

Foundations of American Literature

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“If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?” (Psalm 11.3)

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A discourse setting forth evidences of the influence of the Word of God in and through the lives and works of the early American Pioneer leaders, writers, and thinkers.

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INTRODUCTION

To calculate with precision the age of living giant sequoias that tower over the landscape and dwarf all else in the western United States would be a difficult, if not an impossible, task. But telltale growth rings easily discernable among those giants which have been felled indicate that many of these ancient stalwarts are at least three-thousand-year-old senior citizens. Hence, these majestic mammoths were already extant when the star of Bethlehem appeared in the heavens, and thus have remained as stately sentinels of antiquity, witnessing the Hand of God chart a westward course for the light of the Gospel across the inhabited earth, and carrying with that Gospel the concomitant blessings of individual liberty—and that of nations.

“And ye shall know the truth, and the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” (Jesus to the Scribes and Pharisees, John 8.32)

“I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.” (Jesus to Thomas, John 14.6)

“If the Son (Jesus) therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.” (John 8.36)

“I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.” (John 8.12)

“I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me...&c” (God to Moses and to His people, Exodus 20.2 ff)

By this we understand that God Himself is the author of liberty, and the history of American literature reflects this fact, as even a mere grammar school pupil having

only the most rudimentary elements of learning to his credit can readily discern.

“ We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men...”

As a state of heart and mind, the American dream has existed ever since Adam found himself enslaved by Satan, and the cry for true freedom will reverberate throughout this cavernous earth so long as but a single soul remains alive upon it. As for the American experiment, it is now only a juvenile two hundred years old. And that is not long in the history of mankind.

The present research has presented me with a dilemma, namely, that the gold mine is rich with an abundance of ore, and that the examples from which to draw are legion. As a result, I have chosen to present from each century, beginning with the present and turning back the pages of history some three hundred fifty years, at least one or two representative men whose lives, times, and writings attest to the verity of my judgment.

Though through investigation I found that the floods of ungodlier sorts oft made me afraid (Psalm 18. 4: “ The sorrows of death compassed me, and the floods of ungodly men made me afraid.”), I am yet encouraged, knowing that not everything for which the American Founding Fathers stood is lost. Yea, even today, there stand out as beacon lights on perilous storm-tossed seas of declension and degradation, those literary men of sterling character and high moral standards who hold forth the torch of truth in pursuit of *true life* (John 17. 3: “And this is life eternal, that [men] might know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent.”), *true liberty* (Romans 8. 21: “ Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from *the bondage of corruption* [John 8. 34: “ Whosoever commiteth sin is the servant (slave) of sin.”] into the glorious liberty of the children of God.”), and *true happiness* (Galatians 5. 22: “ But the fruit of the Spirit is ... joy ... ”).

The Twentieth Century

Marked especially from the years immediately following World War I, American literature has been characterized by a general spirit of rebellion against the concept of God, against the Word of God, and against those principles which have made the United States outstanding among nations not only in literature, but also in education, in government, in sound economics, in religion, and in other fundamental aspects of man's existence and well being. At best, it has been found simply ignoring the principal truths of America's *raison d'être*, if not actually and openly denying or ridiculing them. This trend has been found snowballing within recent years, until—at

present—that which seems to be in vogue is not only a denial but also the denigration of the nation's most priceless possession, upon which the American dream is based—her spiritual heritage. Coupled with this are *ad hominem* post mortems which seek to vilify and drag into the muck the good names of those worthy men who understood and embraced fundamental principles of a sound society. What a villainous attack upon both history and posterity!

Adherents to this theory and practice will be bound, they say, by nothing of the colonial and pioneering age—be it moral restraint or otherwise. “Anything goes!” is their battle cry. They are attempting to overturn foundations and rewrite history, having descended into the depths of a muckraker's paradise. They are antinomian and Epicurean at heart, with no restrictions, no boundaries, and no moral guidelines in art, literature, education, government, or anything else. A misunderstood and misapplied “freedom” (so-called) is their god, and they are found to be worshipping at the shrine of unbridled license, on a surrealistic binge. Well do they come under the category of those men delineated in Jude 4 “...who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness...”

It is worthwhile remembering, at this point, that the earliest American writers and statesmen were *not* such men. Indelible was their understanding of The Constitution granting freedom of religion, *but not freedom from God*. No man—not even the self-proclaimed and loftily proud atheist—has that kind of freedom.* And no rebellious desire in that direction can ever alter reality: to wit, that we are *all* prisoners of time, and of space, and of matter. “In [God] we live, and move, and have our being...” (Acts 17.28) Without Him, we could do absolutely nothing.

More often than not, this rebellious trend has resulted from a misunderstanding of the concept of freedom, and of what the American Pioneer forefathers meant by the term. The Founding Fathers entertained no such modern-day misconceptions as those held by the hedonistic “beat generation.” They did not flout convention simply for the sake of rebellion against all authority and against the status quo (the end result being, inevitably—anarchy, confusion, revolution, and the destruction of law,

* An English axiom states, “At the end of (life's) road, you'll meet God,” though you believe not now and perhaps even deny His existence. This is based on

Hebrews 9.27: “It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the Judgment.”

Another, in similar vein, says, “There are no unbelievers in Hell,” meaning, of course, that those who choose to go there cannot possibly continue to disbelieve in the reality of that awful torment. But, alas! “The fool hath said in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” (Psalm 14.1)

“O Lord...Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, Thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, Thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me. If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me;’ even the night shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to Thee.” (Psalm 139.7-12)

order, and of all society) when that convention was based solidly on sound and just principle. They were *builders* of civilization, *not destroyers* as today's libertines who are forever proving themselves bent on the obliteration of modern culture, civilization, and progress—and using “freedom” all the while as a pretext!

Today's lack of integrity, of honesty, of responsibility; of industry, frugality, and hard work—not to mention “a firm reliance on Divine Providence”—seem to be plaguing the nation in all fields, but—thank God—not in all its citizens. The deceptively mistaken and misleading cries for “freedom” and for “self-expression” are but whitewashed-sepulcher “excuses” for the breakdown of restraint and a sense of moral responsibility. It is to be sincerely hoped, by those who love her and the God who has so abundantly blessed her, that before another generation pass, the United States of America, in all fields of endeavor, might be arrested by godly men and turned back into the original paths which have made her great.

Like good news from a far country, like cool waters to a thirsty soul, like refreshing springs in the desert are the writings of a modern-day Pilgrim, the late Professor E. Merrill Root. Graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Amherst College, Dr. Root did subsequent graduate work in English and theology at the University of Missouri, Andover Theological Seminary, and Harvard. He then became Professor of English at Earlham College, where he lectured to enthusiastic and crowded classes for more than forty years. Before his untimely death in 1973, it is known that Dr. Root had authored at least twelve major volumes of poetry (in addition to prose) which have been rated by Robert Frost, Max Eastman, and Taylor Caldwell as among America's topmost.

Merrill Root was a man who saw clearly and spoke without temerity on the great issues facing not America alone, but all nations of the free world. He was a scholar *par excellence* in every sense of the word, but more than that he was a man—an American—whose roots go back to those of the Founding Fathers. With their outlook and philosophy his writings are replete, in a Twentieth Century setting; and he was grieved to the depths of his soul, as are others, to have witnessed his beloved homeland drifting so far afield from her original moorings.

Merrill Root's voice rings today* as clear and as true as finest crystal, resounding splendidly far above and beyond the cacophonous writhings of today's collectivist mob-o-crats, and rising to transcend the gutter graffiti spawned from cesspool pens of the decadent which brazenly masquerades as “literature” among false intellectuals devoid of any sense of uprightness.

May I parenthesize here the following, with which I find myself in complete and total agreement:

* Hebrews 11. 4: “...he being dead yet speaketh.”

“It is incumbent on literary men, to guard against impurities, and chastise, with critical lash, all useless innovations.... Colloquial barbarities abound in all countries, *but among no civilized people* (emphasis mine) are they admitted, with impunity, into books.”*

Of the soul of America, perhaps the one book among Merrill Root's prose works which best reveals what those refugee Pilgrims deeply felt about their most prized and priceless possession—their crowning gem of all literature, is *America's Steadfast Dream*. In it, he says on page 284 ff:

“In our justified and noble reverence for the Bible as religion, we sometimes forget or neglect it as literature. And if we do ignore the Bible as literature—as the greatest single book of literature in the world—we lose much of the power and glory of the Bible. Here is a great work of art; here is beauty that is ‘fair as the moon, clear as the sun.’ Here is a *readable* book.”

“Scientific ‘explanations’ of the world are here today and gone tomorrow.** They are mere facets of time. But the Bible is the whole diamond of Eternity, giving us all the facets of life and also the whole and organic gem. Secular ‘literature’ or ‘science’ has its place and use for a day, and then is swept into the dustbins of history. The Bible transcends all the brooms of time, and grows younger and deeper and richer *in saecula saeculorum*, as immortal as beauty, as timeless as Eternity.”

“The Bible is both true and beautiful because it never quibbles with the lie called ‘relativism’; it is categorical, absolute, final;*** it laughs at

* Extract from a pseudonymous attack (*circa* 1790) on Noah Webster's project for an American dictionary. Prior to this date, Webster had experimented with various reforms in spelling, and had toyed with the idea of still more innovations and colloquialisms for “The American Language.” He became more conservative later in life, whereupon his early radicalism (including his rather hasty remark concerning the supposedly inevitable divergence of American English from that of the British) was used by opponents to plague him.

** 1 Timothy 6.20, 21: “O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings, and *oppositions of science falsely so called*: which some professing have erred concerning the faith.”

*** Isaiah 40.8: “The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the Word of our God shall stand forever.”

Psalm 119.89: “For ever, O Lord, thy Word is settled in heaven.”

Matthew 24.35: “Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my Words shall not pass away.”

John 1.1: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

Hebrews 4.12: “For the Word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of Him (The Almighty God) with whom we have to do.”

Supreme Courts and political ideologies, for it is itself the Court of Last Resort and the Book of Judgment Day.*

Professor Root continues with his appraisal of the Book of Books, against which the vanities of manmade philosophy and thought are set in opposition:

“Its authenticity is always based upon the one thing that cannot end or change: ‘*In the beginning God...*’ Every philosophy based on ‘In the beginning man,’ or ‘In the beginning matter and mechanism,’ or ‘In the beginning the amoeba,’ forever fails because it is forever and obviously false. The only abiding and living philosophy is based upon the Absolute—hence, ‘*In the beginning God.*’”

“The Bible knows man as no other book in history knows him. ‘And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.’** That is great realism, in comparison with which Hobbes, or Dreiser, or Dean Swift, or any modern like Hemingway, is as insipid as thin pea-soup five days old.”

“Typical ‘moderns’ like the late H.G. Wells (who knew the ‘outline of history’ but never the essence of life) have never understood this book. Typical Wee Ones like Archibald MacLeish have tried to rewrite it—and perpetrated bathos. Wells supposed that the answer given is that God is represented as irrational power, before which man must bow in dumb submission. *That is not what The Book says!* If you but read the great torrent of terrible and beautiful words, which cascade like an upward Niagara of creation, then you know better. God is He who makes the rain to fall upon the dry ground, who gives the young lions their food, who guides the stars in their courses—who is the beneficent Lord of Life. His merciful power is so vast—the *potentia qua* of essential Life—that we cannot see His limits or comprehend His diversity; but what we do see and know indicates, even where we cannot see or know,*** His mercy, His loving-kindness, His power to sustain sun or planet, to feed the young lions, to water the thirsty land. And therefore, even when He slays us, we can trust in Him. This side of the New Testament, there is no answer

* John 12.48: “He that rejecteth me (Jesus), and receiveth not my Words (The Bible, The Word of God), hath one that judgeth him: The Word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day.”

** Genesis 6.5

*** Psalm 19.1: “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork.”

Romans 1.20: “For the invisible things of Him (God) from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they (men) are without excuse...”

more profound and true.

Touching upon the element of mystery connected with the Scriptures, which some invariably find eccentric to the ever-changing so-called "modern Twentieth Century scientific thinking," Root illumines:

"In all great ancient cultures there were the great mysteries. And what is more readable by man than a mystery. But here (is found) the essential mystery of God's being, of God's relationship to man, of the interplay of time and Eternity. And here is the deepest, the greatest, the central Mystery of all literature—the Incarnation, the Word become flesh, the very God becoming very man. The strangest and greatest Mystery in all the world!"*

In summary, his opinions on the Word of God, reminiscent of the posture and demeanor of Seventeenth Century Pilgrims, reveal both pious and practical, down-to-earth attitudes toward this Book that are worthy of serious attention from, and emulation by, every living soul upon the earth. Indeed, it is mandatory for the age in which we live.

"It is never dull, never tedious (save in some genealogies), never abstract and tortured and dull like the style of John Dewey or Herbert Marcuse; it is a book for the humble tinker, John Bunyan, and for the noble modern Irishman, Lord Dunsany, and for Mr. Everyman. It is the Book of God, and therefore the Book for man. It is not a book—but a library, a universe, a cosmos of literature, a Book of Books. It is a pure river of the water of life, clear as crystal, where all the sons of men may drink."

"If, out of all the literature of the world, one could preserve *only one book*, that book should be the Bible. I love the literatures of Greece and Rome, of Europe and America and China; *but if I had to choose one book*—which God in his infinite mercy forbid!—I would choose the Bible."

"We should never read it as a duty, as dogma or instruction, as something merely 'good' for us. Here is no mere 'teaching' or 'preaching.' Christ, for example, was no 'teacher'—He was far too great for that.

* John 1.14: "And the Word (Christ) was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father [God the Father],) full of grace and truth."

Romans 8.2, 3: "For the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, *God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh*, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh."

2 Corinthians 5.21: "For He (God) hath made Him (Jesus) to be sin for us, who (Jesus) knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him."

Was He not the human incarnation of the Artist who created the cosmos?*

“No one is truly educated for living until he has read and assimilated the wisdom of [The Word of God]...”

“Let us read the Bible as it should be read, and the meaning will take care of itself. To paraphrase Walt Whitman,

Whose touches this Book, touches God!”

Yes, the position on and attitude toward The Word of God advanced and defended by Merrill Root are indeed those which fired earlier Pilgrims to risk all in order to win a conscience void of offence toward God and man. The Bible is, after all, the Supreme Revelation of the Creator to man His creature, and God's personal Message to the hearts of men everywhere. Little wonder, then, that it should so enlighten, inspire, comfort, and make wise unto salvation all who tread the sacred pilgrimage to Eternity by means of it.

The men who traversed the fierce Atlantic in frail barks with this Book of Books in heart and mind three and a half centuries ago were no hotheaded Marxist puppet revolutionaries who believe that “power grows out of the barrel of a gun,” bent on the destruction of western civilization in order to usher in a Soviet imperialistic “Utopia” with certain and inescapable mass murders (clandestine, of course!) mercilessly carried out in order to rid itself of the opposition on the one hand, and to strike fear and terror to the hearts of any who might entertain ideas of true freedom which could prove unsettling to “the dictatorship of the proletariat” on the other. No, not these men. By no stretch of a warped imagination could any human being possibly bring himself to believe such a fabrication, for history *cannot* be rewritten.

“The Moving Finger writes; and having writ,
Moves on; nor all your Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it.”**

And yet there exist, in our day, such proponents of lies, parading as men of letters, deceiving and being deceived. History is history; fact is fact; and truth *cannot* be altered—otherwise, it is no longer truth. But alas! It has been well said,

“There is none so blind as he who will not see.”

Who, then, were the American Pioneers, and what was the imperative back of their coming? They were levelheaded citizens of moral integrity in search of that freedom—inseparably coupled with responsibility—which was theirs by right of Divine

* Hebrews 1.1, 2: “God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom He hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also He made the worlds...”

** Omar Khayyam

Fiat, and in pursuit of which quest they laid their lives on the line in no uncertain terms:

“And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on Divine Providence,* we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.”**

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TO BE CONTINUED

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* Direct reference to The Creator and Sustainer of the Universe, The Living God, The Almighty.

Genesis 1.1: “In the beginning God *created* (Heb. [BA·RA], to call forth from nothing, to beget by word alone, to command into existence by sheer force of [The Creator's] will) the heaven and the earth.”

Job 26.7: “He (God) hangeth the earth upon *nothing*...”

Colossians 1.17: “And He is before all things, and by Him all things *consist* (Gr. indicating cohesion, holding or sticking together; design, purpose, and order as opposed to chaos, and necessitated by complexities of the molecular structure of the Universe).”

** The American Declaration of Independence