

*Literary  
Romanticism  
in  
America*



Edited by  
WILLIAM L. ANDREWS

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## Preface

"The essence of romanticism," observes Robert E. Spiller in *The Cycle of American Literature*, "is the ability to wonder and to reflect." This essentially American, as well as romantic, imaginative and intellectual attitude toward the world has been for better or worse the birthright of the American writer from the founding of this country forward. Tracing the fate of this birthright, whether treasured, rejected, compromised, or sold by writers or schools of writers, constitutes one of the most important tasks of literary historians and critics as they seek to define the Americanness of American literature. The essays collected here propose a number of original conclusions about the uses to which such writers as Franklin, Emerson, Hawthorne, Frederick Douglass, Thomas Wolfe, Allen Tate, and Walker Percy put their wondering and reflecting faculties. At the same time the essays point a direction in which the American writer's romantic birthright has developed, suggesting in the process how this development has affected the evolution of a peculiarly American tradition in literature.

The book opens where it must, with Ralph Waldo Emerson, the first major articulator and exponent of the American romantic perspective on man and society. After arguing that the distinctiveness of America in the world's eyes lies in this country's "experiment in democracy," Clarence Gohdes sets out to show how the principles of Emersonian romantic idealism undergird the American faith in government of, by, and for the people. Demonstrating the presence of this link between America's romantic intellectual tradition and its democratic political tradition

has far-reaching ramifications, as subsequent essays in the collection attest. Gohdes' essay not only introduces the reader to Emerson as America's democrat-idealist par excellence; it also posits a key theme for the rest of the book—how the American writer's response to his romantic cultural inheritance becomes almost inevitably a social, if not a political, act.

While Gohdes points out how romantic idealism served as a moral and political guide for an individualistic Emerson at odds with public opinion or governmental policy, Arlin Turner plays turnabout with the example of Nathaniel Hawthorne. When popular prejudice found an ally in facile idealism, and romanticizing national history became a ready way of dismissing its complexities, Hawthorne, in Turner's view, took pains to disavow what had been adulterated in his American writer's birthright. In the name of intellectual independence, Hawthorne found it necessary to stand aloof from the same brand of romantic idealism that sustained the rugged intellectual individualism of Emerson. The usefulness of this aloofness to Hawthorne when he wrote as "questioning observer and interpreter of America" is amply documented in Turner's study. Turner shows that the habit of detachment and objectivity vis-à-vis the subjects of his romances stood Hawthorne in good stead when he decided to address the social scene in America past or present. No less than the romance writer did Hawthorne the social commentator write with acuteness and judiciousness, for in social, as well as moral or psychological, contexts he felt characteristically obliged to render both the light and the dark of his subject. Thus from fictionalized historian of the Puritan era to contemporary pundit on Victorian America, Hawthorne emerges from Turner's essay a romanticist more disposed to reflect than to wonder, to discover in the nation's past the seeds of mounting irrepressible conflicts, not a glorious manifest destiny.

As social and intellectual conflicts at mid-century centered more and more around the fate of black people in America, a group of Afro-American writers emerged in the 1850s with their own contribution to the romantic tradition in American literature. Out of the fugitive-slave narrative, an often collaborative

effort between ex-slaves and abolitionist amanuenses, came a small group of novels and autobiographies that established an independent prose narrative tradition in Afro-American letters. The interrelated purposes and import of these books, in the opinion of William L. Andrews, united them and their authors into the first Afro-American literary renaissance, a counterpart of the much more celebrated American renaissance of the 1850s. Led by Frederick Douglass in the autobiography and Martin R. Delany in the novel, this largely unnoticed black literary movement was characterized by the sort of imaginative idealism, intellectual individualism, and humanitarian concern that distinguished most romantic writing of the nineteenth century. In addition, such perennial themes in American romantic writing as rebellion, alienation, and the quest for selfhood appeared in a penetrating new light when the early black writer focused his perspective on them. With these themes foremost, "The 1850s: The First Afro-American Literary Renaissance" documents a seminal though as yet largely unread chapter in black American literary history. The evidence of intellectual and imaginative kinship between the two renaissances in American letters during the 1850s suggests that the often discretely categorized *mainstream* and *minority* literary traditions share a common romantic heritage in the nineteenth century.

With Louis D. Rubin's essay, the focus of attention shifts to three writers of the modern South and the applicability of romantic literary modes to their purposes. Professor Rubin discusses "Thomas Wolfe and the Place He Came From" in order to affirm that Wolfe's relationship to the South was similar to that of most writers of the Southern Renaissance, even though his manner of expressing that relationship was not. Although Eugene Gant appears only to despise the land of his youth instead of maintaining the classic love-hate ambivalence toward it typified in Faulkner's Quentin Compson, Rubin believes that Eugene's lingering feeling for the "South that burned like Dark Helen in [his] blood" betrays a "passionate emotional attachment" to the Piedmont South that was true of Gant's creator also. As a result of this attachment and moral involvement, Wolfe wrote with an

immediacy, subjectivity, and self-consciousness that have often been judged the very antithesis of the traditional southern literary temper. While Rubin considers this brand of romanticism in Wolfe's writing to be distinctive, he thinks it by no means unprecedented in the history of southern literature. His identification of a tradition of southern writing based on a "passionate and direct assertion of personality" illuminates yet another obscure vein of romantic expression in American letters. Likewise, his reminder that Wolfe, like his more classical southern literary forebears, took the American self grounded in the South and traced its attempts to realize the American Dream, provides a unifying framework in which to view such southern literary contrasts to Wolfe as Allen Tate and Walker Percy.

The autobiographical fictional mode pioneered by Wolfe in modern southern literature is also exemplified in Allen Tate's novel *The Fathers* (1938), discussed in C. Hugh Holman's essay "*The Fathers* and the Historical Imagination." However, Holman is interested in Tate as an American writer who borrowed from the English romantic tradition, in this case from the historical novel of Walter Scott, to create a literary form suitable to American experience and cultural needs. To Holman, *The Fathers* belongs to the traditional "historical imagination" of the South, typified by Ellen Glasgow's novels, in its investigation of conflicting social codes, values, and ideals in the South through the prism of the Civil War. But the novel belongs also to a larger national *Bildungsroman* tradition, because its hero is not the passive protagonist of historical fiction in the Scott mold, but a "spectator-narrator" whose understanding of the world and his own experience in it emerges as he tells his story retrospectively. Such experimentation with retrospective narrative invites comparison with *Moby-Dick*, *The Blithedale Romance*, *My Ántonia*, and *The Great Gatsby*. It also endows *The Fathers* with a density of symbolic implication and a Jamesian or Fordian structure that urge a more complete consideration of what the possibilities of the historical imagination are and how they may be applied. By showing the reader how the historical romanticist has moved beyond merely recreating the past to dramatizing the process by

which the past is interpreted, Holman points out one direction that the reflective mode of the romantic imagination has pursued since the nineteenth century.

The fate of that other romantic faculty, wonder, in the work of the contemporary southern novelist Walker Percy is the subject of Panthea Reid Broughton's "Walker Percy and the Innocent Eye." Percy's protagonists all share a preoccupation with reclaiming their vision, Broughton points out, so that they may recover the distance that stands between them and the world around them. Desiring "access to being," liberation from the malaise of isolation and abstraction of the self, they devise various ways to clarify their perceptions and regain the resonance and meaning of their experience. Broughton believes these efforts hark back to the cultivation of naïveté, wonder, and innocence that romantic writers, particularly in America, have engaged in since the early nineteenth century. But while "the innocent eye" worked for Emerson as a precondition of true perception and for Clemens as a penetrating narrative point of view, its redemptive value for the alienated twentieth-century American is severely questioned in Percy's novels. Like Hawthorne, whose protagonists often suffer from spiritual maladies similar to those that plague Percy's heroes, Walker Percy distrusts the substitution of seeing for being as a stratagem of life. After attaining their special insights and visionary perspectives on themselves and their fellows, the observer figures in both writers' work realize they are no closer to a lasting felt sense of life. Visionary perception alone proves an insufficient conduit for human feeling and spiritual interconnection. What this conclusion in Percy's work (as well as in Hawthorne's) signifies is that America's romantic tradition is not as naïve as its pronouncements about the necessity of naïveté in art suggest. As Turner, Andrews, and Broughton show, American romanticism has endured at least partly because it has embraced as checks and balances both wonder *and* reflection, intuition *and* skepticism, transcendent individualism *and* democratic brotherhood.

In the concluding essay of this collection, John Seelye looks at the evolution of that supreme American romance—the rise of the



self-made man—in classic biographical and autobiographical narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the hands of Cotton Mather, Benjamin Franklin, Frederick Douglass, and Horatio Alger, the American success hero assumed the habiliments of a cultural ideal, while the story of how he “made it” became formularized into popular myth. What Seelye is interested in is the disjunctiveness of this myth of success in the work of the authors he selects; he finds a thematic schism separating “the fiction of the self-made man” and the “truth of the clay foot of the climber.” How that schism gets embroidered over through art, artifice, and sometimes sheer chutzpah is Seelye’s chief concern as analyst of Mather’s biography of Sir William Phips (1702), Franklin’s *Autobiography* (1791), Douglass’ *Narrative* (1845), and Alger’s popular novels of the 1860s and 1870s. From the analysis of these books against their sociopolitical background comes a sobering insight into the complex of egoistic, economic, and political factors that have shaped the classic American success story into the near-fantastic forms it has often taken. The title character of the essay, Richard M. Nixon, is offered as proof of the barnaclelike tenacity with which the success myth and its hero, no matter how suspect or discredited they may have become, still cling to America’s consciousness. So long as life imitates art, Seelye’s essay implies, America’s men on the make will package themselves according to the images selected and promoted by today’s Mathers, Franklins, and Algers, who with poll as well as pen have shown themselves mightier than the sword. In the face of this continuing devaluation by inflation of the American culture hero, Americans will do well to adopt the pragmatic, not the innocent, eye in front of the television, reserving their wonder and reflection for what it takes no romantic vision to see is the “nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.”

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*An  
American Author  
as Democrat*



CLARENCE GOHDES

During World War II one of my friends, an anthropologist by profession, served as an officer of our State Department, advising on the essential or nonessential nature of shipments to be made to the west coast of South America. In going over the invoices submitted for his inspection he noticed that there were orders for a surprising amount of florida water, a kind of toilet water, to be shipped from a particular firm in New York City. Certainly, he thought, florida water could be regarded as nonessential with cargo space at a premium. But he noticed that his statements to that effect were completely disregarded by his superiors, who had dwelt long in the area; and the orders went through. When an opportunity for a vacation came along, he indulged himself in anthropological pursuits in a rural and very backward community. The florida water question still bothered him, but upon inquiry he soon found out that the local witch doctors—in plentiful supply—used that particular brand of florida water as an important element in their ceremonies. The victim of a spell or of a demon causing a disease had to be sprinkled with the contents of one of those bottles from New York. No other variety, he was assured, was “strong enough.” So far as the natives of that section of Latin America were concerned, the witches at least considered the United States of America a vitally important source of florida water—and very little more.

If one asks in a more general way, What has our country stood for in the eyes of foreign nations? no neat answer readily emerges, for the attitude of the world toward any of its constituent nations varies from time to time and is subject to sudden gusts of

emotion. Economics, politics, and even witchcraft, it seems, may condition the reaction. The materials for an answer to such a question abound in the books and articles written by travelers who may have visited our shores for six weeks or six months, who may have seen New York but not Chicago, who may have come with an open mind or with a fixed determination to be displeased. One may illustrate the difficulties best by setting forth some of the aspects of our country and of our people which have from time to time been noted in books of travel.

A hundred years ago we seemed to foreigners, like Charles Dickens, to be especially devoted to the habit of tobacco chewing. More lately we have shifted to gum. Whether the gum chewing has anything to do with it, foreign observers credit us with having better teeth than most peoples—and our dentists with being the best in the world. Visitors from countries with an established church have viewed us as seething in sectarian confusion and as having produced only two religions of our own: Mormonism and Christian Science. We have always appeared as a very busy people, humming with activity. Theodore Roosevelt's phrase for the idea was "the strenuous life." The absence of a leisured class has impressed one writer after the other. One of them once asked an American friend, "Don't you really have any leisured class at all?" and the answer came back, "O, yes, only we call them *tramps*." A traveling impresario from Italy once picked out as the four most distinctive American products: apples, oysters, white bread, and women. The last of these usually have come in for comment, for both Europeans and Asiatics readily note the unusual respect paid to ladies in this country and sometimes have expressed astonishment at the freedom with which the sexes commingle. In the 1880s one travel-book writer summed up the woman question as follows: "At Cairo," he said, "a woman is an idealized slave"; in Florence, "a cherished article of domestic chattel"; in New York, "an equal, and more often than not, an aggravating, overbearing confederate." Another Italian was particularly impressed by the lack of iron gratings between women employees and their male customers, and still another from a Catholic country found the maidenly habit of

flirting to be very characteristic. Boston, he thought, was most notorious in this respect. And he cited as an example a couple whom he saw seated on the grass in the Public Garden, the girl reading aloud from *Harper's Magazine*, the boy shading her with a parasol. Only one change is needed to make that picture of flirting in Boston perfect—the magazine should have been the *Atlantic Monthly*. There was a time when our sexual morality astonished the European travel-book writer; we seemed to be a whole nation of Darbys and Joans. But very recently even the French have been shocked by our novels and the folkways of our young men, and perhaps the old AEF ditty will eventually be revised to read, “The Americans are a naughty race, *parlez-vous*.”

Our people have long been classed as the leading newspaper and magazine readers, and the size of our papers, daily and Sunday, still is a wonder of the New World, like Niagara Falls or Yellowstone Park. Widespread education at state expense seemed, years ago, to be one of our chief accomplishments, but our colleges were only faintly praised as offering very practical training. In architecture we seemed merely to be imitative, until the skyscrapers at length sprang up to give us distinction. In music, also, we lagged, but more recently our symphony orchestras have begun to exact admiration, and our composers are becoming known; though for several decades our specialty has appeared to be dance music. Even in remote villages in the Near East one can hear American “rock,” or at least a version of it. We are also recognized as the chief purveyors of the most popular dramatic entertainment ever known to mankind. Not only the movies, but furs, tobacco, cotton, automobiles, airplanes, and even Parker 51 fountain pens have at one time or another seemed to be our most cherished economic products. The procession of our men of daring has run from the Indian fighter and the cowboy to the Chicago gangster. The mixture of races in our melting pot has always been a lively topic for travelers to comment upon—and of course the American Negro has prompted a whole literature by himself. Earlier in our history we had been again and again charged with not paying our debts! Now we are charged with being Uncle Shylock.

Heinrich Heine once observed that in the beginning God created man in his own image, and ever since man has been striving to return the compliment. Certainly men have created a very human image of their fellowmen.

Such aspects of American life as I have used to illustrate—very human as they are—belong to the realm of the superficial, though I should immediately admit that the superficial is of no little importance in the field of international relations. When one looks for something weightier in answer to the question, What has America stood for in the eyes of the world? there are two chief aspects of the answer.

At the time of the establishment of our government, and for many decades thereafter, the United States represented to the intelligence of the world most fundamentally an experiment in democracy. The advanced liberals looked upon us with favor, drank to the health of George Washington, and prophesied all manner of future accomplishment to come from the experiment. The conservatives, a more powerful set in that they usually controlled their own governments, regarded us with disfavor as a nation of plebeians playing with political dynamite that one day would blow up and perhaps injure Europe with the falling wreckage. Late in the nineteenth century, even social-minded John Ruskin, who described himself as a "peculiar Tory," could not forbear twitting American visitors about their "republican experiment." And Matthew Arnold solemnly expressed the opinion that "few stocks could be trusted to grow up properly without having a priesthood and an aristocracy to act as their schoolmasters." We often lay the blame for traditional, old-fashioned isolationism upon the square shoulders of the American people, but an important factor was undoubtedly the hostile attitude of the conservatives of Europe, who despised democracy as a plague and looked upon our future with foreboding. The great test, of course, came at the time of the Civil War, when the broadest intellectual significance of the question was exactly what Abraham Lincoln stated it to be—a test whether this nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, could long endure. The fact that our government did endure was of enormous consequence in

shaping foreign opinion, for the dire prophecies of the conservatives were shown by events to have been as false as yesterday's science. The first really important general answer to the question, What has the world thought of us? is to be found in the fact that we have represented an experiment in democracy.

America has also appeared to the world as an example of phenomenal wealth, and of power based upon that wealth. The riches of our country were, of course, a matter of prophecy from the earliest days of exploration. Indeed, exploration was largely motivated by the dreams of wealth. Years after the establishment of the nation, the chief view of our wealth, I think, was that the common man enjoyed a greater prosperity than his European cousin. It was not until after the Civil War, with the astonishing progress of industry, that we came to be identified with riches in spectacular amount. And our reputation in this regard has developed so amazingly in the present century as to make pale the golden vision of America that seemed so enticing in the last decades of the nineteenth.

So far as power is concerned, probably the first overt demonstration that impressed the intellectual world came in 1898 with our war against Spain, when, with one of those ironies occasionally seen in history, the chief American nation turned against the very mother of American colonization and achieved a quick and emphatic victory. This premonitory sign that here was a new element of considerable importance in reckoning the balance of power was soon followed by two wars which proved beyond question that the United States of America represented might. At the present time, it may be said, our country stands as one of the giants of history, holdings in one hand billions of dollars and in the other weapons of indescribable power—the symbols of what the United States stands for in the eyes of the world. Uncle Sam may very well show a look of bewilderment upon his erstwhile provincial face.

It may be interjected that our claims to recognition as an experiment in democracy have been sadly obscured by the vast shadows cast by wealth and power, even though in times of crisis we ourselves assert them with fervor. Change and experiment

elsewhere have come so thick and fast that we are now the oldest among the governments of the chief nations of the earth. The word experiment thus seems outmoded, even though we all trust that we shall never cease to experiment.

Considering, now, the opinion that we have stood longest before the eyes of the intellectual world as an experiment in democracy, the question may be asked of the literary historian, How well do the American authors illustrate the chief claim of America upon the world's intelligence? The answer, again, is not easy to derive, for art is art and political and social philosophy are political and social philosophy—despite the efforts of literary critics during the 1930s to make an olio of the three. How American is American literature? . . . How French is French literature? 'Tis hard to say.

Certainly our literary men of past times, with very few exceptions, have been sturdy believers in the democratic experiment. Their political and social views impressed the critics of nineteenth-century England at least as being "radical," in the older European sense of that word. Even the gentle Longfellow, teacher and translator of Dante, refused a decoration offered by the Italian government on the ground that as a citizen of a republic and as an American it would be improper for him to accept it. But do the actual writings of our major authors reflect much of the idea for which we have stood in the eyes of the world? Poe and Henry James we may as well dismiss as belonging to the no-man's-land of art. Though James dealt frequently in his fiction with Americans suffering at the hands of conspiring or hostile Europeans, he told his brother William that he wished to write in such a way that no one could detect his nationality. That, he said, would be "more civilized." Assuredly we should have no objections to James's view, for all that we can wish for our writers is that they be as American as they *unconsciously* can be. Hawthorne, strong as the instincts of the artist were in him, would never have been willing to pass for anyone but an American. In fact, when certain Englishmen, hearing of the very favorable criticism of *The Scarlet Letter* in England, assumed on that



account that its author could only be British, he was disgusted instead of flattered.

But what about that author who was capable of elaborating a plot dealing with a pair of Siamese twins, one of whom was a Methodist and a teetotaler, the other a freethinker and a devotee of the bottle? Mark Twain has been read by millions in Germany, Russia, and elsewhere, who have considered him a veritable mirror of the American character. The British critics of the nineteenth century claimed to have found our most original contribution to the world's store of literature in our humorous writing, and surely Mark Twain stands at the head of our vast procession of literary jesters. But, I should say, he has offered to the world primarily a hearty picture of the cheerful irreverence that has been one of the accompaniments of our democratic life—an important picture, to be sure, yet not a central one.

When we consider the work of Whitman and of Emerson, I think we approach a more obvious centrality, for these two men have perhaps come nearest to expressing directly and indirectly what John Dewey called "the metaphysical implications of the idea of democracy." Of the two, Whitman is perhaps more widely read today at home and abroad, but, considering also the days gone by, Emerson is the one whose message has been more widely disseminated. For that reason he is to be preferred as our point of concentration. However, another reason leads one to choose Emerson—and that is the fact that from him Whitman drew ideas and inspiration on a variety of topics, including the metaphysics of democracy. "Master, these shores *you* have found," wrote Whitman in a letter addressed to Emerson and printed in the second edition of *Leaves of Grass*. In a more homely metaphor he remarked, "I was simmering, simmering, simmering. Emerson brought me to a boil."

We might remind ourselves at this point that Emerson has been a potent influence upon a number of American writers. Whitman, Thoreau, Emily Dickinson, Edwin Arlington Robinson—these and more have felt the tonic effect of his ideas. In Europe also the list of those who have acknowledged his catalytic stimu-