American renaissance : art and expression in the age of Emerson and Whitman

F.O. Matthiessen.

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DONALD McKAY. Builder of the *Flying Cloud*, the *Sovereign of the Seas*, the *James Baines*, and the *Lightning*.

DAGUERREOTYPE BY SOUTHWORTH AND HAWES (Boston)

American Renaissance

ART AND EXPRESSION IN THE AGE OF EMERSON AND WHITMAN

F. O. MATTHIESSEN

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FOR

HANNS CASPAR KOLLAR, *formerly of Vienna,*

and HARRY DORMAN, *of Santa Fe, New Mexico,*

WHO HAVE TAUGHT ME MOST
ABOUT THE POSSIBILITIES OF LIFE IN AMERICA

AMERICAN RENAISSANCE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE ACHIEVEMENT OF T. S. ELIOT, 1939

'There is a moment in the history of every nation, when, proceeding out of this brute youth, the perceptive powers reach their ripeness and have not yet become microscopic: so that man, at that instant, extends across the entire scale, and, with his feet still planted on the immense forces of night, converses by his eyes and brain with solar and stellar creation. That is the moment of adult health, the culmination of power.'

—EMERSON, *Representative Men.*

'Men must endure
Their going hence even as their coming hither:
Ripeness is all.'

—marked by Melville in his copy of *King Lear.*

METHOD AND SCOPE

THE starting point for this book was my realization of how great a number of our past masterpieces were produced in one extraordinarily concentrated moment of expression. It may not seem precisely accurate to refer to our mid-nineteenth century as a *re-birth;* but that was how the writers themselves judged it. Not as a re-birth of values that had existed previously in America, but as America's way of producing a renaissance, by coming to its first maturity and affirming its rightful heritage in the whole expanse of art and culture.

The half-decade of 1850-55 saw the appearance of *Representative Men* (1850), *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), *Moby-Dick* (1851), *Pierre* (1852), *Walden* (1854), and *Leaves of Grass* (1855). You might search all the rest of American literature without being able to collect a group of books equal to these in imaginative vitality. That interesting fact could make the subject for several different kinds of investigation. You might be concerned with *how* this flowering came, with the descriptive narrative of literary history. Or you might dig into its sources in our life, and examine the economic, social, and religious causes *why* this flowering came in just these years. Or you might be primarily concerned with *what* these books were as works of art, with evaluating their fusions of form and content.

By choosing the last of these alternatives my main subject has become the conceptions held by five of our major writers concerning the function and nature of literature, and the degree to which their practice bore out their theories. That may make their process sound too deliberate, but Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman all commented very explicitly on language as well as expression, and the creative intentions of Hawthorne and Melville can be readily discerned through scrutiny of their chief works. It has seemed to me that the literary accomplishment of those years could be judged most adequately if approached both in the light of its authors' purposes and in that of our own developing conceptions of literature. The

double aim, therefore, has been to place these works both in their age and in ours.

In avowing that aim, I am aware of the important books I have not written. One way of understanding the concentrated abundance of our mid-nineteenth century would be through its intellectual history, particularly through a study of the breakdown of Puritan orthodoxy into Unitarianism, and of the quickening of the cool Unitarian strain into the spiritual and emotional fervor of transcendentalism. The first of those two developments has been best sketched by Joseph Haroutunian, *Piety versus Moralism: The Passing of New England Theology* (1932). The whole movement will be genetically traced in Perry Miller's monumental study of *The New England Mind,* the first volume of which (1939), dealing with the seventeenth century, has already extended the horizons of our cultural past. Another notable book could concentrate on how discerning an interpretation our great authors gave of the economic and social forces of the time. The orientation of such a book would not be with the religious and philosophical ramifications of the transcendental movement so much as with its voicing of fresh aspirations for the rise of the common man. Its method could be the one that Granville Hicks has inherited from Taine, and has already applied in *The Great Tradition* (1933) to our literature since the Civil War. An example of that method for the earlier period is Newton Arvin's detailed examination (1938) of Whitman's emergent socialism.

The two books envisaged in the last paragraph might well be called *The Age of Swedenborg* and *The Age of Fourier.* Emerson said in 1854, 'The age is Swedenborg's,' by which he meant that it had embraced the subjective philosophy that 'the soul makes its own world.' That extreme development of idealism was what Emerson had found adumbrated in Channing's 'one sublime idea': the potential divinity of man. That religious assumption could also be social when it claimed the inalienable worth of the individual and his right to participate in whatever the community might produce. Thus the transition from transcendentalism to Fourierism was made by many at the time, as by Henry James, Sr., and George Ripley and his loyal followers at Brook Farm. *The Age of Fourier* could by license be extended to take up a wider subject than Utopian socialism; it could treat all the radical movements of the period; it would stress the fact that 1852 witnessed not only the appearance of *Pierre* but of *Uncle Tom's Cabin;* it would stress also what had been largely ignored

until recently, the anticipation by Orestes Brownson of some of the Marxist analysis of the class controls of action.[1]

But the age was also that of Emerson and Melville. The one common denominator of my five writers, uniting even Hawthorne and Whitman, was their devotion to the possibilities of democracy. In dealing with their work I hope that I have not ignored the implications of such facts as that the farmer rather than the businessman was still the average American, and that the terminus to the agricultural era in our history falls somewhere between 1850 and 1865, since the railroad, the iron ship, the factory, and the national labor union all began to be dominant forces within those years, and forecast a new epoch. The forties probably gave rise to more movements of reform than any other decade in our history; they marked the last struggle of the liberal spirit of the eighteenth century in conflict with the rising forces of exploitation. The triumph of the new age was foreshadowed in the gold rush, in the full emergence of the acquisitive spirit.[2]

The older liberalism was the background from which my writers emerged. But I have concentrated entirely on the foreground, on the writing itself. I have not written formal literary history—a fact that should be of some relief to the reader, since if it required a volume of this length for five years of that record, the consequences of any extension of such a method would be appalling. Parrington stated in his *Main Currents of American Thought* (1927): 'With aesthetic judgments I have not been greatly concerned. I have not wished to evaluate reputations or weigh literary merits, but rather to understand what our fathers thought . . .' My concern has been opposite. Although I greatly admire Parrington's elucidation of our liberal tradition, I think the understanding of our literature has been retarded by the tendency of some of his followers to regard all criticism as 'belletristic trifling.' I am even more suspicious of the results of such historians as have declared that they were not discussing art, but 'simply using art, in a purpose of research.' Both our historical writing and our criticism have been greatly enriched during the past twenty years by the breaking down of arbitrary divisions between them, by the critic's realization of the necessity to master what he could of historical discipline, by the historian's desire to extend his

1. See A. M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Orestes A. Brownson* (1939), and Helen S. Mims, 'Early American Democratic Theory and Orestes Brownson' (*Science and Society,* Spring 1939).

2. See Norman Ware, *The Industrial Worker,* 1840-1860 (1924), and E. C. Kirkland, *A History of American Economic Life* (1936).

domain from politics to general culture. But you cannot 'use' a work of art unless you have comprehended its meaning. And it is well to remember that although literature reflects an age, it also illuminates it. Whatever the case may be for the historian, the quality of that illumination is the main concern for the common reader. He does not live by trends alone; he reads books, whether of the present or past, because they have an immediate life of their own.

What constitutes the secret of that life is the subject of this volume. It may be held that my choice of authors is arbitrary. These years were also those of Whittier's *Songs of Labor* (1850), of Longfellow's *Hiawatha* (1855), of work by Lowell and Holmes and Simms, of Baldwin's *Flush Times in Alabama and Mississippi,* of T. S. Arthur's *Ten Nights in a Barroom.* Nor were any of my authors best sellers. The five hundred copies of Emerson's first book, *Nature* (1836), had been disposed of so slowly that a second edition was not called for until 1849; and though his lecturing had made him well known by then, the sales of none of his books ran far into the thousands. Thoreau recorded in his journal that four years after the appearance of his *Week on the Concord and Merrimack* (1849) only 219 copies had been sold; so he had the publisher ship the remainder back to him and said: 'I have now a library of nearly nine hundred volumes, over seven hundred of which I wrote myself. Is it not well that the author should behold the fruits of his labor?' After that *Walden* was considered a great risk, but it managed to go through an edition of two thousand. Whitman set up and printed *Leaves of Grass* for himself, and probably gave away more copies than were bought, whereas Longfellow could soon report (1857) that the total sales of his books had run to over three hundred thousand, and *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio* (1853), by the sister of N. P. Willis, sold a hundred thousand in its first year. Although *Typee* (1846) was more popular than Melville's subsequent work, it never came within miles of such figures. Hawthorne reported that six or seven hundred copies of *Twice-Told Tales* (1837) had been disposed of before the panic of that year descended. To reach a wider audience he had to wait until *The Scarlet Letter,* and reflecting on the triumphant vogue of Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), Maria Cummins' *The Lamplighter* (1854), the ceaseless flux of Mrs. E. D. E. N. Southworth's sixty novels, he wrote to Ticknor in 1855: 'America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash—and should be ashamed of myself if I did succeed. What is the mystery of these innumerable editions of *The Lamplighter,* and other books neither better nor worse?—worse they could not be, and better they need not be, when they sell by the hundred thousand.'

Such material still offers a fertile field for the sociologist and for the historian of our taste. But I agree with Thoreau: 'Read the best books first, or you may not have a chance to read them at all.' And during the century that has ensued, the successive generations of common readers, who make the decisions, would seem finally to have agreed that the authors of the pre-Civil War era who bulk largest in stature are the five who are my subject. That being the case, a book about their value might seem particularly unnecessary. But 'the history of an art,' as Ezra Pound has affirmed, 'is the history of masterwork, not of failures or mediocrity.' And owing to our fondness for free generalization, even the masterworks of these authors have been largely taken for granted. The critic knows that any understanding of the subtle principle of life inherent in a work of art can be gained only by direct experience of it, again and again. The interpretation of what he has found demands close analysis, and plentiful instances from the works themselves. With a few notable exceptions, most of the criticism of our past masters has been perfunctorily tacked onto biographies. I have not yet seen in print an adequately detailed scrutiny even of 'When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd,' or of *Moby-Dick.* And such good criticism as has been written has ordinarily dealt with single writers; it has not examined many of the interrelations among the various works of the group.

My aim has been to follow these books through their implications, to observe them as the culmination of their authors' talents, to assess them in relation to one another and to the drift of our literature since, and, so far as possible, to evaluate them in accordance with the enduring requirements for great art. That last aim will seem to many only a pious phrase, but it describes the critic's chief responsibility. His obligation is to examine an author's resources of language and of genres, in a word, to be preoccupied with form. This means nothing rarefied, as Croce's description of De Sanctis' great *History of Italian Literature* can testify: form for De Sanctis 'was not the "form" pathologically felt by aesthetes and decadents: it was nothing else than the entire resolution of the intellectual, sentimental, and emotional material into the concrete reality of the poetic image and word, which alone has aesthetic value.'

The phases of my somewhat complex method of elucidating that concrete reality can be briefly described. The great attraction of my subject was its compactness:[3] for though I made no attempt to confine my study of these authors to the strait jacket of a five-year segment of their careers, the fact remained that Emerson's theory of expression was that on which Thoreau built, to which Whitman gave extension, and to which Hawthorne and Melville were indebted by being forced to react against its philosophical assumptions. The nature of Emerson's achievement has caused me to range more widely in my treatment of him than in that of the others. *Representative Men* has no more right to be called his masterpiece than *Nature* (1836) or *The Conduct of Life* (1860). He wrote no masterpiece, but his service to the development of our literature was enormous in that he made the first full examination of its potentialities. To apply to him his own words about Goethe: he was the cow from which the rest drew their milk. My discussion of his theory has always in view his practice of it, and its creative use by the others. My prime intention is not Sainte-Beuve's: to be 'a naturalist of minds,' to relate the authors' works to their lives. I have not drawn upon the circumstances of biography unless they seemed essential to place a given piece of writing;[4] and whenever necessary, especially in the case of Melville, I have tried to expose the modern fallacy that has come from the vulgarization of Sainte-Beuve's subtle method—the direct reading of an author's personal life into his works.

The types of interrelation that have seemed most productive to understanding the literature itself were first of all the obvious debts, of Thoreau to Emerson, or Melville to Hawthorne. In the next place there were

3. I have avoided, therefore, the temptation to include a full length treatment of Poe. The reason is more fundamental than that his work fell mainly in the decade of 1835-45; for it relates at very few points to the main assumptions about literature that were held by any of my group. Poe was bitterly hostile to democracy, and in that respect could serve as a revelatory contrast. But the chief interest in treating his work would be to examine the effect of his narrow but intense theories of poetry and the short story, and the account of the first of these alone could be the subject for another book: the development from Poe to Baudelaire, through the French symbolists, to modern American and English poetry. My reluctance at not dealing with Poe here is tempered by the fact that his value, even more than Emerson's, is now seen to consist in his influence rather than in the body of his own work. No group of his poems seems as enduring as *Drum-Taps;* and his stories, less harrowing upon the nerves than they were, seem relatively factitious when contrasted with the moral depth of Hawthorne or Melville.

4. I have provided a Chronology of the principal events in the five authors' lives on pages 657-61.

certain patterns of taste and aspiration: the intimate kinship to the seventeenth-century metaphysical strain that was felt by Emerson, Thoreau, and Melville; the desire for a functional style wherein Thoreau and Whitman especially were forerunners of our modern interest. That last fact again suggests one of my chief convictions: that works of art can be best perceived if we do not approach them only through the influences that shaped them, but if we also make use of what we inevitably bring from our own lives. That is an unorthodox postulate for literary history. But if we can see *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre* much more accurately by uncovering Melville's extraordinary debt to Shakespeare, and come closer to Hawthorne's intentions by observing that his psychological assumptions were still fundamentally the same as Milton's, it seems equally clear that Henry James and Eliot can cast light back on Hawthorne, and that one way of judging *Leaves of Grass* is by juxtaposing it with the deliberate counterstatement made by Whitman's polar opposite, Hopkins. I have, therefore, utilized whatever interrelations of this type have seemed to grow organically from my subject. I do not expect the reader to be willing at this point to grant any relevance to the juxtaposition of Whitman with the painters Millet and Eakins, or to that of Thoreau with the theories of the forgotten sculptor Horatio Greenough. It will be my responsibility to demonstrate those relevances.

The phase of my subject in which I am most interested is its challenge to pass beyond such interrelations to basic formulations about the nature of literature. In the chapter, 'Allegory and Symbolism,' Hawthorne and Melville have been its center, but I have attempted, so far as I was able, to write also an account of these two fundamental modes of apprehending reality. In the concluding chapter, 'Man in the Open Air,' the concern was to bring all five writers together through their subject matter, through their varied responses to the myth of the common man. But these serious responses can be better defined if set into contrast with the comic myth of the frontier, especially in its richest expression by George Washington Harris' *Sut Lovingood*. And the function of myth in literature can be clarified by the rediscovery of its necessity by the age of Joyce and Mann. As a final descriptive instance of my method, I have conceived of the two central books on Hawthorne and Melville as composing a single unit in which the chief value would be the aspects of tragedy that could be discerned through its representative practice by these two writers. I have made no pretence of abstracting a general theory of tragedy, but have

crystallized out certain indispensable attributes that are common also to the practice of both Shakespeare and Milton.

After this description of my method, it is obvious that the division into four books is merely to indicate the central emphasis of each. This division, with the index, should make it easy for a reader particularly concerned with a single writer to concentrate on his work alone. Since volumes of criticism are now conventionally supposed to be short, I might have concealed the length of mine by printing it as four separate books, spaced, say, a year apart. But that would have defeated one of my main purposes: to make each writer cast as much light as possible on all the others. Moreover, our chief critical need would seem to be that of full-length estimates. I saw no use in adding further partial portraits to those of Parrington and Van Wyck Brooks, but wanted to deal in both analysis and synthesis. That required extensive quotation, since a critic, to be of any use, must back up his definitions with some of the evidence through which he has reached them. Only thus can the reader share in the process of testing the critic's judgments, and thereby reach his own. I trust that the further division into sixty-odd short essays will help the reader to skip wherever he wants. However, when dealing with the work of one writer, I have made as many transitions as practicable to that of the others.

It may be of some help to the reader to know from the start that the structure of the volume is based on recurrent themes. In addition to the types of interrelation I have mentioned, the most dominant of these themes are: the adequacy of the different writers' conceptions of the relation of the individual to society, and of the nature of good and evil—these two themes rising to their fullest development in the treatment of tragedy; the stimulus that lay in the transcendental conviction that the word must become one with the thing; the effect produced by the fact that when these writers began their careers, the one branch of literature in which America had a developed tradition was oratory; the effect of the nineteenth century's stress on seeing, of its identification of the poet with the prophet or seer; the connection, real if somewhat intangible, between this emphasis on vision and that put on light by the advancing arts of photography and open-air painting; the inevitability of the symbol as a means of expression for an age that was determined to make a fusion between appearance and what lay behind it; the major desire on the part of all five writers that there should be no split between art and the other

functions of the community, that there should be an organic union between labor and culture.

The avenue of approach to all these themes is the same, through attention to the writers' use of their own tools, their diction and rhetoric, and to what they could make with them. An artist's use of language is the most sensitive index to cultural history, since a man can articulate only what he is, and what he has been made by the society of which he is a willing or an unwilling part. Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Whitman, and Melville all wrote literature for democracy in a double sense. They felt that it was incumbent upon their generation to give fulfilment to the potentialities freed by the Revolution, to provide a culture commensurate with America's political opportunity. Their tones were sometimes optimistic, sometimes blatantly, even dangerously expansive, sometimes disillusioned, even despairing, but what emerges from the total pattern of their achievement—if we will make the effort to repossess it [5]—is literature for our democracy. In reading the lyric, heroic, and tragic expression of our first great age, we can feel the challenge of our still undiminished resources. In my own writing about that age, I have kept in mind the demands made on the scholar by Louis Sullivan, who found a great stimulus for his architecture in the functionalism of Whitman. 'If, as I hold,' Sullivan wrote, 'true scholarship is of the highest usefulness because it implies the possession and application of the highest type of thought, imagination, and sympathy, his works must so reflect his scholarship as to prove that it has drawn him toward his people, not away from them; that his scholarship has been used as a means toward attaining their end, hence his. That his scholarship has been applied for the good and the enlightenment of all the people, not for the pampering of a class. His works must prove, in short (and the burden of proof is on him), that he is a citizen, not a lackey, a true exponent of democracy, not a tool of the most insidious form of anarchy . . . In a democracy there

5. Santayana has said that the American mind does not oppose tradition, it forgets it. The kind of repossession that is essential has been described by André Malraux in an essay on 'The Cultural Heritage' (1936): 'Every civilization is like the Renaissance, and creates its own heritage out of everything in the past that helps it to surpass itself. *A heritage is not transmitted; it must be conquered;* and moreover it is conquered slowly and unpredictably. We do not demand a civilization made to order any more than we demand masterpieces made to order. But let us demand of ourselves a full consciousness that the choice made by each of us out of the past—out of the boundless hopes of the men who came before us—is measured by our thirst for greatness and by our wills.'

can be but one fundamental test of citizenship, namely: Are you using such gifts as you possess for or against the people?' These standards are the inevitable and right extension of Emerson's demands in *The American Scholar*. The ensuing volume has value only to the extent that it comes anywhere near measuring up to them.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ALL my reading of American literature has been done during the era of Van Wyck Brooks and Parrington. It was hardly an accident that when I graduated from college in the early nineteen-twenties, I knew very little of our own literature except some contemporary poetry that I had read with my friends. The now encouraging, if tardy, attention that is being paid by our universities to our cultural past dates in most instances since that time. Consequently, the appearance of Lewis Mumford's *The Golden Day* (1926) was a major event in my experience. Through Mumford I became aware of the body of ideas he was popularizing, with their first expression in Brooks' *America's Coming of Age* (1915); and Brooks' stringent demands for a culture adequate to our needs were the strongest influence on my own first work, a critical biography of Sarah Orne Jewett (1929). These statements of my debts to Brooks and Mumford should be as explicit as possible, since when I come to discuss Melville, I am forced to take issue with the accuracy of Mumford's interpretation (1929). And by the time Brooks wrote *The Flowering of New England* (1936), he had relaxed his standards. He was no longer concerned with ideas, or with critical discriminations, but with describing the surfaces of the milieu that had produced the writing, good or bad. His picture is charming but sentimental. His method is most successful in its vignettes of minor and forgotten figures, but it has robbed the period of most of its clash and struggle, it has so diluted Thoreau that it is hard to tell him from Bronson Alcott, and, as I shall have to show when dealing with Hawthorne, it has deprived one of our few tragic writers of his chief significance.

The two critics who have helped me draw a circle of definition around my subject are Coleridge and Eliot. The leading practitioners in their respective times of the type of criticism that is always fertile—the artist's comment on the principles of his craft—these two have had a particular value for my purposes. Coleridge was the immediate stimulus to Emer-

son's organic theory of language and expression, and has given me many of the formulations for the creative aims of the whole transcendental age. Eliot, in turn, through his reaction against Emerson and his admiration for Hawthorne, has served both to put a period and to suggest an extension. He has typified the fundamental shift in our way of regarding the artist: from inspired seer to trained craftsman. He has also illuminated our deepening concern with tragedy.

Among my advantages nearer at hand, I probably owe even more than I am aware to those friends who have been engaged in the same field, especially to Perry Miller, Newton Arvin, Charles Olson, John Finch, and Howard Schomer. Olson's generosity in letting me make use of what he has tracked down in his investigation of Melville's reading, particularly Melville's markings in his volumes of Hawthorne, alone made possible my study of that interrelation. The three readers whom I have had in mind as the kind of audience I most wanted to satisfy are C. L. Barber, Harry Levin, and Howard Baker. Nearly every page has been improved by one (or more) of their blue pencils, as well as by the persistent scrutiny of my assistant, Stanley Geist, whose own first published work, his Harvard honors essay on Melville (1939), has already shown his devotion to style.

During the ten years that I have been working towards this volume I have received kindnesses from many scholars, and have become grateful to the staffs of many libraries, especially to those of Harvard and Yale, the New York Public Library, the Library of Congress, the Huntington Library in San Marino, the Morgan Library in New York, and the Library of Portsmouth, N. H. Whenever I have used unpublished material, I have made my acknowledgments in a note. A detailed bibliography would have been supererogatory, since during the past few years the *American Writers Series* (published by the American Book Company) has included volumes of representative selections from all five of my authors, in each case with a careful critical bibliography of the important work that has been done on the texts, and in biography and criticism. Two of these volumes are particularly notable: *Hawthorne,* edited by Austin Warren, especially for the section of the introduction dealing with Hawthorne's theology, by far the most searching treatment that has been made of that difficult subject; and *Melville,* edited by Willard Thorp, for its useful work in straightening out some of the badly confused details of Melville's biography.

I should like to hope that I am indebted to everyone who has worked with perception on any of the five authors, but there are undoubtedly some veins that I have missed. Among the older studies, George Edward Woodberry's critical biographies of Hawthorne (1902) and Emerson (1907) stand up the best, for Woodberry, a student of both Henry Adams and Charles Eliot Norton, strove for a synthesis of the intellectual rigor of the one with the aesthetic sensibility of the other. Mark Van Doren's *Thoreau: A Critical Study* (1916)—his first published work, done when he was hardly out of college—is still the most discerning treatment, and is rivalled only by two of Paul Elmer More's earlier *Shelburne Essays.* I have recorded in the notes my many other major obligations. Three books lying for the most part outside my particular subject that have been a stimulus through the skill of their respective methods are J. W. Beach, *The Method of Henry James* (1918), H. L. Mencken, *The American Language* (1919, revised edition 1936), and Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (1931)—the most successful instance of her sensitive kind of cultural and folk history. I have also been indebted to, even when I have found myself in disagreement with, the challenging views of Yvor Winters in *Primitivism and Decadence: A Study of American Experimental Poetry* (1937) and in *Maule's Curse: Seven Studies in the History of American Obscurantism* (1938).

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Sense of the Past; Yale University Press for Hawthorne's *American Notebooks,* edited by Randall Stewart, and for Ezra Pound, *The ABC of Reading.*

During the course of this long volume I have undoubtedly plagiarized from many sources—to use the ugly term that did not bother Shakespeare's age. I doubt whether any criticism or cultural history has ever been written without such plagiary, which inevitably results from assimilating the contributions of your countless fellow-workers, past and present. The true function of scholarship as of society is not to stake out claims on which others must not trespass, but to provide a community of knowledge in which others may share.

F. O. M.

Kittery, Maine
April 1941

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ILLUSTRATIONS

NOTE ON THE ILLUSTRATIONS

CONCERNED as he was with every possibility of *seeing,* Emerson was fascinated with the developing art of photography from the time of the invention of the daguerreotype in the late eighteen-thirties. He conceived of the camera as a powerful symbol for his age's scrutiny of character, just as Hawthorne was to do in making his hero in *The House of the Seven Gables* a practitioner in the new technique, and thus a searcher into the traits and motives behind men's faces. The great master of the photographic portrait in our mid-nineteenth century was Matthew Brady, who recorded both Hawthorne and Whitman at the time of the Civil War. Rather than add to these portraits any of the already well-known likenesses of my other writers, I have chosen to reproduce the finest daguerreotype I have ever seen, the portrait by Southworth and Hawes (1854) of Donald McKay (1810-1880), the master shipbuilder of the clipper era, a farmer's son who reached his full fame when, in the same year as *Moby-Dick,* he built at East Boston the *Flying Cloud.* McKay's portrait makes the most fitting frontispiece, since it reveals the type of character with which the writers of the age were most concerned, the common man in his heroic stature, or as Whitman called the new type, 'Man in the Open Air.'

My primary purpose in including the pictures by W. S. Mount, the most sensitive of our nineteenth-century genre painters, and by the great realist Eakins was to suggest that the advance of open-air painting came from a response to nature analogous to that expressed in *Walden* and *Leaves of Grass.* I give an analysis of all these paintings in the section dealing with Whitman.

BOOK ONE

From Emerson to Thoreau

I

IN THE OPTATIVE MOOD

'Our American literature and spiritual history are, we confess, in the optative mood.'

—EMERSON, 'The Transcendentalist' (1842)

THE PROBLEM that confronts us in dealing with Emerson is the hardest we shall have to meet, because of his inveterate habit of stating things in opposites. The representative man whom he most revered was Plato. For Plato had been able to bridge the gap between the two poles of thought, to reconcile fact and abstraction, the many and the One, society and solitude. Emerson wanted a like method for himself, but he had to confess, in words that throw a bar of light across his whole career: 'The worst feature of this double consciousness is, that the two lives, of the understanding and of the soul, which we lead, really show very little relation to each other; never meet and measure each other: one prevails now, all buzz and din; and the other prevails then, all infinitude and paradise; and, with the progress of life, the two discover no greater disposition to reconcile themselves.' Accepting thus Kant's distinction between the Reason and the Understanding, he felt himself secure in the realm of the higher laws. To-day he has been overtaken by the paradox that 'The Over-Soul' proves generally unreadable; whereas, on the level of the Understanding, which he regarded as mere appearance, his tenacious perception has left us the best intellectual history that we have of his age.

We tend to take at its face value another of his lucidly objective self-estimates: 'My contribution will be simply historical. I write anecdotes of the intellect; a sort of Farmer's Almanac of mental moods.' Philosophers have long since abandoned the futile pursuit of trying to reduce such moods into a system. But the danger now is that in the multiplicity of his conflicting statements, we shall miss the wholeness of character lying behind them. He was in reaction against the formal logic of the eighteenth century, since he believed it not merely to confine but to distort; yet he insisted that 'we want in every man a logic, we cannot pardon the