-1657)

William Bradford was elected governor of Plymouth in the Massachusetts Bay Colony shortly after the Separatists landed. He was a deeply pious, self-educated man who had learned several languages, including Hebrew, in order to "see with his own eyes the ancient oracles of God in their native beauty." His participation in the migration to Holland and the *Mayflower* voyage to Plymouth, and his duties as governor, made him ideally suited to be the first historian of his colony. His history, *Of Plymouth Plantation* (1651), is a clear and compelling account of the colony's beginning. His description of the first view of America is justly famous:

Being thus passed the vast ocean, and a sea of troubles...they had now no friends to welcome them nor inns to entertain or refresh their weatherbeaten bodies; no houses or much less towns to repair to, to seek for succor...savage barbarians...were readier to fill their sides with arrows than otherwise. And for the reason it was winter, and they that know the winters of that country, know them to be sharp and violent, and subject to cruel and fierce storms...all stand upon them with a weatherbeaten face, and the whole country, full of woods and thickets, represented a wild and savage hue.

Bradford also recorded the first document of colonial self-governance in the English New World, the "Mayflower Compact," drawn up while the Pilgrims were still on board ship. The compact was a harbinger of the Declaration of Independence to come a century and a half later.

Puritans disapproved of such secular amusements as dancing and card-playing, which were associated with ungodly aristocrats and immoral living. Reading or writing "light" books also fell into this category. Puritan minds poured their tremendous energies into nonfiction and pious genres: poetry, sermons, theological tracts, and histories. Their intimate diaries and meditations record the rich inner lives of this introspective and intense people.

Anne Bradstreet (c. 1612-1672)

The first published book of poems by an American was also the first American book to be published by a woman — Anne Bradstreet. It is not surprising that the book was published in England, given the lack of printing presses in the early years of the first American colonies. Born and educated in England, Anne Bradstreet was the daughter of an earl's estate manager. She emigrated with her family when she was 18. Her husband eventually became governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, which later grew into the great city of Boston. She preferred her long, religious poems on conventional subjects such as the seasons, but contemporary readers most enjoy the witty poems on subjects from daily life and her warm and loving poems to her husband and children. She was inspired by English metaphysical poetry, and her book *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America* (1650) shows the influence of Edmund Spenser, Philip Sidney, and other English poets as well. She often uses elaborate conceits or extended metaphors. "To My Dear and Loving Husband" (1678) uses the oriental imagery, love theme, and idea of comparison popular in Europe at the time, but gives these a pious meaning at the poem's conclusion:

If ever two were one, then surely we.
If ever man were loved by wife, then thee;
If ever wife was happy in a man,
Compare with me, ye women, if you can.
I prize thy love more than whole mines of gold
Or all the riches that the East doth hold.
My love is such that rivers cannot quench,
Nor ought but love from thee, give recompense.
Thy love is such I can no way repay,
The heavens reward thee manifold, I pray.
Then while we live, in love let's so persevere
That when we live no more, we may live ever.

Edward Taylor (c. 1644-1729)

Like Anne Bradstreet, and, in fact, all of New England's first writers, the intense, brilliant poet and minister Edward Taylor was born in England. The son of a yeoman farmer — an independent farmer who owned his own land — Taylor was a teacher who sailed to New England in 1668 rather than take an oath of loyalty to the Church of England. He studied at Harvard College, and, like most Harvard-trained ministers, he knew Greek, Latin, and Hebrew. A selfless and pious man, Taylor acted as a missionary to the settlers when

he accepted his lifelong job as a minister in the frontier town of Westfield, Massachusetts, 160 kilometers into the thickly forested, wild interior. Taylor was the best-educated man in the area, and he put his knowledge to use, working as the town minister, doctor, and civic leader.

Modest, pious, and hard-working, Taylor never published his poetry, which was discovered only in the 1930s. He would, no doubt, have seen his work's discovery as divine providence; today's readers should be grateful to have his poems — the finest examples of 17th-century poetry in North America.

Taylor wrote a variety of verse: funeral elegies, lyrics, a medieval "debate," and a 500-page *Metrical History of Christianity* (mainly a history of martyrs). His best works, according to modern critics, are the series of short preparatory meditations.

Calvanist

Michael Wigglesworth (1631-1705)

Michael Wigglesworth, like Taylor an English-born, Harvard-educated Puritan minister who practiced medicine, is the third New England colonial poet of note. He continues the Puritan themes in his best-known work, *The Day of Doom* (1662). A long narrative that often falls into doggerel, this terrifying popularization of Calvinistic doctrine was the most popular poem of the colonial period. This first American best-seller is an appalling portrait of damnation to hell in ballad meter.

It is terrible poetry — but everybody loved it. It fused the fascination of a horror story with the authority of John Calvin. For more than two centuries, people memorized this long, dreadful monument to religious terror; children proudly recited it, and elders quoted it in everyday speech. It is not such a leap from the terrible punishments of this poem to the ghastly self-inflicted wound of Nathaniel Hawthorne's guilty Puritan minister, Arthur Dimmesdale, in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) or Herman Melville's crippled Captain Ahab, a New England Faust whose quest for forbidden knowledge sinks the ship of American humanity in *Moby-Dick* (1851). (*Moby-Dick* was the favorite novel of 20th-century American novelist William Faulkner, whose profound and disturbing works suggest that the dark, metaphysical vision of Protestant America has not yet been exhausted.)

Like most colonial literature, the poems of early New England imitate the form and technique of the mother country, though the religious passion and frequent biblical references, as well as the new setting, give New England writing a special identity. Isolated New World writers also lived before the advent of rapid transportation and electronic communications. As a result, colonial writers were imitating writing that was already out of date in England. Thus, Edward Taylor, the best American poet of his day, wrote metaphysical poetry after it had become unfashionable in England. At times, as in Taylor's poetry, rich works of striking originality grew out of colonial isolation.

Colonial writers often seemed ignorant of such great English authors as Ben Jonson. Some colonial writers rejected English poets who belonged to a different sect as well, thereby cutting themselves off from the finest lyric and dramatic models the English language had produced. In addition, many colonials remained ignorant due to the lack of books.

The great model of writing, belief, and conduct was the Bible, in an authorized English translation that was already outdated when it came out. The age of the Bible, so much older than the Roman church, made it authoritative to Puritan eyes.

New England Puritans clung to the tales of the Jews in the Old Testament, believing that they, like the Jews, were persecuted for their faith, that they knew the one true God, and that they were the chosen elect who would establish the New Jerusalem — a heaven on Earth. The

Puritans were aware of the parallels between the ancient Jews of the Old Testament and themselves. Moses led the Israelites out of captivity from Egypt, parted the Red Sea through God's miraculous assistance so that his people could escape, and received the divine law in the form of the Ten Commandments. Like Moses, Puritan leaders felt they were rescuing their people from spiritual corruption in England, passing miraculously over a wild sea with God's aid, and fashioning new laws and new forms of government after God's wishes.

Colonial worlds tend to be archaic, and New England certainly was no exception. New England Puritans were archaic by choice, conviction, and circumstance.

Samuel Sewall (1652-1730)

Easier to read than the highly religious poetry full of Biblical references are the historical and secular accounts that recount real events using lively details. Governor John Winthrop's *Journal* (1790) provides the best information on the early Massachusetts Bay Colony and Puritan political theory.

Samuel Sewall's *Diary*, which records the years 1674 to 1729, is lively and engaging. Sewall fits the pattern of early New England writers we have seen in Bradford and Taylor. Born in England, Sewall was brought to the colonies at an early age. He made his home in the Boston area, where he graduated from Harvard, and made a career of legal, administrative, and religious work.

COTTON MATHER

Engraving © The Bettmann Archive

Sewall was born late enough to see the change from the early, strict religious life of the Puritans to the later, more worldly Yankee period of mercantile wealth in the New England colonies; his *Diary*, which is often compared to Samuel Pepys's English diary of the same period, inadvertently records the transition.

Like Pepys's diary, Sewall's is a minute record of his daily life, reflecting his interest in living piously and well. He notes little purchases of sweets for a woman he was courting, and their disagreements over whether he should affect aristocratic and expensive ways such as wearing a wig and using a coach.

Mary Rowlandson (c. 1635-c.1678)

The earliest woman prose writer of note is Mary Rowlandson, a minister's wife who gives a clear, moving account of her 11-week captivity by Indians during an Indian massacre in 1676. The book undoubtedly fanned the flame of anti-Indian sentiment, as did John Williams's *The Redeemed Captive* (1707), describing his two years in captivity by French and Indians after a massacre. Such writings as women produced are usually domestic accounts requiring no special education. It may be argued that women's literature benefits from its homey realism and common-sense wit; certainly works like Sarah Kemble Knight's lively *Journal* (1825) of a daring

solo trip in 1704 from Boston to New York and back escapes the baroque complexity of much Puritan writing.

Cotton Mather (1663-1728)

No account of New England colonial literature would be complete without mentioning Cotton Mather, the master pedant. The third in the four-generation Mather dynasty of Massachusetts Bay, he wrote at length of New England in over 500 books and pamphlets. Mather's 1702 *Magnalia Christi Americana* (*Ecclesiastical History of New England*), his most ambitious work, exhaustively chronicles the settlement of New England through a series of biographies. The huge book presents the holy Puritan errand into the wilderness to establish God's kingdom; its structure is a narrative progression of representative American "Saint's Lives." His zeal somewhat redeems his pompousness: "I write the wonders of the Christian religion, flying from the deprivations of Europe to the American strand."

Roger Williams (c. 1603-1683)

As the 1600s wore on into the 1700s, religious dogmatism gradually dwindled, despite sporadic, harsh Puritan efforts to stem the tide of tolerance. The minister Roger Williams suffered for his own views on religion. An English-born son of a tailor, he was banished from Massachusetts in the middle of New England's ferocious winter in 1635. Secretly warned by Governor John Winthrop of Massachusetts, he survived only by living with Indians; in 1636, he established a new colony at Rhode Island that would welcome persons of different religions. religious tolerance

A graduate of Cambridge University (England), he retained sympathy for working people and diverse views. His ideas were ahead of his time. He was an early critic of imperialism, insisting that European kings had no right to grant land charters because American land belonged to the Indians. Williams also believe in the separation between church and state — still a fundamental principle in America today. He held that the law courts should not have the power to punish people for religious reasons — a stand that undermined the strict New England theocracies. A believer in equality and democracy, he was a lifelong friend of the Indians. Williams's numerous books include one of the first phrase books of Indian languages, *A Key Into the Languages of America* (1643). The book also is an embryonic ethnography, giving bold descriptions of Indian life based on the time he had lived among the tribes. Each chapter is devoted to one topic — for example, eating and mealtime. Indian words and phrases pertaining to this topic are mixed with comments, anecdotes, and a concluding poem. The end of the first chapter reads:

> If nature's sons, both wild and tame,
> Humane and courteous be,
> How ill becomes it sons of God
> To want humanity.

In the chapter on words about entertainment, he comments that "it is a strange truth that a man shall generally find more free entertainment and refreshing among these barbarians, than amongst thousands that call themselves Christians."

Williams's life is uniquely inspiring. On a visit to England during the bloody Civil War there, he drew upon his survival in frigid New England to organize firewood deliveries to the poor of London during the winter, after their supply of coal had been cut off. He wrote lively defenses of religious toleration not only for different Christian sects, but also for non-Christians. "It is the will and command of God, that...a permission of the most Paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or Antichristian consciences and worships, be granted to all men, in all nations...," he wrote in *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience* (1644). The intercultural experience

Quakers = religious society of friends

of living among gracious and humane Indians undoubtedly accounts for much of his wisdom.

Influence was two-way in the colonies. For example, John Eliot translated the Bible into Narragansett. Some Indians converted to Christianity. Even today, the Native American church is a mixture of Christianity and Indian traditional belief.

The spirit of toleration and religious freedom that gradually grew in the American colonies was first established in Rhode Island and Pennsylvania, home of the Quakers. The humane and tolerant Quakers, or "Friends," as they were known, believed in the sacredness of the individual conscience as the fountainhead of social order and morality. The fundamental Quaker belief in universal love and brotherhood made them deeply democratic and opposed to dogmatic religious authority. Driven out of strict Massachusetts, which feared their influence, they established a very successful colony, Pennsylvania, under William Penn in 1681.

named after William Penn

Quaker

John Woolman (1720-1772)

The best-known Quaker work is the long *Journal* (1774) of John Woolman, documenting his inner life in a pure, heartfelt style of great sweetness that has drawn praise from many American and English writers. This remarkable man left his comfortable home in town to sojourn with the Indians in the wild interior because he thought he might learn from them and share their ideas. He writes simply of his desire to "feel and understand their life, and the Spirit they live in." Woolman's justice-loving spirit naturally turns to social criticism: "I perceived that many white People do often sell Rum to the Indians, which, I believe, is a great Evil."

JONATHAN EDWARDS

Engraving © The Bettmann Archive

Woolman was also one of the first antislavery writers, publishing two essays, "Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes," in 1754 and 1762. An ardent humanitarian, he followed a path of "passive obedience" to authorities and laws he found unjust, prefiguring Henry David Thoreau's celebrated essay, "Civil Disobedience" (1849), by generations.

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)

The antithesis of John Woolman is Jonathan Edwards, who was born only 17 years before the Quaker notable. Woolman had little formal schooling; Edwards was highly educated. Woolman followed his inner light; Edwards was devoted to the law and authority. Both men were fine writers, but they revealed opposite poles of the colonial religious experience.

Edwards was molded by his extreme sense of duty and by the rigid Puritan environment, which conspired to make him defend strict and gloomy Calvinism from the forces of liberalism springing up around him. He is best known for his frightening, powerful ser-

mon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (1741):

> [I]f God should let you go, you would immediately sink, and sinfully descend, and plunge into the bottomless gulf...The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked....he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else but to be cast into the bottomless gulf.

Edwards's sermons had enormous impact, sending whole congregations into hysterical fits of weeping. In the long run, though, their grotesque harshness alienated people from the Calvinism that Edwards valiantly defended. Edwards's dogmatic, medieval sermons no longer fit the experiences of relatively peaceful, prosperous 18th-century colonists. After Edwards, fresh, liberal currents of tolerance gathered force.

LITERATURE IN THE SOUTHERN AND MIDDLE COLONIES

Pre-revolutionary southern literature was aristocratic and secular, reflecting the dominant social and economic systems of the southern plantations. Early English immigrants were drawn to the southern colonies because of economic opportunity rather than religious freedom.

Although many southerners were poor farmers or tradespeople living not much better than slaves, the southern literate upper class was shaped by the classical, Old World ideal of a noble landed gentry made possible by slavery. The institution released wealthy southern whites from manual labor, afforded them leisure, and made the dream of an aristocratic life in the American wilderness possible. The Puritan emphasis on hard work, education, and earnestness was rare — instead we hear of such pleasures as horseback riding and hunting. The church was the focus of a genteel social life, not a forum for minute examinations of conscience.

William Byrd (1674-1744)

Southern culture naturally revolved around the ideal of the gentleman. A Renaissance man equally good at managing a farm and reading classical Greek, he had the power of a feudal lord.

William Byrd describes the gracious way of life at his plantation, Westover, in his famous letter of 1726 to his English friend Charles Boyle, Earl of Orrery:

> Besides the advantages of pure air, we abound in all kinds of provisions without expense (I mean we who have plantations). I have a large family of my own, and my doors are open to everybody, yet I have no bills to pay, and half-a-crown will rest undisturbed in my pockets for many moons altogether.
>
> Like one of the patriarchs, I have my flock and herds, my bondmen and bondwomen, and every sort of trade amongst my own servants, so that I live in a kind of independence on everyone but Providence.

William Byrd epitomizes the spirit of the southern colonial gentry. The heir to 1,040 hectares, which he enlarged to 7,160 hectares, he was a merchant, trader, and planter. His library of 3,600 books was the largest in the South. He was born with a lively intelligence that his father augmented by sending him to excellent schools in England and Holland. He visited the French Court, became a Fellow of the Royal Society, and was friendly with some of the leading English writers of his day, particularly William Wycherley and William Congreve. His London diaries are the opposite of those of the New England Puritans, full of fancy dinners, glittering parties, and womanizing, with little introspective soul-searching.

south = secular, aristocratic, economic, slavery, plantation

Byrd is best known today for his lively *History of the Dividing Line*, a diary of a 1729 trip of some weeks and 960 kilometers into the interior to survey the line dividing the neighboring colonies of Virginia and North Carolina. The quick impressions that vast wilderness, Indians, half-savage whites, wild beasts, and every sort of difficulty made on this civilized gentleman form a uniquely American and very southern book. He ridicules the first Virginia colonists, "about a hundred men, most of them reprobates of good families," and jokes that at Jamestown, "like true Englishmen, they built a church that cost no more than fifty pounds, and a tavern that cost five hundred." Byrd's writings are fine examples of the keen interest southerners took in the material world: the land, Indians, plants, animals, and settlers.

Robert Beverley (c. 1673-1722)

Robert Beverley, another wealthy planter and author of *The History and Present State of Virginia* (1705, 1722) records the history of the Virginia colony in a humane and vigorous style. Like Byrd, he admired the Indians and remarked on the strange European superstitions about Virginia — for example, the belief "that the country turns all people black who go there." He noted the great hospitality of southerners, a trait maintained today.

Humorous satire — a literary work in which human vice or folly is attacked through irony, derision, or wit — appears frequently in the colonial South. A group of irritated settlers lampooned Georgia's philanthropic founder, General James Oglethorpe, in a tract entitled *A True and Historical Narrative of the Colony of Georgia* (1741). They pretended to praise him for keeping them so poor and overworked that they had to develop "the valuable virtue of humility" and shun "the anxieties of any further ambition."

The rowdy, satirical poem "The Sotweed Factor" satirizes the colony of Maryland, where the author, an Englishman named Ebenezer Cook, had unsuccessfully tried his hand as a tobacco merchant. Cook exposed the crude ways of the colony with high-spirited humor, and accused the colonists of cheating him. The poem concludes with an exaggerated curse: "May wrath divine then lay those regions waste / Where no man's faithful nor a woman chaste."

In general, the colonial South may fairly be linked with a light, worldly, informative, and realistic literary tradition. Imitative of English literary fashions, the southerners attained imaginative heights in witty, precise observations of distinctive New World conditions.

Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) (c. 1745-c. 1797)

slave narrative

Important black writers like Olaudah Equiano and Jupiter Hammon emerged during the colonial period. Equiano, an Ibo from Niger (West Africa), was the first black in America to write an autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789). In the book — an early example of the slave narrative genre — Equiano gives an account of his native land and the horrors and cruelties of his captivity and enslavement in the West Indies. Equiano, who converted to Christianity, movingly laments his cruel "un-Christian" treatment by Christians — a sentiment many African-Americans would voice in centuries to come.

Jupiter Hammon (c. 1720-c. 1800)

The black American poet Jupiter Hammon, a slave on Long Island, New York, is remembered for his religious poems as well as for *An Address to the Negroes of the State of New York* (1787), in which he advocated freeing children of slaves instead of condemning them to hereditary slavery. His poem "An Evening Thought" was the first poem published by a black male in America. ■

Spain and France fought against Britain in American revolution

CHAPTER 2

American Exceptionalism

DEMOCRATIC ORIGINS AND REVOLUTIONARY WRITERS, 1776-1820

The hard-fought American Revolution against Britain (1775-1783) was the first modern war of liberation against a colonial power. The triumph of American independence seemed to many at the time a divine sign that America and her people were destined for greatness. Military victory fanned nationalistic hopes for a great new literature. Yet with the exception of outstanding political writing, few works of note appeared during or soon after the Revolution.

American books were harshly reviewed in England. Americans were painfully aware of their excessive dependence on English literary models. The search for a native literature became a national obsession. As one American magazine editor wrote, around 1816, "Dependence is a state of degradation fraught with disgrace, and to be dependent on a foreign mind for what we can ourselves produce is to add to the crime of indolence the weakness of stupidity."

Cultural revolutions, unlike military revolutions, cannot be successfully imposed but must grow from the soil of shared experience. Revolutions are expressions of the heart of the people; they grow gradually out of new sensibilities and wealth of experience. It would take 50 years of accumulated history for America to earn its cultural independence and to produce the first great generation of American writers: Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman, and Emily Dickinson. America's literary independence was slowed by a lingering identification with England, an excessive imitation of English or classical literary models, and difficult economic and political conditions that hampered publishing.

Revolutionary writers, despite their genuine patriotism, were of necessity self-conscious, and they could never find roots in their American sensibilities. Colonial writers of the revolutionary generation had been born English, had grown to maturity as English citizens, and had cultivated English modes of thought and English fashions in dress and behavior. Their parents and grandparents were English (or European), as were all their friends. Added to this, American awareness of literary fashion still lagged behind the English, and this time lag intensified American imitation. Fifty years after their fame in England, English neoclassic writers such as Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, Oliver Goldsmith, and Samuel Johnson were still eagerly imitated in America.

Moreover, the heady challenges of building a new nation attracted talented and educated people to politics, law, and diplomacy. These pursuits brought honor, glory, and financial security. Writing, on the other hand, did not pay. Early American writers, now separated from England, effectively had no modern publishers, no audience, and no adequate legal protection. Editorial assistance, distribution, and publicity were rudimentary.

Until 1825, most American authors paid printers to publish their work. Obviously only the leisured and independently wealthy, like Washington Irving and the New York Knickerbocker group, or the group of Connecticut poets knows as the Hartford Wits, could afford to indulge their interest in writing. The exception, Benjamin Franklin, though from a poor family, was a printer by trade and could publish his own work.

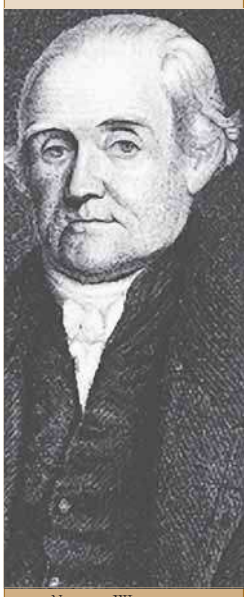
one of the founding fathers of the U.S.

Charles Brockden Brown was more typical. The author of several interesting Gothic romances, Brown was the first American author to attempt to live from his writing. But his short life ended in poverty.

The lack of an audience was another problem. The small cultivated audience in America wanted well-known European authors, partly out of the exaggerated respect with which former colonies regarded their previous rulers. This preference for English works was not entirely unreasonable, considering the inferiority of American output, but it worsened the situation by depriving American authors of an audience. Only journalism offered financial remuneration, but the mass audience wanted light, undemanding verse and short topical essays — not long or experimental work.

The absence of adequate copyright laws was perhaps the clearest cause of literary stagnation. American printers pirating English best-sellers understandably were unwilling to pay an American author for unknown material. The unauthorized reprinting of foreign books was originally seen as a service to the colonies as well as a source of profit for printers like Franklin, who reprinted works of the classics and great European books to educate the American public.

Printers everywhere in America followed his lead. There are notorious examples of pirating. Matthew Carey, an important American publisher, paid a London agent — a sort of literary spy — to send copies of unbound pages, or even proofs, to him in fast ships that could sail to America in a month. Carey's men would sail out to meet the incoming ships in the harbor and speed the pirated books into print using typesetters who divided the book into sections and worked in shifts around the clock. Such a pirated English book could be reprinted in a day and placed on the shelves for sale in American bookstores almost as fast as in England.



NOAH WEBSTER

Engraving © The Bettmann Archive

Because imported authorized editions were more expensive and could not compete with pirated ones, the copyright situation damaged foreign authors such as Sir Walter Scott and Charles Dickens, along with American authors. But at least the foreign authors had already been paid by their original publishers and were already well known. Americans such as James Fenimore Cooper not only failed to receive adequate payment, but they had to suffer seeing their works pirated under their noses. Cooper's first successful book, *The Spy* (1821), was pirated by four different printers within a month of its appearance.

Ironically, the copyright law of 1790, which allowed pirating, was nationalistic in intent. Drafted by Noah Webster, the great lexicographer who later compiled an American dictionary, the law protected only the work of American authors; it was felt that English writers

should look out for themselves.

Bad as the law was, none of the early publishers were willing to have it changed because it proved profitable for them. Piracy starved the first generation of revolutionary American writers; not surprisingly, the generation after them produced even less work of merit. The high point of piracy, in 1815, corresponds with the low point of American writing. Nevertheless, the cheap and plentiful supply of pirated foreign books and classics in the first 50 years of the new country did educate Americans, including the first great writers, who began to make their appearance around 1825.

cultural and intellectual movement

THE AMERICAN ENLIGHTENMENT

The 18th-century American Enlightenment was a movement marked by an emphasis on rationality rather than tradition, scientific inquiry instead of unquestioning religious dogma, and representative government in place of monarchy. Enlightenment thinkers and writers were devoted to the ideals of justice, liberty, and equality as the natural rights of man.

Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790)

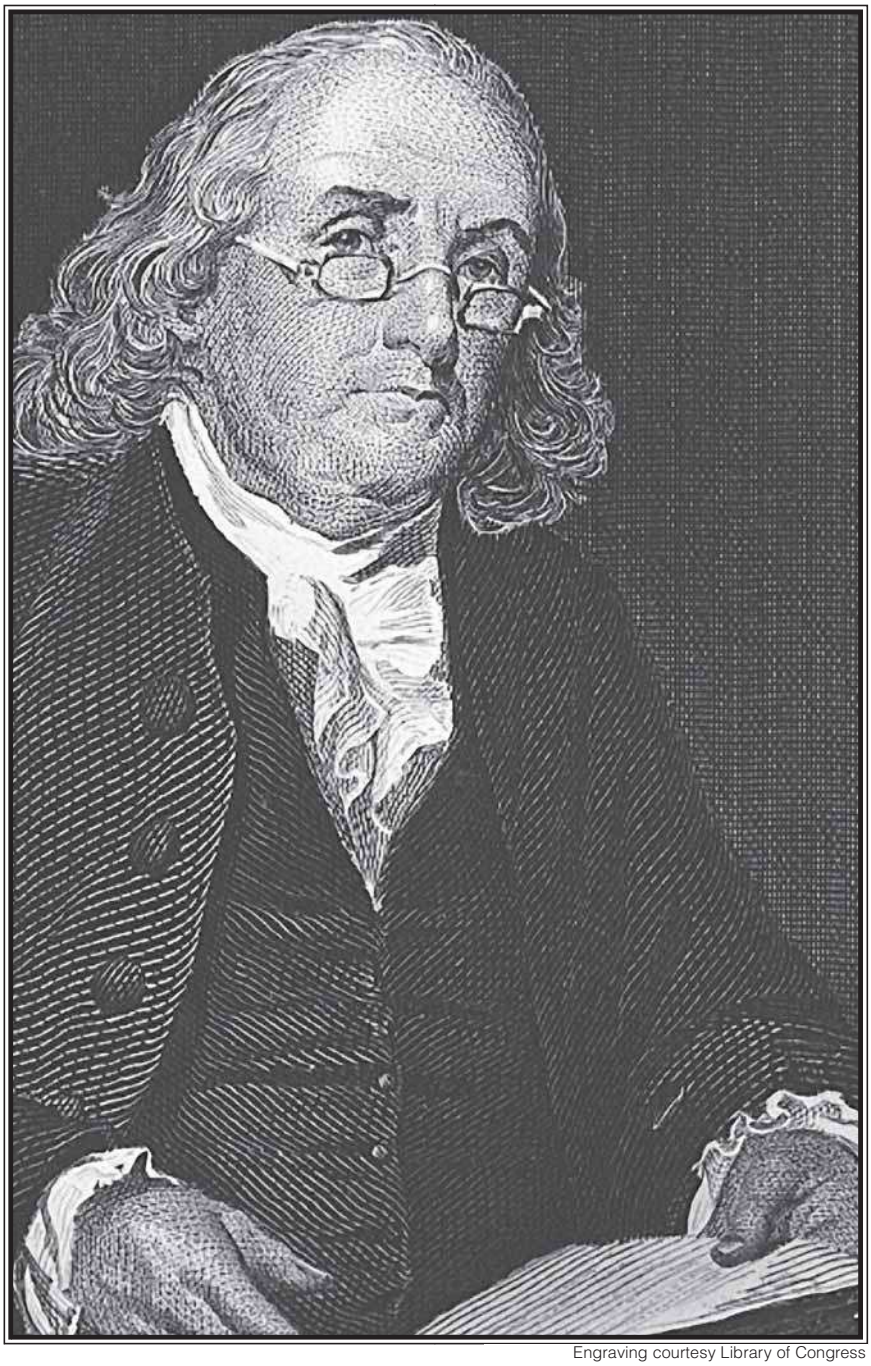
Benjamin Franklin, whom the Scottish philosopher David Hume called America's "first great man of letters," embodied the Enlightenment ideal of humane rationality. Practical yet idealistic, hard-working and enormously successful, Franklin recorded his early life in his famous *Autobiography*. Writer, printer, publisher, scientist, philanthropist, and diplomat, he was the most famous and respected private figure of his time. He was the first great self-made man in America, a poor democrat born in an aristocratic age that his fine example helped to liberalize.

Franklin was a second-generation immigrant. His Puritan father, a chandler (candle-maker), came to Boston, Massachusetts, from England in 1683. In many ways Franklin's life illustrates the impact of the Enlightenment on a gifted individual. Self-educated but well-read in John Locke, Lord Shaftesbury, Joseph Addison, and other Enlightenment writers, Franklin learned from them to apply reason to his own life and to break with tradition — in particular the old-fashioned Puritan tradition — when it threatened to smother his ideals.

While a youth, Franklin taught himself languages, read widely, and practiced writing for the public. When he moved from Boston to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Franklin already had the kind of education associated with the upper classes. He also had the Puritan capacity for hard, careful work, constant self-scrutiny, and the desire to better himself. These qualities steadily propelled him to wealth, respectability, and honor. Never selfish, Franklin tried to help other ordinary people become successful by sharing his insights and initiating a characteristically American genre — the self-help book.

Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanack*, begun in 1732 and published for many years, made Franklin prosperous and well-known throughout the colonies. In this annual book of useful encouragement, advice, and factual information, amusing characters such as old Father Abraham and Poor Richard exhort the reader in pithy, memorable sayings. In "The Way to Wealth," which originally appeared in the *Almanack*, Father Abraham, "a plain clean old Man, with white Locks," quotes Poor Richard at length. "A Word to the Wise is enough," he says. "God helps them that help themselves." "Early to Bed, and early to rise, makes a Man healthy, wealthy, and wise." Poor Richard is a psychologist ("Industry pays Debts, while Despair encreaseth them"), and he always counsels hard work ("Diligence is the Mother of Good Luck"). Do not be lazy, he advises, for "One To-day is worth two tomorrow." Sometimes he creates anecdotes to illustrate his points: "A little Neglect may breed great Mischief....For want of a Nail the Shoe was lost; for want of a Shoe the Horse was lost; and for want

Benjamin Franklin



Engraving courtesy Library of Congress

of a Horse the Rider was lost, being overtaken and slain by the Enemy, all for want of Care about a Horse-shoe Nail." Franklin was a genius at compressing a moral point: "What maintains one Vice, would bring up two Children." "A small leak will sink a great Ship." "Fools make Feasts, and wise Men eat them."

Franklin's *Autobiography* is, in part, another self-help book. Written to advise his son, it covers only the early years. The most famous section describes his scientific scheme of self-improvement. Franklin lists 13 virtues: temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity, and humility. He elaborates on each with a maxim; for example, the temperance maxim is "Eat not to Dullness. Drink not to Elevation." A pragmatic scientist, Franklin put the idea of perfectibility to the test, using himself as the experimental subject.

To establish good habits, Franklin invented a reusable calendrical record book in which he worked on one virtue each week, recording each lapse with a black spot. His theory prefigures psychological behaviorism, while his systematic method of notation anticipates modern behavior modification. The project of self-improvement blends the Enlightenment belief in perfectibility with the Puritan habit of moral self-scrutiny.

Franklin saw early that writing could best advance his ideas, and he therefore deliberately perfected his supple prose style, not as an end in itself but as a tool. "Write with the learned. Pronounce with the vulgar," he advised. A scientist, he followed the Royal (scientific) Society's 1667 advice to use "a close, naked, natural way of speaking; positive expressions, clear senses, a native easiness, bringing all things as near the mathematical plainness as they can."

Despite his prosperity and fame, Franklin never lost his democratic sensibility, and he was an important figure at the 1787 convention at which the U.S. Constitution was drafted. In his later years, he was president of an antislavery association. One of his last efforts was to promote universal public education.

Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur (1735-1813)

Another Enlightenment figure is Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, whose *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) gave Europeans a glowing idea of opportunities for peace, wealth, and pride in America. Neither an American nor a farmer, but a French aristocrat who owned a plantation outside New York City before the Revolution, Crèvecoeur enthusiastically praised the colonies for their industry, tolerance, and growing prosperity in 12 letters that depict America as an agrarian paradise — a vision that would inspire Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and many other writers up to the present.

Crèvecoeur was the earliest European to develop a considered view of America and the new American character. The first to exploit the "melting pot" image of America, in a famous passage he asks:

> What then is the American, this new man? He is either a European, or the descendant of a European, hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country. I could point out to you 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....Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labors and posterity will one day cause changes in the world.

Read the shit above

THE POLITICAL PAMPHLET: *Thomas Paine (1737-1809)*

The passion of Revolutionary literature is found in pamphlets, the most popular form of political literature of the day. Over 2,000 pamphlets were published during the Revolution. The pamphlets thrilled patriots and threatened loyalists; they filled the role of drama, as they were often read aloud in public to excite audiences. American soldiers read them aloud in their camps; British Loyalists threw them into public bonfires.

Thomas Paine's pamphlet *Common Sense* sold over 100,000 copies in the first three months of its publication. It is still rousing today. "The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind," Paine wrote, voicing the idea of American exceptionalism still strong in the United States — that in some fundamental sense, since America is a democratic experiment and a country theoretically open to all immigrants, the fate of America foreshadows the fate of humanity at large.

Political writings in a democracy had to be clear to appeal to the voters. And to have informed voters, universal education was promoted by many of the founding fathers. One indication of the vigorous, if simple, literary life was the proliferation of newspapers. More newspapers were read in America during the Revolution than anywhere else in the world. Immigration also mandated a simple style. Clarity was vital to a newcomer, for whom English might be a second language. Thomas Jefferson's original draft of the Declaration of Independence is clear and logical, but his committee's modifications made it even simpler. *The Federalist Papers*, written in support of the Constitution, are also lucid, logical arguments, suitable for debate in a democratic nation.

THOMAS PAINE

Portrait courtesy Library of Congress

NEOCLASSISM: EPIC, MOCK EPIC, AND SATIRE

Unfortunately, "literary" writing was not as simple and direct as political writing. When trying to write poetry, most educated authors stumbled into the pitfall of elegant neoclassicism. The epic, in particular, exercised a fatal attraction. American literary patriots felt sure that the great American Revolution naturally would find expression in the epic — a long, dramatic narrative poem in elevated language, celebrating the feats of a legendary hero.

Many writers tried but none succeeded. Timothy Dwight, (1752-1817), one of the group of writers known as the Hartford Wits, is an example. Dwight, who eventually became the president of Yale University, based his epic, *The Conquest of Canaan* (1785), on the Biblical story of Joshua's struggle to enter the Promised Land. Dwight cast General Washington, commander of the American army and later the first president of the United States, as Joshua in his allegory and borrowed the couplet form that Alexander Pope used to

translate Homer. Dwight's epic was as boring as it was ambitious. English critics demolished it; even Dwight's friends, such as John Trumbull (1750-1831), remained unenthusiastic. So much thunder and lightning raged in the melodramatic battle scenes that Trumbull proposed that the epic be provided with lightning rods.

Not surprisingly, satirical poetry fared much better than serious verse. The mock epic genre encouraged American poets to use their natural voices and did not lure them into a bog of pretentious and predictable patriotic sentiments and faceless conventional poetic epithets out of the Greek poet Homer and the Roman poet Virgil by way of the English poets.

mock of revolution

In mock epics like John Trumbull's good-humored *M'Fingal* (1776-1782), stylized emotions and conventional turns of phrase are ammunition for good satire, and the bombastic oratory of the Revolution is itself ridiculed. Modeled on the British poet Samuel Butler's *Hudibras*, the mock epic derides a Tory, M'Fingal. It is often pithy, as when noting of condemned criminals facing hanging:

> No man e'er felt the halter draw.
> With good opinion of the law.

M'Fingal went into over 30 editions, was reprinted for a half-century, and was appreciated in England as well as America. Satire appealed to Revolutionary audiences partly because it contained social comment and criticism, and political topics and social problems were the main subjects of the day. The first American comedy to be performed, *The Contrast* (produced 1787) by Royall Tyler (1757-1826), humorously contrasts Colonel Manly, an American officer, with Dimple, who imitates English fashions. Naturally, Dimple is made to look ridiculous. The play introduces the first Yankee character, Jonathan.

Another satirical work, the novel *Modern Chivalry*, published by Hugh Henry Brackenridge in installments from 1792 to 1815, memorably lampoons the excesses of the age. Brackenridge (1748-1816), a Scottish immigrant raised on the American frontier, based his huge, picaresque novel on Don Quixote; it describes the misadventures of Captain Farrago and his stupid, brutal, yet appealingly human, servant Teague O'Regan.

POET OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION: *Philip Freneau (1752-1832)*

One poet, Philip Freneau, incorporated the new stirrings of European Romanticism and escaped the imitativeness and vague universality of the Hartford Wits. The key to both his success and his failure was his passionately democratic spirit combined with an inflexible temper.

The Hartford Wits, all of them undoubted patriots, reflected the general cultural conservatism of the educated classes. Freneau set himself against this holdover of old Tory attitudes, complaining of "the writings of an aristocratic, speculating faction at Hartford, in favor of monarchy and titular distinctions." Although Freneau received a fine education and was as well acquainted with the classics as any Hartford Wit, he embraced liberal and democratic causes.

From a Huguenot (radical French Protestant) background, Freneau fought as a militiaman during the Revolutionary War. In 1780, he was captured and imprisoned in two British ships, where he almost died before his family managed to get him released. His poem "The British Prison Ship" is a bitter condemnation of the cruelties of the British, who wished "to stain the world with gore." This piece and other revolutionary works, including "Eutaw Springs," "American Liberty," "A Political Litany," "A Midnight Consultation," and "George the Third's Soliloquy," brought him fame as the "Poet of the American Revolution."

Freneau edited a number of journals during his life, always mindful of the great cause of democracy. When Thomas Jefferson helped him

establish the militant, anti-Federalist *National Gazette* in 1791, Freneau became the first powerful, crusading newspaper editor in America, and the literary predecessor of William Cullen Bryant, William Lloyd Garrison, and H.L. Mencken.

As a poet and editor, Freneau adhered to his democratic ideals. His popular poems, published in newspapers for the average reader, regularly celebrated American subjects. "The Virtue of Tobacco" concerns the indigenous plant, a mainstay of the southern economy, while "The Jug of Rum" celebrates the alconolic drink of the West Indies, a crucial commodity of early American trade and a major New World export. Common American characters lived in "The Pilot of Hatteras," as well as in poems about quack doctors and bombastic evangelists.

Freneau commanded a natural and colloquial style appropriate to a genuine democracy, but he could also rise to refined neoclassic lyricism in often-anthologized works such as "The Wild Honey Suckle" (1786), which evokes a sweet-smelling native shrub. Not until the "American Renaissance" that began in the 1820s would American poetry surpass the heights that Freneau had scaled 40 years earlier.

Additional groundwork for later literary achievement was laid during the early years. Nationalism inspired publications in many fields, leading to a new appreciation of things American. Noah Webster (1758-1843) devised an American *Dictionary*, as well as an important reader and speller for the schools. His *Spelling Book* sold more than 100 million copies over the years. Updated Webster's dictionaries are still standard today. The *American Geography*, by Jedidiah Morse, another landmark reference work, promoted knowledge of the vast and expanding American land itself. Some of the most interesting, if nonliterary, writings of the period are the journals of frontiersmen and explorers such as Meriwether Lewis (1774-1809) and Zebulon Pike (1779-1813), who wrote accounts of expeditions across the Louisiana Territory, the vast portion of the North American continent that Thomas Jefferson purchased from Napoleon in 1803.

The 18th-century American Enlightenment was a movement marked by an emphasis on rationality rather than tradition, scientific inquiry instead of unquestioning religious dogma, and representative government in place of monarchy. Enlightenment thinkers and writers were devoted to the ideals of justice, liberty, and equality as the natural rights of man.

WRITERS OF FICTION

The first important fiction writers widely recognized today, Charles Brockden Brown, Washington Irving, and James Fenimore Cooper, used American subjects, historical perspectives, themes of change, and nostalgic tones. They wrote in many prose genres, initiated new forms, and found new ways to make a living through literature. With them, American literature began to be read and appreciated in the United States and abroad.

Charles Brockden Brown (1771-1810)

Already mentioned as the first professional American writer, Charles Brockden Brown was inspired by the English writers Mrs. Radcliffe and English William Godwin. (Radcliffe was known for her terrifying Gothic novels; a novelist and social reformer, Godwin was the father of Mary Shelley, who wrote *Frankenstein* and married English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley.)

Driven by poverty, Brown hastily penned four haunting novels in two years: *Wieland* (1798), *Arthur Mervyn* (1799), *Ormond* (1799), and *Edgar Huntley* (1799). In them, he developed the genre of American Gothic. The Gothic novel was a popular genre of the day featuring exotic and wild settings, disturbing psychological depth, and much suspense. Trappings included ruined castles or abbeys, ghosts, mysterious secrets, threatening figures, and solitary maidens who survive by their wits and spiritual strength. At their best, such novels offer tremendous suspense and hints of magic, along with profound explorations of the human soul in extremity. Critics suggest that Brown's Gothic sensibility expresses deep anxieties about the inadequate social institutions of the new nation.

gothic elements

Brown used distinctively American settings. A man of ideas, he dramatized scientific theories, developed a personal theory of fiction, and championed high literary standards despite personal poverty. Though flawed, his works are darkly powerful. Increasingly, he is seen as the precursor of romantic writers like Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. He expresses subconscious fears that the outwardly optimistic Enlightenment period drove underground.

Washington Irving (1789-1859)

The youngest of 11 children born to a well-to-do New York merchant family, Washington Irving became a cultural and diplomatic ambassador to Europe, like Benjamin Franklin and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Despite his talent, he probably would not have become a full-time professional writer, given the lack of financial rewards, if a series of fortuitous incidents had not thrust writing as a profession upon him. Through friends, he was able to publish his *Sketch Book* (1819-1820) simultaneously in England and America, obtaining copyrights and payment in both countries.

The *Sketch Book of Geoffrye Crayon* (Irving's pseudonym) contains his two best remembered stories, "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." "Sketch" aptly describes Irving's delicate, elegant, yet seemingly casual style, and "crayon" suggests his ability as a colorist or creator of rich, nuanced tones and emotional effects. In the *Sketch Book*, Irving transforms the Catskill mountains along the Hudson River north of New York City into a fabulous, magical region.

American readers gratefully accepted Irving's imagined "history" of the Catskills, despite the fact (unknown to them) that he had adapted his stories from a German source. Irving gave America something it badly needed in the brash, materialistic early years: an imaginative way of relating to the new land.

No writer was as successful as Irving at humanizing the land, endowing it with a name and a face and a set of legends. The story of "Rip Van Winkle," who slept for 20 years, waking to find the colonies had become independent, eventually became folklore. It was adapted for the stage, went into the oral tradition, and was gradually accepted as authentic American legend by generations of Americans.

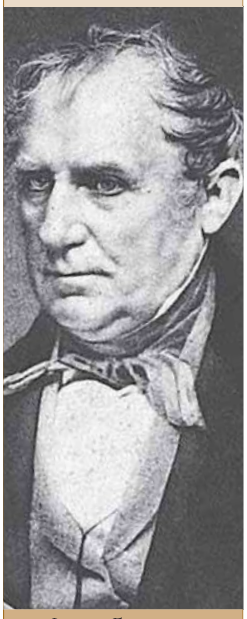
Irving discovered and helped satisfy the raw new nation's sense of history. His numerous works may be seen as his devoted attempts to build the new nation's soul by recreating history and giving it living, breathing, imaginative life. For subjects, he chose the most dramatic aspects of American history: the discovery of the New World, the first president and national hero, and

the westward exploration. His earliest work was a sparkling, satirical *History of New York* (1809) under the Dutch, ostensibly written by Diedrich Knickerbocker (hence the name of Irving's friends and New York writers of the day, the "Knickerbocker School").

James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851)

James Fenimore Cooper, like Irving, evoked a sense of the past and gave it a local habitation and a name. In Cooper, though, one finds the powerful myth of a golden age and the poignance of its loss. While Irving and other American writers before and after him scoured Europe in search of its legends, castles, and great themes, Cooper grasped the essential myth of America: that it was timeless, like the wilderness. American history was a trespass on the eternal; European history in America was a reenactment of the fall in the Garden of Eden. The cyclical realm of nature was glimpsed only in the act of destroying it: The wilderness disappeared in front of American eyes, vanishing before the oncoming pioneers like a mirage. This is Cooper's basic tragic vision of the ironic destruction of the wilderness, the new Eden that had attracted the colonists in the first place.

Personal experience enabled Cooper to write vividly of the transformation of the wilderness and of other subjects such as the sea and the clash of peoples from different cultures. The son of a Quaker family, he grew up on his father's remote estate at Otsego Lake (now Cooperstown) in central New York State. Although this area was relatively peaceful during Cooper's boyhood, it had once been the scene of an Indian massacre. Young Fenimore Cooper grew up in an almost feudal environment. His father, Judge Cooper, was a landowner and leader. Cooper saw frontiersmen and Indians at Otsego Lake as a boy; in later life, bold white settlers intruded on his land.



James Fenimore Cooper

Photo courtesy Library of Congress

Natty Bumppo, Cooper's renowned literary character, embodies his vision of the frontiersman as a gentleman, a Jeffersonian "natural aristocrat." Early in 1823, in *The Pioneers*, Cooper had begun to discover Bumppo. Natty is the first famous frontiersman in American literature and the literary forerunner of countless cowboy and backwoods heroes. He is the idealized, upright individualist who is better than the society he protects. Poor and isolated, yet pure, he is a touchstone for ethical values and prefigures Herman Melville's Billy Budd and Mark Twain's Huck Finn.

Based in part on the real life of American pioneer Daniel Boone — who was a Quaker like Cooper — Natty Bumppo, an outstanding woodsman like Boone, was a peaceful man adopted by an Indian tribe. Both Boone and the fictional Bumppo loved nature and freedom. They constantly kept moving west to escape the oncoming settlers they had guided into the wilder-

ness, and they became legends in their own lifetimes. Natty is also chaste, high-minded, and deeply spiritual: He is the Christian knight of medieval romances transposed to the virgin forest and rocky soil of America.

The unifying thread of the five novels collectively known as the *Leather-Stocking Tales* is the life of Natty Bumppo. Cooper's finest achievement, they constitute a vast prose epic with the North American continent as setting, Indian tribes as characters, and great wars and westward migration as social background. The novels bring to life frontier America from 1740 to 1804.

Cooper's novels portray the successive waves of the frontier settlement: the original wilderness inhabited by Indians; the arrival of the first whites as scouts, soldiers, traders, and frontiersmen; the coming of the poor, rough settler families; and the final arrival of the middle class, bringing the first professionals — the judge, the physician, and the banker. Each incoming wave displaced the earlier: Whites displaced the Indians, who retreated westward; the "civilized" middle classes who erected schools, churches, and jails displaced the lower-class individualistic frontier folk, who moved further west, in turn displacing the Indians who had preceded them. Cooper evokes the endless, inevitable wave of settlers, seeing not only the gains but the losses.

Cooper's novels reveal a deep tension between the lone individual and society, nature and culture, spirituality and organized religion. In Cooper, the natural world and the Indian are fundamentally good — as is the highly civilized realm associated with his most cultured characters. Intermediate characters are often suspect, especially greedy, poor white settlers who are too uneducated or unrefined to appreciate nature or culture. Like Rudyard Kipling, E.M. Forster, Herman Melville, and other sensitive observers of widely varied cultures interacting with each other, Cooper was a cultural relativist. He understood that no culture had a monopoly on virtue or refinement.

PHILLIS WHEATLEY

Cooper accepted the American condition while Irving did not. Irving addressed the American setting as a European might have — by importing and adapting European legends, culture, and history. Cooper took the process a step farther. He created American settings and new, distinctively American characters and themes. He was the first to sound the recurring tragic note in American fiction.

WOMEN AND MINORITIES

Although the colonial period produced several women writers of note, the revolutionary era did not further the work of women and minorities, despite the many schools, magazines, newspapers, and literary clubs that were springing up. Colonial women such as Anne Bradstreet, Anne Hutchinson, Ann Cotton, and Sarah Kemble Knight exerted consider-

able social and literary influence in spite of primitive conditions and dangers; of the 18 women who came to America on the ship *Mayflower* in 1620, only four survived the first year. When every able-bodied person counted and conditions were fluid, innate talent could find expression. But as cultural institutions became formalized in the new republic, women and minorities gradually were excluded from them.

Phillis Wheatley (c. 1753-1784)

Given the hardships of life in early America, it is ironic that some of the best poetry of the period was written by an exceptional slave woman. The first African-American author of importance in the United States, Phillis Wheatley was born in Africa and brought to Boston, Massachusetts, when she was about seven, where she was purchased by the pious and wealthy tailor John Wheatley to be a companion for his wife. The Wheatleys recognized Phillis's remarkable intelligence and, with the help of their daughter, Mary, Phillis learned to read and write.

Wheatley's poetic themes are religious, and her style, like that of Philip Freneau, is neoclassical. Among her best-known poems are "To S.M., a Young African Painter, on Seeing His Works," a poem of praise and encouragement for another talented black, and a short poem showing her strong religious sensitivity filtered through her experience of Christian conversion. This poem unsettles some contemporary critics — whites because they find it conventional, and blacks because the poem does not protest the immorality of slavery. Yet the work is a sincere expression; it confronts white racism and asserts spiritual equality. Indeed, Wheatley was the first to address such issues confidently in verse, as in "On Being Brought from Africa to America":

'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a Savior too;
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic dye."
Remember, Christians, negroes, black as Cain,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

Other Women Writers

A number of accomplished Revolutionary-era women writers have been rediscovered by feminist scholars. Susanna Rowson (c. 1762-1824) was one of America's first professional novelists. Her seven novels included the best-selling seduction story *Charlotte Temple* (1791). She treats feminist and abolitionist themes and depicts American Indians with respect.

Another long-forgotten novelist was Hannah Foster (1758-1840), whose best-selling novel *The Coquette* (1797) was about a young woman torn between virtue and temptation. Rejected by her sweetheart, a cold man of the church, she is seduced, abandoned, bears a child, and dies alone.

Judith Sargent Murray (1751-1820) published under a man's name to secure serious attention for her works. Mercy Otis Warren (1728-1814) was a poet, historian, dramatist, satirist, and patriot. She held pre-Revolutionary gatherings in her home, attacked the British in her racy plays, and wrote the only contemporary radical history of the American revolution.

Letters between women such as Mercy Otis Warren and Abigail Adams, and letters generally, are important documents of the period. For example, Abigail Adams wrote to her husband, John Adams (later the second president of the United States), in 1776 urging that women's independence be guaranteed in the future U.S. constitution.

1861 - 1870 American civil war which concluded with American union

CHAPTER 3

THE ROMANTIC PERIOD, 1820-1860: ESSAYISTS AND POETS

The Romantic movement, which originated in Germany but quickly spread to England, France, and beyond, reached America around the year 1820, some 20 years after William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge had revolutionized English poetry by publishing *Lyrical Ballads*. In America as in Europe, fresh new vision electrified artistic and intellectual circles. Yet there was an important difference: Romanticism in America coincided with the period of national expansion and the discovery of a distinctive American voice. The solidification of a national identity and the surging idealism and passion of Romanticism nurtured the masterpieces of "the American Renaissance."

Romantic ideas centered around art as inspiration, the spiritual and aesthetic dimension of nature, and metaphors of organic growth. Art, rather than science, Romantics argued, could best express universal truth. The Romantics underscored the importance of expressive art for the individual and society. In his essay "The Poet" (1844), Ralph Waldo Emerson, perhaps the most influential writer of the Romantic era, asserts:

> For all men live by truth, and stand in need of expression. In love, in art, in avarice, in politics, in labor, in games, we study to utter our painful secret. The man is only half himself, the other half is his expression.

The development of the self became a major theme; self-awareness, a primary method. If, according to Romantic theory, self and nature were one, self-awareness was not a selfish dead end but a mode of knowledge opening up the universe. If one's self were one with all humanity, then the individual had a moral duty to reform social inequalities and relieve human suffering. The idea of "self" — which suggested selfishness to earlier generations — was redefined. New compound words with positive meanings emerged: "self-realization," "self-expression," "self-reliance."

self is not selfish

As the unique, subjective self became important, so did the realm of psychology. Exceptional artistic effects and techniques were developed to evoke heightened psychological states. The "sublime" — an effect of beauty in grandeur (for example, a view from a mountaintop) — produced feelings of awe, reverence, vastness, and a power beyond human comprehension.

Romanticism was affirmative and appropriate for most American poets and creative essayists. America's vast mountains, deserts, and tropics embodied the sublime. The Romantic spirit seemed particularly suited to American democracy: It stressed individualism, affirmed the value of the common person, and looked to the inspired imagination for its aesthetic and ethical values. Certainly the New England Transcendentalists — Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and their associates — were inspired to a new optimistic affirmation by the Romantic movement. In New England, Romanticism fell upon fertile soil.

TRANSCENDENTALISM

The Transcendentalist movement was a reaction against 18th-century rationalism and a manifestation of the general humanitarian trend of 19th-century thought. The movement was based on a fundamental belief in the unity of the world and God. The soul of each individual was thought

all creation is essentially united.
over-soul

macrocosm == universe
microcosm == human

human intuition is superior to logic and experience for discovering the truth.

to be identical with the world — a microcosm of the world itself. The doctrine of self-reliance and individualism developed through the belief in the identification of the individual soul with God.

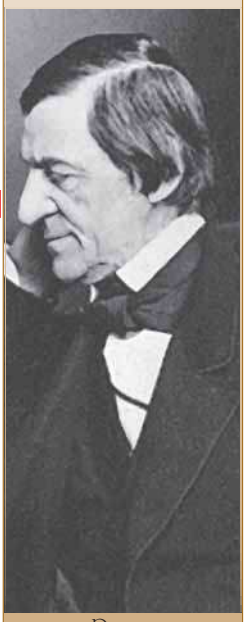
Transcendentalism was intimately connected with Concord, a small New England village 32 kilometers west of Boston. Concord was the first inland settlement of the original Massachusetts Bay Colony. Surrounded by forest, it was and remains a peaceful town close enough to Boston's lectures, bookstores, and colleges to be intensely cultivated, but far enough away to be serene. Concord was the site of the first battle of the American Revolution, and Ralph Waldo Emerson's poem commemorating the battle, "Concord Hymn," has one of the most famous opening stanzas in American literature:

why did Emerson write the poem below?

By the rude bridge that arched
the flood
Their flag to April's breeze
unfurled,
Here once the embattled farmers
stood
And fired the shot heard round
the world.

artist's village

Concord was the first rural artist's colony, and the first place to offer a spiritual and cultural alternative to American materialism. It was a place of high-minded conversation and simple living (Emerson and Henry David Thoreau both had vegetable gardens). Emerson, who moved to Concord in 1834, and Thoreau are most closely associated with the town, but the locale also attracted the novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne, the feminist writer Margaret Fuller, the educator (and father of novelist Louisa May Alcott) Bronson Alcott, and the poet William Ellery Channing. The Transcendental Club was loosely organized in 1836 and included, at various times, Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller, Channing, Bronson Alcott, Orestes Brownson (a leading minister), Theodore Parker (abolitionist and minister), and others.



Ralph Waldo Emerson

Photo courtesy National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

The Transcendentalists published a quarterly magazine, *The Dial*, which lasted four years and was first edited by Margaret Fuller and later by Emerson. Reform efforts engaged them as well as literature. A number of Transcendentalists were abolitionists, and some were involved in experimental utopian communities such as nearby Brook Farm (described in Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*) and Fruitlands.

Unlike many European groups, the Transcendentalists never issued a manifesto. They insisted on individual differences — on the unique viewpoint of the individual. American Transcendental Romantics pushed radical individualism to the extreme. American writers often saw themselves as lonely explorers outside society and convention. The American hero — like Herman Melville's Captain Ahab, or Mark Twain's Huck Finn, or Edgar Allan Poe's Arthur Gordon Pym — typically faced risk, or even certain destruction, in the pursuit of meta-

physical self-discovery. For the Romantic American writer, nothing was a given. Literary and social conventions, far from being helpful, were dangerous. There was tremendous pressure to discover an authentic literary form, content, and voice — all at the same time. It is clear from the many masterpieces produced in the three decades before the U.S. Civil War (1861-65) that American writers rose to the challenge.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the towering figure of his era, had a religious sense of mission. Although many accused him of subverting Christianity, he explained that, for him "to be a good minister, it was necessary to leave the church." The address he delivered in 1838 at his alma mater, the Harvard Divinity School, made him unwelcome at Harvard for 30 years. In it, Emerson accused the church of acting "as if God were dead" and of emphasizing dogma while stifling the spirit.

Emerson's philosophy has been called contradictory, and it is true that he consciously avoided building a logical intellectual system because such a rational system would have negated his Romantic belief in intuition and flexibility. In his essay "Self-Reliance," Emerson remarks: "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." Yet he is remarkably consistent in his call for the birth of American individualism inspired by nature. Most of his major ideas — the need for a new national vision, the use of personal experience, the notion of the cosmic Over-Soul, and the doctrine of compensation — are suggested in his first publication, *Nature* (1836). This essay opens:

> Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs. Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past...? The sun shines today also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.

Emerson loved the aphoristic genius of the 16th-century French essayist Montaigne, and he once told Bronson Alcott that he wanted to write a book like Montaigne's, "full of fun, poetry, business, divinity, philosophy, anecdotes, smut." He complained that Alcott's abstract style omitted "the light that shines on a man's hat, in a child's spoon."

Spiritual vision and practical, aphoristic expression make Emerson exhilarating; one of the Concord Transcendentalists aptly compared listening to him with "going to heaven in a swing." Much of his spiritual insight comes from his readings in Eastern religion, especially Hinduism, Confucianism, and Islamic Sufism. For example, his poem "Brahma" relies on Hindu sources to assert a cosmic order beyond the limited perception of mortals:

> If the red slayer think he slay
> Or the slain think he is slain,
> They know not well the subtle ways
> I keep, and pass, and turn again.
>
> Far or forgot to me is near
> Shadow and sunlight are the same;
> The vanished gods to me appear;
> And one to me are shame and fame.

They reckon ill who leave me out;
When me they fly, I am the wings;
I am the doubter and the doubt,
And I the hymn the Brahmin sings

The strong gods pine for my
abode,
And pine in vain the sacred Seven,
But thou, meek lover of the good!
Find me, and turn thy back on
heaven.

This poem, published in the first number of the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine (1857), confused readers unfamiliar with Brahma, the highest Hindu god, the eternal and infinite soul of the universe. Emerson had this advice for his readers: "Tell them to say Jehovah instead of Brahma."

The British critic Matthew Arnold said the most important writings in English in the 19th century had been Wordsworth's poems and Emerson's essays. A great prose-poet, Emerson influenced a long line of American poets, including Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Wallace Stevens, Hart Crane, and Robert Frost. He is also credited with influencing the philosophies of John Dewey, George Santayana, Friedrich Nietzsche, and William James.

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)

Henry David Thoreau, of French and Scottish descent, was born in Concord and made it his permanent home. From a poor family, like Emerson, he worked his way through Harvard. Throughout his life, he reduced his needs to the simplest level and managed to live on very little money, thus maintaining his independence. In essence, he made living his career. A nonconformist, he attempted to live his life at all times according to his rigorous principles. This attempt was the subject of many of his writings.

self-sufficient life
self-reliance
nonconformist:
rejecting societal norms and
principles
individuality

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Henry David Thoreau
rejected materialistic life style

Photo © The Bettmann Archive

Thoreau's masterpiece, *Walden, or, Life in the Woods* (1854), is the result of two years, two months, and two days (from 1845 to 1847) he spent living in a cabin he built at Walden Pond on property owned by Emerson. In *Walden*, Thoreau consciously shapes this time into one year, and the book is carefully constructed so the seasons are subtly evoked in order. The book also is organized so that the simplest earthly concerns come first (in the section called "Economy," he describes the expenses of building a cabin); by the ending, the book has progressed to meditations on the stars.

introspective work

In *Walden*, Thoreau, a lover of travel books and the author of several, gives us an anti-travel book that paradoxically opens the inner frontier of self-discovery as no American book had up to this time. As deceptively modest as Thoreau's ascetic life, it is no less than a guide to living the classical ideal of the good life. Both poetry and philosophy, this long poetic essay challenges the reader to examine his or her life and live it authentically. The building of the cabin, described in

great detail, is a concrete metaphor for the careful building of a soul. In his journal for January 30, 1852, Thoreau explains his preference for living rooted in one place: "I am afraid to travel much or to famous places, lest it might completely dissipate the mind."

Thoreau's method of retreat and concentration resembles Asian meditation techniques. The resemblance is not accidental: like Emerson and Whitman, he was influenced by Hindu and Buddhist philosophy. His most treasured possession was his library of Asian classics, which he shared with Emerson. His eclectic style draws on Greek and Latin classics and is crystalline, punning, and as richly metaphorical as the English metaphysical writers of the late Renaissance.

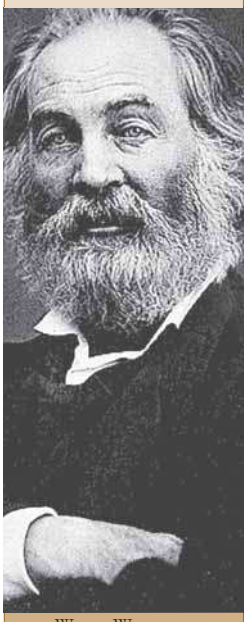
In *Walden*, Thoreau not only tests the theories of Transcendentalism, he re-enacts the collective American experience of the 19th century: living on the frontier. Thoreau felt that his contribution would be to renew a sense of the wilderness in language. His journal has an undated entry from 1851:

> English literature from the days of the minstrels to the Lake Poets, Chaucer and Spenser and Shakespeare and Milton included, breathes no quite fresh and in this sense, wild strain. It is an essentially tame and civilized literature, reflecting Greece and Rome. Her wilderness is a greenwood, her wildman a Robin Hood. There is plenty of genial love of nature in her poets, but not so much of nature herself. Her chronicles inform us when her wild animals, but not the wildman in her, became extinct. There was need of America.

oversoul - divine essence universal spirit connection between God and universe

wilderness (untamed land) vs. civilization

frontier man - Naffy, Bumppo- fiction



WALT WHITMAN

passive resistance: non-violent resistance to the laws or policies that are deemed unjust.

civil disobedience is based on Transcendentalism.

In literature, decorum refers to the principle of appropriate behavior, style, or language within a work to suit its subject, characters, and audience. It is about maintaining harmony and alignment between the content and the context.

Photo courtesy Library of Congress

Walden inspired William Butler Yeats, a passionate Irish nationalist, to write "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," while Thoreau's essay "Civil Disobedience," with its theory of passive resistance based on the moral necessity for the just individual to disobey unjust laws, was an inspiration for Mahatma Gandhi's Indian independence movement and Martin Luther King's struggle for black Americans' civil rights in the 20th century.

Thoreau is the most attractive of the Transcendentalists today because of his ecological consciousness, do-it-yourself independence, ethical commitment to abolitionism, and political theory of civil disobedience and peaceful resistance. His ideas are still fresh, and his incisive poetic style and habit of close observation are still modern.

Walt Whitman (1819-1892)

Born on Long Island, New York, Walt Whitman was a part-time carpenter and man of the people, whose brilliant, innovative work expressed the country's democratic spirit. Whitman was largely self-taught; he left school at the age of

The concept of decorum was especially important in classical and neoclassical literature, where writers adhered to strict guidelines about how different genres should be written. For instance, epic poetry had its own set of decorum, requiring grand themes and noble characters, while satire demanded wit and sharp criticism.

atom: every creature with a universe
soil: nature theme
- you should learn yourelf -" experience",

-- unity of nature, God
this poem.
-- democratic spirit, every soul

--transcendentalism is the source of

11 to go to work, missing the sort of traditional education that made most American authors respectful imitators of the English. His *Leaves of Grass* (1855), which he rewrote and revised throughout his life, contains "Song of Myself," the most stunningly original poem ever written by an American. The enthusiastic praise that Emerson and a few others heaped on this daring volume confirmed Whitman in his poetic vocation, although the book was not a popular success.

A visionary book celebrating all creation, *Leaves of Grass* was inspired largely by Emerson's writings, especially his essay "The Poet," which predicted a robust, open-hearted, universal kind of poet uncannily like Whitman himself. The poem's innovative, unrhymed, free-verse form, open celebration of sexuality, vibrant democratic sensibility, and extreme Romantic assertion that the poet's self was one with the poem, the universe, and the reader permanently altered the course of American poetry.

Leaves of Grass is as vast, energetic, and natural as the American continent; it was the epic generations of American critics had been calling for, although they did not recognize it. Movement ripples through "Song of Myself" like restless music:

romantic self

My ties and ballasts leave me...
I skirt sierras, my palms cover continents
I am afoot with my vision.

The poem bulges with myriad concrete sights and sounds. Whitman's birds are not the conventional "winged spirits" of poetry. His "yellow-crown'd heron comes to the edge of the marsh at night and feeds upon small crabs." Whitman seems to project himself into everything that he sees or imagines. He is mass man, "Voyaging to every port to dicker and adventure, / Hurrying with the modern crowd as eager and fickle as any." But he is equally the suffering individual, "The mother of old, condemn'd for a witch, burnt with dry wood, her children gazing on....I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of the dogs....I am the mash'd fireman with breast-bone broken...."

More than any other writer, Whitman invented the myth of democratic America. "The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States is essentially the greatest poem." When Whitman wrote this, he daringly turned upside down the general opinion that America was too brash and new to be poetic. He invented a timeless America of the free imagination, peopled with pioneering spirits of all nations. D.H. Lawrence, the British novelist and poet, accurately called him the poet of the "open road."

demo cratic natur e of his work.

Whitman's greatness is visible in many of his poems, among them "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," a moving elegy on the death of Abraham Lincoln. Another important work is his long essay "Democratic Vistas" (1871), written during the unrestrained materialism of industrialism's "Gilded Age." In this essay, Whitman justly criticizes America for its "mighty, many-threaded wealth and industry" that mask an underlying "dry and flat Sahara" of soul. He calls for a new kind of literature to revive the American population ("Not the book needs so much to be the complete thing, but the reader of the book does"). Yet ultimately, Whitman's main claim to immortality lies in "Song of Myself." Here he places the Romantic self at the center of the consciousness of the poem:

is associated with creativity, emotion, individualism and freedom.

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me
as good belongs to you.

Romantic self is expressed through art.

-- Gilded age: period of economic growth and poverty.

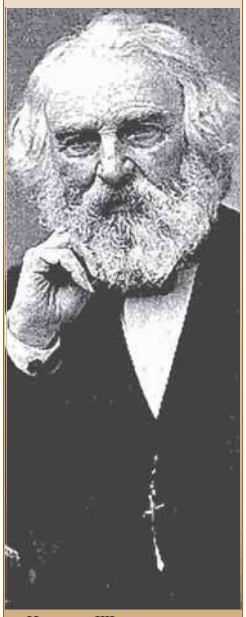
Whitman's voice electrifies even modern readers with his proclamation of the unity and vital force of all creation. He was enormously innovative. From him spring the poem as autobiography, the American Everyman as bard, the reader as creator, and the still-contemporary discovery of "experimental," or organic, form.

THE BRAHMIN POETS

In their time, the Boston Brahmins (as the patrician, Harvard-educated class came to be called) supplied the most respected and genuinely cultivated literary arbiters of the United States. Their lives fitted a pleasant pattern of wealth and leisure directed by the strong New England work ethic and respect for learning.

In an earlier Puritan age, the Boston Brahmins would have been ministers; in the 19th century, they became professors, often at Harvard. Late in life they sometimes became ambassadors or received honorary degrees from European institutions. Most of them travelled or were educated in Europe. They were familiar with the ideas and books of Britain, Germany, and France, and often Italy and Spain. Upper class in background but democratic in sympathy, the Brahmin poets carried their genteel, European-oriented views to every section of the United States, through public lectures at the 3,000 lyceums (centers for public lectures) and in the pages of two influential Boston magazines, the *North American Review* and the *Atlantic Monthly*.

Brahmin: rich, educated, aristocratic
Brahmin poets were based in Boston, New England.
No religion is involved in these kinda poems.
-- Brahmin poets incorporated European world view, literary themes, style into American literature.



HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

Photo courtesy Brown Brothers

The writings of the Brahmin poets fused American and European traditions and sought to create a continuity of shared Atlantic experience. These scholar-poets attempted to educate and elevate the general populace by introducing a European dimension to American literature. Ironically, their overall effect was conservative. By insisting on European things and forms, they retarded the growth of a distinctive American consciousness. Well-meaning men, their conservative backgrounds blinded them to the daring innovativeness of Thoreau, Whitman (whom they refused to meet socially), and Edgar Allan Poe (whom even Emerson regarded as the "jingle man"). They were pillars of what was called the "genteel tradition" that three generations of American realists had to battle. Partly because of their benign but bland influence, it was almost 100 years before the distinctive American genius of Whitman, Melville, Thoreau, and Poe was generally recognized in the United States.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882)

The most important Boston Brahmin poets were Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and James Russell Lowell. Longfellow, professor of modern languages at Harvard, was the best-known American poet of his day. He was responsible for the misty, ahistorical, legendary sense

of the past that merged American and European traditions. He wrote three long narrative poems popularizing native legends in European meters — "Evangeline" (1847), "The Song of Hiawatha" (1855), and "The Courtship of Miles Standish" (1858).

Longfellow also wrote textbooks on modern languages and a travel book entitled *Outre-Mer*, retelling foreign legends and patterned after Washington Irving's *Sketch Book.* Although conventionality, sentimentality, and facile handling mar the long poems, haunting short lyrics like "The Jewish Cemetery at Newport" (1854), "My Lost Youth" (1855), and "The Tide Rises, The Tide Falls" (1880) continue to give pleasure.

James Russell Lowell (1819-1891)

James Russell Lowell, who became professor of modern languages at Harvard after Longfellow retired, is the Matthew Arnold of American literature. He began as a poet but gradually lost his poetic ability, ending as a respected critic and educator. As editor of the *Atlantic* and co-editor of the *North American Review*, Lowell exercised enormous influence. Lowell's *A Fable for Critics* (1848) is a funny and apt appraisal of American writers, as in his comment: "There comes Poe, with his raven, like Barnaby Rudge / Three-fifths of him genius and two-fifths sheer fudge."

Under his wife's influence, Lowell became a liberal reformer, abolitionist, and supporter of women's suffrage and laws ending child labor. His *Biglow Papers, First Series* (1847-48), creates Hosea Biglow, a shrewd but uneducated village poet who argues for reform in dialect poetry. Benjamin Franklin and Phillip Freneau had used intelligent villagers as mouthpieces for social commentary. Lowell writes in the same vein, linking the colonial "character" tradition with the new realism and regionalism based on dialect that flowered in the 1850s and came to fruition in Mark Twain.

Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809-1894)

Oliver Wendell Holmes, a celebrated physician and professor of anatomy and physiology at Harvard, is the hardest of the three well-known Brahmins to categorize because his work is marked by a refreshing versatility. It encompasses collections of humorous essays (for example, *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*, 1858), novels (*Elsie Venner*, 1861), biographies (*Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 1885), and verse that could be sprightly ("The Deacon's Masterpiece, or, The Wonderful One-Hoss Shay"), philosophical ("The Chambered Nautilus"), or fervently patriotic ("Old Ironsides").

Born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the suburb of Boston that is home to Harvard, Holmes was the son of a prominent local minister. His mother was a descendant of the poet Anne Bradstreet. In his time, and more so thereafter, he symbolized wit, intelligence, and charm not as a discoverer or a trailblazer, but rather as an exemplary interpreter of everything from society and language to medicine and human nature.

They have democratic values

TWO REFORMERS

New England sparkled with intellectual energy in the years before the Civil War. Some of the stars that shine more brightly today than the famous constellation of Brahmins were dimmed by poverty or accidents of gender or race in their own time. Modern readers increasingly value the work of abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier and feminist and social reformer Margaret Fuller.

John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892)

John Greenleaf Whittier, the most active poet of the era, had a background very similar to Walt Whitman's. He was born and raised on a modest Quaker farm in Massachusetts, had little formal education, and worked as a journalist. For decades before it became popular, he was an ardent abolitionist. Whittier is respected for

anti-slavery poems such as "Ichabod," and his poetry is sometimes viewed as an early example of regional realism.

Whittier's sharp images, simple constructions, and ballad-like tetrameter couplets have the simple earthy texture of Robert Burns. His best work, the long poem "Snow Bound," vividly recreates the poet's deceased family members and friends as he remembers them from childhood, huddled cozily around the blazing hearth during one of New England's blustering snowstorms. This simple, religious, intensely personal poem, coming after the long nightmare of the Civil War, is an elegy for the dead and a healing hymn. It affirms the eternity of the spirit, the timeless power of love in the memory, and the undiminished beauty of nature, despite violent outer political storms.

Margaret Fuller (1810-1850)

Margaret Fuller, an outstanding essayist, was born and raised in Cambridge, Massachusetts. From a modest financial background, she was educated at home by her father (women were not allowed to attend Harvard) and became a child prodigy in the classics and modern literatures. Her special passion was German Romantic literature, especially Goethe, whom she translated.

The first professional woman journalist of note in America, Fuller wrote influential book reviews and reports on social issues such as the treatment of women prisoners and the insane. Some of these essays were published in her book *Papers on Literature and Art* (1846). A year earlier, she had her most significant book, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. It originally had appeared in the Transcendentalist magazine, *The Dial*, which she edited from 1840 to 1842.

EMILY DICKINSON

Daguerreotype courtesy Harper & Bros.

Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* is the earliest and most American exploration of women's role in society. Often applying democratic and Transcendental principles, Fuller thoughtfully analyzes the numerous subtle causes and evil consequences of sexual discrimination and suggests positive steps to be taken. Many of her ideas are strikingly modern. She stresses the importance of "self-dependence," which women lack because "they are taught to learn their rule from without, not to unfold it from within."

Fuller is finally not a feminist so much as an activist and reformer dedicated to the cause of creative human freedom and dignity for all:

> ...Let us be wise and not impede the soul....Let us have one creative energy....Let it take what form it will, and let us not bind it by the past to man or woman, black or white.

EMILY DICKINSON (1830-1886)

Emily Dickinson is, in a sense, a link between her era and the literary sensitivities of the turn of the century. A radical individualist, she

was born and spent her life in Amherst, Massachusetts, a small Calvinist village. She never married, and she led an unconventional life that was outwardly uneventful but was full of inner intensity. She loved nature and found deep inspiration in the birds, animals, plants, and changing seasons of the New England countryside. conformist

Dickinson spent the latter part of her life as a recluse, due to an extremely sensitive psyche and possibly to make time for writing (for stretches of time she wrote about one poem a day). Her day also included homemaking for her attorney father, a prominent figure in Amherst who became a member of Congress.

Dickinson was not widely read, but knew the Bible, the works of William Shakespeare, and works of classical mythology in great depth. These were her true teachers, for Dickinson was certainly the most solitary literary figure of her time. That this shy, withdrawn village woman, almost unpublished and unknown, created some of the greatest American poetry of the 19th century has fascinated the public since the 1950s, when her poetry was rediscovered.

Dickinson's terse, frequently imagistic style is even more modern and innovative than Whitman's. She never uses two words when one will do, and combines concrete things with abstract ideas in an almost proverbial, compressed style. Her best poems have no fat; many mock current sentimentality, and some are even heretical. She sometimes shows a terrifying existential awareness. Like Poe, she explores the dark and hidden part of the mind, dramatizing death and the grave. Yet she also celebrated simple objects — a flower, a bee. Her poetry exhibits great intelligence and often evokes the agonizing paradox of the limits of the human consciousness trapped in time. She had an excellent sense of humor, and her range of subjects and treatment is amazingly wide. Her poems are generally known by the numbers assigned them in Thomas H. Johnson's standard edition of 1955. They bristle with odd capitalizations and dashes.

A nonconformist, like Thoreau she often reversed meanings of words and phrases and used paradox to great effect. From 435:

Much Madness is divinest sense —
To a discerning Eye —
Much Sense — the starkest Madness —
'Tis the Majority
In this, as All, prevail —
Assent — and you are sane —
Demur — you're straightway dangerous
And handled with a chain —

Her wit shines in the following poem (288), which ridicules ambition and public life:

I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you — Nobody — Too?
Then there's a pair of us?
Don't tell! they'd advertise — you know!
How dreary — to be — Somebody!
How public — like a Frog —
To tell one's name — the livelong June —
To an admiring Bog!

Dickinson's 1,775 poems continue to intrigue critics, who often disagree about them. Some stress her mystical side, some her sensitivity to nature; many note her odd, exotic appeal. One modern critic, R.P. Blackmur, comments that Dickinson's poetry sometimes feels as if "a cat came at us speaking English." Her clean, clear, chiseled poems are some of the most fascinating and challenging in American literature. ■