

*Literature and the American Tradition\**

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WHEN AMERICAN LITERATURE first received grudging recognition in universities, it had to be justified through often extravagantly forced comparison with English movements and models. More recently critics have distinguished direct imitation from naturalization of imported influence. Just such an awareness of American adaptability, the development of cultural independence through accommodation of foreign symbolizations to a different human environment, has impressed Leon Howard. And the experience of lecturing abroad in diverse countries has reinforced his desire to formulate succinctly the national character of American accomplishments.

He explains how their will to survive in a new land forced New England Puritans to compromise their concept of a closed society. Even the damned proved good citizens and artisans, on whom the elect depended. Later, migrant Romantic attitudes underwent similar transformation. The drudgery of wilderness chores, the dangers of primitive life, modified Wordsworthian rapport with nature. For commemoration of pasts already repudiated, dreams of an alabaster future were substituted. And excessive leveling made responsible citizens fear mobocracy, not tyrant kings.

HAD THE STUDY multiplied such examples of accommodation, however commonplace, until through comparative analyses of several national literatures mutations were discovered, unaccountable through inheritance and therefore genuinely native, a fresh estimate of American growth might have been achieved. Instead, the emphasis in Howard's book is allowed to shift from discrimina-

\* Leon Howard, *Literature and the American Tradition* (New York: Doubleday, 1960).

tion of cultural origins to measurement of the degree to which intuition, reason, or empiricism dominated any single author or period. Far from being precise, such attempts become increasingly incoherent, partly because few American writers were philosophers trained in tidy definition (Jonathan Edwards and Henry James conceivably are exceptions); but also because Howard's own use of his terms is far from systematic. Where the mind of a Lovejoy is required, to compress lucidly the complex and momentous, a kind of congenial carelessness is offered instead. "Empiricism" is expected to describe accurately and adequately the self-reliance of Cooper's Natty Bumppo, Poe's marketing acuteness, Hawthorne's skepticism, plus a multitude of other prudent faculties, in spite of myth-making propensities, developments from allegorical precept—the usual congeries of the competitive and complementary. Thoreau is classified with the intuitionists; Twain is less realistic than Howells. . . . So untrue is such criticism-by-categories to the actual interdependence, regardless of order or proportioning, among the creative mind's powers of observation, insight, logical extrapolation, and verification through fictitious construction, that the very continuum which Howard has been trying to prove emergent collapses long before the "unsettled" twentieth century is reached.

In his final paragraphs, the author claims to have been tracing a tradition undiscoverable in his book: "belief in the creative power of the human spirit to endure and prevail and to exist in the meanest and queerest of individuals." The patent irrelevance of this summation, however disarmingly everlasting its yea, merely epitomizes a persistent critical failure caused perhaps by a preference for illustration, rather than exploration, contrary to the example set by makers of literature themselves.

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