

CIVILIZING AMERICA: MANNERS AND CIVILITY IN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

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Civilizing America is a collection of essays which originated in a Conference entitled “Civilizing America: Manners and Civility as categories of Social, Cultural, and Literary Analysis”. It is a timely book for two reasons. Americans are unpopular in profoundly different ways with many people because of their apparent insensitivity to other cultures. A collection like this underscores the fact that Americans have been seriously concerned with questions of conduct and manners, though in their not so long history they have perceived these in different ways and manners have not always meant the same thing to all Americans. The other reason is frontally academic because this book advances and participates in an aspect of Civilization Studies in which manners and civility are key terms. The editor Dietmar Schloss recounts the scholarly interest in the role of conduct in the transformation of society sparked off by the English version of Norbert Elias’s landmark study *Über den Prozess der zivilisation* (1939) [*The Civilizing Process* (1978)]. Civilization Studies with America as the focus received a fillip with Elias’s book and this collection is a contribution to this valuable kind of cultural criticism.

The book is complex and its excellent organization chronologically sets out the development of the idea of civility from colonial times to the present. It is prefaced by Schloss’s own informative and argumentative Introduction. This is followed by an essay on civility in eighteenth century British women because it is in this location that one looks for initiatory moves for the discussion of manners in America. After

this European context we move to the American scene with a section on fashioning American identity in the colonial period and that of the early American Republic. There are essays here on American drama and the idea of self control (Fliegelman), food and civility in early America (Purucker), John Cotton (Schulz), social disgust in 18th century Anglo society (Shields) and Brockden Brown's novels (Verhoeven). This section is followed by one on the Search for American manners in the early nineteenth century with essays on John Neal and etiquette (Richter), Coopers's spat with Fanny Trollope (McWilliams) and Cooper's idea of manners (Clark), Emerson on manners (Herwig Friedl) and manners in Ante-Bellum America (Mulvey). The next section is on consolidation of manners in the late nineteenth century in America with essays on the American novel (Winnett), the American novel of manners (Bettina Friedl), James (Perosa), Benjamin Franklin and Alger (Scharnhorst), American Naturalism (Muller). The final section is about the demise and reinvention of manners after 1900 with essays on Modernity (Fluck), Ishmael Reed (Klinkowitz), Leslie Silko (Fischer-Hornung) and manners and contemporary American Fiction (Ickstadt). Clearly there is great range and depth in this collection.

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Manners matter and this book is precisely an attempt to investigate the process by which manners and other types of restraint are deployed in America in the present context of the market, multiculturalism and democracy. That America has a Civilization one can grant, but, is it backed up by a culture of refinement and gentility? There is a question mark here and the question comes up time and again in writings by Americans. Conduct is crucial and it affects public behaviour and influences the public perception of a people. This collection, organized chronologically, gives us a sense of the ways in which manners, conduct and culture have shaped or not shaped America. It brings an interdisciplinary touch to crucial questions of manners and social change. Manners and civility were seen as inward things that shaped the culture of a people. Americans felt ambivalent on this way of looking at the matter. Culture, as the great Indian statesman, C. Rajagopalachari, has said, is about people applying all kinds of restraints upon themselves. But accepting the self-imposition of all kinds of restraints in a market economy, in a society which is democratic, and which has been profoundly influenced by the thinking of the Enlightenment was not that easy. It was recognized that perhaps the inward model could not explain the public nature of Americans very well. The old concept of manners is perhaps not very effective in understanding modern democratic market societies. The old values, and with the Renaissance gentleman in mind, implied etiquette, good behaviour, restraint, and a worldly wisdom which could engage with different situations with aplomb. But these are perhaps not as important in a market driven democracy like America where there has been an emphasis on being natural and doing your own thing.

Mark Twain's *Huck Finn* presents a view that is almost mythic in its resonance for Americans. He does not want to be civilized. He has been there before:

The Widow Douglass, she took me for her son, and allowed she would sivilize me; but it was rough living in the house all the time, considering how dismal regular and decent the widow was in all her ways; and so when I couldn't stand it no longer, I lit out. I got into my old rags, and my sugar-hogshead again, and was free and satisfied.

Huck represents the American wish to be natural and not burdened by the past, by culture or tradition. Much of American national character is the result of the *Huck Finn* syndrome. When Natty Bumppo refuses to settle down and marry and raise a family, or in cowboy movies when John Wayne lights out into the West with the sun going down we see powerful images of America and its refusal of gentility and civility and settled living.

Fanny Trollope was particularly repelled by the greedy and frenetic behaviour of Americans. Her refined aristocratic sensibility was offended. She visited America in the mid nineteenth century and pointed to American naturalness and lack of culture. Hers was an aristocratic concept of what manners should be like and was unsympathetic to democracy and equality. All men are not born equal. She was horrified by the landscape, disgusted with Cincinnati which for her was a city of hogs, uncomfortable with a Mississippi steam boat, the kind Huck would have liked. She wrote:

The total want of all the usual courtesies of the table, the voracious rapidity with which the viands were seized and devoured, the strange uncouth phrases and pronunciation; the loathsome spitting, from the contamination of which it was absolutely impossible to protect our dresses, the frightful manner of feeding with their knives, till the whole blade seemed to enter into the mouth; and the still more frightful manner of cleaning the teeth afterwards with a pocket knife, soon forced us to feel that we were not surrounded by the generals, colonels and majors of the old-world.

James Fenimore Cooper, who famously spoke of the American poverty of materials even as he defended the great landscape and the trees and rivers of America as worthy of literary treatment, had a more nuanced approach to her fulminations. In his *Homeward Bound* and *Home as Found* he tried to do a balancing act and launch a defence of America, seeing the nation as involved in a cultural process, yet to be consummated. But he ended up more or less underscoring Fanny Trollope's criticism. Cooper saw Trollope's arguments as only part of the story but could not quite convince his readers about his three stages of settlement—the first stage being rigorous and requiring settlers to be affectionate with one another, the second stage of competition and occasional differences between families, and the

third stage of harmony. Cooper was a believer in a radical aristocracy and his deep-rooted conservatism is of a piece with the attitudes which produced the long line of Boston Brahmins who are all in a sense familiar with the mind of Europe and see America in that context, not as a law unto itself. They represent the face of American civility but clearly they are not dominant.

In fact, in the nineteenth century, the Boston Brahmins and the educated elites of the North, and in our times the recent phenomenon of celebrity culture, the Michael Jacksons, the Oprah Winfreys, the iconic sportsmen and women, are America's answer to the aristocracy of the Europeans. The aristocracy of Europe were expected to set an example in manners. One may quarrel with this but the fact remains that they at their best did provide leadership, though their decadence has been in evidence for quite a while. There was a trickle down effect and the masses imitated or saw the aristocracy as an ideal to be emulated. In America the situation is just the opposite. The iconic figures of America are not natural born aristocrats. They have made it big and demonstrated what is possible in America—any one is good enough but it is work and drive which brings you there. There is a trickle-up effect. This has had the effect of making all Americans potential celebrities. And that in turn made manners not a settled code which was handed down but something in the making—a process rather than a product. There is, as a witty scholar in Schloss's collection puts it, a "controlled decontrolling of emotional controls".

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But this does not mean that Americans did not aspire to European ideals or engage with them in a sophisticated manner. The educated elites and the Boston Brahmins are a case in point. In fiction, not only Cooper, but also Hawthorne and James, find American naturalness problematic. Hawthorne was engaged with the Puritan past and uncomfortable with the rugged American present, precisely because he saw that the old world had much to offer in terms of manners and conduct. In fact, his criticism of the Puritan past was in direct proportion to the Puritans failing to conduct themselves properly. In James we see this tension interestingly represented in novels like *Daisy Miller* and *The Europeans*. What we have here is a profound critique of American naturalness set against aristocracy in Europe and Americans who believe themselves to be part of it. In Daisy's case, James is making the point that notwithstanding her fashionable attire and her sophisticated sense of dress she is destroyed by Americans who have internalized the hypocrisies of European manners and she is rejected by the American expatriate community because she is natural. American naturalness is American innocence. James gives us a take on the natural American as a tragic figure, certainly not the object of ridicule. As one of the essayists in this volume, Bertina Friedl says with much accuracy and finesse

James's *Daisy Miller* is familiarly ostracized by those expatriate Americans whose Europeanized judgement on appropriate manners no longer permits them to regard natural good taste and artlessness as more appealing than inherited class distinctions and fastidiousness of behavior. They may be puzzled by Daisy's elegant appearance, but they are unable or unwilling to construe her spontaneity and unassuming friendliness as anything but vulgar.

Dean Howells also accepts James's sense of the natural as having to do with integrity of character which is sufficiently expressed through natural dignity and good manners. So American naturalness, when combined with elegance and sincerity, is superior to European aristocratic affectedness.

Whether one likes it or not, one is still judged by a code of manners, etiquette and good conduct, and Americans cannot be seen as not being interested in these matters. An aversion like Huck Finn's to external civilization is, of course not peculiar to America though I would argue that American history makes it particularly easy to dismiss such matters somewhat more expeditiously than an Englishman or a Frenchman would. The market is, of course, a determinant and getting on in life even to the exclusion of genteel manners is a strong temptation. The medieval belief in the civilizing process, so aptly described in the essay by Manfred Henz, has had necessarily to give way to a different conception of manners. In the Renaissance and till about the 18th century, thinkers believed that a society's progress was in direct proportion to the establishment of a polite code of behaviour, to the degree of self fashioning a person could engage himself in. To this, Americans, whether part of an elite or not, responded by invoking Locke and Rousseau with their belief in natural rights and began stressing the idea of the natural man. The state of nature was an ideal, and it became an American ideal. America was now seen as Nature's Nation. Jacksonian democracy as opposed to Jeffersonian aristocratic thinking informed the thought of major thinkers like Emerson, Whitman, and Thoreau. America herself was a poem and Cooper's remark that America had a poverty of materials was actually a wrong conception because what seemed poverty was riches of nature. This was a view profoundly challenged by Cooper, Hawthorne and James, but they do this by offering variations of the natural position, not completely rejecting it but adding a nuanced and sophisticated dimension to it. And it is this strain in American thinking which in a way has prevented wholesale surrender to the extreme natural position. Formal American poetry is part of this interrogation of the free verse driven natural position. But both the naturalists and the not so natural are one in rejecting the conservatives as anti woman, anti democratic and de facto proponents of a corrupt aristocratic feudal order. Schloss's collection is an attempt to delineate the way in which Americans through the decades have engaged with questions of manners,

civility and conduct, something so visible in the “wealth and diversity of literary achievement that has come out of the United States over the past two hundred years” (xiii). Schloss further says “democratic freedom does not entail the radical absence of restraints but is itself the product of a complex ensemble of restraints and self-restraints” (xiv). So we may conclude, agreeing with Schloss that obnoxious American behaviour does not preclude a serious self-reflexivity about these matters of moment. Americans do have manners after all!

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