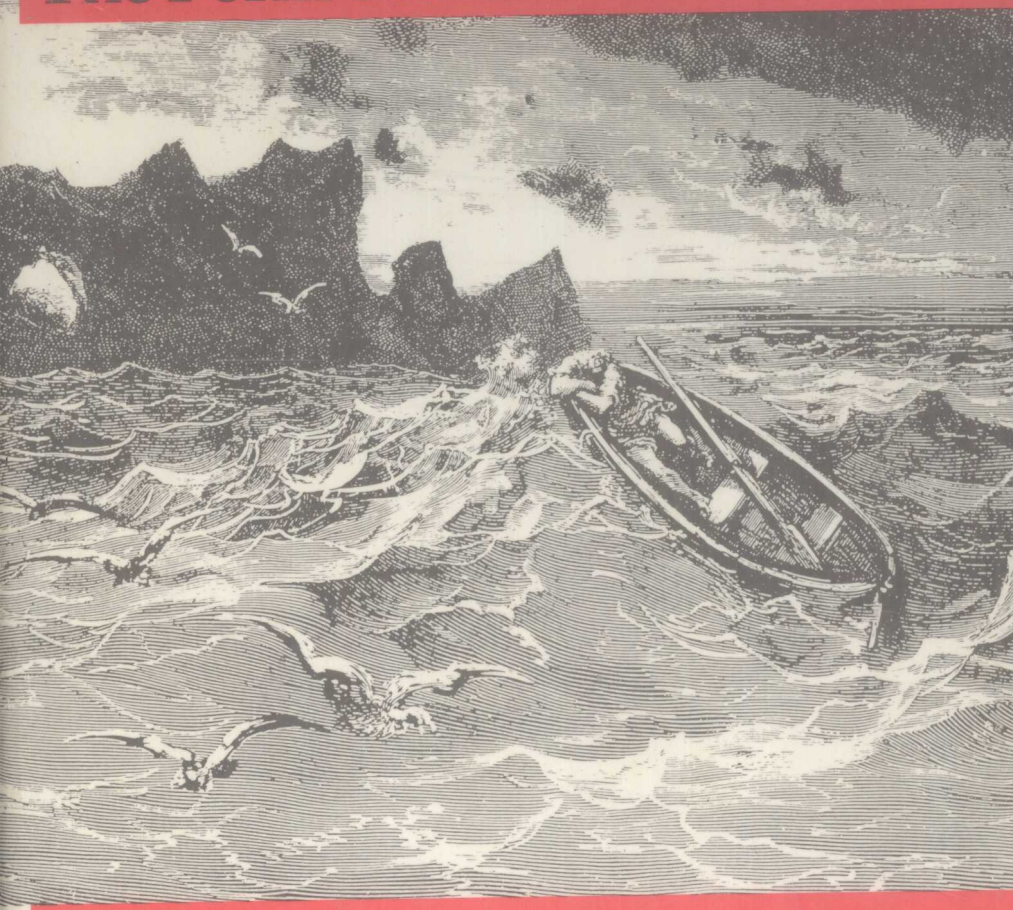
# The Form of American Romance



Edgar A. Dryden

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The Johns Hopkins
University Press
BALTIMORE/LONDON

Printed in the United States of America

The Johns Hopkins University Press
701 West 40th Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21211
The Johns Hopkins Press Ltd., London

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences–Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Dryden, Edgar A.
The form of American romance / Edgar A. Dryden. p. cm.
Bibliography: p.
Includes index.
ISBN 0-8018-3675-1 (alk. paper)
1. American fiction–History and criticism. 2. Romanticism–United States. 3. Literary form. I. Title.
PS374.R6D79 1988
813'.009–dc19 88-6490
CIP

For
Jonathan,
Stephanie,
and Nathan

# PREFACE

> Before going about putting a certain example to the test, I shall attempt to formulate, in a manner as elliptical, economical, and formal as possible, what I shall call the law of the law of genre. It is precisely a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy. In the code of set theories, if I may use it as least figuratively, I would speak of a sort of participation without belonging—a taking part in without being part of, without having membership in a set.
>
> —Jacques Derrida,
> "The Law of Genre"

The idea of romance has long been an important one to writers and readers seeking to establish the borderlines that will circumscribe the field of American fiction by setting it apart from other national literatures. Such demarcations of a literary corpus, however, are accompanied by theoretical and practical difficulties. Recent questionings of American romance as a formal and generic category have disturbed the serene methodological self-assurance that characterized earlier studies of the American novel by reminding us of the extent to which, in Fredric Jameson's words, "categories, such as those of genre . . . are implicated in the literary history and formal production that they were traditionally supposed to clarify and neutrally to describe."[1] Nevertheless, while we may question the taxonomic certainty of generic categories we must also recognize that, as Derrida has shown, "there is no genreless text."[2] And indeed American romance illustrates in a remarkable way the principle

of contamination that for Derrida marks the idea of genre. For even the individual texts generically identified as such by a subtitled designation, as in *The Scarlet Letter: A Romance,* seem at the same time to resist confining generic categories and to violate their formal purity by the blurring and crossing of borderlines. Such texts suggest that we must consider the category of genre theoretically rather than to take it for granted as a transparent concept whose meaning we can know unequivocably and can use as an unexamined starting point for interpretation. So while my study, for the most part, works with texts from the established canon of the American novel arranged in traditional canonical ways, it does so in a fashion designed to question and unsettle traditional categories. It attempts at once a theoretical and reflexive approach to the concept of American romance by focusing on the question of form, taking "form" as a term for the enabling principles of a work rather than for its external shape. My guide here is Ortega y Gasset's discussion of literary genre in his admirable *Meditations on Quixote.* Seen from his perspective American romance becomes not merely the name of a fictional form but of a fictional content which "reaches fulfillment in the process of its expansion or manifestation."[3] It becomes at one and the same time "a certain thing to be said and the only way to say it fully" (113). But for the writers that I discuss there is an incompatibility between the shaping power and that which is shaped, and this problem of form enters into their works as an essential theme, with the result that they stage the process of their own self-engendering.[4] My first chapter attempts a description of the manifestation and temporal unfolding of the basic tendencies or directions that constitute that process by placing them within the larger context of some of the fundamental aspects that mark the novel as a form. I am not, in short, claiming that American fiction has a history exclusively its own. It is not my intention to strengthen what one critic has called the "myth of American exceptionalism."[5] But I shall argue that for the writers that I discuss the author's place or situation as an American becomes a metaphor for his artistic concerns, and

the dark, magical, and dreamlike narratives that he produces bring to the foreground the problem of fictional form in an especially interesting way. However, the concept of literary form as I understand it is one that resists a purely theoretical description, one that must emerge narratively from the process of rigorously interpreting individual texts. Hence I follow the initial chapter with careful readings of five American novels. This focus on individual texts, while it may seem at times to lead away from the main line of the argument, is intended, rather, to suggest new ways of conceiving it, of allowing a sense of the form of American romance to arise out of the process of reading itself.

Now, as Northrop Frye has shown, romance is the paradigm of all storytelling, and, for that reason, perhaps, since the Renaissance it has been defined in terms of its problematic relation to a reader.[6] Indeed A. C. Hamilton argues that "of all the genres only romance enchants or 'takes'" the readers by drawing them into the text in order to absorb and possess them. Hence the experience of reading becomes the essential theme of romance, a fact that leads Hamilton to suggest that reader response criticism offers the most useful approach to the form.[7]

Since I shall argue that the act of reading generates the enabling energy of American romance and take advantage of the insights of a number of critics whose works are associated with the recent refocus of criticism on the reader, I want to emphasize here that I am not primarily concerned with developing or using a theoretical model of reading. My main interest is not with readers reading but rather with the implications of the ways reading is represented in certain American texts. More specifically, I am concerned with exploring the curious and troubling moment where the act of reading appears to mark and disturb the American novelist's passage from life to writing and to entangle experience with an intertextual system of relationships. By describing the unique and special problem that that moment generates in five American texts, I want to sketch a "history" of American romance that will complicate the question of its uniqueness by illustrating ways in which it is exemplary.

As Joseph Riddel has noted, the historical moment that the American critical fable identifies as marking the beginning of a distinctive native voice coincides with the one the French see announcing the advent of modernism.[8] And, perhaps for similar reasons, the "history" of the American novel echoes in a remarkable way the preoccupations of both domestic and European critics of the novel. This relationship forms the subtext that I try to articulate in the notes to the first chapter while I focus directly on the problem of elaborating a genealogy of American romance, but one that is understood to be constructed rather than natural, or, to use Edward Said's formulation, one that emphasizes a relationship of affiliation rather than one of filiation or natural descent.[9]

A word about the novels that form the line of relationships that I chart. The ones that I discuss may seem somewhat arbitrarily chosen, but no choice of examples is an entirely innocent one, and my selection privileges the novels in several senses. They are, first of all, texts that focus on the formal implications of the problems of writing and reading in a way that has a long genealogy in the history of the novel as well as a specific importance in the configuration of its development in America. Each has been chosen with the others in mind with the hope that the interplay of my examples will suggest the nuances of my argument. For instance, in all the novels that I discuss echoing is a figure of representation which carries with it a set of associated themes including broken or substitute genealogical relations, problems of originality and repetition, fragmented voices, and misdirected, delayed, or torn letters, and these issues become the enabling impulses that seek their fulfillment in the form of the individual novels. Moreover each of my novels occupies an exemplary position in a particular authorial career and hence illustrates its author's struggle with his chosen form in especially revealing ways. Finally, taken together, the five novels chart a line of development that provides representative examples of what literary history calls romanticism, realism, modernism, and postmodernism and hence suggest a certain story about the continuity of the

American novel. But this is a story whose plot must emerge from the readings of the individual texts, readings that I have tried to organize in such a way that they will echo one another and thereby convey my sense of the enabling themes that each text shares with the others and will make possible a concluding description of the form of their relationship.

In preparing this study I have incurred a number of debts and take pleasure in acknowledging them here. First I want to thank my colleagues at Arizona who read and commented on portions of the manuscript: Patrick O'Donnell, Suresh Raval, and Charles Sherry. More than ever I am grateful for the continuing support of my old friends Homer Brown, John Rowe, and Joseph Riddel. Their enduring friendship and the example of their scholarship have provided a large part of the enabling energy for my study. A major portion of the book was written during my tenure of a fellowhip from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, and I am deeply grateful for the free time it provided.

Early versions of parts of this book have already been published. Chapter 1 was published as such in *Genre* 17 (Winter 1985): 335–61. A few paragraphs of the Hawthorne chapter first appeared in *Individual and Community: Variations on a Theme in American Fiction,* ed. Kenneth H. Baldwin and David K. Kirby (Durham: Duke University Press, 1975) and are reprinted here with the permission of Duke University Press; part of the Melville chapter was published as "From the Piazza to the Enchanted Isles: Melville's Textual Rovings," in *After Strange Texts: The Role of Theory in the Study of Literature,* ed. Gregory S. Jay and David L. Miller (University: University of Alabama Press, 1985), 46–68 and is reprinted here with the permission of the University of Alabama Press; another part of the Melville chapter has been published as "The Entangled Text: Melville's *Pierre* and the Problem of Reading," *Boundary 2* 7 (Spring 1979): 145–73; an early version, since extensively revised, of the James chapter appeared as "The Image in the Mirror: The Double Economy of James's *Portrait,*" *Genre* 13 (Spring 1980): 31–49.

# ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE TEXT

| | |
|---|---|
| *AA* | William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* New York: Random House, Vintage Books Edition, 1972. |
| *BR* | Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance.* Edited by William Charvat, Roy Harvey Pearce, and Claude M. Simpson. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1964. |
| *C* | John Barth, *Chimera.* New York: Random House, 1972. |
| *FIN* | Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The French and Italian Notebooks.* Edited by Thomas Woodson. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1980. |
| *FR* | William Faulkner, *The Faulkner Reader.* New York: Random House, 1961. |
| HHM | Herman Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses." In *Moby-Dick.* Edited by Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker. New York: W. W. Norton, 1967. |
| *HSG* | Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of The Seven Gables.* Edited by William Charvat, Roy Harvey Pearce, and Claude M. Simpson. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1965. |
| *L* | John Barth, LETTERS. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1979. |
| *LIF* | John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse.* New York: Doubleday & Co., 1968. |

*M-D* Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick.* Edited by Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker. New York: W. W. Norton, 1967.

*MF* Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun.* Edited by William Charvat, Roy Harvey Pearce, and Claude M. Simpson. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1968.

*MOM* Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Mosses from an Old Manse.* Edited by William Charvat, Roy Harvey Pearce, and Claude M. Simpson. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1974.

*P* Herman Melville, *Pierre.* Edited by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971.

P Herman Melville, "The Piazza." in *Piazza Tales,* edited by Egbert S. Oliver. New York: Hendricks House, 1962.

*PL* Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady.* Edited by Leon Edel. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963.

*SL* Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter.* Edited by William Charvat, Roy Harvey Pearce, and Claude M. Simpson. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1974.

*TT* Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Twice-Told Tales.* Edited by William Charvat, Roy Harvey Pearce, and Claude M. Simpson. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1974.

*UC* Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Snow Image and Uncollected Tales.* Edited by William Charvat, Roy Harvey Pearce, and Claude M. Simpson. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1974.

*W* Sir Walter Scott, *Waverley.* Dutton, 1906.

# CONTENTS

# ONE

## *The Thematics of a Form:* Waverley *and American Romance*

In the summer the sun pours down torrents of fire on La Mancha, and frequently the burning earth produces the effect of a mirage. The water which we see is not real water, but there is something real in it: its source. This bitter source, which produces the water of the mirage, is the desperate dryness of the land. We can experience a similar phenomenon in two directions: one simple and straight, seeing the water which the sun depicts as actual; another, ironic, oblique, seeing it as a mirage, that is to say, seeing through the coolness of the water the dryness of the earth in disguise. The ingenuous manner of experiencing imaginary and significant things is found in the novel of adventure, the tale, the epic; the oblique manner in the realistic novel. The latter needs the mirage to make us see it as such. So it is not only that *Quixote* was written against the books of chivalry, and as a result bears them within it, but that the novel as a literary genre consists essentially of such an absorption.

—Ortega, *Meditations on Quixote*

For Ortega literary genres are at once historic and thematic categories, "certain basic themes, mutually exclusive," a particular literary genre being "at one and the same time a certain thing to be said and the only way to say it fully."[1] Because each epoch is a "basic interpretation of man . . . each epoch prefers a particular genre" (113). The novel, genre of the modern epoch, is born of the Renaissance's discovery of the "*me ipsum,* the consciousness, the subjective" (138) and names a "basic poetic content" (113) that can best be described in terms of a thematics of perception and interpretation. *Don Quixote* focuses on the shifting play between hallucinated and oblique modes of reading, and all subsequent novels, which "bear *Quixote* within [them] like an inner filigree" (162), echo that troubling relationship.

The law of the modern and the law of the novel, then, is a mode of reading or understanding that results in the "criticism," "destruction," and "absorption" (139) of one book by another. From this point of view the history of the novel may be seen as a history of reading that takes the form of putting into question a process that seems at first to possess the force and dignity of a natural arrangement.[2] As Frank Kermode perceptively observes, the novel seems "somehow a *substitute* for critical thought about the interpretation of earlier narrative."[3] In that sense it is a manner of reading that is a writing, an oblique, ironic "seeing" that at once reveals the innocence of naive narratives and naive readers and uses that innocence as a mode of self creation. "By itself, seen in a direct way," Ortega writes, "reality, the actual . . . would never be poetic" (139). But when we consider it "obliquely," through the lenses of the "mirage," we perform the reading that is at once destructive and creative.

This is the logic that allows us to see *Don Quixote* as establishing the basic pattern and enabling theme for the genre: two kinds of text, the romance and the novel, the old and the new, with the new directed against the old, which is regarded as naive, mystified, and potentially dangerous, but at the same time tied to it and dependent on it as a point of departure; and two kinds of reader, the one naive and innocent, enchanted by

the magic of story and doomed by his or her very involvement to disillusionment, and the other, serious, critical, and interpretive, suspicious of story as leading away from productive, active involvement with the text and the world of which it is a part, but, at the same time, aware of the undeniable pleasures associated with its magic.[4]

A particularly interesting version of this pattern exists in the eighteenth-century English fiction, in those texts that have been said to mark the "rise of the novel." Both the novelists and their critics were vitally interested in the possibly subversive effects that fiction could have on readers, especially the naive and innocent ones. For these readers, novels and romances might serve as instruments of debauchery capable of perverting the imagination, turning the head, and making young ladies unfit for marriage.[5] According to one reviewer, "wild scenes" in novels "excite, tend to debauch the mind, and throw an insipid kind of uniformity over the moderate and rational prospects of life, consequently adventures are sought for and created, when duties are neglected, and content despised."[6] This remarkable and frightening power presumably derives from the novel's ability to excite the curiosity and thereby to divert the attention from the real world to a world of make-believe that is found so absorbing that one becomes apathetic to real life.[7] Apologists for the novel as well as its detractors acknowledge fiction's magical powers, but its defenders, following the example of earlier apologists for poetry and drama, point to the way that magic may be used for moral and pedagogical ends. Through the careful use of novels and romances the "Rigour of Precepts" may be mollified by the "Allurements of Example."[8] Because they entertain, novels may also instruct, but it is important that the entertainment function remain subordinate to the principle of instruction.[9]

To the readers of Richardson and Defoe, of course, this is a familiar theme, one of the most interesting versions of which appears in the preface to *Moll Flanders.*

But as this Work is chiefly recommended to those who know how to Read it, and how to make the good Uses of it, which the Story all along recommends to them; so it is to be hop'd that such Readers will be much more pleas'd with the Moral, than the Fable; with the Application, than with the Relation, and with the End of the Writer, than with the Life of the Person written of.[10]

Defoe distinguishes here between two kinds of readers, one naively fascinated by adventure who focuses on the "Fable," the other, more serious, primarily interested in the "end of the Writer" and the productive "Application" of the text. It is the second, one supposes, who knows how properly to read the text and make the "good Uses of it, which the Story all along recommends," though the passage is ambiguous enough to raise questions. But one point is clear: Defoe sees that the magic of "Fable" is capable of charming even the serious, productive reader. "The Moral 'tis hop'd will keep the Reader serious, even where the Story might incline him to be otherwise" (4). So powerful are the attractions of the private pleasures that story offers, pleasures that may be both erotic and perverse, that they threaten to overwhelm those associated with communal and interpretive activities. Defoe seems to be suggesting here that reading is only superficially related to interpretation, the latter being an activity that is at once more serious and less interesting. This is an attitude that Frank Kermode describes as a "cultural myth" that is "attached specifically to the reading of fictional narrative,"[11] and one, I would add, that is born from the "absorption" that marks the novel as genre. For the "modern" text always contains within itself the earlier narrative and the unfounded assumptions that give it the transparency of a simple tale. And, as Kermode observes, the "mere existence of a story-line, and the more or less traditional devices by which a text can pretend to establish the authenticity of its account of the world, can insure the abandonment of strenuous analytic activity."[12] Even the serious reader may be overwhelmed by the

unreality of the story and give in to his desire to see the narrative knot unraveled, the secret of the text revealed. And since this possibility is inscribed within the text itself, it poses a disturbing problem for the author as well as the reader. The author must not only contend with the spell of story, find a way to work with illusions without being deluded, but also establish a contract with the reader that will insure that their relation is grounded on the important rather than the trivial. In short, the author must find a way to establish and maintain authority as an author in the face of a deviant energy that threatens to subvert the dignity and importance of writing.

The emphasis on moral and religious instruction in Richardson's and Defoe's prefaces and the critical commentaries by their contemporaries represents one attempt to control—one might say rationalize—the magic of story. A different but related effort occurs in the fiction and criticism of Sir Walter Scott with results that influence at least a generation of English and American novelists.[13] Early in *Waverley* the narrator interrupts his brief sketch of Waverley Honour to offer an apology to the reader.

I beg pardon, once and for all, of those readers who take up novels merely for amusement, for plaguing them so long with old-fashioned politics, and Whig and Tory, and Hanoverians and Jacobites. The truth is, I cannot promise them that this story shall be intelligible, not to say probable, without it. My plan requires that I should explain the motives on which its action proceeded; and these motives necessarily arose from the feelings, prejudices, and parties, of the times. I do not invite my fair readers, whose sex and impatience give them the greatest right to complain of these circumstances, into a flying chariot drawn by hippogriffs, or moved by enchantment. Mine is a humble English post-chaise, drawn upon four wheels, and keeping his majesty's highway. Such as dislike the vehicle may leave it at the next halt, and wait for the conveyance of Prince Hussein's tapestry, or Malek the Weaver's flying sentry-box. Those who are contented to remain with me will