I  British Authors at an American Birth

All things now rise, and the cries of men to be born in ways afresh, aside from the old narratives.
Charles Olson (‘An Ode to Nativity’ Archaeologist of Morning)

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The American Renaissance of the first half of the nineteenth century is not a product of twentieth-century critical hindsight. Many writers of the day – including many now long forgotten – felt themselves to be shaping a literary renaissance and many nineteenth-century critics believed they were witnessing the beginning of a distinctive, national American literature. What is a product of critical hindsight is our conception of which writers made the most substantial contribution to an original American literature. Even here, though, it is a case of history having cleared the undergrowth and made the flowerings more visible, rather than of light falling on them for the first time. All those writers we now acknowledge as major authors achieved recognition – sometimes quite considerably – in their own lifetimes.

Most critics of the day agreed that Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851) was the ‘rough beginning’, and that his work did much to elevate and dignify American literature while

L. Peach, British Influence on the Birth of American Literature
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answering a profound national need. As one writer in the *Memorial of James Fenimore Cooper* (1852) wrote: ‘We were endeavouring to hold up our heads before the world, and to claim a character and intellect of our own, when Cooper appeared with his powerful genius to support our pretensions’.

The poet William Cullen Bryant (1794–1878) enjoyed similar recognition, although we must be cautious. Washington Irving welcomed, in the introduction to his edition of Bryant’s poetry, Bryant’s distinctive American nature poetry. Irving, however, had spent the seventeen years prior to writing this introduction in Europe and had assumed a typical European fireside view of America. He romanticised the American wilderness, investing it with a static solitude, majesty and grandeur. It was this European, romantic view of America which Irving saw in Bryant’s poetry and confused with realism:

> The descriptive writings of Mr. Bryant are essentially American. They transport us into the depths of the solemn primeval forest — to the shores of the lonely lake — the banks of the wild nameless stream, or the brow of the rocky upland rising like a promontory from amidst a wide ocean foliage; while they shed around us the glories of a climate fierce in its extremes, but splendid in all its vicissitudes.

Walt Whitman (1819–92) was also impressed by William Bryant’s poetry, but for different reasons. To the reader familiar with Whitman’s preoccupation with process, growth and the continuously developing self the enthusiasm for Bryant, a more static and conventional poet, may seem incongruous. Whitman, however, found in Bryant signs of the ruggedness and energy which he regarded as the two cornerstones of a distinctive, American poetry.