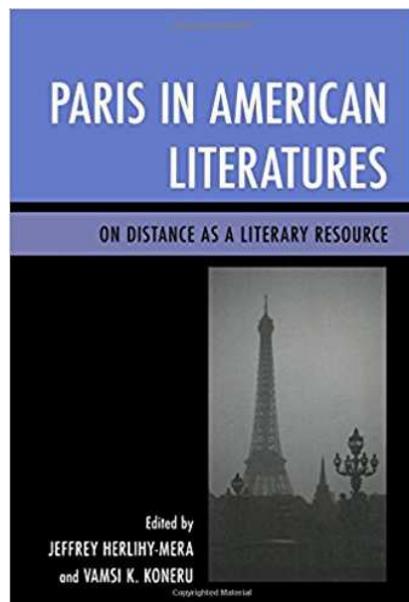




## Paris in American Literatures

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### Recensione di Arianna Miazzo\*

*Paris in American Literatures* is an essay exploring the notion of space and its influence on literature, prominently focusing on the use of distance as a literary resource. It consists of nine chapters, each one concerning a different author and his relationship to the city of Paris. The French capital has always been a shelter for artists, but its particular background during the 1920s made it the headquarter of the Lost Generation as well. The term is used to define those who came of age during the First World War. Members of this group were Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry Miller, Sherwood Anderson, Ezra Pound and many others, most of whom gathered around the figure of Gertrude Stein, proud resident of Rue de Fleurus 27. Stein spent her mature life in Paris, becoming a true icon in the artistic milieu. She was the main early backer of Picasso and she helped Matisse burst into the upper class, where his paintings granted him a wealthy life. Gertrude Stein and her partner Alice B. Toklas were the patrons and collectors of a large group of artists and writers.

The study of the notion of space as a literary device is relatively new, and previous studies treated it but superficially for what concerns the idea of “migration” and of “cultural exile.” Peculiar to these essays, is the attention to the unusual situation of the Americans in Paris, to be considered neither as “immigrants” nor as tourists on a long vacation in Europe. These essays have two main objectives: examining the use of a foreign scene as a literary artifice, and engaging new perspectives on the expatriate writing process. Most of the authors considered in the essays spent a considerable amount of time in Paris, or even their entire lives. That stay changed them deeply from a human and artistic point of view. Even though distance from home caused a sharp feeling of patriotism, some of these expatriated Americans – like Saul Bellow – found it easier to write about their homeland while being abroad. Most of them inevitably made comparisons between America and France. None of them had a neutral relationship to Paris, a city loved and hated, but never ignored. The creative power of this city worked independently from the feelings it generated.

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Even if each chapter has a different focus, persistent refrains are the idea of freedom and the controversial concept of deracination (a deracinated person being in general terms isolated, subtracted from a native or customary culture).

Freedom is expressed in many ways. France had a more liberal legislation than America, better opportunities for women (especially within the artistic domain), and an audience which was more receptive to the shock of the new. Paris in particular had a cosmopolitan element unavailable to any other city at the time. Moreover, the opinion of the Parisian society would never impact on American authors as much as their homeland. Totally detached from the local social hierarchy, foreigners benefitted from an even broader freedom. “You could be as wild as you wanted to in Paris if you were a foreigner” (Remerowski 2006).

Although the positive effects of freedom were numerous, many of those who expatriated suffered from a wide range of issues, alcoholism being the most prominent and infiltrating each social class. It was not the only trouble. Many writers of the Lost Generation were addicted to drugs, or had to face mental disorders such as depression, bipolarity, and more. More subtly, being away from one’s homeland often caused a loss of values and of emotional balance.

The positive effects were perceived in a more acute way by certain writers, like for instance women and homosexual authors. In France there were no laws regulating sodomy. As McAlmon noticed, homosexuals could live in Paris without hiding. This French law allowed him to act more freely, with a positive impact on his writing. Another writer who benefitted from this freedom was Edith Wharton, raised in Europe, who eventually proclaimed that Paris was in her blood and managed to integrate perfectly in the Parisian society.

Edith Warton is a perfect example of deracination: even if the statement “Je l’ai dans mon sang!” (Wharton 1907) suggests a French belonging, the writer never renounced her American nationality. Emerson, Sherwood Anderson, and Bellow among others, felt the same way.

Emerson specifically investigated the idea of the traveler/observer, a theme crucial to his discourse. This peculiar feeling of the observer, deriving from the status of foreigner, indicates a double perspective: on the one hand being an outsider is convenient, on the other it causes an acute discomfort, since the expatriate aims at participating in the public life of the city as insider. Emerson himself had a difficult relationship with Paris and was unable to conciliate his being American with local costumes. While he suffered from this exclusion, other writers managed to transform it in a creative drive.

Sherwood Anderson never wanted to be accepted as a French and worked on his American traits, in order to make them a relevant part of his personality. As many others, he ‘used’ Paris as a personal activator for his writing. He also seized the opportunity to reconcile with his homeland. “Paris seemed always to offer [...] that something he needed.” (Resetarits 2013, 16) is a quotation that perfectly explains the way in which some writers ‘exploited’ the Parisian background. Even if the romantic component was present, none of the Americans who had to see Paris went there with an innocent attitude.

Henry Miller was probably the only one who had moved to Paris to become a writer. What Miller wanted was not to exploit the best aspects of the city, yet to accept it as a whole, an attitude that led him to reject the other Americans in Paris. “Miller was not only a Francophile, but he was determined to become French himself,” (Masuga 2013, 88) and that differentiated him from his contemporaries. His contempt for the lifestyle of the other Americans in Paris came from a deeply felt envy and indicated a willingness to recreate a new Paris out of his imagination, a city where squalor and beauty could go hand in hand.

The deracination in the case of Miller is quite unusual: unwilling to join any group of his time, he remained alone with his uprooting experience, proving to be able to become everything he wanted to. “Migration as an experience often involves the loss of control [...]” (Herlihy-Mera and Koneru 2013, 151) and always enriches the one who undertakes it. However, while the mind is exposed to an intense stress, anchoring at the safe idea of homeland is inevitable. Miller proved that in certain situations it was illuminating even to lose control, while other authors preferred the comforting but desolating shelter of their homeland.



Saul Bellow was one of them. Coming to Paris because of his wife's decision, he never accepted the city, fighting with a fierce cultural opposition until the end of his stay. Betrayed by his own expectations, "he found the romantic myth of Paris false and therefore hypocritical [...]" (Crowe 2013, 107). Moreover, he felt rejected by the locals, who were opposing to the "American occupation" in progress; the increasing fame of Hemingway and Fitzgerald led many Americans to Paris, engendering a huge amount of tourism. Even if the American presence was a source of money, a lot of residents were frustrated. They thought that tourists would ruin the city by being disrespectful towards the landscape. Unsatisfied by every aspect of Paris, Bellow found himself disappointed: the hostility he felt proved to be his strength, allowing him to unveil new writing sources. Being an outlander once again (his family had to migrate to Canada from Russia) he freed himself from his own emotional restrictions.

In conclusion, what was Paris? A place where to indulge in vices, by exceeding and avoiding moral judgment? Or a captivating place, inspiring creativity and an aesthetic sense? Paris was all of this, and surely more. The city proved to be a receptor of talent, "an 'accommodating' lover, whose affectionate embrace allowed [...] a gradual easing, eventually marking the passage from paralysis to mobility [...]" (Fargione 2013, 131). A generous lover, but even a demanding one: freedom has a price and what Paris claimed from its devotees was a constant, modernist restlessness, similar to that which Joyce identified as the main quality of his ideal reader.

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