Voices of a Nation

*In the 19th century, American writers struggled to discover who they were and who we are*



Christian Schussele, "Washington Irving and his Literary Friends at Sunnyside" (1864)/Wikimedia Commons

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Henry David Thoreau once famously said that Americans lead lives of quiet desperation, that flitting circumstances cause our distraction and that, despite Christianity and candles, we sit in the dark. There, in a nutshell, is the conundrum of the 19th-century American writer who frowned on the country’s aesthetic lassitude, its getting and spending, its fundamental malaise—and yet wanted, above all, to create a language commensurate with a luminous, moral vision of national freedom; what could be more American?

“The mind of this country, taught to aim at low objects, eats upon itself,” Ralph Waldo Emerson, America’s spiritual cheerleader, complained. The writer, the American writer, would be different. “We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands,” Emerson continued, “we will speak our own minds.” But though Emerson’s call for self-reliance is one of the common­places of American literature, not until I began systematically assembling material for my anthology of 19th-century American writers on writing did I understand how these authors, who frequently meditated on craft or style, also anguished about what self-reliance, to them as writers, truly meant.

Partly this is because they were trying to become masters in their own house; and by the end of the 19th century, they mostly were. Think of their range: the oratory of Emerson or of Sojourner Truth; the lyrical prose of jingle-man Edgar Allan Poe; the vatic humor of Herman Melville; the cool ironies of Henry Adams; the wit of Fanny Fern; the buzzing epithets of William James; the dialect verse of Frances Harper. Yet though distinctive, these writers each had to figure out what self-reliance might mean for them individually—and in terms of a larger, national vocation.

One solution was recourse to the spread-eagle: “The spirit of Literature and the spirit of Democracy are one,” claimed John O’Sullivan, editor of the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, a political and literary journal. In 1842 O’Sullivan and his contemporaries were still reeling from the insult hurled at them more than 20 years earlier, in 1820, when the clever British clergyman Sydney Smith taunted Americans by asking, with a sneer, “In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book?” As it happens, American authors were asking the very same thing.

What’s more, what *is*an American book, they wanted to know. Typically conscientious and New Englandy, as Emily Dickinson would say, the Reverend William Ellery Channing rushed into the breech to define what this new national literature might be. “We mean the expression of a nation’s mind in writing,” Channing said. But what is a nation’s mind? A mind distinctly and  uniquely identified as American? One democratic American mind for all?  The language of Channing’s entreaty, like that of Emerson’s rousing “American Scholar,” which it anticipates, is romantic, heuristic, hopelessly nationalistic: “In going down into the secrets of his own mind,” says Emerson of the true American scholar, “he has descended into the secrets of all minds.”

In other words, Americans need only think for themselves to realize that, within themselves, they contained all the divinity, power, creativity, and imagination needed for any task, particularly writing. “If the single man plant himself indomitably on his instincts, and there abide, the huge world will come round to him. Patience, —patience,” Emerson counseled with confidence. But his advice hints yet again at the rift in American 19th-century culture between the artist who creates and the selfsame public that sporadically and indifferently consumes those creations.

That the American mind cannot live on thought alone was made amply clear in Stephen Longfellow’s advice to his son Henry, who confided to his father that he wanted to write for his career. “There is not wealth enough in this country to afford encouragement & patronage to merely literary men,” the father replied. “And as you have not had the fortune (I will not say whether good or ill) to be born rich, you must adopt a profession which will afford you a subsistence as well as reputation.”

Money. American writers might sometimes have a room of their own—think of Thoreau’s cabin in the woods—but money was a problem, sometimes even an obsession. (Savvy creature that he was, Thoreau knew this and slyly called *Walden*’s first chapter “Economy.”) Making the writer’s life even more difficult was the absence of international copyright. Novelist John De Forest, who coined the nagging phrase “the great American novel”—nagging, because no one seemed able to write it—explained in 1868 that this great American novel “will not soon be wrought unless more talent can be enlisted in the work, and we are sure that this sufficient talent can hardly be obtained without the encouragement of an international copyright.” In other words, without such a copyright, American publishers could, and did, effectively pirate British books, selling them far more cheaply than books written by Americans, who expected and needed to be paid. It wasn’t until 1891 that Congress enacted the International Copyright Act.

But as students of America know, Nature (real and imagined) quickly became the preferred refuge of the American artist, nature untrammeled and free and thus set apart from the new nation’s materialistic passions. Nature is America’s back yard, vast and seemingly limitless, and if the 19th century is about anything, it’s about making that back yard—those long and lovely democratic vistas of Walt Whitman—even bigger. “I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America,” poet Charles Olson would later say. Much of 19th-century American writing is the bravura literature of exploration. Consider the great historians William H. Prescott and Francis Parkman, who interpret Cortéz and the Oregon trail, or Elisha Kent Kane, explorer of the Arctic and seeker of an open Polar sea, or later John Muir, who reads glaciers, avalanches, and torrents, which he calls “the pens with which Nature produces written characters most like our own.”

For these writers, Nature also comes to suggest the down-to-earth, the real, the concrete, and the unpretentious, which are presumably the most American. “The haughty soul of man has always scorned simplicity,” declared a roundly democratic Lydia Maria Child. Of course the shunning of affectation for the sake of effect is itself an affectation—and central to an American argot. “I do not pretend to write English—that is, I do not pretend to write what the English themselves call English,” John Neal exclaimed. “I do not, and I hope to God . . . that I never shall write what is now worshipped under the name of classical English.” Instead, as Emerson succinctly put it, “My book should smell of pines.”

Many American writers (though not all) advocated what New England­ers had called the “plain style” and aspired to direct address and a clarity of language, although a few early American writers culled their style from the cadence of the religious sermon or the colloquialism of the southwestern humorists and the lingo of the frontier. These writers were looking for an idiom elastic enough to represent each singular individual and yet, somehow, to include and symbolize all Americans. “What I assume you shall assume,” Whitman sings. “For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.” In 1867 Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a Northern white man, published in *The Atlantic Monthly* the “Negro Spirituals” he had scrupulously transcribed while serving in South Carolina as the leader of the first federally authorized regiment of black troops. “The present writer has been a faithful student of the Scottish ballads, and had always envied Sir Walter the delight of tracing them out amid their own heather,” Higginson wrote. “It was a strange enjoyment, therefore, to be suddenly brought into the midst of a kindred world.” Citing James Russell Lowell’s cracker-barrel *Biglow Papers* as Yankee precedent, in case he needed one, Higginson sought to extend the language to include “kindred” worlds, for at stake was the question yet again not just of how to “write” American but of who might be one.

Both real and a pose—*vide*Emily Dickinson, who said candor was her only wile—sincerity is the hallmark of this style. In myriad introductions to slave narratives where, like Harriet Jacobs, the author contends that she wrote her book herself, the author not only authenticates the veracity of her individual experience but offers something more broadly democratic: what I assume, you can assume; what I write, even as a former slave, you can feel. Oddly, though, it is Ulysses S. Grant’s clearheaded and deeply moving *Personal Memoirs* that best epitomizes the plain style. “I have entered upon the task with the sincere desire to avoid doing injustice to any one,” Grant said with typical understatement. He wrote those memoirs when ill and far down on his luck, which brings us back to Stephen Longfellow’s advice to his son, those books that smell of pine notwithstanding. One writes to write; but one needs to pay the bills.

The imposture of sincerity animates some of our most unusual fictional characters—and their creators. Consider Natty Bumppo, a rough-and-ready and fundamentally anti-intellectual American wandering in an almost primeval New World forest as concocted by James Fenimore Cooper, America’s first commercial author, who spent a good deal of energy figuring out how to compete (often litigiously) in the not very fictitious literary marketplace. In this, Cooper anticipates Mark Twain. Capitalist par excellence, Twain invents the youthful hero Huck Finn, who, dismayed by civilized life, seeks freedom in the form of an unbounded territory out west. Thoreau, too: at Walden Pond he casts his line into the invisible, plumbing the depths of spirit and solitude, though he marches back to the village of Concord from his woodsy hut so his mother can wash his clothes. And the consumptive, impoverished war correspondent Henry Timrod celebrates in his ode “Ethnogenesis” the fantasy of a new Confederate nation founded on nature—that is, cotton, or the “snow of Southern summers”—which will somehow rescue the agrarian South from the fanatical, industrial, moneygrubbing North.

“What I feel most moved to write, that is banned,—it will not pay,” Melville complained to Nathaniel Hawthorne. “Yet, altogether, write the *other*way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches.” The conflict between the wish to escape an increasingly bourgeois American life in nature and the necessity to make ends meet inevitably demoralized many 19th-century writers. Knocking against an increasingly conventional market­place that demanded the predictable (or those cheap British imports), Louisiana novelist George Washington Cable balked. The artist “shall stand before kings,” he said; “he shall not stand before Sunday-school library committees.” Louisa May Alcott, who churned out successful popular stories, sharply satirized the public’s demand for them. Referring to Jo March, the writer-heroine of *Little Women*, Alcott notes that Jo’s “story was as full of desperation and despair as her limited acquaintance with those uncomfortable emotions enabled her to make it, and having located it in Lisbon, she wound up with an earthquake, as a striking and appropriate denouement.” Earthquakes didn’t happen in sunny America.

But these writers, whatever their means, wished to influence public opinion; they were, in effect, crusaders. Literature is born of imagination, yes, but of ethics too. Partly, this is the Puritan heritage of conscience, reflected equally in Thoreau’s imperatives about writing and in those pronouncements of authors stylistically unlike him, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Helen Hunt Jackson, and Charles Chesnutt, who considered writing an endeavor steeped in high moral purpose. What better way to assuage guilt, particularly if you were a genteel scribbling woman who wasn’t supposed to write at all? “It may be truly said that I write with my heart’s blood,” said Stowe, author of the wildly popular and influential *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. “This crushing of my own heart might enable me to work out some great good to others.” And the hopeful novelist Chesnutt, the son of free blacks, noted when he launched his career, that “the object of my writings would be not so much the elevation of the colored people as the elevation of the whites.”

At no time was the issue of moral purpose more pressing than in the years following the bloody Civil War, whose massive casualties included the idealism (and messianism) of the early part of the century. Yet as the nation redefined itself, as democracy became theoretically more inclusive, up sprang the so-called realistic writing of Ambrose Bierce and Hamlin Garland and Bret Harte and even Henry James, authors committed to what the influential William Dean Howells demanded over and over: “to do the best he can with the material he has chosen, to make the truest possible picture of life.” Realism was America’s new signature.

Actually, realism hearkens back to the nitty-gritty of the captivity or the slave narrative—Hannah Duston braining her Indian captors, the beating of Frederick Douglass’s aunt Hester—and certainly gimlet-eyed women writing before the war, like Fanny Fern or Rebecca Harding Davis, with her “trespass vision” (Tillie Olsen’s term), were nothing if not realists. Nonetheless, after the war, a generation of writer for whom Howells was a powerful spokesperson yearned to write of what they saw, however small or everyday, as they saw it. Nothing more. That was democracy. But ironically realism also springs from the increasingly Romantic notion that art evolves according to its own being, with the artist merely its medium or conduit. As John Burroughs pointed out, “Readers fancy that in the works of Thoreau or Jefferies some new charm or quality of nature is disclosed, that something hidden in field or wood is brought to light. They do not see that what they are in love with is the mind or spirit of the writer himself. Thoreau does not interpret nature, but nature interprets him.”

And the work itself? “Each novel has a law of its own, which it seems to create for itself,” said Howells, who did not always practice what he preached. “Almost from the beginning it has its peculiar temperament and quality, and if you happen to be writing that novel you feel that you must respect its law.”  Naturally, there were unbelievers such as sentimentalists committed to moral uplift like the popular F. Marion Crawford or “naturalists” like Frank Norris who labeled realism a buttoned-up, uncrafted approach to literature in which mechanical fidelity to life’s trivia was its sole raison d’être.

Rejecting this paint-by-number realism, which undermined their devotion to and sense of their craft, writers like Kate Chopin, with a touch of annoyance, explained that picturesque subjects were not automatically the stuff of art. “I have been taken to spots supposed to be alive with local color. I have been introduced to excruciating characters with frank permission to use them as I liked, but never, in any single instance, has such material been of the slightest service.” Chopin, Sarah Orne Jewett, Stephen Crane, Cable, Sidney Lanier, and Lafcadio Hearn concern themselves with not just imagination but its material counterpart, form. “I have had to rewrite pages 50 times,” Hearn told a friend. “It is like a groping for something you know is inside the stuff, but the exact shape of which you don’t know.” And when advising a friend, Jewett astutely remarked, “I think we must know what good work is, before we can do good work of our own, and so I say, study work that the best judges have called good and see *why*it is good; whether it is, in that particular story, the reticence or the bravery of speech, the power of suggestion that is in it, or the absolute clearness and finality of revelation; whether it sets you thinking, or whether it makes you see a landscape with a live human figure living its life in the foreground.”

“Preaching is fatal to art in literature,” said Crane. To this group, even Thoreau begins to seem didactic. “Truth,” Crane noted, was being true to one’s own point of view. “I have tried to observe closely, and to set down what I have seen in the simplest and most concise way.” Sincerity now meant devotion to craft. It also stood for integrity of vision—the ability to take what one sees and shape it into an expressive, formal whole. When Henry James advised Edith Wharton to “*do New York*,” he was not talking about Zolaesque or photographic realism; rather he was telling her to write what she knew as boldly, as capaciously, as creatively as she could.

After Emerson and Thoreau, probably no one in America meditated on the act of writing more than James, whose letters and essays and novels take composition as their perpetual subject. And no one comes closer to healing the divide between craft and mission, or to what was bandied about as “the novel with a purpose,” than James. To him, personal vision always trumps subject matter, whether one wrote about American forests or the peoples who lived there, whether about runaway slaves or huddled masses. “Therefore, if I should certainly say to a novice, ‘Write from experience, and experience only,’” he counseled in his essay “The Art of Fiction.” “I should feel that this was a rather tantalizing monition if I were not careful immediately to add, ‘Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!’”

*It goes without saying that you will not write a good novel unless you possess the sense of reality; but it will be difficult to give you a recipe for calling that sense into being. Humanity is immense and reality has a myriad forms; the most one can affirm is that some of the flowers of fiction have the odour of it, and others have not; as for telling you in advance how your nosegay should be composed, that is another affair. It is equally excellent and inconclusive to say that one must write from experience; to our supposititious aspirant such a declaration might savour of mockery. What kind of experience is intended, and where does it begin and end? Experience is never limited and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web, of the finest silken threads, suspended in the chamber of consciousness and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative—much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius—it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations.*

“How slowly our literature grows up!” Hawthorne had groaned in 1845. Could he have read James, who read Hawthorne with such delight and profit, he might have felt that an American literature was, indeed, growing up and perhaps growing wise to boot. Though naysayers accused James of denuding American literature, rendering it bloodlessly detached from the everyday, he actually broadened its definition much as his friend Howells and their friend Crane had tried to do, by making it alive to the possibilities of that mind on whom nothing is lost—not the struggle for survival, not the need for time and money—and which in the end makes literature a place far broader than the borders of nation.

As for the marketplace, it endured and trimmed the sales of far too many, including James, and many a writer groaned and groused about its philistine stranglehold. But it could not curtail or stop an artist, not for very long. True, Hearn left the country, as did Crane and Harold Frederic and James and Constance Fenimore Woolson and Wharton. Nothing becomes America like the leaving of it; and, said the American wit Thomas Gold Appleton, “Good Americans, when they die, go to Paris.” Then again, American literature had always spoken the language of exploration.

Though *realism*itself became an embattled term in the second half of the 19th century, just as *transcendentalism* had before it, these are categories that, on final examination, have little relevance when we barge into the writer’s study to listen to him or her talk about the act of getting words onto paper. Writers write. They search all day for a word, pull out their hair, rewrite what they’d laboriously composed the night before; they find and lose editors, publishers, money, loved ones, and sleep. And if we eavesdropped on all their conversations about leaky pens and elusive readers, we would have a shelf of volumes.

All anthologies are quirky, and my anthology of 19th-century American writers will be no exception. But as I read through these authors and pondered what they were saying, I realized that they were really talking to one another, and I wanted to include that conversation. What we discover when we look at American writers are women and men imbued with a generosity of spirit; they read one another, support one another, admire and criticize and urge one another forward. The greatest instance of this is perhaps Melville’s dedication of *Moby-Dick* to Hawthorne, but there are other examples: the literary friendships of Emerson and Margaret Fuller, Jewett and Willa Cather, Jackson and Dickinson, James and Wharton, Frederic and Crane, Twain and Grant, John Chapman and Emerson, and Howells and just about everyone.

This generosity of spirit extends to us. American literature in the 19th century speaks in the 21st in terms we have not yet abandoned for all our sophistication, technology, globalism, and panache. Like it or not, and despite their many varied voices, American writers cannot untangle those knotty, annoying questions about what it means to be an American, to feel American, to compose American, whether for oneself or for others, whether in America or not. Doubtless for all our sakes, it’s better that they cannot.

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