The more that I teach and write about American literature, the more I have come to believe that the primary work of American literature is the Declaration of Independence. It is an eloquent piece of writing—a robust argument for independence—that states the principles upon which the new nation was founded and that many American writers, as well as reformers and social activists, later invoked as a resource.

No approach to or definition of American literature is likely to satisfy everyone, but for making sense of its writers and texts, the beginning of paragraph two of the Declaration of Independence is for me, and I find for my students, the best focal point: “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, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”

These are momentous words, as Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and other members of the Continental Congress realized. On July 2, 1776, they had voted to support “a declaration of independence” from Great Britain, and on July 4, they formally endorsed the document itself. As Adams explained in a letter, July 3, to his wife Abigail: “Yesterday the greatest question was decided which ever was debated in America; and a greater perhaps never was, nor will be, decided among men. A resolution was passed without one dissenting colony, that these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States.”

“The second day of July 1776,” Adams noted in another letter on July 3 to her, “will be the most memorable epoch in the history of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival. It ought to be commemorated, as the day of deliverance, by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires and illuminations, from one end of this continent to the other, from this time forward forever more.”

For many decades, Americans have celebrated the Fourth of July (Adams was off by two days in his prediction) with all the boisterousness that Adams called for: it is the major national holiday, the nation’s birthday.

However, when now we read the Declaration of Independence and review exuberant comments about it by the Founders, their contemporaries, and their successors, we are acutely mindful of the groups that its author and signers marginalized or excluded. We face the hard irony that Jefferson, George Washington, James Madison, and other Southerners owned and sold slaves. Adams (and he was not alone) opposed slavery, but at the time he was transfixed by the grandeur of America’s assertion of its independence, not the distance of many from its affirmations.

So many in the 1770s and 1780s—African Americans above all, but Native Americans and women as well—were denied their full rights: we wonder, almost obsessively, why this was the case. Why did not the leaders of the Revolution recognize, as W. E. B. Du Bois noted a century later in the aftermath of the Civil War and the failure of Reconstruction, that “the cost of liberty” is always “less than the price of repression” (John Brown, 1909)? By failing in the 1770s to confront the discrepancy between the Declaration of Independence and hu-
man bondage, Jefferson and the others, Du Bois said, postponed and made worse the bloody reckon-
ing between North and South that occurred in the 1860s.

The slave population, numbering 700,000 in 1790, had grown dramatically by 1860. These are the figures according to the 1860 census:

1. Total number of slaves, Lower South: 2,312,352 (47% of total population).
2. Total number of slaves, Upper South: 1,208,758 (29% of total population).
3. Total number of slaves, Border States: 432,586 (13% of total population).

As President Lincoln recalled in his Second In-
augural, March 4, 1865, slavery had entrenched it-
self as “a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew
that this interest was somehow the cause of the war.”
This fact shadows the integrity of those central fig-
ures of the American Revolution such as Jefferson,
James Madison, and George Washington who advo-
cated and fought for freedom for the colonies yet
practiced slavery.

In my own teaching, I have noticed that stu-
dents—intensely aware of American slavery—start
my courses already critical of the Declaration of
Independence and suspicious of affiliated passages
like this one by Thomas Paine, which proudly af-
fects national identity: “Our citizenship in the United
States is our national character. Our citizenship in
any particular state is only our local distinction. By
the latter we are known at home, by the former to
the world. Our great title is AMERICANS—our
inferior one varies with the place.” (The American
Crisis, April 19, 1783).

Or this one, by the French writer and American
settler (and friend of Jefferson) St. John de
Crevecoeur in his Letters from an American Farmer
(1793): “What then is the American, this new man?
He is either an European, or the descendant of an
European, hence that strange mixture of blood,
which you will find in no other country. I could
point out to you a family whose grandfather was an
Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son
married a French woman, and whose present four
sons have now four wives of different nations. He
is an American, who, leaving behind him all his
ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones
from the new mode of life he has embraced, the
new government he obeys, and the new rank he
holds. He becomes an American by being received
in the broad lap of our great Alma Mater. Here
individuals of all nations are melted into a new race
of men, whose labours and posterity will one day
cause great changes in the world” (Letter III).

Crevecoeur makes no mention here of African-
Americans or Native Americans or women—though
he does condemn slavery later, in Letter IX—and
such omissions, my multi-culturally adept students
spot right away.

Yet what Crevecoeur leaves out—so I seek to
explain to students—does not essentially discredit
or falsify the account he gives. He is describing
opportunities that the newly independent United
States made available to many persons (to be sure,
white and male), and in the process he is giving
expression to an idea, a radiant theme, that would
inspire members of excluded groups in subsequent
decades. They demanded, wrote forcefully about,
and struggled to achieve this fulfillment as Ameri-
cans themselves.

The Declaration of Independence must be exam-
ined critically, through questioning of its emphases
and exclusions: we must attend to the history of
those who were positioned far from its ideals of
equality and freedom and must acknowledge the
grave inconsistency in Jefferson in particular, who
wrote the draft of the document even as his slaves
toiled in Virginia. As Carl Becker, in The Declara-
tion of Independence: A Study in the History of Po-
litical Ideas (1922), remarked, “Jefferson appre-
hended the injustice of slavery; but one is inclined
to ask how deeply he felt it”; and as Garry Wills, in
Inventing America: Jefferson’s Declaration of In-
dependence (1978), has said, “there is no minimiz-
ing,” either, “Jefferson’s views on Negro limits” and
“multiple inferiorities.”

Yet the dynamic reality is that the Declaration
provided the first American citizens and those of
later generations—including countless writers who
journeyed to America from many lands—with a new
project and vocation. American literature, like
American history, ultimately should be read and stud-
ied appreciatively, as a progressive, sustaining body
of work. “The Revolution made possible,” states
Gordon S. Wood in The Radicalism of the Ameri-
can Revolution (1992), “the anti-slavery and
women’s rights movements of the nineteenth cen-
tury and in fact all our current egalitarian think-
ing.” “The entire history of liberal reform in
America,” the historian Joseph J. Ellis similarly
observes in American Sphinx: The Character of
Thomas Jefferson (1997): “can be written as a pro-
cess of discovery, within Jefferson’s words, of a spiritually sanctioned mandate for ending slavery, providing the rights of citizenship to blacks and women, justifying welfare programs for the poor and expanding individual freedoms.”

There is a long tradition of reform and radical critique of the United States that is itself grounded in American ideals, principles, and values and rooted in the Declaration of Independence. See, for instance, David Walker, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829); William Lloyd Garrison, “Declaration of the National Anti-Slavery Convention” (1833); Henry Highland Garnet, “An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America” (1848); Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “Declaration of Sentiments” (1848); and Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slaves is the Fourth of July?” (1852). The greatest twentieth-century example is Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech (1963).

In literature, culture, and politics, the American Revolution has never ended, and the energizing “making-new” amid an ongoing revolution is the most extraordinary truth about the United States. As the French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville reported in *Democracy in America* (1835), “America is a land of wonders, in which everything is in constant motion and every change seems an improvement.” The twentieth-century American poet E. E. Cummings made a version of this very point in exhilarated (if unnerving) terms: “America makes prodigious mistakes, America has colossal faults, but one thing cannot be denied: America is always on the move. She may be going to Hell, of course, but at least she isn’t standing still” ("Why I Like America,” *Vanity Fair*, May 1927).

From the time of the Revolution through the nineteenth century and even into the present, many commentators on American life from abroad have been skeptical of the United States: How could a nation endure on the basis of freedom and equality? “Hollow and unsound,” said the British author Frances Trollope about the United States in her *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832). “There is no method,” concluded the English economist and essayist Walter Bagehot, “by which men can be both free and equal” (*The Economist*, September 5, 1863).

“By the end of the nineteenth century,” according to the historian Simon Schama, “the stereotype of the ugly American—voracious, preachy, mercenary, and bombastically chauvinist—was firmly in place in Europe” (“The Unloved American,” *The New Yorker*, March 10, 2003). European writers and intellectuals well into the twentieth century perpetuated these criticism, doubts, and doleful prophecies—Sigmund Freud, for instance, who lectured at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1909, his only visit here: “America is the most grandiose experiment the world has seen, but, I am afraid, it is not going to be a success” (quoted in Ronald Clark, *Freud: The Man and His Cause*, 1980).

Yet to others, America was (and has stayed) special because of its revolutionary creed, “the land of the future,” noted the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel in his Introduction to *The Philosophy of History* (1832), “where, in the ages that lie before us, the burden of the World’s history shall reveal itself.” Even the ordeal of immigration and settlement that so many experienced did not diminish their hopefulness, as Mary Antin, a Russian immigrant who at age fifteen settled in Boston with her family, explained in *The Promised Land* (1912): “Everything that ever was to happen to me in the future had its germ or impulse in the conditions of my life on Dover Street. My friendships, my advantages and disadvantages, my gifts, my habits, my ambitions—these were the materials out of which I built my after life, in the open workshop of America. My days in the slums were pregnant with possibilities; it only needed the ripeness of events to make them fruit forth in realities. Steadily as I worked to win America, America advanced to lie at my feet. I was an heir, on Dover Street, awaiting maturity. I was a princess waiting to be led to the throne.”

It is a double perspective on—or maybe a double feeling (anguished and invigorated) about—the United States and its literature that I am trying to describe. James Baldwin said about “American history” that it is “longer, larger, more various, more beautiful, and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it” (“A Talk To Teachers,” October 16, 1963, in *The Price of the Ticket*, 1985), and the same should be said about American literature as it emerges from and responds to this history through the medium of the English language, an “English” fortified, in the past and in the present, by many terms and expressions from other languages. American literature is literature in English, even as it is also multi-lingual in its vocabulary—in, for example, Kate Chopin (raised in a French-speaking household, later familiar with Creole and Cajun culture and idiom in New Orleans) and Saul Bellow (born in Montreal of Russian-Jewish parents, a master mixer of Jewish, Yiddish, and American tones)—and unstoppably multi-cultural.
Politically, the American Revolution, the working out of the Declaration’s claims, keeps on course, and this is everywhere reflected in American literature as new authors, texts, and voices enter the ever-expanding American literary canon. That the peculiar glory of the United States is its permanent revolution is a theme that Lincoln voiced better than anyone before or since. He stated in a public letter to members of the Republican Party, April 6, 1859: “All honor to Jefferson—to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there, that to-day, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression.”

Here, and on other occasions, Lincoln maintained that the Declaration of Independence would always compel the United States to move ahead and enlarge and deepen the range of its freedoms. Writing to the Virginia legislator Henry Lee, May 8, 1825, Jefferson himself had reflected that the Declaration of Independence was “intended to be an expression of the American mind,” and Lincoln fervently concurred. American literature is the expression of the American mind as it has developed, explicitly or implicitly, from the self-evident truths that Jefferson and the others in 1776 proclaimed, and everything that came before matters because of the light that the Declaration casts upon it.

As the historian Joyce Appleby has stated, “when the revolutionary leaders based their claims to self-government on natural rights, they collected their rampant particularities into a unity of first principles” (“Self-Styled Men of Destiny,” Times Literary Supplement, March 14, 2003). This does not mean that the sentiments and ideas expressed in the Declaration of Independence were unprecedented. In her brilliant study, American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence (1997), Pauline Maier has shown that its principles and arguments were present in the English Declaration of Rights of 1688-1689 and in declarations and resolutions in American colonies and localities that Jefferson drew upon, adapted, and echoed. George Mason, for example, included this passage (amended by a committee) in June 1776 at the beginning of the “Declaration of Rights” for Virginia: “That all men are born equally free and independent, and have certain inherent natural rights, of which they cannot, by any compact, deprive or divert their posterity, among which are the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety.”

Joseph J. Ellis also makes a pertinent observation when he says that Jefferson no doubt had at hand “his own previous writings,” including A Summary View of the Rights of British America (July 1774), the “Declaration of the Causes and Necessity for Taking Up Arms” (July 1775), and the three drafts of the Virginia Constitution, all of which had sources and analogies of their own as well. Nor did Jefferson work alone in June 1776; he was part of a five-person committee—the others were Roger Sherman of Connecticut, Robert R. Livingston of New York, Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, and John Adams of Massachusetts—and the members of Congress made further changes.

Jefferson found the Congress’s revisions painful, but the collective enterprise was in keeping with the assignment that he had undertaken. Andrew Burstein, in The Inner Jefferson (1995), has offered this apt reminder: the Declaration “was meant as a composite of the thought of many, the joint resolve of thirteen culturally distinct, independent states.” From the beginning of the drafting process and through the stages of revision, Jefferson was writing for a collective body, the members of Congress and on behalf of the commitment to and advocacy of independence that they were coming to share. The Declaration of Independence is Jefferson’s expression of the American mind as it expressed itself to and through him. It was, simultaneously, an individual, cumulative, and corporate text.

In the 1770s and 1780s, “we made a formulation here of what we were,” the novelist and critic Ralph Ellison says in On Initiation Rites and Power (1974). “and who we were, and what we expected to be, and we wrote it down in the documents of the Bill of Rights, the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence…. We put ourselves on the books as to what we were and would become, and we were stuck with it.” Notice that Ellison says we: “we made a formulation here of what we were,” as though all of us, whatever our race, whoever we are, collaborated in authoring the formulations of the nation’s inaugural documents. Ellison’s act of including himself, as an African-American, within the terms and frameworks of these documents at first may seem astounding, even shocking. Some might protest that he is historically wrong, and that the tragedy of American history is the nature of its exclusions, its keeping of Ellison’s people out. But
from Ellison’s perspective, the truth of American history is that it always included him; he was always part of the “American mind,” and that was the case even though at times he might have been invisible.

The fact that the Declaration of Independence is ultimately a progressive work does not mean that it is always deployed in the service of progressive causes. Throughout American history, speakers, writers, factions, and parties have sometimes tried to invoke the Declaration of Independence in a reactionary mode, affirming their freedom in opposition to African-Americans and other minority groups and supporters who, it is said, are making claims for themselves that encroach upon or take away from established, customary, or traditional rights and liberties. The Declaration is a contested piece of writing; it does not automatically declare its meaning; it has not meant the same thing to everyone at the same moment, and anyone can attempt to make use of it. But this, too, is a form of tribute: it is considered essential to have the Declaration of Independence on one’s side. Or, if that is hard to make happen, it then becomes imperative to assail the Declaration’s tenets and claim, somehow, that these are flawed, unconvincing, or absurd.

During the antebellum period, some distinguished white Southerners expressed extreme discomfort with the Declaration of Independence, protesting against the political and cultural mischief it had produced. Senator John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, for instance, stated in a Senate speech, June 27, 1848, that the Declaration’s assertion of freedom and equality constituted “the most false and dangerous of all political errors,” an error that was leading many people to conclude, falsely, that “the black race” was entitled to liberty and equality. Calhoun’s arguments now seem shameful on moral grounds, and, in intellectual terms, fussily literal-minded (e. g., “All men are not created. According to the Bible, only two, a man and a woman, ever were”). But his obstinate effort to disprove the Declaration amounts to an acknowledgement of its authority, as he suggests himself when he concedes that in the United States the belief in freedom and equality, “under the authority of a document put forth on so great an occasion, and leading to such important consequences, has spread far and wide, and fixed itself deeply in the public mind.”

Perhaps for this very reason, when Jefferson Davis delivered his inaugural address, February 18, 1861, as president of the Confederate States of America, he felt obligated to make connection to the Declaration of Independence, declaring that “the sovereign states now composing this Confederacy,” in withdrawing from the Union, had “merely asserted a right which the Declaration of Independence of 1776 had defined to be inalienable.” Davis was supremely selective: he said not a word about the Declaration’s emphasis on freedom and equality.

The Confederacy’s vice president, Alexander H. Stephens, was more direct, more akin to Calhoun. He asserted in a major speech in Savannah, George, March 21, 1861, that Jefferson had been mistaken: “The prevailing ideas entertained by him and most of the leading statesmen at the time of the formation of the old constitution, were that the enslavement of the African was in violation of the laws of nature; that it was wrong in principle, socially, morally, and politically. It was an evil they knew not well how to deal with, but the general opinion of the men of that day was that, somehow or other in the order of Providence, the institution would be evanescent and pass away. This idea, though not incorporated in the constitution, was the prevailing idea at that time. The constitution, it is true, secured every essential guarantee to the institution while it should last, and hence no argument can be justly urged against the constitutional guarantees thus secured, because of the common sentiment of the day. Those ideas, however, were fundamentally wrong. They rested upon the assumption of the equality of races. This was an error.”

There is a crazy grandeur to Stephens’s position, as he casts the Confederate cause against that of the Founders, the leaders of the new nation and patriots of 1776. Perhaps the Confederate armies, through greater success on the battlefields, might somehow have given a period of credibility to such a retrograde view. But as we read Stephens’s speech now, the striking thing about it—which no lament for the Lost Cause can mask—is that it is profoundly anti-American. He concluded: “Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its corner- stone rests upon the great truth, that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery—subordination to the superior race—is his natural and normal condition” (“Applause” followed).

Lincoln (who, as it happens, had been acquainted with Stephens since the 1840s) was far more powerfully in contact with the authentic movement of American history, the history that Stephens sought to discredit. Lincoln’s address at Gettysburg, November 19, 1863, began: “Four score and seven years
ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

In the context of devastating war, and with breathtaking clarity and precision, Lincoln extended and reshaped Jefferson’s words into a principled vision of the United States that included everybody. As Pauline Maier, Garry Wills, and John Patrick Diggins in their different ways have cogently argued, Lincoln did something immense at Gettysburg. Diggins points out: “Jefferson never intended that the Declaration should stipulate principles that would unify the country, that it should be binding on the individual, or, what is more crucial, that it was consciously intended to apply to all people.... Whereas Jefferson’s Declaration was a manifesto of separation and dissolution, Lincoln reconceived it as a symbol of national unity.”

True enough, yet one might keep in mind Stephens’s claims about the views of the Founders, the claims he disputes. In his speech is the implication that Jefferson and the others held a position closely similar to the one that Lincoln would memorably express at Gettysburg. Lincoln could have agreed with nearly everything in Stephens’s description of Jefferson. What Stephens denounced, Lincoln affirmed.

As the interpretive acts undertaken by Calhoun, Davis, Stephens, and Lincoln reveal, American history is highly literary and intertextual, keyed time and again to fateful acts of writing and rewriting, reading and rereading. Ellison’s insight—that we “put ourselves on the books”—thus can be taken further: the United States, its creation in history, was a work of art, an enterprise of the imagination that has the complicatedness and inexhaustibility of the sublime works of literary art that American writers later produced. The sheer daring; the bracing presumption; the vision reached for and dramatized in high intellectual performance: this is what the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and the gritty, grand business of founding the nation, required, and it motivates the work of American writers. American literature took shape within the context established by the Declaration of Independence, from that text’s history, from that literary work of 1776 and its aftermath of interpretation and action.

The Founders, as visionary artists, focused on ideas that derived from John Locke and Scottish Enlightenment philosophers, and more immediately from the writings that Pauline Maier has explored, yet the ideas as written and approved still seem extraordinary—the balanced sharing of power, the affirmation of fundamental human rights, the simultaneous rule of the majority and protection of the minority. In To Begin the World Anew: The Genius and Ambiguities of the American Founders (2003), Bernard Bailyn has said this very well:

These were extraordinary flights of creative imagination—political heresies at the time, utopian fantasies—and their authors and sponsors knew that their efforts to realize these aspirations had no certain outcomes. Nothing was assured; the future was unpredictable. Everywhere there were turns and twists that had not been expected. Though they searched the histories they knew, consulted the learned authorities of the day, and reviewed the masterworks of political theory, they found few precedents to follow, no models to imitate. They struggled with logical, ideological, and conceptual problems that seemed to have no solutions. The deeper they went the more difficult the problems appeared.

The description offered here pertains to Jefferson and Madison, but with only slight adjustments it fits as well the authors of Moby-Dick, Leaves of Grass, Light in August, and Invisible Man. The convergence of the nation and the nation’s literature is indeed affirmed in Whitman’s 1855 Preface: “The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.” It is implicit too in Oliver Wendell Holmes’s claim that Emerson’s August 31, 1837, address, “The American Scholar” was “our intellectual Declaration of Independence.”

The Rejection of Exceptionalism

American writers are part of a literary and political tradition propelled by the spirit of 1776, but in saying this, we must indeed accent their bold independent-mindedness. Relating them to the Declaration of Independence both does and does not do them justice. In an essay about his fellow-writer and friend Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville asserted that American writers are seekers, not finders; the best writers of the United States, he said, embark on a quest for truth, as did Shakespeare in his great tragedies, even if that means challenging self-evident principles and pushing to the limits of language’s capacity to bear meaning. “Those deep far-away things in him; those occasional flashings forth of the intuitive Truth in him; those short, quick probings at the very axis of reality;—these are the
things that make Shakespeare, Shakespeare,” Melville maintained, and this was the challenge he believed that Hawthorne had embraced and that he seized himself (“Hawthorne and His Mosses,” New York Literary World, August 17 and August 24, 1850).

Melville is the classic instance of an American writer in love with, and driven wild by, the intensities and contradictions of American experience, for whom an unflinching search for the truth about this country is bound up with an ambitious effort to make contact beyond that with “the very axis of reality.” As the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga professed in Life and Thought in America (1972), American writers have been “preoccupied with the essence behind things,” and that is where American literature leads, deeply into American life and through that to the core of personal identity and to the desire in each of us somehow to make a mark during the passage of time given us.

“Life must be lived on a higher platform,” Emerson insisted, “to which we are always invited to ascend; there, the whole aspect of things changes” (“Nominalist and Realist,” in Essays: Second Series, 1844). Life, he proposed, is “March weather, savage and serene in one hour” (“Montaigne; or, the Skeptic,” in Representative Men, 1850); it is an “ecstasy” (“Fate,” in The Conduct of Life, 1860); it is a “search after power” (“Power,” in The Conduct of Life). The American writer, Emerson stated in “The Poet” (Essays: Second Series, 1844), “hears a voice, he sees a beckoning. Then he is apprised, with wonder, what herds of daemons hem him in. He can no more rest.”

Having witnessed the extremes to which nationalism can lead—xenophobic nationalism that has in Europe and Africa caused horrific warfare and ethnic cleansing—we may hesitate to seek out the Americaness of American literature. Many American writers, have been tenacious critics of American nationalism, America first-ism, American exceptionalism. A “patriot,” Mark Twain remarked, is “the person who can holler the loudest without knowing what he is hollering about.” To Ambrose Bierce, a patriot is “the dupe of statesman and the tool of conquerors”; patriotism, to him, is not (as Samuel Johnson proposed) the “last resort of a scoundrel” but “the first.”

Such criticism of America is itself part of the provocative thrust of American literature, with its exalted and outraged responses to the country, to its immense virtues and huge shortcomings and tragic failures. It is impossible to imagine Bierce as any-thing other than an American writer, and Twain is the most American of all American writers.

American literature is too diverse, too complex, in its expression and exploration of “independence” ever to be reduced to a subject that critics on the left or the right could exploit for long as a narrow nationalism. Many American writers—Harriet Beecher Stowe, Jack London, Upton Sinclair, John Steinbeck, Amiri Baraka, for example—are intensely, even outrageously, scandalously political, but this does not mean that the subject of American literature is itself political. It is too big (and always expanding), and too multi-faceted for that, and the best writers in their works actively resist being interpreted in that way.

Many American writers are torn from side to side in their social and political positions: Sometimes they cherish, sometimes they deride, national ideals and visions, and both attitudes are often expressed in the same place, as in, for example, Walt Whitman’s Democratic Vistas (written 1867-68, published 1871):

I say we had best look our times and lands searchingly in the face, like a physician diagnosing some deep disease. Never was there, perhaps, more hollowness at heart than at present, and here in the United States. Genuine belief seems to have left us. The underlying principles of the States are not honestly believ’d in, (for all this hectic glow, and these melodramatic screamings,) nor is humanity itself believ’d in. What penetrating eye does not everywhere see through the mask? The spectacle is appalling. We live in an atmosphere of hypocrisy throughout.…

When I pass to and fro, different latitudes, different seasons, beholding the crowds of the great cities, New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Chicago, St. Louis, San Francisco, New Orleans, Baltimore—when I mix with these interminable swarms of alert, turbulent, good-natured, independent citizens, mechanics, clerks, young persons—at the idea of this mass of men, so fresh and free, so loving and so proud, a singular awe falls upon me.…

American literature is packed with strife and tension, ambivalence and contradiction, as Whitman’s words attest. “Intrepid, unprincipled, reckless, predatory, with boundless ambition, civilized in externals but a savage at heart,” wrote Melville about the United States in his novel Israel Potter (1855).
“It was wonderful to find America, but it would have been more wonderful to miss it,” surmised Mark Twain in an entry for “Pudd’nhead Wilson’s Calendar” (Pudd’nhead Wilson, 1894). “The deliberate consciousness of America so fair and smooth-spoken, and the under-consciousness so devilish. Destroy! destroy! destroy! hums the under-consciousness. Love and produce! Love and produce! cackles the upper-consciousness,” said the British novelist D. H. Lawrence in an essay on Hawthorne (Studies in Classic American Literature, 1923). “I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America,” asserted the poet-critic Charles Olson. “I spell it large because it comes large here. Large and without mercy” (Call Me Ishmael, 1947). “America is not a young land,” offered William S. Burroughs: “it is old and dirty and evil before the settlers, before the Indians. The evil is there waiting” (Naked Lunch, 1959).

Such harsh, ominous judgments, however, are inevitably tempered or contradicted by a love of the country that writers cannot restrain or deny, as in the African American poet Claude McKay’s “America” (1921):

Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,  
And sinks into my throat her tiger’s tooth,  
Stealing my breath of life, I will confess  
I love this cultured hell that tests my youth!  
Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,  
Giving me strength erect against her hate.  

(lines 1-6)

Emerson as much as anyone understood why writers could feel so connected to a land that exasperated them: “One thing is plain for all men of common sense and common conscience, that here, here in America, is the home of man. After all the deductions which are to be made for our frivolities, which stake every gravest national question on the silly die, whether James or whether Jonathan shall sit in the chair and hold the purse; after all the deduction is made for our frivolities and insanities, there still remains an organic simplicity and liberty, which, when it loses its balance, redresses itself presently, which offers opportunity to the human mind not known in any other region” (“The Young American,” in Nature, Addresses, and Lectures, 1849).

“I love America more than any other country in the world, and exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually,” James Baldwin maintained in Notes of a Native Son (1955). “One cannot be an American by going about saying that one is an American. It is necessary to feel America, like America, love America, and then work,” the artist Georgia O’Keeffe affirmed (quoted in The Saturday Evening Post, March 2, 1926).

American writers and artists hence celebrate their country in the midst of an antagonistic relation to it. F. Scott Fitzgerald, for one, was captivated by the allure of the American dream, its ache and yearning, even as in The Great Gatsby and other books he exposed its deadly costs. “France was a land,” wrote Fitzgerald, “England was a people, but America, having about it still that quality of the idea, was harder to utter—it was the graves at Shiloh and the tired, drawn, nervous faces of its great men, and the country boys dying in the Argonne for a phrase that was empty before their bodies withered. It was a willingness of the heart” (“The Swimmers,” The Saturday Evening Post, New York, October 19, 1929).

The United States and its people are always becoming something new. This newness, and the striving (“the willingness of the heart”) that it instills, is central to American literature, and to the amazing complexity of the country. “Most people have come to America,” D. H. Lawrence concluded, “to get away from everything they are and have been…. But it is never freedom till you find something you really positively want to be” (“The Spirit of Place,” in Studies in Classic American Literature, 1923). Another British writer (and, eventually, American citizen), W. H. Auden, said: “In a land which is fully settled, most men must accept their local environment or try to change it by political means, and only the exceptionally gifted or adventurous can leave to seek his fortune elsewhere, while in America, on the other hand, to move on and make a fresh start somewhere else is still the normal reaction to dissatisfaction and failure” (Introduction, Faber Book of Modern American Verse, 1956).

American literature engages the meanings of freedom and equality and investigates many forms that the fortune-seeking “pursuit of happiness” has taken. This phrase, so important, contains the revision that Jefferson made in the list of rights that John Locke had defined in The Second Treatise of Government (1689). Locke had written, “life, liberty and property,” but Jefferson (adapting Mason’s phrasing in his Declaration for Virginia) emphasized a “pursuit,” that is, an ongoing activity, a mission, an act of striving for “happiness,” for good fortune, felicity, and enjoyment of the good. Jefferson “tied the
new nation’s star to an open-ended, democratic process whereby individuals develop their own potential and seek to realize their own life goals,” Eric Foner maintains in *The Story of American Freedom* (1998). This desire, an American hunger, is the force that impels American literature.

American writers struggle with the problem of so much to say, of so much wanting and so much history to weigh and give expression to. American literature often is wild and exorbitant, and not only in obvious cases like Allen Ginsberg and Sylvia Plath. The extreme passion for form in Henry James; the massive mobilizations of description and commentary in Theodore Dreiser; the career-long determination in Eliot and Stevens to shape lines of verse sufficient to truth: there is wildness of many kinds in these and other American writers—Whitman, Hart Crane, Melville, Faulkner, Ellison. They search for, and draw upon, the self-identifying power that the Declaration of Independence authorized.

American literature is sublime, and much of it is both beautiful and fierce, desperate to express in a line or a sentence a feeling about the self, about the country, that language has never before captured. It is a competitive literature, as writers, motivated by the richness of this literature’s traditions (its exemplary achievements, its verbal resources), push beyond them.

The last word belongs to Thoreau, from his essay “Walking” (1862), where he articulates the hope and confidence, balanced against a pointed question, that Jefferson and the signers of the Declaration of Independence had aroused in the generations that followed them and that should empower and inspire us:

If the moon looks larger here than in Europe probably the sun looks larger also. If the heavens of America appear infinitely higher, and the stars brighter, I trust that these facts are symbolical of the height to which the philosophy and poetry and religion of her inhabitants may one day soar. I trust that we shall be more imaginative, that our thoughts will be clearer, fresher, and more ethereal, as our sky,—our understanding more comprehensive and broader, like our plains,—our intellect generally on a grander scale, like our thunder and lightning, our rivers and mountains and forests,—and our hearts shall even correspond in breadth and depth and grandeur to our inland seas. Perchance there will appear to the traveler something, he knows not what … of joyous and serene, in our very faces. Else to what end does the world go on, and why was America discovered?

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