

THE AMERICAN
NOVEL AND ITS
TRADITION

Richard Chase

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THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY PRESS
Baltimore and London

A part of the first section of Chapter I originally appeared in *Commentary* (Copyright 1955 by The American Jewish Committee). The section of Chapter VIII that concerns G. W. Cable's *The Grandissimes* appeared in the *Kenyon Review* (Copyright 1956 by Richard Chase).

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Printed in the United States of America

Johns Hopkins paperback edition, 1980

First published in 1957, Anchor Books edition

Published by arrangement with Doubleday & Company, Inc.

The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, Maryland 21218

The Johns Hopkins Press, Ltd, London

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Chase, Richard Volney, 1914-1962.

The American novel and its tradition.

Reprint of the 1st ed. published

by Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y.

Bibliography: p. 247. Includes index.

1. American fiction—History and criticism.

I. Title. [PS371.C5 1980] 813'.009 79-3702

ISBN 0-8018-2303-X

Introduction

IN this study of the American novel, I have arranged my chapters chronologically from Charles Brockden Brown to Faulkner. But the book is an essay in definition and appreciation, and although it often takes a historical view, it is not a detailed literary history. My main and, as it seems, inevitable theme is the relation between the romance, or romance-novel, and the novel proper. I have limited the discussion to a relatively small number of novels, in order to consider them at some length. The choice of novels has been guided partly by my theme, but it has necessarily been somewhat arbitrary. I have not mentioned, or have mentioned only in passing, a good many which I might have included but for various reasons did not. Certain books, such as *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby-Dick*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *The Sound and the Fury*, may be expected to appear in almost any study of the American novel, and I have included these. In the last fifteen years much criticism and scholarship have been devoted to these novels, and I have thought it possible to write of them in the spirit of summary and generalization and in this way to take advantage of the large body of recent criticism, even though I am forced to differ with certain established opinions.

A variety of motives has entered into the choice of the other novels I consider. I have had in mind in almost every case the originality and "Americanness" of the novel in question, though I do not deny that the precise nature of these qualities is often debatable, nor that certain novels I

do not discuss may be said also to have these qualities. In at least one instance—Cooper's *Satanstoe*—the opportunity of cultural definition rather than formal or aesthetic definition has determined the choice. In every other case the choice has been influenced by the novel's offering the opportunity of both. Finally, I picked two novels not only for their relevance to the general argument but because they are unfortunately unknown to most readers—G. W. Cable's *The Grandissimes* and Howells's *The Vacation of the Kelwyns*.

As for my main purpose, it is: to assess the significance of the fact that since the earliest days the American novel, in its most original and characteristic form, has worked out its destiny and defined itself by incorporating an element of romance. This purpose has led me to propose a native tradition of the novel. I understand this tradition, inevitably, as springing from England, but as differing from the English tradition by its perpetual reassessment and reconstitution of romance within the novel form.

Thus I am interested mainly in defining the leading characteristics of the American romance-novel, as it may be called—that freer, more daring, more brilliant fiction that contrasts with the solid moral inclusiveness and massive equability of the English novel. As Thoreau says, the imagination has a place for “wildness” as well as for the more solid and domesticated virtues, just as “nature has a place for the wild clematis as well as the cabbage.” True, cabbages may be made to grow in the American soil and the wild clematis in the English. But as it has turned out, the element of romance has been far more noticeable in the American novel than in the English.

Thoreau's words suggest something of what “romance” means as it was applied to the American novel by such different writers as Cooper, Hawthorne, James, and Frank Norris in their prefaces and essays and, as, following their lead, I use it in this book. I try to define “romance” in the first chapter. For the moment, let me say that the word

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must signify, besides the more obvious qualities of the picturesque and the heroic, an assumed freedom from the ordinary novelistic requirements of verisimilitude, development, and continuity; a tendency towards melodrama and idyl; a more or less formal abstractness and, on the other hand, a tendency to plunge into the underside of consciousness; a willingness to abandon moral questions or to ignore the spectacle of man in society, or to consider these things only indirectly or abstractly.

Obviously the romance is by nature disqualified to perform some of the classic offices of the novel. Henry James, as it now seems, did not adequately respond to *The Scarlet Letter*, although his treatment of it in his biography of Hawthorne is the starting point of any sane criticism. He seems never to have heard of *Moby-Dick*, and if he had read it there is no doubt that he would have found it lacking in certain of the novelistic virtues. He would have found that it lacked the sense of life as it is actually lived, that it did not establish the continuity between events and the characters' sense of events, that there was a general lack of that "experience" which James defines as "our apprehension and our measure of what happens to us as social creatures." Like other romance-novels, *Moby-Dick* is thus somewhat disqualified for engaging the moral imagination in the sort of close involvement with real life which makes the context for moral ideas in such novels as those of Balzac, George Eliot, and James himself.

To keep the record straight, let me say that I agree with the usual modern opinion that James is the greatest American novelist and critic of the novel. There is no doubt, however, that James in practice—say, in *The Portrait of a Lady*, as well as in a novel like *The Princess Casanovissa*, which has a strong element of melodramatic romance, or *The Wings of the Dove*, which is a kind of lyric pageant—was more the romancer than his own theories, strictly applied, would have allowed him to be. But what I am most interested in in this book is that farther realm of fiction which

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the American novelists have explored and occupied—moved, as they have been, by what James himself called a “rich passion for extremes.” In this trans-Jamesian realm of fiction there are certain special virtues. Among them are the “intellectual energy” that Brockden Brown prized, the profundity described by Melville as “the blackness of darkness,” a certain intrepid and penetrating dialectic of action and meaning, a radical skepticism about ultimate questions.

These are not the qualities usually thought of in relation to the romance or romance-novel. They are not to be found in Scott or Stevenson, even less in Margaret Mitchell, Kenneth Roberts or the many other American writers who, distantly following Scott, have romanticized episodes of the American past. Nor in the general history of literature has romance been distinguished, among the perennial literary forms, for its intellectual and moral power. On the contrary, it has on this score generally been inferior to greater forms such as tragedy and comedy—in ancient and medieval as well as in modern times.

Nevertheless the best American novelists have found uses for romance far beyond the escapism, fantasy, and sentimentality often associated with it. They have found that in the very freedom of romance from the conditions of actuality there are certain potential virtues of the mind, which may be suggested by such words as rapidity, irony, abstraction, profundity. These qualities have made romance a suitable, even, as it seems, an inevitable, vehicle for the intellectual and moral ideas of the American novelists. They have used romance to introduce into the novel what one may roughly describe as the narrow profundity of New England Puritanism, the skeptical, rationalistic spirit of the Enlightenment, and the imaginative freedom of Transcendentalism. In doing so they have created a brilliant and original, if often unstable and fragmentary, kind of literature.

It follows that the usual depreciation of romance on intellectual and moral grounds is not always justifiable. (It

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also follows that the overestimation of the novels of Hawthorne, Melville, and Faulkner by many recent critics, on the ground that these novels have the harmony and authority of the greatest tragic and religious literature, is not justifiable either. But this is a matter that may be postponed to later pages.) It is not necessarily true that in so far as a novel departs from realism it is obscurantist and disqualified to make moral comments on the world. As applied to many novels, there is no doubt that this view contains much truth. Still, one may put in a provisional claim for a particular kind of rationality in the romance-novel. The very abstractness and profundity of romance allow it to formulate moral truths of universal validity, although it perforce ignores home truths that may be equally or more important. One may point to the power of romance to express dark and complex truths unavailable to realism. The inner facts of political life have been better grasped by romance-melodramas, as they may be called—such as those of Dostoevski and Malraux—than by strictly realistic fiction.

Admittedly, the "intellectual energy" of Brown's *Wieland*, of *Moby-Dick*, or of *The Octopus* doesn't guarantee intellectual clarity. The compulsion to plunge directly to "the very axis of reality," a compulsion Melville finds, and praises, in both Hawthorne and Shakespeare, leads to some desperate gambits. And the intense desire to drive everything through to the last turn of the screw or twist of the knife, which distinguishes American writers from English, often results in romantic nihilism, a poetry of force and darkness.

But it is not my primary aim either to defend or attack the American novel on intellectual or moral grounds. I do not suggest that whatever is right. I do suggest, however, that the romance-novel *is*. It used to be thought that the element of romance in American fiction was destined to disappear, perhaps had to all intents and purposes already disappeared, as a result of the rise of modern realism which set in after the Civil War. It used to be thought, also, that

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this was a good thing, romance being regarded as a backward tendency of the comparatively unenlightened youth of our culture. But the fact seems to be that the history of the American novel is not only the history of the rise of realism but also of the repeated rediscovery of the uses of romance, and that this will continue to be so. In view of this fact about American literature, it becomes of some interest to describe how, in certain instances, this process of the amalgamation of realism and romance has been going on. And that is what I try to describe in the ensuing pages.

Let me note again my general awareness of the difficulty of making accurate judgments about what is specially American in American novels or American culture. Yet without a certain rhetorical boldness, such as appears in the first part of the first chapter, nothing of interest can be said at all on this score. In the first chapter, I try to bring out certain contrasting characteristics of the American novels as opposed to the English, in an attempt to account for the obvious fact that although most of the great American novels are romances, most of the great English novels are not—the fact, in other words, that the tradition of romance is major in the history of the American novel but minor in the history of the English novel. But elsewhere I would have it understood that when I speak of what is true of the American novels, I do not at all imply that in one way or another the same may not be true of the English, French, or Russian novels. It would be tedious to say this repeatedly in the ensuing pages, and so I have left it unsaid. My only purpose is to define some of the leading qualities of the American novel. My method is not comparative but descriptive, except at the beginning of the book, and in one or two other places, where comparison (or contrast) appears to facilitate description.

In conclusion, I should like to thank Andrew Chiappe and R. W. Flint for their careful reading of the manuscript of this book and for the several helpful suggestions which they offered for its improvement.

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Chapter I

THE BROKEN CIRCUIT

A Culture of Contradictions

THE imagination that has produced much of the best and most characteristic American fiction has been shaped by the contradictions and not by the unities and harmonies of our culture. In a sense this may be true of all literatures of whatever time and place. Nevertheless there are some literatures which take their form and tone from polarities, opposites, and irreconcilables, but are content to rest in and sustain them, or to resolve them into unities, if at all, only by special and limited means. The American novel tends to rest in contradictions and among extreme ranges of experience. When it attempts to resolve contradictions, it does so in oblique, morally equivocal ways. As a general rule it does so either in melodramatic actions or in pastoral idyls, although intermixed with both one may find the stirring instabilities of "American humor." These qualities constitute the uniqueness of that branch of the novelistic tradition which has flourished in this country. They help to account

for the strong element of "romance" in the American "novel."

By contrast, the English novel has followed a middle way. It is notable for its great practical sanity, its powerful, engrossing composition of wide ranges of experience into a moral centrality and equability of judgment. Oddity, distortion of personality, dislocations of normal life, recklessness of behavior, malignancy of motive—these the English novel has included. Yet the profound poetry of disorder we find in the American novel is missing, with rare exceptions, from the English. Radical maladjustments and contradictions are reported but are seldom of the essence of form in the English novel, and although it is no stranger to suffering and defeat or to triumphant joy either, it gives the impression of absorbing all extremes, all maladjustments and contradictions into a normative view of life. In doing so, it shows itself to derive from the two great influences that stand behind it—classic tragedy and Christianity. The English novel has not, of course, always been strictly speaking tragic or Christian. Often it has been comic, but often, too, in that superior form of comedy which approaches tragedy. Usually it has been realistic or, in the philosophical sense of the word, "naturalistic." Yet even its peculiar kind of gross poetic naturalism has preserved something of the two great traditions that formed English literature. The English novel, that is, follows the tendency of tragic art and Christian art, which characteristically move through contradictions to forms of harmony, reconciliation, catharsis, and transfiguration.

Judging by our greatest novels, the American imagination, even when it wishes to assuage and reconcile the contradictions of life, has not been stirred by the possibility of catharsis or incarnation, by the tragic or Christian possibility. It has been stirred, rather, by the aesthetic possibilities of radical forms of alienation, contradiction, and disorder.

The essential difference between the American novel and the English will be strongly pointed up to any reader of

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F. R. Leavis's *The Great Tradition*. Mr. Leavis's "great tradition" of the novel is really Anglo-American, and it includes not only Jane Austen, George Eliot, Conrad, and Henry James but, apparently, in one of its branches Hawthorne and Melville. My assumption in this book is that the American novel is obviously a development from the English tradition. At least it was, down to 1880 or 1890. For at that time our novelists began to turn to French and Russian models and the English influence has decreased steadily ever since. The more extreme imagination of the French and Russian novelists has clearly been more in accord with the purposes of modern American writers than has the English imagination. True, an American reader of Mr. Leavis's book will have little trouble in giving a very general assent to his very general proposition about the Anglo-American tradition. Nevertheless, he will also be forced constantly to protest that there is another tradition of which Mr. Leavis does not seem to be aware, a tradition which includes most of the best American novels.

Ultimately, it does not matter much whether one insists that there are really *two* traditions, the English and the American (leaving aside the question of what writers each might be said to comprise) or whether one insists merely that there is a radical divergence within one tradition. All I hold out for is a provisional recognition of the divergence as a necessary step towards understanding and appreciation of both the English and the American novel. The divergence is brought home to an American reader of Leavis's book when, for example, he comes across the brief note allotted to the Brontës. Here is Leavis's comment on Emily Brontë:

I have said nothing about *Wuthering Heights* because that astonishing work seems to me a kind of sport . . . she broke completely, and in the most astonishing way, both with the Scott tradition that imposed on the novelist a romantic resolution of his themes, and with the tradition coming down from the eighteenth century that de-

manded a plane-mirror reflection of the surface of "real" life. Out of her a minor tradition comes, to which belongs, most notably, *The House with the Green Shutters*.

Of course Mr. Leavis is right; in relation to the great tradition of the English novel, *Wuthering Heights* is indeed a sport. But suppose it were discovered that *Wuthering Heights* was written by an American of New England Calvinist or Southern Presbyterian background. The novel would be astonishing and unique no matter who wrote it or where. But if it were an American novel it would not be a sport; it has too close an affinity with too many American novels, and among them some of the best. Like many of the fictions discussed in this book *Wuthering Heights* proceeds from an imagination that is essentially melodramatic, that operates among radical contradictions and renders reality indirectly or poetically, thus breaking, as Mr. Leavis observes, with the traditions that require a surface rendering of real life and a resolution of themes, "romantic" or otherwise.

Those readers who make a dogma out of Leavis's views are thus proprietors of an Anglo-American tradition in which many of the most interesting and original and several of the greatest American novels are sports. *Wieland* is a sport, and so are *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Blithedale Romance*, *Moby-Dick*, *Pierre*, and *The Confidence Man*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *McTeague*, *As I Lay Dying*, *The Sun Also Rises*—all are eccentric, in their differing ways, to a tradition of which, let us say, *Middlemarch* is a standard representative. Not one of them has any close kinship with the massive, temperate, moralistic rendering of life and thought we associate with Mr. Leavis's "great tradition."

The English novel, one might say, has been a kind of imperial enterprise, an appropriation of reality with the high purpose of bringing order to disorder. By contrast, as Lawrence observed in his *Studies in Classic American Literature*

ture, the American novel has usually seemed content to explore, rather than to appropriate and civilize, the remarkable and in some ways unexampled territories of life in the New World and to reflect its anomalies and dilemmas. It has not wanted to build an imperium but merely to discover a new place and a new state of mind. Explorers see more deeply, darkly, privately and disinterestedly than imperialists, who must perforce be circumspect and prudential. The American novel is more profound and clairvoyant than the English novel, but by the same token it is narrower and more arbitrary, and it tends to carve out of experience brilliant, highly wrought fragments rather than massive unities.

For whatever reason—perhaps the nagging scrupulosity of the Puritan mind has something to do with it—the American novel has sometimes approached a perfection or art unknown to the English tradition, in which we discover no such highly skilled practitioners as Hawthorne, Stephen Crane, Henry James, or Hemingway. These writers, often overestimated as moralists, seem content to oppose the disorder and rawness of their culture with a scrupulous art-consciousness, with aesthetic forms—which do, of course, often broaden out into moral significance.

In a well known passage Allen Tate refers to the “complexity of feeling” that everyone senses in the American novel and that, as Mr. Tate says, “from Hawthorne down to our own time has baffled our best understanding.” The complexity of the American novel has been much exaggerated. With the exception of one or two of James’s novels no American fiction has anything like the complexity of character and event of *Our Mutual Friend*, for example. In *The Scarlet Letter* or *Moby-Dick* the characters and events have actually a kind of abstracted simplicity about them. In these books character may be deep but it is narrow and predictable. Events take place with a formalized clarity. And certainly it cannot be argued that society and

the social life of man are shown to be complex in these fictions.

But of course Tate says "complexity of feeling," and he is right about that. The states of feeling, and the language in which they are caught, are sometimes very intricate in American novels. Yet these musing tides of feeling and language that make such a rich poetry in our fiction often seem to be at variance with the simplified actions and conceptions of life our novels present. The origins of this apparent anomaly must be sought in the contradictions of our culture.

Marius Bewley takes up Tate's remark in an essay called "Fenimore Cooper and the Economic Age" and traces this "complexity of feeling" to a "tension" which he finds not only in Cooper but in Hawthorne and James. It is, he thinks, a political tension in its origins, although as embodied in the works of these authors, it assumes many forms. This tension, he says, "was the result of a struggle to close the split in American experience, to discover a unity that—for the artist especially—almost sensibly *was not there*. What was the nature of the division that supported this conflict? It took on many forms concurrently; it was an opposition between tradition and progress or between the past and the future; between Europe and America, liberalism and reaction, aggressive acquisitive economics and benevolent wealth. These same divisions existed in Europe also, but there they were more ballasted by a denser social medium, a richer sense of the past, a more inhibited sense of material possibilities."

Mr. Bewley's apt discussion of the matter needs to be amended in one fundamental way. The kind of art that stems from a mind primarily moved by the impulse toward aesthetic and cultural unities and thus "struggles to close the split in American experience" as an artist might wish to close it—this kind of art is practiced often, though not always, by Henry James, but less often by Hawthorne and Cooper, and much less often by Faulkner, Melville, and Mark Twain. The fact is that many of the best American