

SO BIG DEAL, HEMINGWAY

By Michael Ventura

July 24, 2014

If you write a lot, sometimes you publish a sentence that is so silly you just have to walk away from it and not look back.

Take this parenthesis I wrote last year: “(And hey: Henry Miller, Willa Cather, and Mark Twain are the only American novelists certain to outlast the era of America’s primacy.)”

All right, that night I was temporarily insane.

Not until I saw the sentence in print did I blanch at its flip grandiosity. But slowly, almost reluctantly, I’ve decided that I agree with myself.

The very term “American literature” is propaganda for the primacy of the United States. There are 35 sovereign nations in the Americas and only one calls itself “America,” and only “Americans” think that’s OK. (When Simón Bolívar said “America” he meant all the Americas, not just one country.)

Well, it’s too ingrained: I’m an American, not a UnitedStatesian. There’s American literature and Latin American literature. (Canadian writers get left all by their lonesome). But my attitude will one day be a historical oddity.

For the last century, no matter your nationality, to think clearly about your nation you had to know about the United States, because the USA had a long reach and exercised its grip with muscular, uncaring skill. The USA could make you or break you.

Now our great power is on the skids, and everybody knows it. No neocon’s bluster can slow that slide. When a great power falters, every aspect of its culture loses the charisma to attract attention past its borders.

While the sun never set on the British Empire, everyone anywhere who claimed to be literate had a working knowledge of British literature. Now who pays attention? (Name your five favorite living British novelists. Name your three.) The UK continues to birth great novelists – Anthony Powell, and colonials Lawrence Durrell (India) and Doris Lessing (Zimbabwe/Rhodesia) – but only intellectuals noticed. Since 1945, George Orwell alone spanned the world.

As the American Century dims in memory, will Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and William Faulkner be read when comprehending the American character is merely an intellectual interest rather than a cultural and political necessity?

Already the pain that permeates Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* reads like self-pitying clinical depression if you don’t know how World War I shattered a civilization’s zeitgeist. Even if you do, now we’ve seen shattered zeitgeist after shattered zeitgeist, a carny parade of zeitgeists gone to pieces, so big deal, Hemingway, you had to eat your zeitgeist, what’s new?

The brilliance of Hemingway’s style is always there for all who love American English, but, for longevity, content counts more than style.

Fitzgerald’s prose is a joy, and, in his way, he’s fearless, but his passion was for a tony white America at the peak of its self-importance. The world is sick of that America. Again: To reach the pantheon of world literature is a matter, not of style, but of content.

Faulkner is a genius of form whose moral failure was to use his genius to ennoble the immorality of Southern white culture. With a *Gone With the Wind* hypocrisy, Faulkner’s

backdrop is always the Old South mystique of the Confederacy, without which he is incomprehensible. (In contrast, Flannery O'Connor and Zora Neal Hurston have no use for that mystique.)

To gauge the hypocrisies of Faulkner and of the Confederacy's white descendants, read *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw*, the spoken autobiography of a brilliant, illiterate black sharecropper. Shaw's dates are 1885-1973. Faulkner's, 1897-1962. They write/speak of a shared era, Shaw in Alabama, Faulkner in Mississippi. *All God's Dangers* is a volume that can't date, because, as Jesus put it, the poor are always with us, and Shaw speaks of how a poor man, a spurned man, with no resource but integrity, may face the world on his own terms (though it cost him 12 years in prison).

Enter Toni Morrison, who did something she may or may not have been interested in: She made an honest woman of our vaunted canon – because that canon was a preposterous pose while it lacked a great novel written by an African-American about American slavery. *Beloved* is that novel.

But can *Beloved* be felt without the presence of American slavery still in the air (for, oh, it is still in the air)? *Beloved* may not resonate beyond our borders and our era, but Morrison's *Sula* shall. *Beloved* is deeply wise; *Sula* isn't. *Sula* just is. *Sula* stands in her isness and defies. For *Sula*, a country called America never existed and never could exist as anything but a lie. No, not a lie: a fantasy. In *Sula*'s light, most American writers have babbled about a fantasy that history will find laughable.

As to my parenthetical canon:

Henry Miller can be read with profit anywhere and any when. He didn't give a fuck about any nation and wrote novels that he knew, without doubt, would be outlawed in his own – as was true for many years. Miller was after big game: "The labyrinth is my happy hunting ground." Every culture has that labyrinth and the need to befriend and/or slay its Minotaur. There's no better or happier guide than Miller, but be careful: He doesn't mind if the reader's fondest hopes get killed on this page or that.

Willa Cather wrote wonderfully about Nebraska, New York City, and the Southwest, but her themes transcend national identity. Her body of work asks two classical questions. How does capital-B Beauty function in real life? And: If you're rare enough to be truly individual, how do you survive?

Ah, Mark Twain – the many who praise Huck Finn as the quintessential American character really do not get the point: *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* ends with Huck's utter and unequivocal rejection of his America. He even rejects money. He's headed for the "territories." Twain gave us Huck in the context of an America that justified the enslavement of human beings. Huck's liberty and Jim's slavery jam against each other and demand a choice. No novel has expressed America's paradox more vividly or rejected its options with such finality.

Why will Huck be valuable and immortal as an archetype? Because Huck is the most American of Americans, yet he rejects America. Huck dares to be utterly himself, apart from the society that formed him. Hamlet, Odysseus, Don Quixote, Anna Karenina, David Copperfield, Bigger Thomas, Nick Adams, Jay Gatsby, Jean Valjean, Hester Prynne, Aureliano Buendia – they don't do that. No great archetype of world literature that I can think of (perhaps you can correct me?) makes that move. Huck embodies, but rejects – without an ounce of angst.

To judge greatness by longevity is intellectually sloppy. Something great may merely flash and disappear, yet still be great. I'm only wondering how American literature will fare without America – that is, without an America the world must heed.

We no longer live in an America that has a literature. We writers, I mean. Ours is the nation that used to be America, and we're just writers in it.

But Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*... James Jones' *From Here to Eternity*... Jack London, William Carlos Williams, Emily Dickinson... the diaries of Anais Nin... the essays of James Baldwin... I love them too much to believe they'll fade, but, alas, that's just love talking. (And hey: Think how cutely antique our term "postmodern" will sound in, oh, 125 years.)

In a thousand years it will all be incomprehensible, but for one uneducated Brooklynite who set his own type, printed his own book, and hawked it door to door. People will read Walt Whitman as long as people read, and, because of him, they will think we Americans were a lucky, reckless, splendid people, and they'll pine for the days of the barbaric yawp.

Copyright © Michael Ventura. All rights reserved.