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PART 1

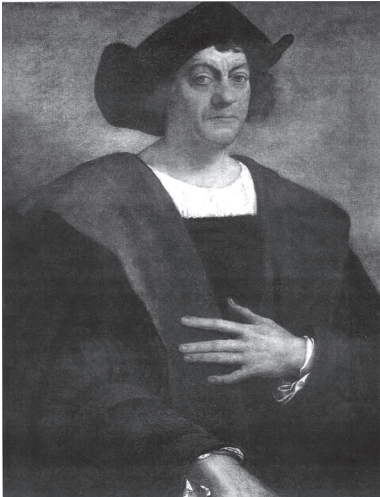
EARLY AMERICAN LITERATURE: COLONIAL PERIOD TO 1815

Chapter 1

The Literature of the New World

DISCOVERIES OF AMERICA

“America,” as a broader term, refers to “the New World” which is inclusive of North and South Americas. But “American literature” in this book means largely the body of literature created in the United States, which is in North America. While the founding of the United States as a nation may be traced to the American Revolution in the 18th century, its multi-cultural heritages are rooted in the various explorations of the New World that had started several hundred years before the American Revolution. Thus, we begin our narrative of American literary history by first looking at exploration writings related to the *discoveries* of America.



The picture of Christopher Columbus.

Who discovered America? The credit is often attributed to Christopher Columbus. The moment when the new continent was “discovered” is even determined by some historians at the exact hour of 2:00 A.M., Friday, October 12, 1492 when Columbus recorded how he spotted the land. Yet Columbus’ s reputation as *the* discoverer of the New World is controversial. It is quite ironic that Columbus who “discovered” America in fact thought that he had reached Asia. As it might be of interest to Chinese readers, Columbus’ s “discovery” is not unrelated to the larger European

myth of China. When Columbus set sail from Spain on August 3, 1492, he was driven by the desire to find a convenient sea passage to the Orient, or, more specifically, a passage to the land of Kublai Khan as Marco Polo had described it in his 13th century travelogues. He was so convinced that he had reached the land of the great Khan that in his four voyages between 1492 and 1502, he interpreted everything he saw according to his pre-established view of what Asia or Asians should look like.

Another noteworthy discoverer of America as *a distinctly new region* is the Florentine navigator Amerigo Vespucci. It is because of Vespucci's story that the New World was named "America." Vespucci sailed to Brazil in 1501 under the Portuguese flag and he noted: "we arrived at a new land which ... we observed to be a continent." In 1503 his book *Mundus Novus* (*The New World*) was printed and was more widely circulated than anything written by Columbus. A German geographer, Martin Waldseemuller, found Vespucci's work when he was preparing a new edition of the world's map. It was Waldseemuller who decided that the new land should be named after its finder: Amerigo. On his 1507 world map, this German geographer marked the new territory—what he called the "fourth part" of the world following Europe, Africa, and Asia—as "America." Vespucci as an explorer is also controversial in that he fabricated the tale that he had made a 1497 voyage during which he found the Southern American continent. It is quite possible that he made up the story to beat Columbus as the first discoverer.



Amerigo Vespucci, Italian merchant, explorer and cartographer.

At any rate, it was Vespucci's writings and Waldseemuller's map that made Europeans aware of the "fourth part" of the world. The Europeans then understood that Columbus's description of the New World as a string of Asian islands was quite misleading. At any rate, to the New World called "America" European settlers came in incessant waves.

As long as we are considering the "origin" of America, we cannot forget that those who first discovered America were not Europeans but the indigenous

people. According to one theory, the indigenous people, some 12, 000 years ago, were Asian hunters who crossed the land-bridge that is now called the Bering Strait to America. But at least some of the indigenous people must have *always* lived in America, as we might surmise from their creation narratives. Since much of the European exploration literature is inspired and informed by the Judeo-Christian account of creation in the Bible, it is important that we compare their narratives to the creation narratives from the indigenous people.

It is necessary to begin the history of American literature with these (and other) discoveries for the following reasons.

First, the discoveries are so diverse in their cultural and historical situations that we are reminded that what is “American” culture—a question which is repeatedly raised and debated—cannot be defined from the perspective of a single culture. Cultural pluralism in the United States today is rooted in the diverse origins of America and it grew more vigorous with succeeding waves of immigrants from different continents of the world. There is, of course, the position that insofar as English has become the predominant American language, American literature must be defined in terms of its British sources of origin. We counter-argue that American English is not solely British in its origin or substance. American English consists of many cultural strains; it evolved as people of different national and cultural backgrounds came to America, discovered America in their own terms, and added their own linguistic and cultural attributes to it.

Even if we only focused on the European colonial experiences in the New World, we would still question the conventional view that Captain John Smith (1580—1631), an Englishman, was the first *American* writer. We know that at least the Spanish had preceded the English in arriving in the New World and in creating a New World literature. By the mid-18th century, Spain’s influence extended to all areas west of Mississippi and south of Oregon as well as Florida and territories south of Tennessee. The French influence was evident in the Northeast, the Midwest and throughout Canada. The Dutch were also involved in the colonization of the New World. They controlled Manhattan Island along with the fertile Hudson Valley.¹

1 The Dutch cultural presence as part of the American life is evident in many American texts. In Scott Fitzgerald’s novel *The Great Gatsby* (1925), for instance, Nick Carraway the narrator finally links the tragic story of Gatsby with the American dream by reflecting on “Dutch sailors’ eyes” on “a fresh, green breast of the New World.”

Another reason why we begin American literary history with discoveries is that discovery or exploration has become part of the American spirit. Thoreau, a 19th century writer, said in *The Maine Woods* that America is *always* in the process of being discovered. After the Age of Exploration, many American writers continued the spirit of discovery in that they pursued a world that is always new and exciting. Thus, the discovery of America denotes not only the exploration of the New World but also the exploration of the new in America.

NATIVE AMERICAN ORAL LITERATURE

The term “Indian” (“los Indios”) is, in fact, a misnomer. Columbus used the word at first to refer to the peoples he encountered in the Bahamas in October 1492, because, until his death, Columbus thought he had discovered Asia. Ethnographers today call the peoples who were in North America before the European settlement “Native Americans,” although many Native Americans today call themselves “American Indians.”

The native peoples had traditions antedating Christianity and European social organizations. Two highly developed civilizations—the Maya and the Aztec—had once been great empires. By the time the Spanish arrived in America, the Maya civilization, already in the decline, had invented systems of writing, mathematics and a calendar. The majority of native cultures were sustained through the oral tradition. Historical records indicate that the destruction of the ancient civilizations in the hands of the Spanish was severe; that natives in areas taken over by the English, French and Dutch fared somewhat better although the changes imposed on them by the European settlers were no less traumatic.

When Native Americans first became aware of the European civilization through their “contact” (a neutralized word employed sometimes by historians) with the Europeans, they had a population of more than ten million and they represented a wide variety of cultures with different ancestries, different structures for distributing authority and responsibility, and different economic systems. These tribal cultures spoke more than 350 languages and they had developed genre systems such as speech, chant, and song. Today, two million of their descendants live in the United States, and in regions north of America, and approximately 200 languages are still in use. For students

of American literature, some knowledge of the native oral literature is indispensable in that this oral tradition is the very foundation of native written literature in the 20th century.

Since most Native American stories were *orally* passed on, these tales then have a *performative* dimension: they are not only “told,” they are also “sung” as chants and songs, and dramatized in ritual dances. Ritual dances are often based on tribal tales that tell of places far off or of geographical locations only the tribal audience would know. Many of these are cycle stories in connection with tribal life experiences such as planting, hunting and fishing, or birth, puberty and death. Of particular significance to scholars of culture and literature are those stories that explain the natives’ view of the origin of the world and those that relate historical events crucial to Native Americans.

Origin stories are those dramatizing tribal interpretations of how the earth originated or of how people established relationships with plants, animals and the cosmos. A characteristic origin story is the Earth-Diver story that typically tells of a great flood which once covered the earth. Earth beings who floated on the huge expanse of water made several attempts, in vain, to find land until an animal brought mud from under the water to create, magically, the earth. The Earth-Diver story resembles the biblical tale of Noah and the flood. A major difference between them is that the “creator” in the Earth-Diver story takes the animal form.

Another type of origin story is the emergence story common among the agricultural tribes. This often tells of how people originated in the womb of the Earth Mother and were then called out into the light by their Sun Father. Life typically evolved from darkness to light, from chaos to order, from vague forms to distinct human forms. Among the Zuni Indians who live in the southwest of the United States, the story concerning the “First Beginning” starts like this:

“Yes, indeed. In this world there was no one at all. Always the sun came up; always he went in. No one in the morning gave him sacred meal; no one gave him prayer sticks; it was very lonely. He said to his two children, the Ahaiyute the War God Hero Twins: “You will go into the fourth womb. Your fathers, your mothers, all the society priests, ... you will bring out yonder into the light of your Sun Father.”

Yet another type of origin story explains the world as an emanation of the creator's thoughts. Often, this creator is a Thought Woman whose thoughts become words and things. Sometimes, the creator seems to be a male. As in the origin myth of the Zuni who live in New Mexico: the (male) creator "thought outward in space, whereby mists of increase, steams potent of growth, were evolved and up-lifted." That thinking is sacred and precedes words is the reason why silence, if indicating the presence of thoughts, is believed by Native Americans to be a sign of the sacred.

Trickster tales are humorous tales featuring trickster characters. Trickster figures are people in the form of animals such as Coyote, Raven, Blue Jay, Mink, or Rabbit. One might also say that they are half animal and half human. A good Chinese analogy for the "trickster" would be Sun Wukong the Monkey King, although the Chinese do not use the word "trickster" and the Monkey only bears some resemblance to the Indian trickster.

In the oral traditions of Native Americans, trickster characters often exist on the margins of the social world; they travel; they are resourceful and clever; in one moment they are human and in the next they are in the form of animal; they make attempts to violate established rules and customs or engage in socially unacceptable acts; they also have an enormous appetite for food and sex. In some tales, a trickster's cleverness is emphasized: he would lure ducks into dancing blindfold so that he can kill them; or he would pretend to be lame in order to win a race. But the same trickster would be a buffoon on other occasions. Whatever a trickster does, his tale is always the expression of humor.

Historical narratives are diverse in kinds. Some of them are tribal records of historical events. Many other narratives feature legendary figures that move in recognizable historical settings. In such tales, the line between an actual event and tribal belief is blurred. Of this vast historical literature, many stories recount European colonization from the perspective of Native Americans. For instance, to the Yuchis, a tribe in the Southeast, white people emerged from the sea foam of the Atlantic. The Yuchi tale "Creation of the Whites" reveals so much of the emotions associated with the first encounters between the Europeans and the natives.

It was out upon the ocean. Some sea-foam formed against a big

log floating there. Then a person emerged from the sea-foam and crawled upon the log. He was seen sitting there. Another person crawled up, on the other side of the log. It was a woman. They were whites. Soon the Indians saw them, and at first thought that they were sea-gulls, and they said among themselves, "Are they not white people?" Then they made a boat and went to look at the strangers more closely.

Later on the whites were seen in their house-boat. Then they disappeared.

In about a year they returned, and there were a great many of them. The Indians talked to them but they could not understand each other. Then the whites left.

But they came back in another year with a great many ships. They approached the Indians and asked if they could come ashore. They said, "Yes." So the whites landed, but they seem to be afraid to walk much on the water. They went away again over the sea.

This time they were gone a shorter time; only three months passed and they came again. They had a box with them and asked the Indians for some earth to fill it. It was given to them as they desired. The first time they asked they had a square box, and when that was filled they brought a big shallow box. They filled this one too. Earth was put in them and when they were carried aboard the ship the white men planted seed in them and many things were raised. After they had taken away the shallow box, the whites came back and told the Indians that their land was very strong and fertile. So they asked the Indians to give them a portion of it so that they might live on it. The Indians agreed to do it, the whites came to the shore, and they have lived there ever since.

This Yuchi tale offers a meaningful contrast to the writings by European explorers.

EUROPEAN EXPLORATION WRITINGS

Christopher Columbus (1451—1506)

Columbus was convinced that the world was smaller than it is and he could reach the Orient, land of Kublai Khan (China in the Yuan Dynasty), if he sailed west. With this conviction, he made four voyages between 1492 and 1502. During his first voyage, on October 12, 1492, he “discovered” the island of San Salvador, and after that, the Bahamas, Cuba and Haiti. He did not see the riches and splendor as described by Marco Polo but he returned to Spain feeling confident that he had reached the East. The first voyage was recorded in a journal now lost but it is partially survived in an abstract by Bartolome de Las Casas.

On his second voyage that began in September 1493, Columbus discovered Puerto Rico, Jamaica, other parts of Cuba, the Virgin Islands, but he still could not find the fabulous cities and the riches in Marco Polo’s narratives. There is no journal or abstract of this voyage. But there is an informal account by an aristocratic friend who accompanied him. From this account, we can see how quickly the relationship between the Europeans and the natives deteriorated.

On the third voyage, which departed in May 1498, he set foot on the South American continent but thought it was an island. So he left for Cuba which he believed was the gateway to the land of the Great Khan. On this voyage, Columbus formed a strange theory. He believed that the earth was not round but was pear-shaped and that he had reached its highest point. The high point is the original Garden of Eden, the “Terrestrial Paradise.”

Because he could not successfully establish a colony, Columbus was relieved of his governorship and was called back to Spain. During his last voyage, Columbus was alone, ill and lost in a cove off Jamaica. He dreamed of “Cathay” (the literary name for “China”) and heard voices from heaven. He returned to Spain disillusioned. Till his death he thought he had reached Asia.

Captain John Smith (1580—1631)

The name of Captain John Smith is now associated with the English expedition that founded the Jamestown¹ colony in 1607. Since his writings were the first ones appearing in English in the New World, those who believe Americanness should be defined more in connection with British cultural sources suggest that American literature should begin with Captain Smith. According to the argument I have offered at the outset, this might be too narrow a cultural view.

Smith was born into a moderately prosperous family at Lincolnshire, England. He went to a grammar school² and received a good education. At the age of 15, he was enlisted to fight in the Netherlands. For ten years, his military career brought him to Hungary, France, Germany, Spain, Austria, Rumania, Turkey and North Africa. Loving adventures, he joined the expedition which founded the Jamestown colony when he returned from the military.

While at Jamestown, Smith made several exploratory trips into the interior. During one of the trips, he was captured by Chesapeake Indians who brought him to their king, Powhatan. Many years later, Smith wrote in his book that he was condemned to death but was rescued by Powhatan's beautiful and kind-hearted daughter, Pochahontas. Today Pochahontas is such a loveable persona to the Americans that she is made into a powerful heroine in an animated Hollywood movie. Positive as the image of Pochahontas may seem, one should not forget the profound irony here: Captain John Smith, in the recount of his captivity, described her as being beautiful and kind only because she was made to be the contrast of the "barbarian" and "savage" Indians, Pochahontas's own people. At any rate, John Smith's account of his captivity and his narrow escape has become one of the best-known passages of European-Indian encounter in exploration literature. The account is included in *The General Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer*

1 Jamestown is in East Virginia, the first permanent English settlement in North America.

2 There used to be a double-track system of education in England. Children were asked to take an exam at 11 and the exam then divided them into two groups: those who would attend a grammar school and those who would attend vocational schools. So children placed in a grammar school were socially more privileged because they did not have to take the vocational track of education and become workers.

Isles (1624). The narrative is presented in the third person and often includes official reports written by others.

Smith's stay in Jamestown lasted till the fall of 1609 when he realized that he had failed to bring effective management to the colony. In 1614, he came back to North America and this time he made trips to the coast of New England. He promoted his idea of colonizing New England in two of his books, *A Description of New England* (1614) and *Advertisements for the Unexperienced Planters of New England, or Anywhere* (1631). He also wrote an autobiography, *The True Travels, Adventure, and Observations of Captain John Smith* (1630).