At Emerson's tomb : the politics of classic American literature

John Carlos Rowe.

At Emerson's Tomb

The Politics of Classic American Literature

John Carlos Rowe

Columbia University Press
New York

At Emerson's Tomb

The Politics of Classic American Literature

Columbia University Press
Publishers Since 1893
New York Chichester, West Sussex

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Rowe, John Carlos
At Emerson's tomb : the politics of classic American literature / John Carlos Rowe.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.
ISBN 0-231-05894-2 (cl).—ISBN 0-231-05895-0 (pa)
1. American literature—19th century—History and criticism. 2. Politics and literature—United States—History—19th century. 3. Emerson, Ralph Waldo. 1803–1882—Political and social views. 4. American literature—20th century—History and criticism. 5. Literature and society—United States. 6. Antislavery movements—United States. 7. Women's rights in literature. 8. Liberalism in literature. 9. Sex role in literature. 10. Race in literature. I. Title.
PS217.P64R69 1997
96-24554
814'.3—dc20
CIP

Casebound editions of Columbia University Press books are printed on permanent and durable acid-free paper.

Printed in the United States of America
c 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
p 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In memory of Joseph N. Riddel

"his mind leaping
like dolphins"

Contents

Preface

In this book, I reassess the liberal tradition of American literature in terms of its relevance to the two great rights movements of modern American history: the abolition of slavery and the women's rights movement. In more general terms, this book examines the ways in which classic American writers from Emerson to Faulkner responded to changing attitudes toward race and gender from the 1840s to 1940s. My methodological assumption is that the claims for social reform made so often by liberal culture should be evaluated in terms of the political and social achievements of specific historical movements.

Of course, demonstrable political changes are not the only ways in which social reforms occur, and I try in the following chapters to suggest some of the ways that literary works change psychological attitudes and thus humans' behaviors in ways that go beyond political and legal reform. Even as I recognize the uniqueness of the changes literature and the arts can bring in individuals' attitudes, I also argue that psychological transformations of readers and viewers are most effective when they are linked with larger social and political reforms. Too often and for too long, the Emersonian tradition of "aesthetic dissent" has defined itself as distinct from those political movements through which historical progress has been achieved in America.

The term "classic" is used in this study in a deliberately ambiguous manner. On the one hand, it refers to the writings by authors associated primarily

with the Emersonian tradition that has shaped what several generations of readers have understood to be the distinctive qualities both of American literature and the American experience. In this century, Emerson, Poe, Melville, Whitman, Twain, Henry James, and Faulkner have been crucial figures of this literary experience for readers both in this country and around the world. This "American Exceptionalism" has been rightly challenged by many recent cultural critics, and it is one of my primary purposes in this book to contribute to that critique. Yet, the aim of my criticism is not to abandon the writings of some of our most powerful social critics for the sake of other literary traditions that have been unjustly ignored and excluded from that tradition. Instead, I hope to construct a new literary tradition that will have closer intellectual and practical alliances with the political and social reform movements that have improved democratic opportunities and broadened our understanding of what it means to be an American. "Classic American literature" in this latter sense, then, must include works that have contributed to this ongoing process of democratization, whether or not those works have been previously recognized as literary masterpieces. Thus the works I discuss by Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and Kate Chopin are interpreted as "classics," because their enduring values derive less from their transcendence of time than from their profound involvement in our history. Most readers will agree that the classic achieves its status because it still has something to tell us, and I would add that such continuing relevance indicates human problems that still command our attention.

I have tried to connect the ten chapters that focus on specific literary works by means of certain complementary and supplementary gestures from which the writers themselves did not always benefit in their own times and mutual relations. Emerson, Melville, and Whitman would have learned much from their contemporaries, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, and we must conclude that racial divisions and gender hierarchies discouraged such education. In my argument, the respective intellectual impasses reached by Emerson, Melville, and Whitman—the inapplicability of transcendentalism to the politics of abolition and the complicity of literary authority with the ideological authorities of modern America—are overcome in Douglass' and Jacobs' uses of literature for explicit political ends. My purpose in emphasizing such complementarities is to stress the intellectual and educational advantages of bringing together different literary traditions, especially when their differences can be made the basis of debate. The point of contact between such different historical and cultural traditions is often the site of historical change, and scholarly books may sometimes help effect such change by establishing such contact.

In the same regard, Twain, James, Chopin, and Faulkner would have benefited from the influences of more politically pragmatic and equally profound

literary writers like Douglass, Jacobs, Hurston, and Morrison. What Chopin's Edna Pontellier misses in her bid for freedom is precisely the sisterhood with women of color whose labor and identity are so profoundly marginalized by Creole society in New Orleans. In their advocacy of communal agency and their critique of self-reliance, Douglass and Jacobs offer alternatives to what Henry James and Faulkner anxiously experience as their reproduction of the aristocratic pretensions of European and Southern feudalism. Taken together, women and African-American writers in this study represent some of the different modes of political, social, and literary agency by means of which these writers not only criticized but also helped transvalue the dominant American ideology of their times. In this respect, they offer positive responses to Twain's pessimism about the chances for genuine freedom available to African Americans and immigrants in the post-Civil War period.

There is yet another, less explicitly acknowledged, critical narrative that links the ten major American writers discussed in this book. Each struggles in turn with the elements of what today we recognize as postmodern social life: the unanchored, multiple self; the discursive basis for all experience and thus the socially constructed character of such experience; the attenuation of the body and the material world; the consequent crises of authority and value. These and many other characteristics of our postmodern condition are already central to the concerns of these nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers. In some cases, we can conclude that they were indeed prescient, anticipating our contemporary concerns because of their understanding of the social structures of a modernity from which our postmodernity surely derives. In other cases, their prescience was also informed by their experiences as women and/or oppressed minorities, often the first of us to experience the full consequences of social hypocrisy and ideological contradiction. As several of the writers in this study continue to warn us, the means of oppression first used to control those in the weakest social position are the same as those used to achieve more comprehensive social control in subsequent periods.

The postmodern dimension of my argument is not intended to be a deliberate anachronism for the purpose of reviving interest in texts now fifty to one hundred and fifty years old. Our current postmodern society has deep roots in the American modernity that begins with industrialization, westward expansion, and the contemporary efforts to reconceptualize the agrarian economy that had relied in significant part on slavery. The questions we ask today about authority, agency, the production of value, and the modes of economic and social production are by no means utterly new or original questions. Each of the writers interpreted in this book has something explicit to say about how our postmodern condition developed out of this modernity, whether it be Poe's

aggressive effort to situate his poetic authority at the center of the postmodern economy, Jacobs' use of the increasingly malleable definitions of family and feminine identity to construct alternative meanings, or Twain's and Warner's satire of a speculative economy and thus their nostalgia for an older, more stable system of social values. Recognizing the many different approaches currently available for the study of our postmodern condition, I begin this study by claiming unequivocally that such postmodernity is the consequence of complex historical processes that are nevertheless open to our collective understanding as intellectuals.

Cultural critics are happily less embarrassed by their exclusions and omissions than scholars of other schools and movements, in part because cultural studies takes the vast and untotalizable field of "culture" for its object of study. There is, of course, properly no such "object," but myriad subjects and disciplines that can be comprehended only with the help of other specialists. I have selected works that stretch from the 1840s to the 1940s without any presumption that I have thereby "represented" the complexity of American cultural and political realities in this hundred-year period. Nevertheless, there are certain areas of emphasis that might properly have figured in this book, given its argument and focus on political rights movements of the modern period. My discussion of race in this book is almost exclusively informed by literary and ideological conceptions of white and African-American peoples and cultures. Yet, the ideological construction of racial hierarchies in the United States relies profoundly on its caricature of Native American cultures according to a wide variety of myths intended to justify our genocidal policies toward native peoples. From Roy Harvey Pearce and Richard Slotkin to Gerald Vizenor, Arnold Krupat, and Louis Owens, specialists in Native American studies have not only analyzed the "Myth of the Vanishing American" and its ideology, but added to the work of Native American writers, like Leslie Silko and Louise Erdrich, that "writes back" to reaffirm the different cultures of Pueblo, Ojibway, Lakota, and other native peoples in the face of their continuing exclusion by the dominant American ideology.

I also do not address the developing nineteenth-century ideologies of sexuality that established the terms that would be used by the end of the century to marginalize lesbian and gay sexual preferences. Critics like Eve Sedgwick, Richard Dellamorra, Michael Moon, and Scott Derrick have taught us much about how ideologies of race, gender, and sexuality are mutually constructed and thus must be disentangled in related ways. My interpretation of Whitman's bid to renew his poetic power in the face of the political crisis and the human damage of the Civil War draws on their theories of nineteenth-century homosociality (and its inherent homophobia), but my approach in no way develops what

such critics distinguish as the very different homosexual identity articulated by gays and lesbians in response to their marginalization and demonization. Quite clearly, Whitman's career is a major example of just such an alternative sexuality and how it challenged the strict binaries of acceptable gender roles and sexual identities in the nineteenth century.

These are only two of the most important exclusions in a study that attempts to establish the terms for enriching the description and interpretation of "classic" American literature by including not just the works but also the intellectual challenges and literary experiments of some of the different cultures that compose America. The study of Asian-American challenges to "American" literature, especially in the period of the Chinese Exclusion Laws, and the rich heritage of the several different cultures associated with Chicano and Latino communities are areas of complementarity with the present study that must be sought in the writings of many other contemporary scholars who have published work in what are by now well-established intellectual disciplines. Just as our students cannot know America without studying the many different cultures that compose this society, so we must read a wide variety of different books to be capable of teaching that America to those students.

I have incurred too many debts in the writing of this book to repay them properly in a brief list of acknowledgments. Many of these chapters were first presented as papers at colleges, universities, and scholarly conferences. I am grateful to my hosts and audiences for their invitations and valuable discussion of these ideas at Princeton University, Pennsylvania State University (and the Poe Studies Association), the Tudor and Stuart Club of Johns Hopkins University, the Institute for North American Studies of Johann-Wolfgang Goethe University (Frankfurt), the American Literature Association, the University of California at Santa Cruz, the Philosophy and Literature Association, Northwestern Louisiana State University, and the Modern Language Association. I benefited greatly from the editors of journals and volumes in which portions of several of these chapters were first published: Richard Kopley, Bainard Cowan, Joseph Kronick, Günter Lenz, Kathryne Lindberg, Forrest Robinson, Susan Gillman, Martha Banta, Lynda Boren, Sara de Saussure Davis, and J. Gerald Kennedy.

I wish to thank the following presses for permission to publish substantially revised versions of work that first appeared as chapters in books they published: Duke University Press for the portions of chapter 3 that first appeared in *Poe's 'Pym': Critical Explorations*, ed. Richard Kopley, and for the portions of chapter 8 that first appeared in *Mark Twain's "Pudd'nhead Wilson:" Race, Conflict, and Culture*, eds. Forrest Robinson and Susan Gillman; Louisiana State University Press for the portions of chapter 4 that first appeared in *Theorizing American*

Literature: Hegel, the Sign, and History, eds. Bainard Cowan and Joseph Kronick, for the portions of chapter 7 that first appeared in *America's Modernisms: Re-Valuing the Canon: Essays in Honor of Joseph N. Riddel*, eds. Joseph Kronick and Kathryne Lindberg, and for the portions of chapter 10 that first appeared in *Kate Chopin Reconsidered: Beyond the Bayou*, eds. Lynda S. Boren and Sara deSaussure Davis; St. Martin's Press for the portions of chapter 5 that first appeared in *Reconstructing American Literary and Historical Studies*, ed. Günter Lenz; Cambridge University Press for the portions of chapter 9 that first appeared in *New Essays on James's "The American,"* ed. Martha Banta, and for the portions of chapter 11 that first appeared in *Modern American Short Story Sequences*, ed. J. Gerald Kennedy.

My wife, Kristin, who is also a teacher, and my sons, Sean, Kevin, and Mark, have been part of all my book projects; to them, I am forever grateful: *I migliori fabbri*.

AT EMERSON'S TOMB
The Politics of Classic American Literature

1 At Emerson's Tomb

Death is seen as a natural event, and is met with firmness. A wise man in our time caused to be written on his tomb, "Think on living." That inscription describes a progress in opinion. Cease from this antedating your experience.

—Emerson, "Immortality"

In the following chapters, I interpret the limitations and possibilities of political critique in the Emersonian tradition of *aesthetic dissent*. By "aesthetic dissent," I mean the romantic idealist assumption that rigorous reflection on the processes of thought and representation constitutes in itself a critique of social reality and effects a transformation of the naive realism that confuses truth with social convention. This utopian dimension of Euro-american romanticism is the basis of the literary modernism that would find its primary critical function in the aesthetic irony practiced by the high moderns and theorized by Anglo-American New Criticism. This is the "aesthetic modernism" that has often been transformed from an historically specific artistic movement to a transhistorical "modernity," an avant-gardism often considered essential to literature. In the study of American literature, it has also served to bolster a certain "American Exceptionalism," to which my 1982 book, *Through the Custom-House*, certainly contributed, despite my explicit effort in that book to challenge traditional conceptions of American literary nationalism by introducing Continental theoretical and philosophical models to read American literature.[1]

"Emersonianism" is easily written but very difficult to trace in any comprehensive way, not simply because the definitions of Emerson's chief influence vary but also because that influence is so vast. The enormous impact of

Emerson's ideas, however those ideas have been "misinterpreted," as both Emerson's defenders and critics claim, is not attributable solely to Emerson's singular genius; it is also a consequence of the adaptability of those ideas to key features of the American ideology. A comprehensive survey of the "critical reception" of Emerson's ideas, then, cannot be attempted in a brief introduction to a study that proposes to examine other traditions existing alongside Emersonianism and yet frequently marginalized or silenced. Instead, I shall use only one excellent example of a careful and dedicated defense of Emersonianism by an influential critic, whose arguments are sufficiently recent to draw together many of the strongest parts of this tradition.

In *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (1987), Richard Poirier treats Emerson as a writer and thinker who understands the essential features of literary language as polysemantic, process-oriented, ceaselessly subversive of convention, and thus performative. For Poirier, literature creates a textual space that is an alternative to the world of ordinary experience, physical materiality, and denotative meaning.[2] This is the aesthetic "world elsewhere" that was the title of an earlier book by Poirier, in which Poirier had argued that an Emersonian "style" established firmly the distinctive qualities of American literature from the transcendentalists to the moderns. Poirier opened *A World Elsewhere* (1966) by claiming: "The most interesting American books are an image of the creation of America itself, of the effort, in the words of Emerson's Orphic poet, to 'Build therefore your own world.' "[3] By the time Poirier published *The Renewal of Literature*, his previous book had been understood by critics to be one of the important contributions to the general proposition that American literature is a version of literary modernism.

America's literary "modernity" is, according to this argument, deeply ingrained in a certain "American" way of thinking and being. As Poirier puts this idea in the opening pages of *The Renewal of Literature*:

> Literature generates its substance, its excitements, its rhetoric, and its plots often with the implicit intention, paradoxically, to get free of them and to restore itself to some preferred state of naturalness, authenticity, and simplicity. . . . Another way to put it, which will help explain why my emphasis on the Emersonians is not merely an American emphasis, is to say that literature implicitly idealizes that condition of bareness, that thinness of social and cultural circumstances, which, according to Henry James and other observers, was supposed to be the special plight of American writers.[4]

As literary modernism became an "international" movement, it merely revealed this essential characteristic of literary idealization that had long been a part of

American literature. Thus the tradition that Poirier traces in *The Renewal of Literature* from Emerson through William James to Wallace Stevens and T. S. Eliot is an *American* tradition that may happily be adapted to *international* literary schools and movements.

William James figures interestingly in Poirier's account of Emersonianism, because Poirier insists that Emerson's idealism is the actual origin of America's only native philosophy, pragmatism. Of course, Poirier develops this argument in his effort to defend Emerson and the tradition he represents against the charge that it has advocated ideas and values that tend to trivialize political praxis, but it is an argument that sounds convincing when Emerson and William James are brought together:

> The effort of reading, like the effort of writing, is entirely its own reward. To ask for more, to seek security in meaning, is a cheat upon literature and upon life. It is like a surrender to Fate. "The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it," [William] James instructs us in *Pragmatism*, "truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events"—including the acts and operations of writing and reading. "Its verity," he continues, "*is* in fact an event, a process: the process namely of verifying itself, its *verification*. Its validity is the process of its valid-*ation*." (Renewal, 44)[5]

What we might term "rhetorical" or "textual" pragmatism in Emerson and William James must be distinguished by Poirier from concrete political action even as such pragmatism must be judged in its own right as a kind of politics of moral reform. Emerson has far more in common with William James, because both are "essentially" philosophers of "language and literature." As Poirier acknowledges, "this will please no one who wants writers to be more politically engaged than Emerson managed to be, and I leave the possible reprimands to them."

Let me say immediately, then, that my argument in this book is part of that "reprimand" of Emerson and the "Emersonianism" Poirier claims can be traced in the tradition of American pragmatism. I take issue with the sort of logical trap into which such Emersonianism forces us, especially where the "politics of literature" is concerned:

> One reason for his emphasis on language as the instrumentality of culture has already been suggested: that there was not much else, institutionally, to be concerned about, not so far as he could see. Slavery, "the woman question," American imperialism in Mexico, all these excited a degree of spirited outrage. But he never imagined that any of them resulted from essential defects in the American system, and in fact could not recognize the presence of a "system." (Renewal, 33–34)

Poirier refers here to Emerson's confidence that America is built upon the antibureaucratic, antisystematic, and ultimately antigovernmental Self that discovers its strength in its capacity to represent itself as "other" from all the conventional determinations (institutions) that threaten it.

For Emerson, such radical selfhood is ultimately "genius": "Through his concept of 'genius' he manages to hold onto an idea of the self, even though it is a self far more shadowy than his rhetoric of individualism has led people to suppose. The self in Emerson is not an entity, not even a function; it is an intimation of a presence, and it comes upon us out of the very act by which the self tries to elude definition" (Renewal, 86–87). Linked with other passages in which Poirier discusses the anti-activist "politics" of such a rhetorical self, it becomes clear that he is *defining* such selfhood and genius by virtue of its capacity to escape political engagement. Poirier explains: "Literature is not in itself an effective political form of action, except under the rather limited conditions described later in this book" (48). Those "conditions" turn out to be the very familiar ones by which the high moderns criticized the social circumstances of a profoundly alienated and alienating industrial age from which all sensitivity to the subtleties of rhetoric and the pragmatics of language had vanished. Modernism at its best reaffirms the Emersonian conviction that "language is . . . the place wherein we can most effectively register our dissent from our fate by means of troping, punning, parodistic echoings, and by letting vernacular idioms play against revered terminologies. Through such resistances, more than through directly political ones, sporadic evidences might emerge of some truer self or 'genius.' Language is the only way to get around the obstructions of language, and in his management of this paradox Emerson shows why he is now and always essential" (72).

Poirier states clearly and succinctly the basic qualities of an Emersonianism that has been used variously to justify an American Exceptionalism and to describe the contours of the international modernism that challenged such national boundaries. It is the naïveté of this theory of literary modernity regarding the workings of ideology that is perhaps the most striking and finally enables this position so easily to be manipulated for purposes contrary to its own lofty goals. Failing to take into account the subtle arts and rhetorical ruses of ideology, the theory of literary modernity assumes that any rhetoric that imitates its style and follows its philosophical predicates will qualify as ethically proper. Yet as so many of the authors studied in the following chapters demonstrate, the powers of patriarchy, slavery, and urban capitalism were profoundly rhetorical and textual in the *real* effects they had on their victims. Indeed, the problems of textual and rhetorical domination are very often the first ones to be addressed by writers, like Douglass and Jacobs and Chopin, who are explicitly committed

to the political functionality of literary representation. What these writers reveal is the degree to which the Emersonianism analyzed so accurately by Poirier is subject to transformation into an aesthetic ideology in the service of the very social and political forces for which Emerson, William James, T. S. Eliot, and Wallace Stevens expressed the greatest contempt.

There is little need at this date to interpret the subtleties of this *aesthetic ideology* and how its overt claims to political critique disguised exclusions and rationalizations that have been quite capably revealed by the new American cultural studies of the last ten years. The great emancipatory movements of the American nineteenth century—women's rights and the abolition of slavery—were unquestionably subordinated by this aesthetic ideology to the "higher laws" of an American Romanticism established firmly by Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman and institutionalized by several generations of professional interpreters. In my opening chapter on Emerson's responses to the specific political issues of his times in such essays as "Emancipation in the British West Indies," his addresses on the Fugitive Slave Law, "American Civilization," and "Woman," I try to show how the subordination of such urgent political and social issues to an aesthetic dissent is endemic to Emerson's transcendentalism, not simply a failure of attention or a "blind spot." Indeed, it is when Emerson talks the *most* about questions of race and gender, as well as about the specifics of political reform, that the complicity of his aesthetics with nineteenth-century U.S. ideology becomes the most apparent. What the admirable work of *rehistoricizing* Emerson has shown us (in the work of scholars as different as Carolyn Porter, Maurice Gonnaud, Barbara Packer, Len Gougeon, and Howard Horwitz) is that Emersonian transcendentalism had an important ideological function to serve in nineteenth-century America: the legitimation of those practices of intellectual abstraction required to rationalize the contradictions of the new industrial economy.[5] As Porter has argued so persuasively, Emersonianism is a mode of reification, despite Emerson's vigorous objections to what he understood as the alienation and commodification inherent in the industrial economy.[6]

It is not surprising, then, that those most committed both to reclaiming their rights to their own labor, both in the economic sphere and the equally important realm of self-representation, should have viewed Emersonianism with such suspicion. In our own times, the most effective critique of Emersonianism has been the rejection of its literary and cultural canons. The successful deconstruction of Emerson is not the work of some Derrida or Harold Bloom, but that of Women's Studies and Afro-American Studies programs (and research initiatives) in the 1960s and 1970s that reconstructed their own traditions, in part by proposing alternatives to Emersonian individualism, the self-sufficient and powerfully gendered genre of the novel (or that special blend of romance

and novel that came persuasively to be known as the "American Novel"), the assumed "privacy" of literary experience (and thus its class-specificity), and the *aesthetic politics* that assumed ideology to be a sort of naive realism or, at best, a crude form of domination.

Of course, this work was not accomplished by way of professional interpretations of Emerson or the traditions with which he was associated: American transcendentalism and European romanticism. The very political efforts of nineteenth-century abolition and the women's rights movement turned crucially on issues of educational opportunity and rights to literacy as basic components of the legal rights to one's identity, self-expression, and control of the labor of one's body. Alienation from one's body as socially, legally, and economically constructed was the shared experience of women and African Americans in the nineteenth-century, however divided post-Civil War political groups representing African Americans and women may have become over such issues as suffrage and economic rights.[7] The rediscovery of just how women and African Americans variously constructed new subject-positions, their own communities, and in this work employed new forms of expression was bound to involve a searching critique of the hegemonic modes of domination that had marginalized these important American cultural legacies. Such cultural criticism was necessary in order for these other voices to be heard in their own terms, rather than as mere "echoes," the ventriloquized "characters" women and African-Americans heard too frequently in both the theater of the everyday and the narratives of high culture speaking *for* them.

Eric Sundquist's *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* is a splendid example of this work of cultural reconstruction, and it influences profoundly my argument in the chapters that follow. Sundquist's work is the culmination of the work of many scholars committed to representing more adequately the unique cultural and political contributions of African-American activists, intellectuals, and artists from Abolition to Civil Rights, from the so-called "fugitive slave narrative" to the diverse arts and politics of the Harlem Renaissance. Sundquist foregrounds the ways African Americans have introduced new modes of expression into American culture by drawing on their African legacies in myth, folklore, music, and dance, as well as the strategies both of survival and affirmation African-Americans developed in folklife, music, song, dance, religion, and storytelling in response to their oppression and exclusion throughout American history. For Sundquist, these different means of cultural representation require "a redefinition of the premises and inherent significance of the central literary documents of American culture."[8] Despite his emphasis on African-American writings, music, song, and political acts, Sundquist is anxious to explain that his intention is:

> . . . not to depose canonical figures but to see their less often celebrated works—Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*, Frederick Douglass' *My Bondage and My Freedom*, and Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*—from the new point of view provided by the introduction of comparatively ancillary but nonetheless important works such as Nat Turner's "Confessions" and Martin Delany's *Blake; or the Huts of America*, and the more extended serious treatment of major authors such as Chesnutt and Du Bois, who are the equals of most any writer in the history of American Literature. (7)

I would describe this sort of literary criticism as *comparative*, even if it deals primarily with U.S. works and cultures.[9]

Sundquist's emphasis is on African-American writers, but his book is "not a study of them alone, nor is it a study . . . of contrasting 'black' and 'white' approaches to the problem of race. Rather, I would like to keep alive the necessary contradiction that the two traditions can be seen as both one and separate. I entertain the assertion of 'separate but (and) equal' European American and African American literary critical traditions."[10] Sundquist's ultimate aim is to make possible the sort of dialectical interchange between the independent traditions of Euroamerican and African-American literatures that ought to have been one important focus of American literary scholarship and too often failed to operate reciprocally even in the production of these two American literatures. For if there is a great tradition of mutual literary influences, frequently ignored by the dominant scholarly and critical schools, there have also been conscious refusals of influence that have not only exemplified racial division in U.S. history but also missed opportunities for crucial political and cultural alliances.

Although they shared the podium on significant occasions in their mutual fight for Abolition, Emerson and Douglass barely refer to each other in their major writings and even correspondence. Of the three references to Emerson in Douglass' three autobiographies, none suggests a substantial influence of transcendentalism on Douglass' thought.[11] By the same token, Emerson's writings, especially those most vigorously critical of slavery, betray no trace of the rhetorical strategies African-American orators, activists, and writers, like Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, had developed in the interests of persuading their auditors and moving the thoughts and emotions of their readers. Melville is familiar with and contemptuous of the proslavery ideology of the southern romances by writers like William Gilmore Simms, John Pendleton Kennedy, and even arguably Edgar Allan Poe, but he relies obliquely and erratically on African-American traditions and then in only selected works, such as *Benito Cereno* and *The Confidence-Man*. Of course, Toni Morrison is profoundly influenced by William Faulkner, just as her writing is fully involved in African-American cultural traditions;

Faulkner is attentive to the vernacular culture of southern African Americans, even if he fails adequately to represent their views and modes of cultural self-representation. There are complex reasons for this history of the uneven interchange between African-American and Euroamerican traditions, but it is safe to say that those reasons are too often traceable to racial divisions that the two cultures still need to overcome both in literary production and scholarly understanding. My interpretation of what Sundquist has achieved in *To Wake the Nations* is a major step toward putting these separate literary and cultural traditions into conversation with each other regarding the issues that have been primarily responsible for dividing them. Because he has insisted on treating African-American cultural traditions in terms of their own integrity—formal inventiveness, social functionality, and political effect, Sundquist has avoided the tendency of so many other studies to subordinate African-American culture to the "models" of the dominant Euroamerican culture.

I very much want my own study to follow Sundquist's example, adding what I can to this new dialectical understanding of these two important nineteenth-century and early modern cultural traditions—helping, in short, to constitute a dialectic that has too often been missing at the productive and interpretive levels of our social understanding. Even as I am attentive to the limitations and exclusions of my own argument—such as the notable absence of the contributions of Native Americans to early modern U.S. culture, I recognize that this dialectic should not be elaborated in our critical and scholarly debates without the incorporation of women's voices in both the political struggles for Abolition and women's rights and in the formation of a national culture composed of several different cultures (a "national multiculture" would be more appropriate as a term). Thus I am critical of Sundquist's explanation about why "neither gender nor sexuality is often foregrounded" in *To Wake the Nations*: "The fact that I do not treat women authors in detail (Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Pauline Hopkins, and Zora Neale Hurston in particular provide significant points of reference throughout) would be a decided shortcoming if my intention had been to write a comprehensive study."[12] The chapters that follow are by no means as comprehensive in their scope as Eric Sundquist's work, whose historical and generic scope is enormous. Even in my more modest argument, however, I must consider the challenge posed to the American literary canon both by American women writers and the literary and cultural politics that follow from their commitments to the women's rights movement and to Abolition.

The efforts to construct independent cultural traditions for women and African-Americans have been extremely successful, in large part because of richness of the materials and because of their self-evident importance for understanding the roles played by culture in political and social change. In my view, some of what has been learned about cultural politics from the women's movement and African-American rights' movements in the nineteenth century now needs to be used to reinterpret and evaluate works and authors associated somewhat unreflectively with the Emersonianism I have described above. The traditional American literary canon need no longer be "expanded," because other traditions have been established independently. But many works and authors in that canon ought to be reassessed in terms of the political efficacy achieved by women's and African-American cultures, to mention here only the two that most powerfully shape the nineteenth and twentieth-century issues in this book.

I view this project as part of what Sacvan Bercovitch calls for in *The Rites of Assent* as a large-scale revaluation of what America's " 'subversive literary tradition' " now should mean, even as we should continue to articulate the different kinds of "subversive" and "critical" literary and cultural strategies that have been employed in our self-consciously "revolutionary" postures as "Americans."[13] Bercovitch does this work in *The Rites of Assent* by drawing out the challenges to ideology in Emerson, Hawthorne, and Melville while detailing their complicity in a mid-nineteenth-century ideology slow to abolish slavery and perversely resistant to changes in gender hierarchies (while simultaneously eradicating American Indian cultures in pursuit of liberal policies). Rehistoricizing classic American literature means for Bercovitch articulating its conflicted qualities, and I agree that any act of cultural transformation must be understood within the constraints of its specific historical moment, including the limitations inevitable in every political practice. What Bercovitch fails to do, even as he recognizes its importance, is provide an effective hermeneutic for distinguishing literary "subversions" that contribute to progressive change from nominally "liberal" or "progressive" sentiments that merely help ideology adapt to new circumstances. In contrast, Sundquist provides us with the terms for judging when Douglass has been coopted by the bourgeois ideology of the nuclear and patriarchal family, for example, and distinguishing this from Nat Turner's use of millennial rhetoric to refuse the cooptation of his words or his deeds by the dominant culture.[14] Failing to make this distinction, Bercovitch can only show how any "major work" of American literature (the phrase is his) potentially challenges ideology, potentially transforms ideology, and just as potentially is recaptured by ideology. Just such a capacity to negotiate between an easy consensus and a more difficult and perhaps actual dissensus is what constitutes the "major" or "classic" literary work for Bercovitch.

Thus when Bercovitch turns to works that may rightly claim to have contributed demonstrably to social change, he finds in them many of the same ideological conflicts as he had found in his earlier (and much more detailed) inter-

pretations of classic American literature. Nowhere is this more evident than in Bercovitch's reading of Frederick Douglass' 1845 *Narrative* and the apparent appeal at the end of the *Narrative* to "the *liberating* appeal for Douglass of free-enterprise ideology."Acknowledging in passing Douglass' manipulation of that ideology for his own rhetorical purposes, Bercovitch nonetheless emphasizes how "Freedom for Douglass means self-possessive individualism."This does not "necessarily . . . de-radicalize" the 1845 *Narrative*, Bercovitch claims, in part because what Bercovitch wants to do is use the self-evident political efficacy of Douglass' work of abolition to *reradicalize* the Emersonianism that Bercovitch draws finally from Douglass. It is an "Emersonianism" that Bercovitch must put in a long footnote as an explicit equation, but the point is clear—Emerson and Douglass are similarly caught in the radicalism *and* ideological constraints of an American ideal of "freedom" that is the paradox of liberal democracy.[15]

Bercovitch creates his own problem by insisting on reading Douglass (or Stowe, as Bercovitch does in pages just preceding these involving the 1845 *Narrative*) in terms of an American ideology sustained as it was problematized by the very literary tradition he knows we must now transform. My own approach is to read that literary tradition of Emersonianism *through* Douglass. Far from being an enthusiastic endorsement of "free-enterprise ideology" and thus of the ontology of "self-possessive individualism," the conclusion of Douglass' 1845 *Narrative* connects economic self-determination with rhetorical self-determination and the necessary complement of a shared discursive community. Douglass' ability to earn his own wages cannot be distinguished from the political symbolism of "self-purchase," which is a symbolic act made so by virtue of the collective work of abolitionists (in this case, the English abolitionists who raised the funds and the Northern abolitionists who arranged the legal transfer). And the coordinated work of abolitionists serves as a sign, like the collective "I" of this political "autobiography," to the "brothers and sisters" in the South who will join this communal action as abolition succeeds. Having experienced in Durgin and Bailey's shipyard in Baltimore some of the limitations of "free-enterprise," Douglass is hardly a naive propagandist for laissez-faire capitalism.

By the same token, Douglass is fully aware of the importance of signs, whether they be words or money, in self-determination, and he encourages the reader to respect the authority over earnings and self-representation that the rights to one's own being should bring. The point of ideological contradiction is not so much Douglass' apparent naïveté before the new slavery of wage-exploitation, although it is fair to say that the 1845 *Narrative* does not provide a comprehensive interpretation of Northern social and economic practices. Rather than collapse Douglass into Emerson, effectively minimizing the differences between abolitionist rhetorical practices and the "aesthetic dissent" of

Emerson, I develop that aspect of Douglass' political practice that seems logically necessary and yet strangely underdetermined in his narrative: the revolution in gender that ought to accompany the revolution against slavery.

What prevents Douglass' *Narrative* from being translated into the "self-possessive individualism" that underwrites the tradition of American autobiography from the Puritans to Moderns is a deliberate identification with the victimization of African-American women under slavery. I will not repeat here what I develop at some length in my reading of Douglass' fictional recovery of his childhood witnessing of the whipping of Aunt Hester—that scene both of voyeuristic eroticism and sympathetic terror—except to say that it exemplifies for me the political efficacy of a certain literary identification, in which it is possible for the subject—in this case white Northern readers and the African-American male author—to experience imaginatively (and thereby sympathetically) the process of the other's victimization.

Such literary experiences are for me profoundly political, and I privilege them in my interpretations of the texts that constitute this narrative of classic American literature. Such moments are often divided between appeals to the reader either for conventionalization—the erotic satisfaction of the white male reader anxious to witness the African-American woman's vulnerability—or for transformation—the sympathy of the recollected child in his awareness that this could "happen to him," that such victimization should awaken revolutionary solidarity. There is for each such literary experience a fundamental horizon or boundary beyond which the text does not go, and it is often at this impasse that the text's complicity with ideology may be read the most easily. The limitation in Douglass' representation of gender in the 1845 *Narrative* is the extent to which African-American women are made essential to the work of abolition and yet given voice and presence (both body and being) only through Douglass' narrative "I."

Douglass' inability to represent African-American women in the 1845 *Narrative* may not be fully confessed by the narrator, but the victimization of African-American women is represented as one of the chief injustices of slavery. Thus the limitation in Douglass' *Narrative* virtually invites, rather than forecloses, supplementary accounts, such as Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which not only details the social and human costs of such victimization but also begins to resist it in the very act of narration. The sheer power of telling the secrets of the domestic household of a slave-holding community like Edenton, North Carolina, empowers Linda Brent and, of course, Harriet Jacobs in her abolitionist purposes. Mrs. Flint's jealousy and shame prompt not only her cruelty toward Linda but also her willingness to keep secret her husband's sexual harassment of Linda. What makes Jacobs' *Incidents* such an important sup-

plement to the African-American narrative of emancipation is its special insight into how the ideology of slavery and racism divides women and confounds the apparently natural affections in families. Yet if Jacobs' narrative develops this critical analysis of the gender-specific consequences of slavery, it encourages a sympathy between white, middle-class women readers and the African-American narrator that is thoroughly utopian, which is to say, "literary." In that famous moment of moral ambiguity when Jacobs' Linda Brent "gives herself" to Sands rather than be raped by Dr. Flint, she knows how the moral dilemma posed by this choice provokes an imaginative sympathy in her readers by way of her appeal to the rhetoric of religious morality (as supported not only by the Church but also by sentimental romances): "But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely! If slavery had been abolished, I, also could have married the man of my choice; I could have had a home shielded by the laws; and I should have been spared the painful task of confessing what I am now about to relate."[16]

Brent's "painful task of confessing" is, of course, less the moral dilemma confronting her (or Jacobs in her own experience) than it is the "painful task" of exposing the contradictions of American democracy with its racism and sexism at mid-century. The goal of *Incidents* is hardly the self-reliant "individual" we associate with Emersonianism (and its ideals of authorship), but the coalition of women across class and racial lines that occasionally "happens" in Linda Brent's experiences (hints of utopia) but more often is the aim of Jacobs' work with other feminists and abolitionists, like Lydia Maria Child: political work in which literary narrative (or fictional autobiography) plays only one part. If I have stressed these fictional experiences of sympathetic identification in Douglass and Jacobs, I should add that much as I prize them for their unique political value they nevertheless cannot exclusively do the work of social reform. One conclusion to be drawn from the progressive political functions claimed by many of the classic American texts in this study is that social reform never is achieved exclusively by cultural means. Insofar as cultural work can be critical, then it must be linked with specific political practices, as Douglass' 1845 *Narrative*, Jacobs' *Incidents*, and Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were variously intended to serve the political agenda of abolition. The literary works treated in this text that offer only lucid analyses of social problems generally conclude in political impasses or contradictions, unable to imagine how literary experience could be transformed into political functionality.

I identify such impasses in Emerson's political writings, Melville's critique of such idealism in *Pierre*, Whitman's struggle to represent the damage of war in

Drum-Taps, James' treatment of the consequences of historical ignorance in *The American*, and Chopin's interpretation of the commodification of women in *The Awakening*. Each of these authors takes recourse in his or her own vocation as writer and intellectual either by affirming its special authority and social vantage, as Emerson, Whitman, James, and Chopin do, or by mocking a literary perspective that reveals only the futility of one's knowledge, as Melville does in *Pierre*. What used to be the essential metaliterary turn in any literary text becomes in this context an expression of the impotence of pure social critique without at least imagined solutions to such problems. By the same token, I do not judge such works to be without social value or as exclusive expressions of an "aesthetic ideology." Each calls for some supplementary act either by way of another literary text that offers practical alternatives, as I think Douglass and Jacobs do in their works, or specific political and social organizations that will accomplish what literature alone is powerless to achieve, as I think Abolition and the nineteenth-century women's rights movements did.

The political coalitions imagined in literature and organized in civil rights' movements are based on the assumption that discursive communities have real power. Women's rights activists, African Americans, and abolitionists discovered this as a consequence of the powerful rhetorics of nineteenth-century ideologies of race, class, and gender.[17] At least part of this book deals, then, with *aesthetic dissent* that draws on just this power of ideological rhetoric, claiming for literature new powers of ideological control and authority. This is the case with my reading of the thematics of racism and sexism in Poe as functions of a new hierarchy of "textual competency," in which the subtleties of poetic language, along with its techniques, become tokens of privilege and power. Thus the fetishized, even dismembered feminine body in Poe, like the "natives" (of Tsalal in *Pym*, for example) and the "masses," are excluded from poetic speech, except as its negation, and all power of representation belongs to the uncanny poet-detective, who can read what is profoundly hidden from these Others. Twain offers an interesting variation on just such a theme, albeit with very different political consequences. Poe's effort to reinvent poetic power is explicitly racist and sexist: it depends crucially upon the poetic construction of the Other as savage, woman, victim. Twain reads critically just this inclination of those who understand the powers of language in the new speculative economy of the late nineteenth century, and he tries to retheorize the function of the author as social critic when the primary object of criticism is itself a social text. For Twain, the proliferation of new popular discourses, ranging from mass media to elaborate marketing schemes and political scams, offers the serious writer and intellectual a new opportunity to establish standards of judgment or discrimination by which the reader can be taught how to distinguish "true fiction" from "true lies."

Reread in terms of the successful work of literary rhetoric in the causes of women's and African-American rights movements, the politics of American literature must thus be revaluated in terms of both its critique of ideology—the traditional function of *aesthetic dissent*—and the discursive communities such literature helps constitute. In my brief account to this point, it may appear that I merely privilege texts like Douglass' and Jacobs' that are self-evidently political in purpose and subordinate texts traditionally or canonically literary, like those by Emerson, Poe, Whitman, and James. Even avowedly emancipatory texts, like Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, can now be read as "limited," not just in terms of the political standards represented by Douglass and Jacobs but also by way of more traditionally literary texts that take on new significance when read in terms of these larger political purposes.

Chopin's Edna Pontellier is thus an utter failure when measured in terms of Douglass' and Jacobs' successful efforts to connect their voices to the discursive communities of abolition and women's rights. Like Pierre or some other romantic ironist, Edna experiences only her alienation from her body, and like Pierre she can find no filiation with other alienated or oppressed people or groups in her South. There are, of course, many opportunities for her to connect with victimized women of color—both African- and Spanish-American—as well as children and servants. Unlike Poe or his surrogates, Edna does not *desire* such alienation, but she has no means of overcoming it and the once-prevalent scenario for the woman heroine of madness or death is thus romanticized and *aesthetic dissent* relegitimated just in proportion as political connections have been missed.

On the other hand, a more recognizably modernist literary work like Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* reveals some surprising coalitions and social filiations when read in terms of these criteria for political efficacy. Although unable to speak *for* Southern African Americans, Faulkner at least identifies the discursive and rhetorical trap in which they have been placed, unable to "speak" except through the grammar and conventions of a white Southern culture that depends upon their virtual silence. The ideological contradictions embodied in Lucas Carothers McCaslin or Molly Beauchamp generally reflect the contradictions of a Southern culture that has forced the descendants of slavery to live out their "freedom" according to the logic of a slaveholding society. Quite brilliantly and courageously, Faulkner lets his text overtake his own literary authority and predict its demise along with the other tattered and unreliable authorities of the Old South.

The "politics" of classic American literature, then, are by no means evenly distributed according to the customary division between canonical and marginalized writers and texts. The literary history I have reconstructed by way of representative literary texts is uneven and sometimes unpredictable according to the sides that have been taken in debates over the American literary canon in the past decade. None of the literary texts selected to represent "classic" American literature is ideologically innocent; none escapes fully the ideological factors influencing American culture when that text was produced. Each work benefits by being read in a critical narrative that causes established literary works to be read together with works whose canonical status has often been in question, as is the case with Douglass' 1845 *Narrative*, Jacobs' *Incidents*, and Chopin's *Awakening*. Critical studies that attempt to read representative texts across a very wide historical span—this book deals with texts from the 1840s to the 1940s—are still uncommon for very good reason. There is no final way to justify the selection of texts as "representative," and those works omitted tend to invalidate most of the general claims made in such studies. It is also difficult in such studies to avoid the impression that the author's "selection" is intended to serve in itself or synecdochally for some "great tradition" based on the values enunciated by the scholarly author.

This book is subject to all these criticisms, but I think it is well worth these costs to try to read anew our classic literature for the sake of some new definition of what constitutes "classic American literature." I have retained this troublesome term, "classic," precisely because I think writers like Douglass, Jacobs, and Chopin ought to be included in that definition even as they force us to redefine what the American "classic" means. I have also given prominence to the term in my title and throughout this book, because I want to reconsider the degree to which the "classic" American literary text has become the site of dehistoricized, depoliticized "aesthetic" representation that has been so frequently criticized. In some respects, such criticism has been well-deserved not only by the critical and scholarly traditions that so defined our "classic" works but also by the literary authors themselves, who did their own parts to inaugurate these same critical and scholarly methods. Yet when many of our "classic" texts are read in the rehistoricized, repoliticized contexts made possible by comparing them with more self-consciously designed political writing, then the "classic" American literary text takes on in many circumstances a new significance, a wider political relevance, and a revived value for this generation of readers.

The important task before scholars and critics of American literature today is how we shall coordinate the several traditions of literary and cultural expression now available to us. We might appeal broadly and enthusiastically to the "dissensus" they make possible, as Bercovitch has done in *The Rites of Assent*. We might follow Eric Sundquist's suggestion that there is some value in keeping "alive the necessary contradiction that the two traditions" of "European American and African American literary-critical" interpretation are "separate