

# THE AMERICAN MYSTERY

Tony Tanner



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*American Literature from Emerson to DeLillo*

TONY TANNER

Foreword by Edward Said

Introduction by Ian F. A. Bell



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## *Foreword*

*Edward W. Said*

I first encountered Tony Tanner more than thirty years ago because of and through Joseph Conrad. Tony had very generously reviewed my first book which was on the autobiographical element in Conrad's fiction and I of course had read his little study of *Lord Jim* with admiration and profit. I can't recall our actual first meeting but I do recall our first extended period together – it was at the University of Zurich in January 1968 where we had been invited as certainly the youngest and most obscure of the renowned participants to a four-day seminar convened by Paul de Man. Emil Staiger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jean-Pierre Vernant, Jean Starobinski, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Pierre Richard, Georges Poulet were the main features: Tony and I sat there as decidedly second-rank soldiers, and were unclear as to why we had been invited, but we were both dazzled and repelled by the overwhelming displays of learning, profundity, and polyglot disputatiousness of these redoubtable figures in European thought and interpretation. It was then that I experienced Tony's amazing gift for genuinely intellectual catholicity and curiosity on the one hand combined with a bottomless capacity for irreverence and wit on the other. We became fast friends during those several snowy, serious days, and remained continuously in touch ever since.

He was always the kindest and most generous of companions. I think I saw him during all the main periods of his professional life, starting and ending of course at King's College particularly when, in the spring of 1997, he was my unfailingly attentive and caring host for three weeks, but also in California, Baltimore, and then when he and Nadia occupied the Alpha Road house in Cambridge during the late 1970s. I recall in particular that during the summer of 1978 my wife,

two small children and I stayed with Nadia and Tony while we were marooned and unable to leave Europe at a particularly bad moment in the Lebanese Civil War, and how happy and surprised I was at his hospitable patience with us all, children especially.

Being myself of a rather itinerant and unsettled colonial character I used to kid Tony about his Englishness and his steadily routine habits, his well-known chair in the combination room, his regular appearances at the various meals, his long residence as a student, fellow, and professor at King's College, his years and years of devotion to reading, writing about, and teaching literature. But he was also a Conradian character who had somehow jumped and who had a keen sense of having betrayed something of himself in so doing. I always felt that about him, a darker side to his genial, extraordinarily reliable and dependable aspects, and to which he intermittently referred. That made him more attractive to me and I think made our relationship stronger. His death left me with a terrible sense of loss and disorientation, a dear friend exactly my age, stolen away in all his great powers, his superb work still pouring forth, his intellectual energies and unrelenting wit at their highest.

Tony's achievements as a great critic and teacher strike me as altogether unique in many different ways that deserve specific enumeration here. First of course was his exceptional grounding in all periods of English literature, from as early as Chaucer and Shakespeare, until the present. This may now seem like a conservative or curatorial achievement, but in fact it was extraordinarily lived, dwelt upon, returned to, and enriched by his own conversation, teaching, writing, and everyday activity. Second was his pioneering work as *the* British scholar of American literature: more than anyone else he made it part of the literary agenda in England. Third was his unerring sense of judgement and discrimination in dealing with fastidiously precise writers like Jane Austen and Henry James. Fourth, and to me most impressive, was his capacity to make intellectual and moral sense of the most disturbing, intimate, and unsettling of human experiences. Obviously his understanding of Conrad speaks to that capacity, but so in particular does his monumental book on adultery in the novel, for me his most powerful, most dislocating, and yet most paradoxically Apollonian work. In his pages on Ruskin, Proust, and Mann in *Venice Desired* there is a similar depth to his analyses of the city's chthonic powers on writers whose own disposition was torn so operatically between the Apollonian and the Dionysian.

To say finally of Tony Tanner that he represented the best that the profession of letters has given us at the end of this century of extremes is to say very modestly what is true of him as a man, a friend, an abiding presence, a mind, and an example. For those of us whose lives he touched and changed so unalterably through his work and his friendship, the loss is immense, but compensated for somewhat by his rich legacy of scholarship and criticism.

## Sources

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11. ‘Don DeLillo and “the American mystery”’: *Underworld*’ from *Raritan: A Quarterly Review*, vol. 17, no. 4 (Spring 1998). Copyright © 1998 by *Raritan*, New Brunswick. Reproduced by permission.
12. “‘The Rubbish-Tip for subjunctive Hopes’”: Thomas Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon*’ appears for the first time in this volume.



## *Introduction*

### *Tony Tanner on American means of writing and means of writing America*

*Ian F. A. Bell*

John Locke began Book III of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* in anticipation of the peculiarly American concern with empirical philology by stressing 'how great a dependence our words have on common sensible ideas', to claim 'I doubt not but, if we could trace them to their sources, we should find, in all languages, the names which stand for things that fall not under our senses to have had their first rise from sensible ideas.' Subsequently, we find Emerson's essay on 'Nature' arguing that 'Every word which is used to express a novel or intellectual fact, if traced to its root, is found to be formed from some material appearance', and Whitman's 'Slang in America' recasts the principle in more populist mode to urge that the 'final decisions' of language 'are made by the masses, people nearest the concrete, having most to do with actual land and sea'. And for all three, words, to be expressive, had to be figurative, capable of yielding a picture, of being literally 'picturesque' (Emerson's term) at the point where they went into action through their engagement with truth and newness (the line continues down into the twentieth century *via* one of Emerson's disciples, the sinologist Ernest Fenollosa, whose calligraphic celebration of the Chinese ideogram was, with the aid of Ezra Pound, powerfully appropriated for modernist poetics). Instead of Locke, we could turn to Jonathan Edwards and the lengthy Puritan heritage of America's abiding concern with hermeneutics and the anxieties of trusting or mistrusting signs, but the thrust remains similar – that America, not exclusively by any means, but certainly most acutely, has, from virtually its first settling, been closely attentive to the material and constructive nature of language. American culture exhibits the great debates about language, representation, and interpretation to a much larger, and more expressive, extent than any other – Washington Irving was right, surely, to coin 'logocracy' on its behalf, and as Ralph Ellison observed closer to our own time, 'In the beginning of America, was

not only the word but the contradiction of the word.' In America, distinctively, words build (as they do so literally in Thoreau); and this has not been a matter of solely literary endeavour: for John Adams 'It is not to be disputed that the form of government has an influence upon language, and language in its turn influences not only the form of government, but the temper, the sentiments, and manners of the people', while Thomas Paine found himself tempted by a particularly pertinent metaphor where 'the American Constitutions were to liberty, what a grammar is to language: they define its parts of speech, and practically construct them into syntax'.

The central political questions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries so frequently became issues of interpretation (at its broadest, of reading the words of the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution), and a recent book by Thomas Gustafson (*Representative Words: Politics, Literature, and the American Language, 1776-1865*) has identified the principal conflict at the heart of such issues – the conflict between the need to settle the meanings of words (to maintain order, community, and communication) and the need to unsettle them (to pursue liberty, independence, and self-expression); the conflict located within what Gustafson calls the 'contradictory imperatives' of constitutional and revolutionary thought. From this, we can negotiate the extent to which, in both civic and literary senses, words in America carry a double burden of representation and misrepresentation, of determinacy and indeterminacy, of acceptance and questioning, of bondage and freedom. It is a burden succinctly caught by Melville in *The Confidence-Man* where we find 'Distrust is a stage to confidence. I have confidence in distrust.'

Melville's oxymoronic stance here, I would venture, indexes the political and linguistic complex we confront in the American literary endeavour of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and ever since *The Reign of Wonder* through *City of Words* and *Scenes of Nature, Signs of Men* to the present collection, Tony Tanner has displayed himself as its most subtle and supple critic. The trajectory he charts is from the adventure of nineteenth-century Romance forms to the awkwardnesses of late twentieth-century postmodernity – the essay on Don DeLillo quotes from the 'Author's Note' to *Libra*:

Because this book makes no claim to literal truth, because it is only itself, apart and complete, readers may find refuge here – a way of thinking about assassination without being constrained by half-facts or overwhelmed by possibilities, by the tide of speculation that widens with the years.

That is, DeLillo inherits the permissions granted by the 'latitude' within the 'highway a little removed from ordinary travel' of Hawthorne's Prefaces. And as Tanner begins with the Emerson of philosophical flux and flow, matched by a prose that is 'vehicular as opposed to stationary; more a conveyance than a homestead; practising interminability in preference to giving a feeling of arrival; an ocean rather than a wall', so he ends with that 'darker' Emersonian, Thomas Pynchon, and the attempts to map the other forms of flow within transitional America (America is probably always transitional) by Mason & Dixon. Throughout, Tanner's trajectory is informed by the textuality of America, its special cognisance of the material manufacture of words (he has already, in *Scenes of Nature, Signs of Men*, described the Lewis and Clark expedition as 'an exercise of territorial annexation by nomination', America itself as 'a linguistic construct', and the monolithic hermeneutics of Hawthorne's Puritan communities has received no better analysis than 'an atmosphere of sadistic semiology'). No other critic has been so alert to what America writes and writes out, appropriates and disenfranchises.

If words and works can offer 'not definitive verdicts but alternative versions' (*City of Words*), then they are liable to the schism of over-determined meaning and meaninglessness (or paranoia and anti-paranoia which, for Pynchon, provides the definition and critique of such binary thinking) and to the hermeneutical anxieties which persist throughout American literature, the inquiries into whether name can ever be related to thing and the attendant worries about the prescriptive nature of such a relation. Within a culture that experiences itself as always new, the issue is felt with special urgency, and the play with the tenuousness, arbitrariness, illusoriness of words becomes a deeply serious matter – William James's vision of 'a universe unfinished, with doors and windows open to possibilities uncontrolled in advance' is both liberating and frightening. If America, following Tocqueville, was 'spoken into existence' (or written), the breath of utterance is generatively unfettered and alarmingly evanescent simultaneously. Tanner is very good on these matters; and in large part it is perhaps because his intellectual furniture has its own American colour in being open to a particular (and far from uncritical) sympathy – the Proustian 'only true voyage of discovery' ('not to visit strange lands but to possess other eyes, to behold the universe through the eyes of another') glossed by Tanner early on (in *The Reign of Wonder*) as the suspension of fixed positions and prejudices in order to achieve 'not a new philosophy but

simply a new breadth of mind and a widened range of sympathy'. More immediate is Hawthorne's notion of sympathy as a key element in a writer's sense of the past and Emerson's commitment to flow and direction against any form of repose. And when (in his most recent book, *Henry James and the Art of Nonfiction*) Tanner identified James's 'central preferences' in resisting direct relations between language and the world as 'Absence rather than presence; shadow rather than substance, broken eloquence esteemed more than confidently replete utterance', he identified preferences that are shared. Richard Poirier reviewed the book (in *The London Review of Books*, 14 December 1995 – it is the best assessment of Tanner and James we have) and used the occasion to bring the other James, William, into the arena of ideas I've been adumbrating. Poirier draws from *The Principles of Psychology* to highlight the 'ghostly elements' that inhabit syntax – those parts of speech that are 'impalpable to direct examination', that are 'nothing but *signs of direction*', not to be glimpsed 'except in flight', and warning 'if we try to hold fast the feeling of direction, the full presence comes and the feeling of direction is lost'.

Full presence as much as replete utterance is antithetical to the feeling of direction sought after by this Emersonian aspect of the brothers James. And so it is with Tony Tanner's appreciation of America's literary language. If, in many ways, that language is all about 'the feeling of direction' (the list is potentially endless: we might add Cooper's anxieties about the linguistic imperialism which threatens Lake Glimmerglass, Pound's admiration for Whistler's 'keys', or the refashioned Romances of Pynchon and DeLillo), Tanner is its most eloquent articulator. Direction, not arrival; provisional and provisory structures; transitional and transitory mores – these are seats of anxiety, as are their antitheses, the civic and political institutions which threaten the enclosure of repose and finality: and they all compete within the ambitions to the new and the singular that define the culture's sense of its independence and identity. These contradictory impulses are nowhere better captured than in that brief and extraordinary phrase of Scott Fitzgerald's describing the youthful reveries of Jay Gatsby: 'they were a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded on a fairy's wing'. Dreaming for Gatsby is about the invention and construction of himself, without biological parentage yet needing a fatherly origin of some sort (his choice is Benjamin Franklin, a great *maker* of things), and so he finds a satisfactoriness (a carefully non-adventurous yet consoling term) in the 'unreality' of

'reality'. This is understandable as a version of reality's infections (although characteristically suppressing the material base which such versions usually find necessary), but the figurative gloss does not allow us to remain comfortable with such a familiar idea: the consolation (and self-delusion) of the first part of the description is quite violently disturbed by the literal impossibility (as a picture) of the second. Words fail here, do not build; deliberately, they create no picture – and their failure indicates the struggle of the American writer to deal with the contradictions I have been outlining.

Tanner takes up the task of narrating this struggle. Gatsby's 'fairy's wing' is not to be dismissed merely as an 'ineffable gaudiness' designed to resist the irreversible ticking of the clock which accompanies his 'fantastic conceits' (although there is more than an element of truth in that), but is a later image of a permanent historical condition. Tanner notices a prevailing tendency to fade, the frequency of words like 'melt' in *The Blithedale Romance*, and asks us to see how 'dematerialisation, attenuation, liquidation, vaporisation and other words of desubstantiation seem variously to dominate the changing atmosphere'. Within this 'peculiarly American nightmare' ('a sudden sense of the complete defamiliarisation of a site or terrain thought to be known and amenable') Hawthorne places what is probably the first fully analysed portrait of the American artist in Miles Coverdale and the conditions his words encounter. Foremost amongst these conditions (and what makes Coverdale so proto-typical of American artistry throughout the century) is the issue of counterfeit, prompted by the mysterious and unnamed crime of Old Moodie. Tanner makes it clear that the crime was forgery and notes the 'worryingly close similarity between writing fiction (or coining images) and counterfeiting the currency on which society depends'. It is perhaps because of this similarity that Coverdale's narration refuses to name the crime, and there is no doubt that it creates special pressure within a culture which advertises itself as new and aggressively self-invented. The story Coverdale tells has to be provisory, has to lack in confidence: the new inevitably works in the absence of established and sustaining structures, and equally inevitable raises questions about its own authenticity, its freshly minted reality (indeed, the creating of new writerly space means the risk not only of counterfeit but, in its most extreme forms, rape and murder: Melville's 'The Paradise of Bachelors and The Tartarus of Maids' and 'The Bell Tower' testify to each respectively). Making always comes close to faking here with a particular urgency that is not exhibited within other

cultures – and faking is itself a form of making: forging applies to construction equally as to counterfeit (the distinctively American nature of Hawthorne's enterprise may be seen in a comparison with Dickens's *Great Expectations*). This problem of authenticity prompted by Hawthorne's fiscal metaphor additionally bears directly upon the novel's atmosphere of 'desubstantiation' in its invocation of the alarming financial instability that resulted from the bank wars of the 1830s, the concomitant debate over coined and paper money that continued through to the end of the century, and the epidemic of speculation in various forms (but particularly over land) that marked a further corollary. In all of these areas, what is at risk is confidence – in itself, not so stable an ideal as we might like to think (as Melville will demonstrate in *The Confidence-Man*, where he begins and ends with a blank cheque and the promissory note that is its counterpart), but nevertheless a necessary means of getting about.

How, then, to have confidence in a world of desubstantiation and counterfeit – or, rather, to give it authentic writerly shape when words may either imprison or remain themselves factitious? Counterfeit applies to people just as much as to bank-notes or art-works, and Tanner observes how the characters of Blithedale have a 'general tendency to lead a masked life' and a 'disposition towards "screening" of all kinds' (veils, false names, mysterious and mystified life histories). Karen Halttunen (in *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1870*) has documented how, by mid-century, the sentimental cult of sincerity had been obliged to find room for the necessity of performativeness in social manners and intercourse, and it is clear that counterfeit comes close to performance within the American exhortation to invent – be it the disavowal of Europe, the tinkering tradition of Franklin, or the self-engineering of Gatsby. No longer is it a matter of having the confidence to distinguish between the authentic and the fake, but of having the constructivist skill to maintain more confidence in some counterfeits (or representations) than in others (the issue becomes particularly compelling towards the end of the nineteenth century with the development of a culture of consumption – to which the novels of Henry James testify so richly). Since trust in all its forms (financial, social, and aesthetic) is so deeply embedded within the whole notion of representation, its fragility makes special demands upon the writer. For Tanner, these demands upon Hawthorne prompt him to create in Coverdale a new kind of figure in American literature – the artist as failed artist, and specifically as 'lodger', most at

home in 'places of transience' and 'truly at home nowhere'. The failure lies in 'forgetting the American past, while being disablingly sceptical about the American present' and in being 'dubious, undecided, ambiguous, about the authentic validity or value of "fiction" and art in general'. It is a clever trick, of course, for the presumably non-failed artist to present such a figure since these are the very shortcomings he will, by implicit comparison, lay claim to avoid. And it is a trick (performance, fakery) we are intended to recognise – in claiming a representative function for Coverdale, Tanner finds himself offering further figures to add to the image of the lodger:

Inasmuch as he sees him as a true product of America, in his disorientation, amnesia, and general sense of loss – *that* is what Hawthorne is doing with Coverdale. Saying to American society, American history, American religion and culture: *this* is the artist you have produced – intruder, lodger, spy.

We might go further still and complete 'intruder, lodger, spy' with the confidence trickster, not only another American representative man but a version of Hawthorne's knowingness about failed artistry. We will confront this trickster in his fullest form of course in *The Confidence-Man* itself, but first I want to look at Tanner's account of *Moby-Dick* in order to develop some additional colours for the palette. Melville's oceanic tale is insistently about words and their operations – 'as much indebted to books as to whales' where 'the activities of writing and fishing are curiously merged, teasingly mixed'. The catalogue of such mergings is encyclopaedic and far too extensive to itemise here, but the point I want to highlight is that particular merging of Melville's lexicon, his 'assertive and allusive' style where 'words accumulate meanings and speculations accrue to words'. In short, words *work* for and in a novel which takes human labour as its other principal theme, the physical and the cerebral 'interweavingly working together'. Mergings, interweavings, mixings, accretions, and allusions bring together style and subject in a particularly expressive way to register what is perhaps the main moral of the novel – what Tanner calls 'reversibility' whereby 'All things are potentially double, paradoxically mixed, oddly reversible. Opposites may turn out to be more like identities' and, crucially, 'rigid polarisation will not hold when applied to the swimming intermixedness of life'.

Reversibility is characterised by reciprocity and mutuality, is set against 'the potentially disastrous, all annihilating effects of the kind of Manichean, dualistic modes of thought based on notions of embattled exclusivity'. So counter to the oppositional structures of Ahab, we have

Ishmael's 'tolerant inclusiveness, his disinclination for rigid partial versions and sectarian monocularity, his eroticised and playful porousness to the wholeness of life'. Osmosis combats bifurcation in Ishmael's 'survival through style', a style that is careless, inconsistent, resistant to closure, fond of 'careful disorderliness', and non-assertive: 'He digs and writes – moves on', as Tanner so economically puts it. This is also Melville's style and, for Tanner, that of America itself: 'In its vast assimilations, its seemingly opportunistic eclecticism, its pragmatic and improvisatory nonchalance, its capacious grandiloquence and demotic humour it is indeed a style for America – the style of America.' It is the 'widened range of sympathy' that Tanner had earlier associated with the stance of 'wonder' itself and its commitment to the *feel* of direction as against repose. In *The Confidence-Man*, this 'reversibility' of apprehension and understanding will be re-cast as 'interchangeability' (a term Tanner borrows from a later, more secular masquerader, Thomas Mann's Felix Krull) to register 'the multiplicity and the sheer ontological dubiety of the self', thoroughly in tune, I would add, with the shift from the cult of sincerity to the social necessity of performativeness I noted earlier. For Tanner, the Confidence Man is grounded in several of the abiding elements of American thought in the nineteenth century – Barnum the 'hoaxer showman', Franklin the 'self-technologist', Poe's 'diddler', and the Emersonian commitment to endless metamorphosis; all of which combine to underwrite, again, the peculiarly American faith in self-invention, 'the specialist in secondary, reproducible identities' (this composite figuration is one that Ralph Ellison will deploy to pessimistic effect at the behest of different social imperatives in *Invisible Man*). Melville now extends *Moby-Dick's* critique of schismatic perception, the urge for fixed authority and absolute guarantees of authenticity, into a wider consideration of the fundamental novelistic strategies – ontological identity, the conception of character, and the conventions of representation. These preoccupations place additional pressure on the constructivist nature of language, on the capacity of words to make/fake. With a neatly punning slippage, the black cripple in the opening sequence hopes to find himself 'werry well wordy of all you kind ge'mmen's kind confidence'. The repetition of 'kind' is an awkward, and certainly fraught, reminder of those humanistic elements of reversibility we found in Ishmael. Here, interchangeability contributes a more abstract and damaging shade to the lexical experiment, the wordiness of the later novel where, as Tanner sees, rightly, 'the connection between words and "worth" or



trustworthiness, indeed between language and value or integrity, is just what – in suitably various guises and disguises – this masquerade of a book is all about’.

The great thing about the masquerade of words (and, I suggest, one of the principal imperatives behind American Romanticism’s fascination with the performative nature of words – endlessly manoeuvring and manoeuvrable, opening and closing, punning and literalising, various and singular) is that it displays so clearly language’s constructivist function, its fresh capacity for making. One of the main reasons that *The Confidence-Man* is such a representative text, for all its adventurousness and its originality (a term profoundly questioned in itself by the novel), is that, as Tanner recognises, it ‘is above all interested in the words men say – and write – as they attempt to relate or exploit, to communicate or manipulate, to enlighten or outwit, to tell the truth or insert a lie’. While we might tend to privilege the seemingly positive side of this list (communication and truth), in fact it is the putatively negative line (manipulation and lies) which I would suggest provides such a rich resource for Melville. This is so because it acknowledges the factitiousness of language (and, concomitantly, its variousness and variability, returning words to the generative and dispersive fluctuations of voice – the ‘porousness’ of Ishmael, perhaps, or more familiarly, the oral insistences of Whitman, the delight in dictating their works for the later Twain and James) at the same time as, paradoxically, it recognises its capacity for change and alterability. It is in these terms that we can trace the trajectory of Tanner’s enterprise in the present collection (I’d probably want to insert Nietzsche and the Wilde of the ‘truth of lies’ as mediatory agents), the lexical inquiries which lead us from the radical experimentation of the American Romance to the nervousness of American postmodern fiction, from Hawthorne and Melville to DeLillo and Pynchon.

Arguably, the Romance of twentieth-century America has been the assassination of Kennedy, and it is striking that DeLillo, in his version of the story that is *Libra*, chose to ally the form of his enterprise (as we saw earlier) with Hawthornesque ‘latitude’. And it is striking equally that Tanner, in thinking widely about the kinds of reading prompted by *Americana*, should find himself asking (in more contemporary terms) the sort of question he would have asked of *The Confidence-Man*: ‘America – or Americana? What kind of “real” life people can shape for themselves in a mediated, consumer culture swamped in images and information, is an abiding concern.’ The material conditions which enable