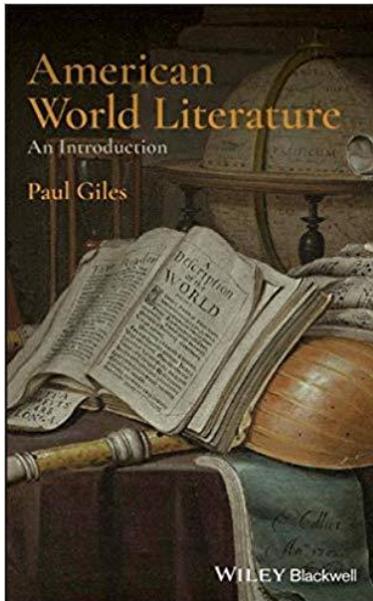




American World Literature: An Introduction

Paul Giles

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Review by Serena Demichelis*

This volume can be defined in different ways: an introduction, as stated in the subtitle, in that it offers some basic information but invites further reading on the part of anyone interested in the elaboration of certain sub-topics; a historical overview on some of the main aspects of US cultural and literary path; a collection of essays specific of several issues concerning American literature. The book opens with an introductory chapter presenting the theory behind the definition of American world literature. In the author's own words, "each of these three terms – 'American,' 'World,' and 'Literature' – is a contested rather than a naturalized entity" (5), which could change in accordance with the times and people involved: despite America being the name of a continent and not of a nation, for instance, the label has generally been used to identify the United States. This has been particularly evident even in the early 2000s, when the wish to expand the idea of American literature to those works produced in the southern hemisphere has "met with resistance from US government funding agencies" (6). The word "literature" itself has undeniably been stretched outside its commonplace meaning of "creative production" to encompass different genres, such as political writing and journalism. As far as the concept of World is concerned, it has posed problems in that the United States have been going through phases mirroring different attitudes, from Thomas Jefferson's "ocean of fire" to the early 21st century stress on globalization. In short, American literature has always been in the middle of what Giles defines as a "dialectical double strand" regarding the issue of "whether American literature should be seen as specifically belonging to the nation or to a wider world" (4), something that characterized the debate circa its institutionalization as an academic subject as well. The introduction is followed by four chapters on various periods of American literature, marking four important moments in the cultural history of the country: Early American literature, the Nineteenth century, Modernism, and Post-Modernism.

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Chapter 2, “Early American Literature in the World,” is concerned with the works produced before the 1800s, within a sociopolitical reality moving from the status of colonial appendix to one of autonomy. This has inevitably shaped criticism into a perspective that looked either at the dialogue with English culture (in a way which generally put American works in a subordinate position) or at the nationalistic effort that accompanied the path towards independence, leaving aside many aspects as much proper of the American early literary dimension. Among these, Giles quotes the multilingual factor (some of the colonizers were not, after all, English speakers), and the presence of Native, African, and women writers – all identified as major components of the panorama by David Shields in his address to the Society of Early Americanists (2001). Giles devotes the following paragraphs to additional issues left out by mainstream criticism – e.g. the classicism of early American writings, which identified cultural and literary roots outside of British tradition. The third chapter (“National/Global – the Framing of Nineteenth-Century American Literature”) elaborates further on some concepts presented in the previous pages and introduces new problems in the scenario. First of all, Giles reiterates the issue of the nationalistic agenda behind some of the writings of this period. This attitude clashed and still clashes with aspects such as Native history and culture, which were generally ignored in the shaping of a new American consciousness. Yet, the 19th century was also the time when slave narratives started circulating, thus opening to authors who (as much as early colonizers) were not autochthonous. They represented a dimension of “alterity” which often reached the reader in a format enhanced by the tropes of Gothicism. The horrors of slavery were transformed into a form of morbid entertainment – thus, the idea that protagonists and writers were not “American” in the common sense of the word became of secondary importance.

Chapter four (“The Worlds of American Modernism”) focuses on a period, or rather sensibility, which made of internationalism one of its main tenets: Modernism. One most important factor described by Giles in dealing with American Modernism is the role played by the Great War. To many writers, the conflict represented an opportunity to break with tradition and thus inevitably progress. Moreover, a certain degree of privileged detachment was possible because of the US late entry in the war and of the fact that no campaign was actually fought on American soil. It was a time of contrast as well and some authors, Theodor Dreiser to name one, starkly opposed to the idea of taking part to the conflict. Despite the opposition of voices, one could claim, as Giles does, that it was the Great War which “invented the idea of ‘American literature’, not only in an institutional sense [...], but also conceptually” (141). The effects of the war on the literary panorama are many: the shade of the fight loomed on works for the decade to follow as well, with authors and their characters recovering from the trauma of combat; historical events brought intellectuals to define themselves as a “generation” for the first time; increased nationalism led to increased concern with American literature in academic curricula. In the 1920s a more conservative attitude was adopted on the larger scale, and the idea of an autonomous American culture developed further in more than one sector, as witnessed by the appearance of *The American Language* by H.L. Mencken, which “sought to valorize idiomatic American expressions as a particular (and not necessarily inferior) version of English” (148 – 149). Chapter four is the longest in the volume and possibly the richest in content: the last paragraph focuses on the analysis of two traditional case studies for American literature scholars and students, *The Great Gatsby* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, both treated as epitomes of the “American spirit” since their publication. By putting a stress on the novels’ features in terms of regionalism (both), transnationalism (*Gatsby*) and post-humanism (*Grapes of Wrath*), Giles addresses a central point in the study of American world literature: the reality of a “national body” characterized by “organic homology” is “putative” (157) and can be disclaimed by its contact with the external world as much as with its inner dimension. The tension deriving from such contact posits American literature as an actually composite entity. The last chapter (“Postmodernism, Globalization and US Literary Culture”) analyzes globalization in Postmodern literature. Giles chooses to understand the idea of “Postmodern” in historical terms (and not in formalist ones [171]), simply taking the label to identify the time span from the 1960s onwards. The relationship between globalization and (American) world literature is not as straightforward as it might seem: it is true that American literature opened up to the world concomitantly with the country’s new status as a global power in the Cold War scenario, but things are not as simple as that. After the Berlin wall fell in 1989, in fact, there was a widespread perception that limitations deriving from political and geographical boundaries were going to cease in favor of the free circulation of men and ideas; English started to be used as a lingua franca in more and more contexts and people saw opportunities that seemed unavailable just a few months before. And yet, there was a dark side as well: first of all, by implying discontinuity, globalization brought with it a good amount of fear and anxiety which reverberated on the works of writers of this generation. Furthermore, “global” was not and is not synonymous with “equal”: in the eyes of many, the United States may as well have been opening up, but still maintaining the idea of playing the main role on the world’s scene. In this regard, Slavoj Žižek



“linked the new-found popularity of multiculturalism in institutional terms to the rise of multinational capitalism” and thus stressed how the idea of diversity and inclusiveness that was being promoted was actually “commodified” (178). The chapter closes with a discussion of Jamaica Kincaid, Toni Morrison, and Maxine Hong Kingston, three authors who embody the difficulties and intricacies of defining American (world) literature (196). Their narratives are thus introduced as representative of an “otherness” which has found a way of being in the American context – although not free of ambiguity, as anticipated by the paragraph’s title, “Disorientation and Reorientation: Kincaid, Morrison, Kingston.”

In conclusion, this volume represents a useful tool to understand the *problem* underlying the idea of American world literature: the word “problem”, however, is not to be meant as *obstacle*, but as *composite situation*. What criticism should do – and what this book tries to do – is elaborating a new procedure, a method to disentangle a complex entity into simpler units which enhance comprehension without giving anything for granted. The pursue of such aim makes *American World Literature* a particularly rich book, ideal for students with a background in literature and scholars wishing to keep an account of the major historical and critical issues of the subject at hand.