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Introduction

People who write about American poetry sometimes start sounding presidential. Grand narratives and continuities are on offer, in which we might, by taking thought, assume a part. Once that happens, it's easy to regard what we're a part of as exceptional. I shall avoid grand narratives and American exceptionalism in introducing this book.¹

We have certainly had our oracular poets and politicians (Emerson, Whitman, Lincoln, Ginsberg, Pound, King, Rich, et al.). It was inevitable that *possible* Americas should shimmer in mirage before us, when the actual one was so often so sordid. "What to the American slave is the 4th of July?" asked Frederick Douglass in July 1852. "A day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham ... a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages." "Go where you may, search where you will," he says in conclusion, "roam through all the monarchies and despotisms of the old world, travel through South America, search out every abuse, and when you have found the last, lay your facts by the side of the every-day practices of this nation, and you will say with me, that, for revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy, America reigns without a rival."² Yet what better patriot, and prose-poet of democracy, can our nation boast than Douglass? He was a believer. In addressing the citizens of Rochester, Douglass naturally fell into a characteristically American genre: the jeremiad – the "first literary innovation" of the New England colonists and their most "enduring" legacy.³ Nothing could be more American than to say America reigns in shameless hypocrisy without a rival. Into the lists add the poet James Monroe Whitfield in his "America" (1853), William Vaughan Moody in his "Ode in a Time of Hesitation" (1901), Allen Ginsberg in *his* "America" (1955), and Robert Lowell in "For the Union Dead" (1960), to name only four.

Efforts to provide the nation with a proper epic date from its inception. Greece had Homer, and Rome, Virgil. A *Columbiad* was in order. Joel Barlow

provided it, taking pains, in prefacing his 1807 edition, to distinguish it from the *Iliad*, the existence of which he rather regrets (“Its obvious tendency was ... to inculcate the pernicious doctrine of the divine right of kings”), and to distinguish it also from the *Aeneid* (“Virgil wrote and felt like a subject, not like a citizen”).⁴ The effect of such poems as *The Columbiad* was as often to obscure American history from view as to illuminate it; as much to redescribe it tendentiously as to define it, especially with regard to those two wonders of the nineteenth-century white imagination: the “vanishing” Indian (see William Cullen Bryant’s “The Prairies,” “For which the speech of England has no name”) and the contented slave (see Henry Timrod’s “The Cotton Boll”). Barlow’s Columbus is a genius, “prudent and humane” in his treatment of indigenous peoples in the Caribbean (13), and who, had he not been thwarted by Ferdinand II and Queen Isabella, would have laid the groundwork for a benevolent European presence in the Americas, “fostering” the native “tribes” with “paternal toil” (21). So begins the poem, so began the whitewashing. Still, as Kerry Larson makes clear herein, several notable women penned their own epics, as in antiphony, making our “national” poetry more complex.

Grave apprehensions as to whether America had duly distinguished itself from the Old World already infect Barlow’s *Columbiad*, where the institution of slavery is condemned as exotic, a thing to be purged lest the Revolution remain incomplete: “Too much of Europe, here transplanted o’er, / Nursed feudal feelings on your tented shore, / Brought sable serfs from Afric ...” (300). In 1954, at the *Congresso Internacional de Escritores e Encontros Intelectuais*, held in Sao Paulo, Brazil, Robert Frost really said nothing new:

Our basic principle – that of Americans I mean – is somewhat complex. But note: John Adams was the man who decided upon our separation from the Old World, Europe. He imagined, for example, that there scarcely existed between us a degree of kinship. Afterward, Tom Paine noted that the war was not so much a war of separation but rather one for liberty and the inspiration of the French Revolution.... But our world did not revolt struggling for equality; scarcely anything was done in equality’s name. The great realization, the real consequence of the revolution was the separation, and I should be greatly troubled if we remained separate from Europe – the Old World – without demonstrating some originality to the world.⁵

To his credit, and the Declaration of Independence notwithstanding, Frost insisted that, truth be told, “scarcely anything was done in equality’s name” and that “everything disappeared” (as he later remarks, wonderfully) with Tom Paine, whom Theodore Roosevelt called a “filthy little atheist.” That Frost read “The Gift Outright” – an American poem about which there

can be no consensus – at the inauguration of JFK is oddly perfect. Kennedy would lead us into a “New Frontier” and preside over “Camelot,” popular terms of art so diverse in implication (New World, Old World) as to be comically incompatible. But America has never been compatible with itself; just ask Young Goodman Brown or the conspiracy theorists who are his heirs.

Whatever the case, one circumstance distinguishing America from England – it would be hard to overstate its importance – is this: our “colonized” population was internal to the nation: slaves.⁶ Once slavery was abolished, neo-slavery and Jim Crow replaced it; after those went came the mass incarceration of people of color.⁷ “Plain it is to us” – writes DuBois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), in phrases that still ring true, *mutatis mutandis* –

that what the world seeks through desert and wild we have within our threshold, – a stalwart laboring force, suited to the semi-tropics; if, deaf to the voice of the Zeitgeist, we refuse to use and develop these men, we risk poverty and loss. If, on the other hand, seized by the brutal afterthought, we debauch the race thus caught in our talons, selfishly sucking their blood and brains in the future as in the past, what shall save us from national decadence?⁸

Here – even as in *The Columbiad*, in Emerson’s “The American Scholar” (1837) and “The Poet” (1841), and in Whitman’s preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* – is a call to make the New World genuinely new.

Crises to do with slavery and its aftermath track our literary history closely, moving it away from England’s. Out of the Missouri Compromise of 1818–1820, in the deliberations for which Jefferson purported to hear “the [death] knell of the republic,” came Bryant’s “The Ages” (1821).⁹ There the United States figures as the consummation of historical operations begun in ancient Greece, relayed via Rome to Europe and England, and then, under the westering star of empire, to America. “Here the free spirit of mankind at length / Throws its last fetters off.” “Who shall place / A limit to the giant’s unchain’d strength,” Bryant asks, “Or curb his swiftness in the forward race?” “Europe is prey to sterner fates, / And writhes in shackles.” “But thou, my country,” says Bryant in apostrophe to the Era of Good Feelings, “shalt never fall ... seas and stormy air / Are the wide barrier of thy borders, where / Among thy gallant sons that guard thee well, / Thou laugh’st at enemies.” Lincoln, of course, knew better, and wrote the two best prose poems of the nineteenth century, both of them elegies: the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural. He watched as the nation endured the Nullification Crisis of 1832–1833, Nat Turner’s insurrection (1832), and the 1837 murder of abolitionist and journalist Elijah Lovejoy by a pro-slavery mob in Alton, Illinois (they tossed his printing press in the Mississippi). And Lincoln said,

before the Young Men's Lyceum in Springfield (in 1838): "If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide." *We must ourselves be its author and finisher*: Whitman took that in the optative mood, switching out the antecedent to the pronoun (*If creation be our lot ...*).

The Mexican War, and the 1850 Compromise it occasioned, gave us James Russell Lowell's best poetry (in *The Bigelow Papers*); Whitfield's "America"; Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience"; Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*; Melville's *Moby-Dick*; Whittier's "Ichabod!" and Emerson's "Ode, Addressed to William Ellery Channing." Publication of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855) coincided with Bleeding Kansas (a guerilla war sparked by the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854). Melville's *The Confidence Man* appeared on April Fool's Day, three weeks after the delivery of the *Dred Scott* decision by the Taney court in 1857. John Brown's work in Kansas in 1856, and at Harpers Ferry in 1859, gave rise to hundreds of poems. Henry Howard Brownell got it exactly wrong in "The Battle of Charlestown": "Sic Semper' – the drop comes down – / And (woe to the rogues that doubt it!) / There's an end of old John Brown!" Melville got it exactly right in "The Portent": "The cut is on the crown / (Lo, John Brown), / And the stab shall heal no more." What Brown portended (1861–1865) gave us more than can be rightly canvassed, the two great peaks of which, in poetry, are Whitman's *Drum-Taps* (1865) and Melville's *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866) – though I would note here that the better part of Dickinson's poems date from the war years, during which she wrote at a pace unmatched in our fevered history. Enough minor poetry occasioned by the war exists to fill 150 two-column, closely printed pages in Burton Stevenson's 1908 anthology, *Poems of American History* (and Stevenson is highly selective). And then there are the sorrow songs of the slaves themselves, and after those, the blues, which have gotten into our poetry (and into everyone's music). The Great Migration – begun in 1910 in response to the reinstatement of white supremacy in the South, and to the lynching terror – gave us the New Negro Renaissance, though DuBois, again, deserves credit for having made *The Crisis* what it was when Langston Hughes published "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" in its pages in 1921: the first national magazine edited by black folk, with 100,000 subscribers in 1918, eight years after the NAACP launched it.

American poetry and American literature are inconceivable outside this history. But again, we have to do with the continuity of discontinuities: broken lives; a fractured union never really made whole; 750,000 dead, between 1861 and 1865;¹⁰ and tens of thousands murdered (almost all of them black) during the Reconstruction and after its collapse. Poets picked up the pieces as best they could, giving us, from time to time, our democratic vistas.

As for the New South, H. L. Mencken pegged it in “The Sahara of the Bozart” (1920): “Down there a poet is now almost as rare as an oboe-player, a dry-point etcher or a metaphysician. It is, indeed, amazing to contemplate so vast a vacuity.” Mencken smoked out, if he did not dwell upon, the reason: “Georgia is at once the home ... of the Methodist parson turned Savonarola and of the lynching bee,” he writes. “The Leo Frank affair was no isolated phenomenon. It fitted into its frame very snugly.”¹¹ Frank, a Jewish-American factory superintendent, was lynched outside Atlanta on August 17, 1915. Postcard photographs of the hanging (recall Bob Dylan’s lines in “Desolation Row”) were printed and sold. Celebrants arrived from the capital of the New South, snatching at Frank’s garments for souvenirs. Such spectacles were weekly affairs at the South. But “The Sahara of the Bozart,” by Richard Wright’s own account, launched a career that gave us *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938), *Native Son* (1940), *Black Boy* (1945), a fair amount of political poetry (in the 1930s), and, wouldn’t you know it, hundreds of haiku. *Native Son* gave us Gwendolyn Brooks’s *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), a counterpart in poetry to Wright’s portrait of black Chicago, a city that, as Steven Tracy points out in Chapter 20, was very much a part of the New Negro Renaissance.¹²

The white-controlled South yielded itself to terrorism, chicanery, lies, and “plantation myths.” Honest accounting was a dead letter in public hearing; with it went a great deal of honest poetry. The oppression was internalized, made a matter of “conscience,” as any close reader of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* – that troubled document of the post-Reconstruction years – knows. It was the old American problem. John Jay Chapman diagnosed it in his biography of William Lloyd Garrison:

In order to bind the Colonies into a more lasting union, a certain suppression of truth, a certain trampling upon instinct had been resorted to in the Constitution. All the parties to that instrument thoroughly understood the iniquity of slavery and deplored it. All the parties were ashamed of slavery and yet felt obliged to perpetuate it. They wrapped up a twenty years’ protection of the African slave trade in a colorless phrase.... Our fathers did not dare to name it.¹³

An incapacity rightly to see America, and so rightly to speak and write of it, and so rightly to think of it, was part of the American enterprise, when the Constitution was framed and signed, and when the settlement of the disputed election of 1876 brought Federal troops out of Southern cities, leaving the freedmen to the tender mercies of the Democratic Party and its terrorist constabulary.¹⁴

On March 29, 1900, Benjamin Tillman, of South Carolina, stood in the Senate Chamber to speak. The “race question,” he said, has “been the cause

of more sorrow, more misery, more loss of life ... than any and all questions which have confronted the American people from the foundation of the Government to the present day. Out of it grew the war, and after the war came the results of the war, and those results are with us now. The South has this question always with it. It cannot get rid of it. It is there. It is," he affirmed, "like Banquo's ghost, and will not down." Reading this, DuBois might have said: *Give the old boy enough rope and he will lynch even himself*. Here is an example of a man unaware of what his words imply and incapable of rightly "hearing" them. This is dramatic irony of a high order. Or shall we imagine a Tillman *somehow* aware that his allusion to *Macbeth* constitutes the inadvertent confession of a ruthless politician – a politician who, in 1876, our centennial year, abetted the murder of another South Carolina politician, Simon Coker, in order to get his start?

A shrewder evocation of the same unquiet banquet in *Macbeth* comes in *The Souls of Black Folk* (another of our great prose poems), three years after Tillman strutted his hour upon the stage. "And yet," DuBois says, thinking of Banquo's apparition, and quoting Macbeth's horrible importunity, "And yet the swarthy spectre sits in its accustomed place at the Nation's feast. In vain do we cry out to this our vastest social problem: 'Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves / Shall never tremble!' The Nation has not yet found peace in its sins; the freedman has not yet found in freedom his promised land" (6). That Tillman and DuBois should both reimagine America as Macbeth's bloody Scotland is a telling irony, which the weird sisters might well have arranged. One wonders what novelist (and poet) William Dean Howells could possibly have had in mind when he said, in 1886, ten years after the collapse of the Reconstruction, that "the more smiling aspects of life" are "the more American," that "the large, cheerful average of health and success and happy life" is "peculiarly American," and that the human race, in America, "has enjoyed conditions in which most of the ills that have darkened its annals might be averted by honest work and unselfish behavior."¹⁵ A "certain suppression of truth" indeed. Honest work and unselfish behavior hadn't gotten the freedmen anywhere. Lynchings rolled on by the day. Howells's ability to ignore this fact is a characteristic American talent; in it he is perfectly sincere. Out of all this, Paul Laurence Dunbar composed the most exemplary lyric poem to emerge in the late nineteenth century, "We Wear the Mask," collected in *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (New York, 1896) with a preface (of course!) by a smiling Howells: "We wear the mask that grins and lies, / It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes, – / This debt we pay to human guile ..." ¹⁶ America *is* hard to see (as Frost once said): part of it hides in plain sight; the rest is compelled to hide

its face. In his preface, Howells assures the reader, first, that Dunbar is wholly African in descent, without “admixture of white blood,” and that his achievement in poetry without white blood is evidence of “the essential unity of the human race.” But the concession comes with a codicil, altogether of its day (the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision was handed down in 1896): the essential unity of the races notwithstanding, “a precious difference of temperament” exists “between [them] which it would be a great pity ever to lose, and ... this is best preserved and most charmingly suggested by Mr. Dunbar in those pieces of his where he studies the moods and traits of his race in its own accent of our English” – that is, in the dialect poetry, which compasses “the range of the race,” as Howells phrases it, not in the poetry written in standard English. Could there be a finer literary-critical counterpart to the “separate but equal” doctrine established by *Plessy*? So much the better, as Howells later remarks, that Dunbar has a “finely ironical perception of the negro’s limitations, with a tenderness for them which I think so very rare as to be almost quite new.”¹⁷ To which the book makes answer unheard: “With torn and bleeding hearts we smile / And mouth with myriad subtleties” (167).

Another force hampered American poetry in the late nineteenth century. Over the Gilded Age, over the Genteel Era, presided Anthony Comstock and the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. To understand the American modernists, we should consider the climate for the arts in America in the period between 1877 and 1920. Comstock did as much as anyone to make that climate what it was. He and his agents instigated some 3,646 prosecutions against authors, editors and publishers, which led to 2,682 convictions and the destruction of some fifty tons of books. The Comstocks created an atmosphere in which literary editors took few risks. “As a practical editor,” Mencken writes in “Puritanism as a Literary Force” (1917),

I find that the Comstocks, near and far, are oftener in my mind’s eye than my actual patrons. The thing I always have to decide about a manuscript offered for publication, before I give any thought to its artistic merit and suitability, is ... whether some roving Methodist preacher, self-commissioned to keep watch on letters, will read indecency into it. Not a week passes that I do not decline some sound and honest piece of work for no other reason.

He continues in a passage that suggests much about our literary expatriatism: “I have a long list of such things by American authors, well-devised, well-imagined, well-executed, respectable as human documents and as works of art – but never to be printed in mine or any other American magazine.... All of these pieces would go into type at once on the Continent.” A remarkable concession from the most intrepid American editor of the period.¹⁸

South and North a certain muzzling set in, its operations both juridical and psychological. The period spanning 1876–1912 was a bland one for American poetry. Exceptional figures include Dunbar, who worked as through the straits. Stephen Crane published, in the late 1890s, two short books of poetry, *The Black Riders* and *War is Kind*; he was innovative, but the result was thin and inconsequential. The most enduring poet to start his career during the Genteel Era was the owlshy dark Robinson. For that epoch the following anthology, well-described by Louis Untermeyer, was a kind of *summa*, its editor a byword for the practices that thwarted the emergence of a genuinely modern American poetry. Untermeyer writes in *The New Era in American Poetry* (1917):

Turn to Edmund Clarence Stedman's *An American Anthology* (1900) – a stupendous tome of almost nine hundred pages – and see what Stedman considered the fine flower of American poetry. In this gargantuan collection of mediocrity and moralizing, there are perhaps sixty pages of genuine poetry and no more than ten pages of what might be considered genuine American poetry.... And all this as recently as 1901!¹⁹

Frost was twenty-seven in 1901, as was Gertrude Stein. Pound was sixteen, Stevens twenty-two, Eliot thirteen, Hart Crane two, Robinson thirty-two, William Carlos Williams eighteen, and Marianne Moore fourteen. Such was the literary world they inherited. What they and their successors did with it is history.

NOTES

- 1 I haven't pages enough in the present volume to take good measure of Native American poetry once it became a part of American literature. But I prepared this companion aware that a counterpart to it has long been available: *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature*, ed. Joy Porter and Kenneth Roemer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). See Norma C. Wilson's essay therein, "America's Indigenous Poetry" (145–160), a fine introduction I wish I might have printed here. See also Craig Womack, *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
- 2 Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (Rochester: Miller, Orton and Mulligan, 1855): 445.
- 3 Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, anniversary edition (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012): xii.
- 4 Barlow, *The Columbiad* (Philadelphia, 1807): xiii–xix. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number.
- 5 *The Collected Prose of Robert Frost*, ed. Mark Richardson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007): 362.
- 6 English subjugation of Ireland presents rather a different case.

- 7 See Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Anchor, 2009), and Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010).
- 8 *Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1903): 90. Hereafter, in this Introduction, cited parenthetically.
- 9 Jefferson made his often-quoted remark in an April 22, 1820, letter to John Holmes.
- 10 See J. David Hacker, “A Census-Based Count of the Civil War Dead,” *Civil War History* 57.4 (December 2011).
- 11 The essay was collected first in Mencken, *Prejudices: Second Series* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1920): 136–154.
- 12 Wright reviewed *A Street in Bronzeville* for Harper and Brothers (his publisher) and recommended that they issue it.
- 13 Chapman, *William Lloyd Garrison* (New York: Moffat, Yard, and Company, 1913): 14–15.
- 14 See also Michael Gilmore, *The War on Words: Slavery, Race and Free Speech in American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). Remarkably, Gilmore fails even to mention Chapman, notwithstanding that he anticipated arguments made in *The War on Words* by a century.
- 15 Howells, “Dostoyevsky and the More Smiling Aspects of Life,” *Harper’s* 73 (1886): 641–642.
- 16 The poem had first appeared in Dunbar’s 1895 volume, *Majors and Minors* (Toledo, OH: Hadley and Hadley).
- 17 *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1896): xiv, xvii–xviii. Hereafter cited parenthetically.
- 18 Mencken, *A Book of Prefaces* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1917): 277. For more about these matters, in a broader, transatlantic context, see Rachel Potter, *Obscene Modernism: Literary Censorship & Experiment, 1900–1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
- 19 *The New Era in American Poetry* (New York: Henry Holt, 1919): 9.