

# The Formation and Transformation of the American Literary Canon

Šárka Bubíková

*University of Pardubice*

Lately, we frequently read about the so-called canon wars and we may wonder what is this new and apparently revolutionary phenomenon in the field of American literary studies. In my paper, I will attempt to outline the history of the American literary canon and to possibly illustrate the fact that current canonical debates are nothing new but that they are just a new phase in an ongoing historical process.

The first thing that might surprise us about the history of American literary canon is the fact that it is comparatively short. As Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury stress, the pre-existence of America as a speculative *terra incognita* in the European imagination (1997 [1991]: 20), preceding the real discovery of the continent by centuries, makes it difficult to mark the true beginning of American writing, the point when it gains its particular character and its independence from European culture. Despite 'the nationalistic literary manifestos of Emerson and Whitman' (Baldick 1996: 107), American literature was not treated as an independent tradition even at American schools, where American writers, if discussed at all, were intermingled with British authors, 'as if it had never occurred to anyone to separate them' (Parker 1991: 23). There were of course attempts to publish works dealing with American literature exclusively, such as *Lectures on American Literature* (1829) by Samuel Lorenzo Knapp or *Cyclopaedia of American Literature* (1855) 'designed to exhibit and illustrate the products of the pen on American soil' (quoted in Messmer 2000: 196) by George and Everett Duyckincks but generally it is not until the 1890s that textbooks of specifically American writing were published. Besides that, most histories of American literature written during the first half of the nineteenth century, including the two already mentioned works, John Neal's *American Writers* (1824), or Rufus Wilmot Griswold's *Prose Writers of America* (1852), were still written in the so-called 'historia litteraria' tradition (Messmer 2000: 195) which means that they dealt not only with belles lettres but included also political, legal, medical, religious and other kinds of writings.

The textbooks, anthologies and literary histories from the last decades of the nineteenth century reveal their dependence on the European (namely British) tradition even in the aesthetic criteria applied to the selection of texts, which was guided by the so-called 'genteel tradition'. The core of this early canon was constituted by writers such as William Cullen Bryant, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Russell Lowell, John Greenleaf Whittier, and Oliver Wendell Holmes. A good example of such a work is *Library of American Literature* (1888-1890) by Edmund Clarence Stedman and E. M. Hutchinson, or *Outline Sketch of American Literature* (1887) by Henry A. Beer, *Builders of American Literature* (1893) by Francis H. Underwood, *American Writers of Today* (1894) by Henry C. Vedder, or famous *Literary History of America* (1900) by Barrett Wendell.

The discussion about the independence of American literary tradition mainly centered around the question of whether a tradition can be independent when it uses the same language

as another tradition. So even at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were authors doubting the originality and independence of American literature. For example Brander Matthews, professor of English at the Columbia University, declared in 1896 that:

English literature is the record of the thoughts and the feelings and the acts of the great English-speaking race. [...] It is no matter where the authors live, whether in New York or in Montreal, in London, in Melbourne or in Calcutta, what they write in the English language belongs to English literature. It is no matter what the nationality of the author may be, whether he is a citizen of the United States or a subject of the British crown; if he uses the English language he contributes to English literature. (Quoted in Messmer 2000: 194)

Similarly, Henry S. Pancoast considers in his *Introduction to American Literature* (1898) American literature to be a ‘continuation of English literature within the limits of what has become the United States, by people English in their speech, English to a considerable extent by inheritance, and English in the original character of their civilization’ (quoted in Messmer 2000: 199).

This discussion about the autonomy of American literature received great impetus from the acceptance of Taine’s concept of *milieu* and its impact on literary production. Thus, this concept allowed for disregarding the close relationship between the development of a language and the development of a culture by focusing instead on the specifics of the American environment.

A great influence on the formation of the American literary canon as an autonomous tradition was exercised by the long critical career of William Dean Howells who supported many writers—not only those we now consider traditional (such as Henry James, Mark Twain, Stephen Crane or Frank Norris) but also those who were for long considered marginal, such as Hamlin Garland, Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Charles Chestnut, Paul Laurence Dunbar or Abraham Cahan.

The first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed great changes in access to schools and a resulting increase in literacy, as well as shifts in literary taste and interpretative strategies. The new role of the United States as a world power called for a clear concept of national literary tradition, and ‘if such a tradition did not exist, it would have to be invented’ (Baldick 1996: 108). Critics responding to this need—represented by Van Wyck Brooks and supported from across the Atlantic by D. H. Lawrence—rewrote American literary history ‘in the image of democratic nationalism’ (108), centering their canon on Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and Mark Twain. Another important canonical movement of the period, New Criticism, approached literature from a different angle and, by focusing on formal aspects of texts, led to exclusion of works with explicit social and didactic contents (such as novels by Harriet Beecher Stowe, William Dean Howells, Theodore Dreiser, etc.). The ‘crowning work’ in which the national concerns for American specifics were combined with New Critics’ formal strategies was F. O. Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance* (1941), a work which defined the core of the American literary canon for several decades.

Russell Reising in his seminal work *The Unusable Past* (1986) characterizes three major paradigm revolutions with respect to the American canon—the genteel tradition of the turn of the century, the social and political approach to canon defined by critics such as Granville Hicks and V. L. Parrington and thirdly, the Agrarian/New Critics approach. We think that the post World War II developmental dynamics resulted in yet another change of paradigm. The gradual disclaiming of the monolithical cultural tradition together with the movement for human and civil rights had a direct impact on the literary canon. The tendency

resulting from these movements is usually called ‘the opening up of the canon’, and is characterized by acknowledging minor traditions within American writing as integral and valuable parts of the American literary heritage. Another important contribution to the process of redefining the American literary canon came from the feminist literary scholarship, and focused on two main projects—reclaiming the literary reputations of forgotten female writers, and bringing into question the validity of interpretative strategies and criteria which had led to their exclusion from literary tradition in the first place.

As the ‘open canon’ of American literature now includes works by a great number of minority writers, the ‘open history’ of American literature now also includes the history of the formation of Afro-American literature from the first attempts to claim manhood for the black race by the means of the written word (for example, anthologies by Arthur Lanusse and William G. Allen), through the emergence of slave narrative as a unique Afro-American genre (as with Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass), the flourishing of Afro-American literature in the post-World-War II period accompanied by official appraisal (for example, the Nobel Prize for Toni Morrison), and the inclusion of such literature into general histories and anthologies of American literature and the accompanying development of a theory and aesthetics of Afro-American literature (for example, Henry Louis Gates, Jr.). The history of the struggle for the acknowledgment of a Native American literary tradition is, in part, the history of the broadening of the term ‘literature’. Until Romantic interest in folk oral traditions, literature meant the culture of a written word; and, thus, to consider Native American oral traditions as literature would have been a contradiction in terms. Apart from the mainly Romantic notion of the ‘natural poetics’ of oral traditions which needed only to be textualized, another important contribution to the understanding of Native American literature came from the works of anthropologists. The first attempts to include Native American poetry into the literary canon dates back to the 1920s (for example, Mary Austin’s anthology *The American Rhythm*), a time when Radicals called for cultural pluralism and Imagists attacked the traditional poetic canon still dominated by Longfellow. The appreciation of the narrative genres of Native American literature came still later and, again, originated among anthropologists in their studies of the structure of myths. However, here lay the roots of a frequently criticized approach to Native American literature which elevates texts into the canon not according to their literary, but cultural, values. As Hershel Parker points out, native myths about the origins of the world, for example, should not be included in literary anthologies on the same rationale that neither similar myths from *Genesis* would have to be included. Thus, the inclusion and understanding of Native American literary traditions within the American canon seems to be the most complex area of contention, as these traditions come from cultures with different attitudes to the written word; and, so, the traditional texts which do receive acknowledgment are frequently not literary texts (such as myths), and the modern texts which are appraised are usually written by Native Americans but in the European-American tradition (such as the novels of N. Scott Momaday and Louis Erdrich).

In the last decades, also a struggle for acceptance of Chicano/Chicana literature into the American literary canon has taken place, although this literary tradition existed north of the Rio Grande River even before the establishment of the United States; so, some literary critics and historians (for example, N. Kanellas) claim that works by the Hispanic authors of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century should be considered the beginning proper of American literature. However, the main obstacle for general acknowledgment of Hispanic literature was the fact that, until quite recently, it was written in Spanish and rooted in different traditions than the Anglo-Saxon.

Acknowledgment of the diversity of American literary tradition is a natural consequence of the Postmodern paradigm. Since American experience has always been characterized by its cultural plurality, this fact needs to be reflected also in its literary canon.

If one accepts *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* (1990) as a good example of the inclusive, 'open' approach to American literature, one can delineate the potential advantages of this, as well as possible dangers connected with a deconstruction of the traditional American literary canon. Placing the beginning of American literature in the Native American oral heritage may begin to pave the way for seeing America not as an exceptional country, but as an ordinary one among others: but, it still needs to overcome its tendency to canonize works because of their ethnic origin instead of canonizing ethnic works because of their literary value.

A deep reflection on the processes of canon formation and transformation should help to overcome the fashionable temptation to see literature only in terms of race and gender; and yet, to help rid itself of the tendency to interpret America as a projection of a purely European imagination.

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