

The dynamics of continuity and change

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Abstract

The proliferation of American Studies Institutions and conferences through the World stands out as testimony to the increasing interest of multi-national academics in the American "organismic" quiddity in the prospect of an American-tutored, unpolar world. The magnetism of the idea of an American "exceptionalism" that is largely nurtured by both "real" and "mythic" dimensions, emerges as a province whereupon antithetical vision are projected.

The proposed paper looks into the unremitting debate between the "Declinist" and "Renewalist" schools of thought over the real position of the United States in the age of globalism. Using a gamut of documentary materials ranging from statistical evidence, to opinion polls, to surveys, and to findings of some futuristic studies. The paper weighs up the arguments and counter-arguments advanced by either party. Understanding the essence of such a debate will certainly help elucidate the underpinnings that lie behind the rather impressive magnitude American Studies are now enjoying both within United States and outside it.

"Civilisation" and "Literature" have for long, and quite erroneously, been taught as separate entities- indeed as totally alien disciplines. This paper, which draws from the new academic reality now in the making, offers some premises whereby "American Civilisation" and "American literature" can be harmonised and integrated.

Since exhaustiveness in a work of this space and time limitation is beyond reach, this study has opted for selectiveness by highlighting the themes which have proven most salient in American Studies where the two courses-up to now separated- could be rendered complementary.

Without being a manifesto for the contention that the literary text remains valueless unless it mirrors the contextual circumstances behind its creation, it sustains quite unequivocally the premise that Civilisation and literature pay more dividend for the recipient (teacher/student) when taught as a fully integrated entity.

Undeniably, the intellectual climate (i.e trends in sociology, psychology, philosophy, theology, science, and technology) – perhaps more than the socio-economic and political realities- do a good deal to enrich the literary imagination of a nation. This idea is voiced quite eloquently by Matthew Arnold when he argues that " The grand work of literary genius is a work of synthesis " and that "its gift lies in the faculty of being happily inspired by a certain intellectual...atmosphere, by a certain order of ideas.¹ To synthesise is indeed to harmonise socio-economic, political and cultural circumstances with the literary product. Interestingly enough, synthesis can also be the task of which the teacher of American Studies is expected to undertake in order to secure harmony between these hitherto separated disciplines.

American literature is unique in being endowed with the quality of being vitally linked to the issue of national identity. American writers were expected to meet the challenge of producing a literature that was totally independent from colonial antecedents. A national literature would therefore effectively contribute to the boosting of the aspiration for independence from the British Crown and nurture the longing for intellectual self-sufficiency²

The first authentically American literary documents are in fact believed to be Captain John Smith's reports of New-World explorations and

settlements which appeared in 1607. These reports were to do a good deal to motivate the influx of Puritan "pilgrims" who swarmed towards the newly discovered continent with a confident forecast of assured self-fulfillment.³

Smith's reports perhaps stand as evidence that literature represents a force which often contributes to the overall shaping of the civilisation of a Nation. The reverse of this-i.e. where literature is itself shaped by contextual circumstances- can be clearly seen in Ann Bradstreet's poems and in William Bradford's writings. Style, which is expected to be an internal quality in the literary text, can also at times be dictated by the general socio-cultural reality. In these two writers' works, style is visibly marked by the conception of simplicity advocated by the Puritan outlook. Bradford, for example, advised neophytes in the craft of writing to avoid "silken language" and instead report to "admirable plainness (sic)." He declared that he would write the history of the Plymouth Plantation in "a plain style, with singular regard unto the simple truth in all things."⁴

The first seeds of American democratic thought were harnessed by the ideas of some universal theorists, thinkers, and philosophers such as the Englishman John Locke through his "social contract theory " and the Frenchman Baron Montesquieu through his doctrine of "separation of power" together with the schemes of "checks and balances" devised by John Adams and others.⁵ All this offered the American Independence movement the intellectual capital to challenge the British Monarchy's legitimacy to continue to govern the American colonies and to make a serious bid for independence towards the creation of a new sovereign republic.

Equally important was the role played by the pamphleteer Thomas Paine whose *The Rights of Man* did a good deal to awaken American political consciousness towards the ultimate goal of American independence. Through this, he launched a scathing attack on the British monarchical system of government by exposing the drawbacks especially by attacking the principle of hereditary rule.⁶

Ralph Waldo Emerson also articulated the notion of democracy but in a slightly different way. In his *Essay on Politics*, he insists on the concept of "good-will" in politics which he sees as a prerequisite for the establishment of a workable and egalitarian system of government: "government have their origins in the moral identity of man." Taking his

defence of democracy further, he opines that goo-will gives governments a "moral identity" and "separates the individual from all party, and unites him at the same time to the race."⁷ Historical speculation, such as the concept of "Manifest Destiny", constituted a vision for the future which the Puritans helped to establish as one of the major theo-political precepts that would eventually largely shape American thought. Such concept is closely linked to what has been branded as the "American Dream." The teacher of American Studies is to take notice of the fact that understanding concepts of this kind certainly help in the general endeavour to understand the fabric of the "laissez-faire" doctrine.⁸

This doctrine upon which the capitalist system has been built, has marked America's national existence from its very beginnings. A widespread tendency to celebrate this precept would henceforth gain momentum with scores of writers praising the go-ahead spirit and the "rags-to-riches" pattern. Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography amply illustrates this in its idealisation of the self-made man who apotheosises the American dream of upward mobility. This wave was to be strongly sensed in the wake of the Civil War with the rise of what was to be branded as the "gilded Age", and the large-scale rapid transformations it provoked in the American way of life. And this can be caught in Carnegie's flamboyant statement "...the old nations of the earth creep on at a snail's pace; the Republic thunders past with the rush of an express."⁹

But, capitalism has also been appraised differently. Henry David Thoreau exposed other faces of this system offering an alternative to Adam Smith's "supply and demand" theory, it is also a severe indictment of the economics which, to him, thwart man's aspiration towards liberty.¹⁰

*Mark Twain, who himself coined the phrase "Gilded Age", wrote in collaboration with Charles Dudley Warner a novel bearing the name title to satirise the process of get-rich-quick and reveal the political conception from the Grant Administration. Upon Sinclair's The Jungle drew its substance from the hardships inflicted upon the immigrant employees and their families to provide graphic descriptions of what he sees as "the home of oppression and injustice, a nightmare of misery, an inferno of suffering, a human hell, a jungle of wild beasts."*¹¹

And, in turn, once published, it itself served as a piece of evidence to incriminate the unscrupulous meat packers and to strengthen the hands of the famous "Pure Food and Drug Act" and the "Beef Inspection Act" which would revolutionise socio-economic legislation in not more than six months after the appearance of the novel.¹²

Other writers chose to turn towards the writing of utopies in order to invert the situations in which they lived. Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward 2000.1887* is a utopian novel whose hero goes to sleep for more than a century. He wakes up the year 2000 to find the city of Boston an agreeable place, purified of all blemishes which used to plague it in the past. This novel expresses the dissatisfaction of many Americans with the hard conditions of labour, the stifling grip of monopoly, and the widespread political corruption. The influence of this work went far beyond the immediate appreciation of professional readership. It, in fact, played a major role in the formation of nationalist clubs in the 1890's and ultimately in the rise of the highly politically influential "populist Party." Bellamy continued to represent a major force in the reformist movement. His *Equality* (1897) helped to foster "an attitude towards social change" which would inspire politicians well into the Twentieth Century.¹³ The Franklin Roosevelt Administration and its "New Deal" programme was an exception. The capitalism order has in fact continued to be omnipresent in American thought inspiring countless literary figures to look into men's immediate moral and socio-economic preoccupations. Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) is a direct comment on how capitalism damages the nucleus of human relationships and stands at the origin of intense human tragedies.

The "Pilgrims' progress" and Westward expansion are vitally linked to the themes of Democracy and Capitalism. The ambitious believers in the pursuit of happiness embarked upon a conquest of new lands in order to secure better chances for self-realisation. Whilst endeavouring to keep away from the now exhausted old World and to fulfil a life of promising potentialities in the New World, the pioneers- in their march westward- inflicted pernicious damages, namely the extermination and expropriation of the Indian population and the irrational exploitation of the Nation's natural bounty.

The "frontier motif" which represents a significant driving force behind a large part of American literature, has developed to become almost a metaphor in the nation's culture. James Fenimore Cooper in his *The Pioneers* and *the Last of the Mohicans* exposes the ugly side of the

Westward expansion. Highlighting the purely economic motives behind such movement, he pinpoints the social and moral consequences of this expansion on the indigenous community.

The other aspect of the opening of the frontier lies in the aggravation of the plight of the farmer. The influx of the newly invented machinery boosted the pace of agricultural production almost to uncontrollable levels. And what was meant to be a blessing for the farmers turned out to be a curse, driving scores of them to bankruptcy as a result of the colossal surplus of goods that the market could not absorb. Hamlin Garland addressed himself to the plight of the farmers and to what he once called the "mystic quality connected with free land" which "has always allured men into the West" this, to him, was no more than "a myth."¹⁴ Main Travelled Roads emanates from this very context where the farmer is shown as a victim of huge debts which he could never pay off and as a helpless in the face of wild changes.

Wild changes also characterised antebellum American reality where the peculiar institution of slavery collided head-on with the rising spirit of White democracy ; and where the feudal system, on which the plantation economy rested, came to jeopardise the very basics of the democratic spirit upon which the American Republic had been built.

Southern planters ardently defended the plantation system and with it the institution of human bondage which was highly rationalized by "King Cotton". To them, the fall of this system would sharpen competition in the labour market, rendering labourers no more than « wage-slaves". This view in fact became a major premise widely cherished by the proponents of slavery such as Gordon Bennett whose New York Herald went to great lengths in juxtaposing life in the slave quarters with that in the English slums of industrial cities like Liverpool. To him, balance was easily tilted towards American slavery.

The slave lived like a prince. He had his cabin, neat, clean, and weather-proof; he had his own garden patch, over which he was lord paramount; he was well-fed, well-lodged, well-clothed, and rarely overworked; sleek, happy contented, enjoying his many holidays with gusto, he lived to a great age 15.

This argument served as the intellectual capital of a long wave of pro-slavery literary works. The most illustrative example is perhaps William J. O "The Hireling and the Slave."¹⁶ It offers a portrayal of the life of the

wage slave confronted with a hostile environment. Its second part draws a magnificently picturesque image of the life of the "bond-slave" by demonstrating the easy-type of the country life. He then turns to Harriet Beecher Stowe on whom he launches a scathing attack branding her as "a moral scavenger" who "snuffs up pollution with a pious sin.¹⁷

Grayson's attitude was prompted by the threat of the abolitionist movement which he saw as being voiced through publications like Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin. Drawing a good deal from the slave narratives such as Frederick Douglass's Autobiography Stowe's novel hammered into the minds of sceptics the bitter reality of human bondage, offering insights into the day-to-day suffering of the bondsmen and their aspiration to be free. This aspiration is given voice in the different slave cultural forms which were mostly a mixture of European and African cultural norms¹⁸ Songs and folktales which denounced slavery and made folk heroes of the rebellious slaves was part of their multi-faceted resistance to the "peculiar institution." The praise chanted by the Louisiana slaves for their folk hero St. Måla, who rebelled against his master, is an illuminating case in point.¹⁹ By shouting, singing, and preaching, the slaves exposed their despair and discontent with the institution that was behind their dehumanisation sowing unequivocal desire for freedom contrary to the "Sambo" propaganda promulgated by the slavocratic oligarchy. Stopping short of overtly attacking slavery the folk singers intelligently and subtly denounced the status quo.

This type of Afro-American literature, which can be branded as that of social and moral protest, was to be carried beyond the age of slavery and well into the Twentieth Century; it has become almost a manifesto for the Community's disenchantment with the excesses of the White-dominated Establishment and as a cry against "black invisibility".

The teacher of American Studies to the theme of Afro-American protest be political or literary. The "Harlem Renaissance" era heralded an Afro-American cultural flowering, especially with the formation of a non-white audience, stimulating writers of that political marginalisation. Margaret Walker's poem "For my People" (1937) and Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1952) perhaps epitomise both the Afro-Americans' now literary spirit and their wide political awakening which can easily be integrated in the same American Studies course.

The Post-World-War II era, which witnessed a rather unprecedented surge of American interventionism and of American adherence to military alliance also stimulated an impressive proliferation of the socio-political war novels. Such novels were by and large conceived as microcosms of American society where the military institution epitomises supremacy; where the domineering army commander is perceived as the oppressor; and where the soldier - who is brave enough to face up to these paradoxes- deserves the status of a "hero". The struggle, which is inherent within the structure of the American military institution, is portrayed as one between the administrative apparatus and the individual rather than as between the American army and the enemy.

More often than not, the war novel advances the conviction that the oppressive quality of the American military institution does not apply only to exceptional cases like war. It in fact, goes beyond such cases to envelop the whole fabric of American life. War novelists like Ned Calmer highlight this idea by drawing an analogy between the military institution and the business institution. In his *The Strange Land* (1950), he pictures a group of American generals sitting comfortably away from the front and giving orders to helpless soldiers from a safe distance.²⁰ One of the characters likens the situation to that of a "board of directors meeting" and he exclaims: "How much the whole war run like a vast corporate enterprise by groups of men like these sitting in comfortably warm rooms after hearty meals...!"²¹

Other war novelists even go as far as expressing their fear of the real dangers which, they believe, borne from within the American system rather than from without. Norman Mailer in his *The Naked and the Dead* (1951), attributes the qualities of tyranny, cruelty, and lack of sensibility to the General whose expression 'was very close to the complacent and hard appearance of any number of American senators and businessmen.'²²

Disillusionment and loss of faith in the American democratic ideal also quite visibly mark the war novel. The attitude of hearty patriotism proves to have failed to grasp the motives of the soldier who tends to defy the U.S. military institution by shunning away from the war front. This attitude is mainly the outcome of the waning belief in the brotherhood which is traditionally believed to be an essence of the combat spirit. It is also the outcome of the growing conviction that the individual is evaluated only according to what he achieves in the name of his country. This is amply

illustrated by Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* (1961) where the major protagonist- a bombardier soldier- seeks for means to evade combat.

Literature written in protest against war is not limited to the novel as a genre. The 1960's were wars in which poets got involved in political activism. In 1966, for example, Robert Bly and David Ray founded the association "poets Against the War" which campaigned against American policy in Vietnam.²³ Such poets were inspired by "intellectual liberalism" which, as a movement of the 1960's, attributed the understanding of contemporary political issues to purely intellectual bases rather to political manifestations.²⁴

James F. Mersman asserts that post-World War II poetry is mostly Vietnam poetry.²⁵ Most of the poems of this period launched harsh attacks on the corruption of the political institution in the United States. Lyndon Johnson's false promises concerning his Vietnam policy in the Presidential elections of 1964 provoked poets like Robert Duncan to dismiss him as immoral.²⁶ Duncan unhesitatingly branded American political and military leaders as "liars and masters of the lie." Robert Bly even described the U.S. government as a faulty source of information and democracy as a presumption, misleading notion.²⁷

As it draws largely from the general socio-economic, political, and cultural settings of the American reality, this poetry has been branded as "culture poetry."²⁸ As a literary variation, it has further fostered the premise that the courses "Civilisation" and "Literature" are by far of more moment to the teacher/student's intellectual experience when integrated and rendered complementary than when arbitrarily dissociated.

NOTES

1. Matthew Arnold, 'the Function of Criticism at the Present Time, " in Complete prose Works, ed.R.H.Sumper,11 vols.(Ann Arbor : University of michigan press, 1960-1977), III, 261. This idea is also articulated by Karl Shapiro in his in Defense of Ignorance (New York Random house, 1960), 22.
2. See Benjamin J.Spencer, The Quest for Nationality : An American Literary Campaign(Syracuse : Syracuse U.P. , 1957).
3. See B.Smith Captain John Smith : His life and Legend (New York : Norton, 1953)
4. Quoted in Consize Anthology of American Literature ed. George Mc.Michael et al. (New York Macmillan publishing Co.,1985), 10 ; The Works of ann Bradstreet in Prose and Verse (New York ; peter Smith ; re.1932), Kenneth B.Murdock, Literature and Theology in Colonial England (Cambridge : Harvard U.P1949)
5. A.H Kelly and W.A.Harbinson, The American Constitution : Its Origins and Development (New York : W.W.Norton, 1970) ; see also m.J.Heale, The Making of American Policies (London, Longman, 1977).
6. See Edward Foner, Tom Paine and Revolutionary America (New York, 1976).
7. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Essay on Politics, " in The Journals and miscellaneous Notebooks, Ralph Waldo Emerson 3vols., ed.William H.Gilman et al. (Cambridge ; Harvard U.P., 1979)
8. See Susan Previant Lee and peter Passell, A New Economic View of American History (Cambridg, Harvard U.P. , 1979).
9. Quoted in Marcus Cunliffe, The Literature of the United States (New York : penguin books, repr. 1980), 201.

10. See Henry David Thoreau, Walden or Life in the Woods (Washington DC. ; Ladder Edition, repr. 1985).
11. Robert B.Downs, "Afterword" to The Jungle (1905repr., New York ; New American library, 1988),349.
12. C.p.hill, A History of the United States (London ; Edward Arnold Publishers , 1979), 164
13. James Winson, ed and D.L Kirkpatrick,ass.ed.,American Literature to 1900 (New York macmillan reference Books, 1980),41.
14. Jean Holloway, Hamlin Garland : A Biography (Austin : University of Texas Press, 1957),33.
15. Quoted in Vernon Louis Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought 3 vols., The Romantic Revolution vol.2 (New York : Harcourt &Brace, 19271930),104-5.
16. Ibid., 105.
17. Ibid.
18. Joseph E.Holloway, Africanisms in American Culture (Bloomington&indianapolis Indiana U.P., 1990), 25.
19. John Balassingame, The Slave Community : Plantation life in the Antebellum South (New York Oxford U.P., 1972).52.
20. Ned Calmer, The Strange Land (1950), 133.
21. Ibid
22. Norman Mailer, The Naked and the Dead (1951),36.
23. Robert Von Hallberg, American poetry and Culture, 1945-1980 (Cambridge ; Harvard U.P., 1985), 8
24. Ibid.35.
25. See James H.Mersmann, Out of the Vietnam Vortex : Astudy of Poets and Poetry against the War (Lawrence ; Kansas U.P., 1974) ;

see also Waler Lowenfels, ed., Where is vietnam ? (New York ; Doubleday, 1967).

26. Robert Ducan, Bending the Bow (New York : New Directioons, 1968),114.
27. Robert Bly, Sleepers Joining Hands (New York :Harper&Row, 1973),21.
28. Hallberg, American Poetry and Culture,73.