The American Renaissance Reconsidered

edited by
Walter Benn Michaels and
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THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY PRESS
BALTIMORE AND LONDON

Printed in the United States of America

Originally published in 1985 as Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1982–83, New Series, no. 9
Johns Hopkins Paperbacks edition, 1989

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

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data may
be found on the last printed page of this book.

Introduction

The term *American Renaissance* designates a moment in the nation's history when the "classics," works "original" enough to lay claim to an "authentic" beginning for America's literary history, appeared. Once designated as the *locus classicus* for America's literary history, however, the American Renaissance does not remain located within the nation's secular history so much as it marks the occasion of a rebirth from it. Independent of the time kept by secular history, the American Renaissance keeps what we could call global renaissance time—the sacred time a nation claims to renew when it claims its cultural place as a great nation existing within a world of great nations. Providing each nation with the terms for cultural greatness denied to secular history, the "renaissance" is an occasion occurring not so much within any specific historical time or place as a moment of cultural achievement that repeatedly provokes rebirth.

The English Institute session entitled "The American Renaissance Reconsidered" met not so much to reconsider this demand for rebirth as to reconsider the terms of the demand. Or, rather, it reconsidered the terms other than those ordained by the American Renaissance. Consequent to this reconsideration, the demand for rebirth was met, but this time the American Renaissance was reborn not *without* but within America's secular history.

As Eric Sundquist reminds us in "Slavery, Revolution, and the American Renaissance," being reborn within an American past did not necessarily entail a recovery of secular history. Sanctioned by a sense of progressive revolution, events in America became historical out of their ability to recall America's revolutionary past. This revolutionary past was a return to lost principles (of the Glorious Revolution of 1689) rather than a rebellion against them. The American Revolution, in other words, ceased to be a historical

event and instead partook of the same sacred time in demand of renewal at work in the "renaissance" formation in literary history. For Sundquist, the "renaissance" moment in our classic antebellum literature coincided with a crisis in the power of the "revolutionary moment" to keep the peace. Both proponents and opponents of slavery invoked the American Revolution as the authority for their charged positions: opponents called for a true revolution (a return to the Spirit of 1776), whereas proponents focused on the Union established by the founding fathers and warned against a war of rebellion (a separation from the principles of a people united by revolution).

In relocating the moment of literary renaissance within an anxious historical meditation over the authority to father a nation, Sundquist oversees the "rebirth" of many more figures than the American Renaissance usually legitimizes. In this essay Martin Delany's *Blake,* Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* and Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom* occupy the same literary space as Melville's *Benito Cereno.* But they do not undermine Melville's authority; instead, they reinvest his narrative with the power to do more than literary justice to the terms of the historical crisis they share.

If Sundquist opens up space in the American Renaissance by relocating texts from secular history within its boundaries, Jane Tompkins recalls an "other" American Renaissance, forgotten or repressed by the values informing the authoritative Renaissance period. In the scenario implicit in the rebirth metaphor, the works of this other American Renaissance constituted the popular world of sentiment.

In affiliating this "other" American Renaissance with the revivalist movements of the time, Tompkins discusses the domestic novel and specifically Susan Warner's *The Wide Wide World* in terms other than those used to sanction Melville's *Moby Dick* published in the same year. She restores the assumptions that the sanctioning authorities of *the* American Renaissance ruled out of discussion. As it turns out, the sentimental narratives in the *other* American Renaissance convert powerlessness into a "future" power by rein-

terpreting submission as a discovery of the power to master one's inner nature as well as the world. As the "revival" of the "nature" that the cultivation of the American Renaissance apparently left behind, this "other" American Renaissance discloses the uncanny at work in the equation of a cultural origin with a "renaissance" moment. Despite the "excluding" progression from nature to culture in the critical romance, both nature and culture, secular history and sacred time are prone to be reborn within the American Renaissance.

In "Romance and Real Estate" Walter Benn Michaels exploits this uncanny effect. He does so moreover by entangling one of the key terms used to confirm the cultural power of the Renaissance, "Romance," within the subtle legal fictions of nineteenth-century property law. As a term "romance" corroborated the "renaissance" claim to be a world apart from the merely secular. In treating this claim as an assertion of a "personal" relation to property, "a clear and unobstructed title," Michaels redesignates romance not only as a space wherein that claim can be disputed (by the other claimants in say Sundquist's or Tompkins's renaissance) but also as the locus for the individual's efforts to come to terms with his "inalienable," hence "free," self.

Michaels does not inscribe the American Renaissance within either a strictly secular history or a literary history. Instead he suggests that one of the key figures within the American Renaissance, Nathaniel Hawthorne, invoked one of the key literary terms used to sanction the canonicity of the Renaissance, that is, romance, in order to work through the relation of individuality to certain aspects of American property law. In Michaels's essay the American Renaissance notions of freedom, revolution, romance, and even selfhood underwriting Sundquist's and Tompkins's essays turn out to be epiphenomena of legal as opposed to literary fiction.

If the "American Renaissance Reconsidered" culminated in an implicit questioning of the grounds for that title to continue legally to buy claim to that literary property, the papers delivered at the Second English Institute session, "The 'Other' American Renaissance," attempted to focus the strictly literary claims in

that title. In the first session, Tompkins and Sundquist located within the period called the American Renaissance figures (like Warner, Delany, Douglass) who had been excluded from the Renaissance canon; and the second session addressed explicitly the powers of the Renaissance to include or exclude. In Sundquist's and Tompkins's essays F. O. Matthiessen in his canonical work *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* had emerged as a tutelary presence whose powers were evoked implicitly and on occasion explicitly to account for the exculsion of certain work and certain themes from the American canon. So the session entitled "The 'Other' American Renaissance" attempted to provide that presence with a kind of self-consciousness.

This program began with Louis A. Renza's essay on a figure Matthiessen excluded from his canon but who, as a result of his incorporation within the French tradition (as well as the post structuralist methodology sanctioned by that tradition) has returned to America. In Renza's analysis, the Poe whom Matthiessen excluded returns from the unconscious literary canon with all the power derived from having been repressed. Renza's Poe has buried himself alive within his text as the only subject capable of possessing the text. Renza argues that Poe always reclaims possession of his text from readers because he anticipated and trumped their readings in order to become aware of the secret self that emerges as what remains unread (and unwritten) but that can only appear as the unconscious reserve that writing and reading releases.

Renza reads Matthiessen's exclusion of Poe from the American Renaissance as a premature burial anticipated by Poe in his fiction, but Jonathan Arac discloses what Matthiessen had to repress (if not quite bury) in order to authorize the canon. In Arac's reading, Matthiessen achieves the masterful sense of unity in his canonizing operation at the expense of finding some of his most cherished values misrepresented. In attending to the discrepancy between the values he cherished and the masterwork of American literature he produced, Arac discovers another American Renaissance. He insists on an international as opposed to a strictly nationalistic

approach to literature, representing the values of "all the people" rather than those of exclusively Renaissance figures and making possible experience rather than constraining all experience within Matthiessen's symbol structure of an organicist aesthetic.

In "Moby Dick and the Cold War," Donald E. Pease suggests that Matthiessen repressed the other American Renaissance because of the political demands of World War II. Affiliating canon-formation with a kind of national consensus-formation, Pease suggests that Matthiessen's work of canon-formation silences both his own powers of dissent as well as the "dissenting" views of such canonical figures as Melville. Pease locates *Moby Dick* within what he calls two scenes of cultural persuasion—that at work in the oratory of Melville's time and that at work in Cold War rhetoric—and releases *Moby Dick* from the key terms of persuasion at work in both scenes.

Allen Grossman ended the session with a meditation on the relationship between polity implicit in Whitman's poetics and the art implicit in Lincoln's national polity. If Michaels ended the first session by reinscribing the American Renaissance within the fictions informing the history of property, Grossman ended the second session by representing the literary (Whitman) and the secular (Lincoln) claims of the American Renaissance, bringing the foundations for the nation's laws, the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, up for an accounting.

Grossman attends to the contradiction between the principles of sociability and justice exemplified by Lincoln and Whitman and the institutions through which these principles could become national polity, and discloses the limits of both these Renaissance men to confer freedom and justice. Most importantly, Grossman's provocative meditation observes that the American Renaissance—the creation of a real world consistent with American principles both of order and value—is unfinished. Hence it demands our continued reconsideration.

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THE AMERICAN RENAISSANCE RECONSIDERED

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Eric J. Sundquist

Slavery, Revolution, and the American Renaissance

On the first anniversary of the *Liberator* in 1832 William Lloyd Garrison invoked the "Spirit of Liberty" that was "thundering at castle-gates and prison-doors" throughout the world. Rather than celebrate the fires of democratic revolution that had spread from the America of 1776, Garrison dwelled on the significant failure of the American Revolution—the problem of slavery. When liberty "gets the mastery over its enemy," Garrison asked rhetorically, "will not its retaliation be terrible?" Only "timely repentance" could save the American "nation of blind, unrelenting, haughty, cruel, heaven-daring oppressors" from the fate of foreign despots and aristocracies. Because repentance on a national scale did not seem likely, Garrison introduced a paradoxical possibility: in order to avoid having to join in defending the South against slave insurrection, the North ought to dissolve the Union; were this threat to "break the chain which binds [the South] to the Union" actualized, however, Garrison predicted that "the scenes of St. Domingo would be witnessed throughout her borders."[1]

Garrison was no doubt thinking of the Nat Turner rebellion of the previous year, America's largest and most successful slave rebellion (which became, as Thomas Wentworth Higginson put it some thirty years later, "a memory of terror, a symbol of wild retribution"), and he thus drew back from such outright "treachery to the people of the south" and paused simply to reflect that, as a nation condoning slavery, "we are guilty—all guilty—horribly guilty." But the "double rebellion" Garrison found stirring in 1832—the rebellion of the South against the United States government, and of slaves against masters—was nonetheless prophetic. It defined the crisis of civil war that would engulf the nation thirty years hence, just as the guilt Garrison sought here to expunge can only be understood to have increased over that period. Surely it

had increased by 1844, when Garrison, on behalf of the American Anti-Slavery Society, announced their policy of "No Union with Slaveholders" and raised the "banner of revolution." Declaring that "the Union which grinds [slaves] to the dust rests upon us" as well, that "their shackles are fastened to our limbs," Garrison called for "bloodless strife, excepting *our* blood be shed."[2]

Although he spoke radically in advocating the dissolution of the Union, Garrison's nonviolent passion suggests in its hesitation to act, or to act violently, the ambivalence that pre–Civil War generations felt and expressed toward the legacy of the founding fathers. In defining a relation to the recent past, the new generations embraced conflicting impulses and contradictions of the kind that appear boldly in the literary work of the period. Just as the political and social documents of the antebellum period constitute some of its greatest and most imaginative writing, so the literary work in its most powerful forms is infused with directly engaged social and political issues. In both cases, the problem of slavery impinged upon all others, producing a national ideology riddled with ambiguities and tension, and year by year distorting the course of American democracy. Before examining in more detail the major events and ideas that united the complex problem of slavery with the principles of the Revolution, and the significant literature that the slavery crisis produced, we might first glance at representative responses of two of the period's great politicians and orators, Webster and Lincoln.

I

The character of the generations between the wars has been described variously—as a grand fete of nationalism, an exercise in imperial aggression, a time during which the new nation darkened with unredeemed sins. The simultaneous truth of these descriptions, and the psychological development that may be said to accompany them, are exemplified in the career of Webster. In 1825 Webster chose a popular rhetorical figure (later echoed to different

effect by Emerson in the opening of *Nature*) in order to celebrate the laying of the cornerstone of the Bunker Hill Monument. As a race of "children" standing "among the sepulchres of our fathers," Webster counseled, Americans should be thankful that the "great wheel of political revolution," which began in America but soon spread "conflagration and terror" around the world, issued here in tranquillity and prosperity. In the spirit of nationalism with which they are blessed, the American children should accept as their great duty the "defence and preservation" of the fathers' creation, the cultivation of "a true spirit of union and harmony." When the monument was completed in 1843, its "foundations in soil which drank deep of early Revolutionary blood," Webster again commemorated the fathers, especially Washington, but spoke ominously against the day when the American Union "should be broken up and destroyed" and "faction and dismemberment obliterate for ever all the hopes of the founders of our republic and the great inheritance of their children." By 1850, anxious to preserve the Union at the cost of conciliating slave interests, Webster would dedicate his famous speech of March 7 in defense of the Compromise of 1850 to Massachusetts, and further suggest in a following speech that Massachusetts, "so early to take her part in the great contest of the Revolution," and by "a law imposed upon her by the recollections of the past," would again be among the first "to offer the outpouring of her blood and treasure" in defense of the Union. At this point, however, Emerson asserted that Webster had become "the head of the slavery party" in the United States.[3]

Although Webster sought to ward off a sectional crisis, not to precipitate one, his fall from political grace became part of an unfolding drama of ideals sacrificed and redeemed. Contemptuously alluding to Webster's "noble words" at Bunker Hill, "the spot so reddened with the blood of our fathers," Theodore Parker replied to Webster that "the question is, not if slavery is to cease, and soon to cease, but shall it end as it ended in Massachusetts, in New Hampshire, in Pennsylvania, in New York, or shall it end as in St. Domingo? Follow the counsel of Mr. Webster—it will end in fire and blood." In courting the attacks of Emerson, Parker, and

others, Webster illustrated the crisis that convulsed the Union—in the very name of "union"—and made appeals to the spirit of the Revolution ironic, if not, as Emerson said of the Fugitive Slave Law that accompanied the Compromise, "suicidal." Perhaps, though, the vision of the fathers and the suicide of the sons were entangled; perhaps, Lincoln warned in his 1838 Lyceum Address, "as a nation of freemen we must live through all time, or die by suicide." Setting the context for his ostensible subject, "the perpetuation of our political institutions," Lincoln spoke against the kind of mob violence that took the life of abolitionist editor Elijah Lovejoy (an event that Edward Beecher that same year described as not simply the murder of a "father" but the slaying of the laws and liberties of a "nation"), and he chose as another example the lynching of "Negroes suspected of conspiring to raise an insurrection."[4] The decades that followed, in which Lincoln would in the eyes of many become the heroic savior of his country, proved the examples less significant than the fundamental question they raised: how, in "a nation of freemen," did the Revolution speak to the issue of slavery?

Lincoln's address, often seen to desecrate the fathers and to betray a monumental desire for personal power, marks his initial turn away from the mesmerizing power of the Revolutionary past. Twenty years later he broke free from the awe of previous generations at the same time he broke free from the nonviolence of conservative antislavery. In saving the Union while abolishing slavery, he thus stood between Garrison and Webster. He was able to do so because the scenes of the Revolution, as he argued in his early address, had grown "dim by the lapse of time." The "forest of giant oaks" had been swept over, leaving only "here and there a lonely trunk," with "mutilated limbs," "despoiled of its verdure." The relationship between Lincoln and the Revolutionary generation can be gauged symbolically by noting that his image of the fathers as declining giant oaks had been anticipated by Thomas Paine, who warned in *Common Sense* that in "the seedtime of continental union" the least fracture would be "like a name engraved with

the point of a pin on the tender rind of a young oak; the wound would enlarge with the tree, and posterity read it in full-grown characters."[5] The name engraved in the oak was slavery; only the further violence of domestic rebellion and fraternal war would heal the wound.

The New Testament figure of a "house divided against itself" that Paine had used to characterize the struggle of king against people in the American colonies would likewise reappear in Lincoln's famous House Divided speech of 1858. On this occasion, as he did even after the Civil War was a reality, Lincoln continued to speak for union—in the name of the fathers' tacit, limited protection of slavery; but the internal divisions between free soil and proslavery, recast by abolitionists and Republicans to show the South as a stronghold of despotism equal to any European monarchy, were nevertheless present in Lincoln's allusion to a secret conspiracy to extend slavery by means of the Nebraska doctrine and the recent Dred Scott decision. Like much of the nation, that is to say, Lincoln himself was divided. As the values and intent of the Revolution became less and less vivid as doctrine, yet more and more compelling as symbols that could be seized with equal insistence by either side, a further division in the "house"—between the Revolutionary past and the nationalistic present—complicated the issues of democratic freedom and sectional power. As George Forgie has argued, the anxiety of the "post-heroic generations" in the face of the inimitable achievements of the Revolutionary fathers left them at once unable to act with originality and unwilling obediently to follow the example set by the fathers. They were rebellious and conservative at the same time, on no issue more so than slavery. The failure to abolish slavery in the late eighteenth century left succeeding generations stymied, imprisoned by the Constitution's apparent protection of slavery, yet conscious of the implicit attack on it in the Declaration of Independence. The post-Revolutionary sons, it could be said, harbored the sins of the past until the accumulated pressure—of territorial acquisition, of political dissension, of guilt—became too great. In the violence of

internal rebllelon and civil war the post-Revolutionary generations became, as Jefferson had feared in the wake of San Domingo, "the murderers of our own children."[6]

II

The "rebirth" our classic literature is said to constitute occurred precisely in an era—from the 1830s through the Civil War—in which the authority of the fathers had become the subject of anxious meditation and in which the national crisis over slavery's limits compelled a return to the fraternally divisive energies of revolution. Though duplicitous attitudes toward America's own recent birth and her course of empire increased in cultural and political thought over that period, they had been nonetheless present from the beginning. The Civil War restored union and may therefore be seen as essentially conservative or redemptive, much as the Revolution itself was seen by many of its participants to be a return—a *revolution,* rather than a *rebellion*—to lost principles on the model of the Glorious Revolution of 1689. In this respect, the Civil War itself might be seen as restoring those freedoms suppressed in 1776, or intended but never actualized: that is, it became a *revolution* rather than the "war of the rebellion" it seemed at the outset. The irony of the 1689 model lies in the great wave of slave imports into the North American colonies that occurred at nearly the same moment; at a more contemporary level, the irony appears in the notion of continuing, progressive revolution that Sacvan Bercovitch has demonstrated to constitute the tradition of the jeremiad in America and to provide the basis for a "national consensus" in which the providential design of the country was constantly reaffirmed and revolutionary radicalism "socialized into an affirmation of order." By the time of the war, Lincoln and others would have no trouble appropriating the fiery vision of the Revolutionary fathers to their own regenerative purposes; but Lincoln's initial desire to punish the South and redeem the fathers *without* abolish-

ing slavery betrays a problem that the national consensus served as well to conceal as to express.[7]

It was a question to which Hawthorne, a man otherwise attentive to the ambiguities of freedom and the fraternal complexities of the Revolution, was strangely blind, except, characteristically, as he recognized the elementary doubleness of America's political origins. Although he understood that "the children of the Puritans" were connected to the Africans of Virginia in a singular way, since the "fated womb" of the Mayflower "sent forth a brood of Pilgrims on Plymouth Rock" in her first voyage, and in a subsequent one "spawned slaves upon the Southern soil," Hawthorne's apprehension of this "monstrous birth," recorded in 1862, did not prevent him from satirizing Lincoln and envisioning a group of escaped slaves "akin to the fawns and rustic deities of olden times." The symbolic connection Hawthorne noted between pilgrims and slaves in a larger sense forms one of the central paradoxes of American history. The rise of liberty and the rise of slavery in America took place simultaneously from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. In Virginia especially, as Edmund Morgan has demonstrated, slavery made free white society more homogeneous, allowed the flourishing of commonwealth ideas about taxation, property, and representation, and thus brought Virginians into the political tradition of New England. The links between liberty and slavery were all the more complicated in view of the rhetoric of enslavement that American colonists employed during the Revolution. A famous suppressed clause of the Declaration of Independence charged George III with "violating the most sacred rights of life and liberty" in the practice of the slave trade and, moreover, with instigating rebellion among American slaves, "thus paying off former crimes committed against the *liberties* of one people, with crimes he urges them to commit against the *lives* of another." Revolutionary pamphlets often cast Americans as slaves of king and parliament, suggesting at times that chattel slavery was but an extreme form of a more pervasive political oppression. As attempts to abolish slavery during and after the