

AMERICAN ROMANTICISM

Volume 1

FROM COOPER TO HAWTHORNE

Excessive America

David Morse

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AMERICAN ROMANTICISM

Volume 1
From Cooper to Hawthorne

For Maxine

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Preface

These studies in American Romanticism draw on the general analysis of Romanticism presented in my *Perspectives on Romanticism* and *Romanticism: A Structural Analysis* and develop it in another cultural context. Although America's classic literature has not invariably been termed 'Romantic' there are not only strong grounds for doing so, as I hope to show, but equally for thinking that, of all societies, the United States is the one that has been most deeply marked by the impact of Romanticism. I should like to thank Bob Gross, Peter Nicholls, Angus Ross, Douglas Tallack and John Whitley for their helpfulness in reading and responding to sections of the manuscript. I am conscious of a particular debt to Bob Gross for the stimulus of his presence at Sussex in 1982-3 and especially for the fascinating seminars he gave as part of the 'Literature and Democracy' course. The texts I have used are specified in the notes at the end, but for clarity and convenience page references to the most copiously cited works are given immediately after the appropriate quotation.

D.M.

And, to this end, let us not aim at common degrees of merit. Can we not leave, to such as love it, the virtue that glitters for the commendation of society, and ourselves pierce the deep solitudes of absolute ability and worth?

Emerson, *Divinity School Address*

Let us, if we must have great actions, make our own so. All action is of an infinite elasticity, and the least admits of being inflated with the celestial air until it eclipses the sun and the moon.

Emerson, *Spiritual Laws*

I have been making war against the superlative degree in the rhetoric of my fair visiter. She has no positive degree in her description of characters & scenes. You would think she had dwelt in a museum where all things were extreme & extraordinary.

Emerson, *Journals*

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1 Introduction: America and the Excessive

American literature is born of excessive hopes and excessive claims, burdened from the start by an overblown national rhetoric. It is imperiously summoned into existence, like a genie out of a bottle, and expected to expand sensationally before the spectator's very eyes. Looking back we may wonder why an American literature could not have been allowed to develop naturally, in the dark of a grateful obscurity, instead of being subject to daily examination for signs of a Jack and the Beanstalk growth. But to envisage this even for a moment is to gloss over the rancorous psychology of colonial status. The American people felt, with justification, that they had been neglected and slighted for far too long. Their objection to colonial taxes and restrictions was not merely a financial one but one based on the clearsighted recognition that, far from being the proud and independent subjects they perceived themselves to be, they were viewed merely as a convenient source of royal revenues, whose touchy feelings could be cheerfully disregarded. Yet even after the fact of independence Americans still lacked the recognition they claimed. They were determined to reverse the terms of the Europe-America opposition. America would not merely be different from Europe; it would surpass and excel Europe in every conceivable aspect. That there would be a great national literature was so obvious that it almost went without saying — though it must be said that America's need for such a literature was far from evident, since as a still-puritan culture it was disposed to regard literature as a perilous supplement to the Bible and the reading of it as both a gratuitous exposure to immorality and a frivolous waste of time. Yet the literature was required as a resplendent symbol of national greatness, as excessive and magnificently superfluous as the flag-flying airline of today. It just had to be there, even if no one particularly wanted it. So American

literature is always an embarrassment and a liability, never able to sustain large and unspecified expectations yet blighted by a massive and comprehensive neglect. American literature in its founding moment is made up of books that everyone wanted to see written but which nobody wants to read. All it can ever hope to achieve is to prove its glowing prospectus a lie. American literature from Brockden Brown, Cooper and Poe, and passing by way of Transcendentalism to Hawthorne, Melville and Twain, is a mode of writing ever subject to anxiety, apprehension and strain. In seeking to give the shadow substance it remains haunted by the fear that it may never be other than a literature of shadows, speaking, like William Wilson's double, in an imperious but throaty whisper. It is crippled by uncertainty as to what audience it is addressing and yet desperately wants to be heard. It seeks to mobilise and mesmerise a vast audience by its commanding rhetoric yet fears that that same power may be employed only to stifle the oppressive sense of empty rows and to hold off the unobtrusive departure of the few that remain. Above all, it would like to be taken seriously. Yet, however hard American writers may try, they never get the reassurance they need. They bear within them the curse of the excessive – which is always and at once to go too far and never to go far enough.

Doubtless nothing of itself is excessive. Excessiveness is in the eye of the beholder. But in the nineteenth century both America and Europe could find common ground in agreeing that the United States was excessive when judged by European standards. For transatlantic travellers from the Old World, then as now, America was the site of untold reckless experiments, a perennial source of the marvellous, the extravagant and the quaint. For Americans it was their ambition and prerogative to surpass the European norm, to raise new and exalted standards that would put the old to shame. America would no longer be inhibited by deference to tradition and reputation but would herself provide the pattern for others to follow. Moreover, the American nation was born into the era of the Sublime, when to undertake titanic projects was a moral obligation and to exceed all limits quite a customary state of affairs. America itself would be this Sublime. Free of feudal shackles and restrictions it would soar as dramatically into the empyrean as the bald-headed eagle itself.

Nevertheless, in the poker game with Europe the Americans needed every ounce of bluff and bravado that they could muster,

for they did not seem to have been dealt very much in the way of cards. The United States had no great cathedrals, palaces or other historic places; it lacked sculptures and paintings; it had no acknowledged writers, philosophers or composers. There was no distinct American language. So everything had to be staked on the grandeur of the American landscape, which could serve as the most potent symbol of everything that America was and, more importantly, could be.

The symbolic significance of American scenery for the construction of an American identity emerges with particular clarity from the life of Thomas Cole, the pioneering landscape artist, who painted mountains, forests and rivers of the new continent in the grand Romantic manner. Cole was born in Lancashire in 1801 but moved with his family to Steubenville, Ohio, when he was eighteen. Although he had already practised engraving in England he did not begin to paint until after his arrival. In 1829 he prepared to sail to Europe to study painting more intensively there, but significantly he made a point of seeing the grandest of native wonders before his departure:

I am very anxious to be on my voyage. Next Wednesday, I intend setting off for the Falls of Niagara. I cannot think of going to Europe without having seen them. I wish to take a 'last, lingering look' at our wild scenery. I shall endeavour to press its features so strongly on my mind that, in the midst of the fine scenery of other countries, their grand and beautiful peculiarities shall not be erased.¹

As it happens Cole was initially disappointed with Niagara, yet his motivation is crucial all the same; for by exposure to native wildness he believes that he will be infused with the *genius loci* and thus more able to retain his independence and originality in the face of the masters of the European tradition. By implication, to be American is to be like Niagara, sublime, tumultuous, excessive. Yet such a determination is prompted by an underlying anxiety. European art is a complex and all-engulfing cultural force and even the talismatic powers of the American landscape may scarcely be sufficient to protect him. Similar fears are voiced by William Cullen Bryant in his famous sonnet:

Thine eyes shall see the light of distant skies:
Yet, Cole! thy heart shall bear to Europe's strand

A living image of thy native land,
Such as on thy own glorious canvas lies.
Lone lakes – savannas where the bison roves –
Rocks rich with summer garlands – solemn streams –
Skies, where the desert eagle wheels and screams –
Spring bloom and autumn blaze of boundless groves.
Fair scenes shall greet thee where thou goest – fair,
But different – everywhere the trace of men,
Paths, homes, graves, ruins, from the lowest glen
To where life shrinks from the fierce Alpine air.
Gaze on them, till the tears shall dim thy sight,
But keep that earlier, wilder image bright.

The sentiments expressed by Bryant contain a hidden contradiction. (For, if the American landscape in its vastness, picturesqueness and pristine freshness is so evidently superior to a Europe depicted in terms of paths, graves and ruins, why the need for solemn adjuration? Perhaps the American excessive is still not excessive enough.) A spontaneous appreciation of beauty must be tempered by native loyalty. It is as if the 'living image' that Cole must keep in his heart of his own country is also the source of his deepest identity as a man and an artist. Nevertheless Cole did believe that the American artist was privileged. For, instead of following the footsteps of others and painting what others had painted, he has the possibility of a pure, immediate and spontaneous encounter with nature that will release in him an increased sense of his own potential and powers:

Before us spread the 'virgin waters which the prow of the sketcher had never yet curled, enfolded by the green woods, whose venerable masses had never figured in annuals, and overlooked by stern mountain peaks, never beheld by Claude or Salvator, nor subjected to the canvas by innumerable dabblers in paint of all past time. All nature here is new to art. No Tivolis, Ternis, Mont Blancs, Plinlimmons, hackneyed and worn by the daily pencils of hundreds; but primeval forests, virgin lakes and waterfalls, feasting his eye with new delights, and filling his portfolio with their features of beauty and magnificence, hallowed to his soul by their freshness from the creation, for his own favoured pencil.²

~~Nature undisturbed retains its divine aura.~~ In its presence, unrestrained and uninhibited by precedent, the American artist can rise to its challenge and display a comparable sublimity.

Integral to the theory of the Sublime as developed by Kant and Schiller was the belief that the gazing at the spectacular works of nature would not overpower man with a sense of his own insignificance, as Burke had believed, but become a revelatory moment of his inner potentiality for greatness. In the development of American culture, in the rhetoric that seeks to create a national self-consciousness, the postulated symmetry between the vastness of the American landscape and the unlimited potential of the American character became an inescapable trope. Even those who felt, like James Russell Lowell, that to argue American greatness in these terms was reductive and simplistic were nevertheless unable to escape from the influence of the analogy. In his early poem 'L'Envoi' Lowell argued that the United States should be defined not through the grandeur of its scenery but through its people, its democratic institutions and its spirit of freedom. He wrote,

Though loud Niagara were today struck dumb,
Yet would this cataract of boiling life
Rush plunging on and on to endless deeps,
And utter thunder till the world shall cease, –
A thunder worthy of the poet's song,
And which alone can fill it with true life.

It is the energy and the example of the American democratic experiment that can make a noise in the world, and it is this rather than nature alone that is truly the source of American pride, yet in so saying Lowell insists as strongly on the analogy between Niagara and man as the unnamed commentator cited by Perry Miller in his *The Life of the Mind of America*, who wrote, somewhat absurdly, 'Only an appreciation of the grandeur of such a fall as that of Niagara could fit a man to construct the bridge that spans its river.'³

The one American whose claims to world historical greatness were unquestionable was, of course, George Washington, and it became customary in commemorative addresses to link the man with the almost illimitable spaces of the continent. Edward Everett in an address which he delivered on the character of

Washington in order to raise funds for the purchase of Mount Vernon as a national shrine eulogised as follows:

beyond the Ohio, beyond the Mississippi, along that stupendous trail of immigration from East to West, which, bursting into States as it moves westward, is already threading the Western prairies, swarming through the portals of the Rocky Mountains and winding down their slopes, the name and memory of Washington on that gracious night [his birthday] will travel with the silver queen of heaven through sixty degrees of longitude, nor part company with her till she walks in her brightness through the golden gate of California and passes serenely on to hold midnight court with her Australian stars.⁴

In his own later celebration of Washington as national leader, James Russell Lowell made still more explicit the connection between the hero and the land: of nature he writes,

For him, her Old-World moulds aside she threw,
And choosing sweet clay from the breast
Of the unexhausted West,
With stuff untainted shaped a hero new,
Wise, steadfast in the strength of God, and true.

Both Washington and America itself are to be defined in terms of their inexhaustible potential and this in turn is linked with freedom from the example of the European past.

It was Walt Whitman, above all, who made such rhetoric inescapable. In Whitman the binary set becomes a triad and with it the poet assumes a new importance as the figure who can truly articulate the dimensions of an unprecedented American largeness. If 'The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem', and if 'It awaits the gigantic and generous treatment worthy of it', then correspondingly, 'The largeness of nature or the nation were monstrous without a corresponding largeness and generosity of the spirit of the citizen.'⁵ A poet of equal magnitude is called for:

The American poets are to enclose old and new for America is the race of races. Of them a bard is to be commensurate with a

people. . . . His spirit responds to his country's spirit . . . he incarnates its geography, and natural life and rivers and lakes.⁶

So, as Whitman continues his hyperbolic flight in his Preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, he speaks no longer of the poet but of 'the greatest poet'. Nothing else will do. And with Whitman we no longer confront mere greatness but are dazzled and bemused in an absolute orgy of the excessive. Of 'the greatest poet' Whitman writes, 'He exhibits the pinnacles that no man can tell what they are there for or what beyond . . . he glows a moment on the extremest verge.'⁷

Inevitably for the poet to give utterance to his patriotic perceptions on this mind-spinning space odyssey he must have access to the most extraordinary powers of language. But, says Whitman, the English language is up to the task: 'It is the chosen tongue to express growth faith self-esteem freedom justice equality friendliness amplitude prudence decision and courage. It is the medium that shall well nigh express the inexpressible.'⁸ Indeed, after Whitman's own torrent of words in the Preface and the poem, we are well-nigh astonished to find him impeding the flow with such a small and mean-spirited phrase as 'well nigh'! For in the spirit of 'well nigh' 'A Song of Myself' could never have been written.

Whitman, notoriously, celebrated himself, but America's Romantic historians, William Prescott and Francis Parkman, celebrated excessive heroes from the past, the pioneer discoverers and explorers, who seemed to have ambitions and personalities commensurate with the scale of these unchartered continents. Prescott's heroes, Cortés and Pizarro, who respectively dominate *The Conquest of Mexico* and *The Conquest of Peru*, are excessive in every sense: insanely ambitious; violent, unscrupulous and brutal, perversely attracted to risky and apparently impossible enterprises. Prescott acknowledges and even stresses the unattractive aspects of both conquistadors, yet he insinuates that their vices and virtues are inextricably bound up together, that their achievements would not have been possible without this disposition to run to extremes. For Prescott, and for Parkman also, history is page after page of glowing deeds, records of individual achievement that can equal and even surpass the legendary exploits of the past. Prescott even says as much. Of Pizarro's quixotic and extraordinary decision to conquer Peru

while stuck on the remote island of Gallo near Panama he writes,

There is something striking to the imagination in the spectacle of these few brave spirits thus consecrating themselves to a daring enterprise, which seemed as far above their strength as any recorded in the fabulous annals of knight-errantry. A handful of men, without food, without clothing, almost without arms, without knowledge of the land to which they were bound, without vessel to transport them, were here left on a lonely rock in the ocean with the avowed purpose of carrying on a crusade against a powerful empire, staking their lives on its success. What is there in the legends of chivalry that surpasses it?⁹

Cortés, with his ruthless and calculating spirit, is a less glamorous personality, who offers more resistance to any presentation in terms of the Romantic visionary, yet even his life yields its sublime moments – moments which, for Prescott, are the essence of history. Cortés deliberately destroys his fleet in order to force his soldiers to commit themselves to the conquest of Mexico, and Prescott stands amazed at the intrepidity and courage of the man: ‘He had set fortune, fame, life itself upon the cast’; it was ‘an act of resolution that has few parallels in history’.¹⁰ In Mexico Cortés pioneered the principle of indirect rule by seizing Montezuma and forcing him, on pain of imprisonment, torture or death, to comply with his demands. Such a plan might seem merely Machiavellian, his placing of Montezuma in fetters both humiliating and unworthy, but to Prescott this is stirring stuff, the very essence of Romantic heroism: ‘The events recorded in this chapter are certainly some of the most extraordinary on the page of history.’¹¹ He exults,

That a small body of men, like the Spaniards, should have entered the palace of a mighty prince, have seized his person in the midst of his vassals, have borne him off a captive to their quarters – that they should have put to an ignominious death before his face his high officers, for executing, probably his own commands, and have crowned the whole by putting the monarch in irons like a common malefactor . . . that all this should have been done by a mere handful of adventurers, is a thing too extravagant, altogether too improbable, for the pages of romance! It is nevertheless literally true.¹²

Such are the joys of the Romantic historian. For he can assure the reader that such incredible events can be securely located in the world of sober fact and thereby proclaim also that the age of marvels is not yet past. Admittedly Prescott immediately follows this passage by stating that the behaviour of Cortés should be neither justified nor praised, so that it would seem that his response is one of wholly dispassionate astonishment, without moral implication. But such an attitude is integral to the excessive. The reader is lifted to an aesthetic realm, beyond good and evil, where he can only gasp in total and uncritical amazement.

Francis Parkman was similarly fascinated with such daring and flamboyant personalities, though his own exemplars were drawn from the more familiar terrain of the United States and Canada. In *Montcalm and Wolfe* he describes the war for Canada through the complementary figures of Montcalm and Wolfe, the one French, the other English, fighting to the death on opposite sides, yet linked by their pertinacity, their resourcefulness and their impetuous and daring spirit. But Parkman's archetypal excessive hero is the French explorer La Salle, immortalised in his classic study *La Salle and the Discovery of the Great West*. This work originally appeared in 1869 but was restricted in scope because of Parkman's inability to make use of a hoard of documents guarded by the French archivist Pierre Margry. In his struggles to obtain access to these manuscripts Parkman showed almost as much pertinacity as his hero, La Salle, since he obtained a grant from Congress to ensure their publication and was finally able to make use of them in the revised edition of 1879. La Salle was a man after Parkman's own heart, an educated man, an intellectual, who nevertheless showed, as Parkman himself showed by his journey down the Oregon Trail, that such a training could be the moral backbone of the excessive hero. Parkman wrote, in early rebuttal of American anti-intellectualism,

Such was Cavelier de la Salle. In him, an unconquerable mind held at its service a frame of iron, and tasked it to the utmost of its endurance. The pioneer of western pioneers was no rude son of toil, but a man of thought, trained amid arts and letters.¹³

The emphasis was needed, for in his epic journeys across the American continent La Salle did not have too much time for