Abstract

REVIEW ESSAY

The Romance of the New World

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The concept of romance has long appealed to students of American culture for whom it extends an invitation to assay a definition of "America." The reasons why the romance should appear so provocative are not far to seek. The self conscious foregrounding of narrative and in particular the tropes used to interpret the significance of national history would seem to draw to itself the attention of critics looking for textual validation for their own concept of American exceptionalism. Edgar Dryden's book situates itself firmly within this tradition of American studies. George Dekker's book, however, represents an extraordinary departure from traditional approaches to American romance: his is an achievement that rewrites the agenda for studies of the romance in America.

To date, the most influential view of the American romance has been that of Richard Chase, though the portrait of American literature painted in *The American Novel and Its Tradition* owes a great deal to D. H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature* and, as R. C. De Prospo has observed, derives ultimately from Toqueville's *Democracy in America.*

In a self-consciously strident argument Lawrence claims, in "The Spirit of Place," that the American classic is marked by the painful displacement of a new sensibility into familiar experience. Through the language of displacement classic American literature "tells lies... . And out of a pattern of lies art weaves the truth." The romancer's preference for a duplicitous, figurative "world elsewhere" dominated future debate over the nature of American romance and was eventually deconstructed by Walter Benn Michaels in his 1985 essay "Romance and Real Estate." This essay explains how the claim to be aloof from the secular world serves "to domesticate the social dislocation of the 1840s and 1850s" and, whilst repressing the possibility of change, disseminates a politically charged definition of property and ownership.

But Daniel Hoffman's 1965 study describes the romance as possessed of mythic, Gothic, archetypal or ritualistic, allegorical and religious characteristics that "lead the imaginations of their authors and readers not toward the treatment of society as a complex interaction of classes and forces, but instead toward an ahistorical depiction of the individual's discovery of his own identity in a world where his essential self is inviolate and independent of such involvement in history." Hoffman sees the romance as satirizing the materialism and "egalitarian levelling zeal" of American society whilst representing "Young America in search of self-knowledge and freedom" (p. xii). Where Hoffman follows the Lawrentian approach to romance as the genre par excellence for the representation of a new world in search of its true identity, Joel Porte situates the American
romance within the specific context of the American literary Renaissance and argues that romance
texts are characterized by the self-conscious need to define themselves: a self-reflexive thematic
concern with the notion of the artist as the revealer of truth leads the romance to present itself as a
species of experience rather than as a means to represent experience. The art of the romancer "may
sometimes seem false," Porte claims, "but it is always true." Thus, Porte departs from Lawrence's
view of the literature of America to the extent that he focusses on the formal qualities of the text
and only implicitly considers its cultural situation. Lawrence deals foremost with the situation of the
New World writer, for "American art-speech contains an alien quality, which belongs to the
American continent and to nowhere else" (p. 7). And so he is compelled to ask, what is distinctive
about America? He concludes that, even more than the experience of migration, it is the motivation
to migrate: the impulse to escape Old World forms of authority and control and the tension that
arises from the inability to escape completely. "Liberty in America has meant so far the breaking
away from all dominion. The true liberty will only begin when Americans discover IT, and proceed
possibly to fulfil IT. IT being the deepest whole self of man, the self in its wholeness, not idealistic
halffness" (p. 13). The same concept of America as somehow still unmade and in need of self-
definition is continually repeated by critics of the romance.

Michael Davitt Bell's important 1980 study elaborates upon the idea of a dichotomy
separating the actual from the imaginary in American culture. Concentrating once more on the
classic texts of the American Renaissance, Bell identifies the romancer's perception of "a seeming
affinity between certain formal problems of fictional narrative and what they saw as a 'formal'
problem of nineteenth century American national culture." Ironically, in Bell's view, the very
circumstances that divorced the realm of the actual from the imaginary (and the romance) was the
common cultural ground that defines the unique nature of America. All of the visible culture of
mid-nineteenth century America was involved in the effort to discover new forms with which to
represent the "strange new truths" of the new nation. Looking to contemporary definitions of
romance, Bell concludes that the term named not one kind of fiction as opposed to another but all
fiction in opposition to history. Only by romanticizing reality could a reconciliation be effected.
And here it was that the defence of the romance intersected with the attempt to define a national
literature: both interests could be satisfied by the poeticization of native American materials. But
this assimilation of romance deprived the genre of its contemporary identity, that of a fantasy
divorced from the needs and desires of the community. The sacrifice of an orthodox relation
between the text and its "world," the opposition between the deviant imagination and social norm, is
the definitive tension within the romance and the conflict that distinguishes American culture from
other national cultures. The "neurotic dualism of romance [is] the tension between language and
impulse, form and suggestion, repression and expression" (p. 129).

In the work of Michael Davitt Bell, D. H. Lawrence and others history appears in its most
abstract form, as does "American culture." Both concepts are used to present a specific view of the
relationship between literature and nationhood; details carefully chosen from the historical record
(when such details appear at all) create the appearance of validity for an assumed relationship
between the unique nature of the American romance and the exceptional character of the New
World.

II

Edgar Dryden assumes that the category of romance performs a mediatory function between
American literature and the American nation. The cultural activities of reading and writing are
stressed as he repeats the now familiar view of the American romance as defined by its self-
reflexivity. His approach is informed by a kind of "soft core" poststructuralism that emphasizes the
textuality of romance texts and provides for a corresponding diminution of the role of history in
both the genre of romance and in the texts discussed. This leads, inevitably, to the abstraction and universalization of the idea of "America," despite disclaimers to the contrary, even in spite of Dryden's professed disapproval of the tendency to essentialize that he (following the lead of Fredric Jameson) sees in conventional genre criticism. Dryden approaches the generic question in a reflexive way, addressing himself to what he calls "the enabling principles of a work rather than...its external shape" (p. x). But it is difficult to guess just what these enabling principles will be when Dryden fails (where George Dekker succeeds so admirably) to consider the precise cultural circumstances that saw the rise of the romance genre in mid-nineteenth century New England. Instead, his discussion focusses on "an incompatibility between the shaping power and that which is shaped, and this problem of form enters into [the writer's] works as an essential theme, with the result that they stage the process of their own self-engendering" (p. x). So the romance is self-reflexive, self-interpreting, obsessed with the conditions of textuality that are the "enabling principles" of the text. And this fixation is emblematized by Dryden's portrait of the artist as an American.

The textual analyses that constitute Dryden's study attend to a "moment" in each text when the representation of reading, the activity that provides the "enabling energy" of the American romance, "appears to mark and disturb the American novelist's passage from life to writing and to entangle experience with an intertextual system of relationships" (p. xi). Evan Carton's study of the rhetoric of American romance similarly focusses on a momentary illumination: "the apprehension that the moment of fulfillment in the quest for the absolute, the moment of the self's integration with God, is the moment of the self's annihilation and meaning's irremediable loss." Though this moment is never realized, still the terror to which this realization gives rise commits the romancer to a balanced and dialectical approach to the real and the ideal, viewing both alienation from and integration with the transcendent as equally deadly alternatives. For although the romance is able to represent a truth that is present only as a representation, romance remains the preferred vehicle for the quest after truth. Romance engages the problematic relationship between words and things, phenomena and noumena, through a self-reflexive concern with the limits placed upon knowledge. Given the indeterminate and materialistic nature of language, its inability to make truth present to knowledge, the romance is the writer's only recourse because the romance is able to transform cognitive failure into a kind of victory. The failure to represent the sublime object can become, in the crucible of the romance's self-reflexion or self-absorption, a supreme representation of sublimity's non-representational character. Romance, in Carton's view, exploits the paradoxical nature of language in order to involve itself with that which it ostensibly opposes.

Evan Carton shares Edgar Dryden's pseudo-deconstructive methodology but as Dryden gradually makes clear, in his book he is referring to the moment when the romance narrative discovers that textuality is everything: this is the recognition that il n'y a pas d'hors texte. By examining this "moment" in a number of exemplary texts Dryden claims that he is able to chart a line of development within American literary history, taking in Romanticism, Realism, Modernism, and Postmodernism. But the main problem with this study is that this historical subtext, like the generic definition of romance, remains only a subtext. Anticipating this objection, Dryden writes that the story of the American romance "must emerge from the readings of the individual texts" and from the echoes that sound from one text to another. This argument is hardly compelling; rather, let us read precisely the chronology that Dryden wants to present and the series of definitions that he would have his chronology support. A critic cannot be attacked for descriptions and definitions that he does not present, nor can he be praised. And to smuggle definitions into the analysis under the cover of close reading is to choose the worst of all methodological possibilities. What definition of romance Dryden does offer centres on the interaction of the novel, romance, and the question of modernity.

The example of Don Quixote as the paradigmatic romance gives rise to the concept that the law of the modern, the law of the novel, and the nature of the romance is that new fictions absorb
the old: the rule of self-consciousness demands that the act of reading put into question the status of earlier narratives. Innocent readers and naive narratives are therefore the stuff of modern fictions. But this parasitical relationship has posed problems for readers and, more particularly, for writers. For the novel asserted both an entertainment value and a didactic value, and these fought for priority. On behalf of the reader, the writer found himself obliged to control the seductive power of the story that threatens to obscure the moral point of the narrative. The struggle for power between the old and the new, the imaginative story and its rational "moral" is a conflict among modes of reading and is represented by a form of romance that concentrates on the question of its own textuality.

But Dryden fails to follow through the implications of his thesis by ignoring the possibility that the romance offered a strategy whereby the author could control readings of his fiction. In his prefaces, Hawthorne appears to be singularly aware of the dangers of a too literal interpretation, of both the real and of the ideal. He defends his fictional practice by explaining, repeatedly, the link that he has tried to establish between romance and the social world of modern America. For example, in the 1851 preface to Twice-Told Tales he explains that his stories must be read as they were written, as part of an attempt "to open an intercourse with the world," and Hawthorne insists that every "sentence, so far as it embodies thought or sensibility, may be understood and felt by anybody, who will give himself the trouble to read it, and will take up the book in a proper mood." But in the preface to The House of the Seven Gables, the reader is warned that both an abstract moral and the concrete circumstances of the fictional plot can be too clearly depicted; that verisimilitude can encourage a literal belief in that which is only figuratively true: literal interpretation "exposes the Romance to an inflexible and exceedingly dangerous species of criticism, by bringing his fancy-pictures almost into positive contact with the realities of the moment," but The House of the Seven Gables has "a great deal more to do with the clouds overhead, than with any portion of the soil of the County of Essex."

In the preface to The Blithedale Romance, conditions prevailing in American culture are blamed for a general predisposition towards literal mindedness, a perspective which reduces the ideal to the mundane by denying the fictive illusion of presence: "In the old countries, with which Fiction has long been conversant, a certain conventional privilege seems to be awarded to the romancer; his work is not put exactly side by side with nature; and he is allowed a license with regard to every-day Probability, in view of the improved effects which he is bound to produce thereby.... This atmosphere is what the American romancer needs. In its absence, the beings of imagination are compelled to show themselves in the same category as actually living mortals; a necessity that generally renders the paint and pasteboard of their composition but too painfully discernible." The desire to resist the semantic closure which results from the perception of identity between the sign and its referent appears to underlie Hawthorne's complaint and his assertion that the writer possesses the right to present the truth in terms of his own choosing. Hawthorne chooses to keep open as many referential options as possible. The totalizing quality of a singular version of Truth seems to have been perceived by Hawthorne and Melville as a real danger: perhaps not so much because of an unsophisticated cultural literalism that such a conception could betray as due to the dangers of self-delusion and moral domination that accompany the dissemination of absolute truths. A dangerous quality of hermeneutic absolutism is suggested in Emerson's account of reading and writing in "The Poet," where the poet is described as a privileged part of the ideal, privy to its transcendental meanings. Hawthorne and Melville both offer an implicit critique of Emersonian referentiality by stressing the plural, interpreted nature of truth and by favouring the semantic ambiguity characteristic of romance.

It is the preference for self-reflexive (romance and symbolistic) form that is stressed in twentieth-century accounts of American Renaissance. The modern critical establishment values this moment in American literary history for its striving towards transcendence: a search for and affirmation of the eternal verities sanctioned by the classics of European literature acts as the
passport of American literature into the realms of Western literary culture. Such a search demonstrated that American writers had, at last, developed the necessary degree of sophistication to eschew "cruder" representations of concrete cultural conditions. It is this transcendental, ahistorical, aspect of Renaissance literature which underpins F. O. Matthiessen's definition of the period. In Matthiessen's words, the definitive quality, common to the texts of the American Renaissance, was "the mode of symbolizing," through which the literature of the Renaissance attempts to come to terms with a perceived dichotomy between this actual world and an ideal other world: "another world yet one to which we feel the tie."11

This separation of the imaginary and the mundane has been repeated by Michael Davitt Bell, Daniel Hoffman, Richard Chase and, most recently, by Edgar Dryden who view the opposition in terms of the conflict created by the resistance of American experience to imaginative representation and the nervousness of the American writer for whom the reader appears as a figure capable of either validating or subverting the text. But the writer and the reader are themselves embedded in the fictions that surround them, in the web of interpretations that reveals no core of meaning. The essential perception of romance is that fiction and history share a common origin in textuality and the crucial question that is posed by the tropes of romance is of the relative priority of history and narrative: which did come first, the sequential nature of history or the desire to see history as a coherent sequence? It is the self-reflexive, almost metafictional, quality of romance as it is represented by Edgar Dryden that foregrounds this dilemma. By revealing the linguistic basis of all understanding the romance is able to reconcile the competing claims of the actual world and an imaginary ideal America.

The linguistic exceptionalism of American literature is a concept most fully expressed by Charles Feidelson's argument that symbolistic literature is uniquely able to reconcile the conflicts and antagonisms of American culture. Feidelson is typical of the critics we have considered in that he limits his notion of culture to the history of verbal forms. Within this context he views the symbolism of the American Renaissance as the heir to Puritan typology, on the one hand, and the precursor to modern symbolism, on the other. Symbolism unifies Feidelson's historical perspective and, by extension, the symbolist enterprise itself is seen to constitute a "unified epistemological stance" or "unitary act of perception" which is capable of providing the terms for the transcendence of the dualistic thinking which has limited American cultural perception since the days of Puritan settlement.12 It is the Puritan preference for stable and fixed conventional correspondences which Feidelson sees as the source of a broadly-based cultural myopia; in contrast, symbolism is able to unite signifier and signified, thought and thing, through a correspondence which is based on identity. The Romantic or Emersonian underpinning of Feidelson's argument is quite clear. Symbolism is assumed to provide access to some ideal form of American historical identity, a timeless or "transtemporal" ideal which is obscured by the superficial discontinuities of sequential history. Symbolism thus reveals the transcendent meaning of America as a kind of manifest epistemological destiny and it is the romance, paradigmatic of the literature of the American Renaissance, which presents a coherent epistemological model.

A view similar to Feidelson's is presented by Michael T. Gilmore who, in his 1977 study of Puritanism and the American romance, sees the modern romancer as the spiritual heir to the Puritan social critic, pointing to the discrepancy between the promise of America and its actual achievement. As the brand of Calvinism brought to the New World attempted to chart a middle way between the renunciation of the world and the embracing of the world, so the American romance attempts to create a neutral territory where the claims of the imaginary and the actual can be resolved. In Gilmore's words, the romance provides "an imaginative context where innerworldly sainthood is repossessed as a secular ideal."13 But in a sharp turn away from the rhetorical/typological approach to the American historical romance George Dekker, while acknowledging as important an awareness of the typological hermeneutic for reading the early historical romances, goes on to point out that Old World literary antecedents and influences are just as significant.
In fact, George Dekker's study appears to be more significant than the approach which posits some abstract conception of literary history as the historical circumstances determining the form of American historical romance. Rather than work from a theoretically inspired vision of the mechanics of romance to the analysis of specific texts, Dekker develops a detailed picture of the historical romance through the consideration of an exhaustive number of such texts. The extent of his reading in this field is amazing and as a result of this erudition he speaks with authority and great persuasive force. Though the scope of this work is comprehensive, it is organized around the three operative terms of its title and is controlled by the assumption, declared early in the argument, that "the single most important part of [the] cultural context [of major writers] is the work of their intellectual peers" (p. 5). As a consequence of this assumption, relationships among writers and their works within the tradition or genre of romance become more coherent and Dekker's use of them more transparent.

The account of the romance tradition in Europe and its adaptation to American conditions is painstakingly detailed, fully referenced, and theoretically rigorous. Beginning with the invention of the historical romance by Sir Walter Scott, Dekker documents the specific historical circumstances of the genre's rise and the determination of its subject – the contest between the forces of reaction and progress. The affinity of this form of romance with the representation of historical trauma, such as the settlement of the American frontier and the Revolutionary War, is revealed also in terms of contemporary literary trends and the gathering force of the Romantic Revival. Dekker then situates the new genre in the context of prevailing philosophical debates, particularly the ideas of the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers concerning the constraints imposed by history upon action and understanding. Once the relationships between the European model and American adaptation, between the traditions of the past and the innovations of the present, between literature and its intellectual milieu, between romance and the concrete details of history, once these important connections have been established, then the argument goes on to consider the question of regionalism, where the demands of romance's universal and local concerns are in conflict, and later moves on to the problem of romance's representation of gender types. Here again the conflict between the forces of progress and those of reaction, that romance is so fitted to represent, is explored in relation to the question of historical conditioning.

Perhaps Dekker's most significant departure from the conventional approach to romance is this investigation of the structures of difference. Early on he writes that "the history of historical romance as I have read it and wished to write of it is long on continuity and short on foreseeable departures from the family type" (p. 1), but throughout he resists universalizing either the genre of romance or the idea of America. Taking the view that genre serves to direct attention to one set of textual attributes rather than any other, Dekker works from his perception of the significant features of romance to consider the structures of difference that emerge from the interaction of the genre with shifting historical and cultural circumstances. He asks the question that every serious critic of genre must confront: how does the genre involve itself with the changing scenes of history (as it must to remain relevant) while still retaining its generic identity? George Dekker does not invoke some static, ahistorical and abstract ideal of "America" with which to explain the resilient nature of romance; rather he faces squarely the changing shape of the romance as it makes the adjustments demanded by the pace of cultural change in America. The heterogeneous and protean nature of America, as it has developed during the past century and a half is reflected in the literary form most frequently called upon to register the trauma of change. The definition of romance presented by Dryden and his predecessors does not change – nor does the "America" that it purports to represent. In contrast, Dekker's extensive analyses of the work of Hawthorne and Melville and of the Southern romance centre upon attitudes toward the question of progress: from the ambivalence of Hawthorne and Melville concerning the nation's colonial past to the Southern writer's portrayal of a world of mythic Southern chivalry crumbling before the onslaught of modernity.

Throughout this lengthy work George Dekker is meticulous in his attention to the details of
cultural transmission and so when he does generalize it is not in order to obtain easy assent but to
distill the results of complicated, closely documented analysis:

historical romances are essentially a product of modern times: of bourgeois
revolutions and European colonial conquests; of the English novel of manners and
morals as developed by Fielding, Smollett, and Edgeworth; of Enlightenment
social-historical theory; and, not least, of the literary theory and practice of the
Romantic Revival (p. 27).

Each of these ingredients is carefully described in a study that will appeal to students of modern
culture in all of its aspects. George Dekker has produced an intelligent work of scholarship that will
stand as a model for generic approaches to literary history for some time yet.

III

Studies in the American Renaissance continues to provide sound, scholarly essays that contribute to
the study of American literary history by filling in deficiencies in our present historical
understanding. By making available recent work on the "lives and works of mid-nineteenth-century
American authors and the circumstances in which they wrote, published, and were received," that
is, "biographical, historical, and bibliographical articles on the literature, history, philosophy, art,
religion, and general culture of America during the period 1830-1860" (as the flyleaf indicates),
Studies in the American Renaissance provides the sort of contextual detail that makes for
compelling textual interpretation. It is from the historical researches published in books like this
that highly charged theoretical arguments should derive their grounds and so their persuasive power – as George Dekker so conclusively shows.

In one of the finest examples of this fusion of empirical scholarship, theoretical persuasion
and textual insight Barton Levi St. Armand reads Emily Dickinson's poetry in the context of the
Spiritualism of the 1850s and the spiritualist legacy of Transcendentalism. By drawing on
Dickinson's letters, by recounting contemporary accounts of seances, mesmerism, and the whole
 symbology of spiritualism, and by documenting the then current vogue for the occult in its
relationship with currents within more orthodox religious practice, he explains Dickinson's
documented eccentricities as the fusion of "nature worship and occult sensitivity" into a literary
persona characterized by the attitude that he calls "Transcendental Mediumship."

The study of manuscript sources, of course, figures largely in these collections. In a lengthy
article Bradley P. Dean reconstructs from Thoreau's journal the context for the composition of the
early "Life Without Principle" lectures. The article presents a reconstruction of the lecture "What
Shall It Profit?" as Thoreau read it in late 1854 and early 1855 and includes a textual commentary
on the differences between that lecture and "Life Misspent," reconstructed portions of which are
also reproduced. Edward L. Tucker describes the circumstances leading to the establishment, and
the collapse, of the Pioneer, a high quality "little" magazine published by James Russell Lowell and
Robert Carter in 1843 and intended to become "The Great American Magazine" (p. 189). The story
of the magazine's short but illustrious career (publishing Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "Lenora,"
and Hawthorne's "The Birth-Mark" and "The Hall of Fantasy") is complemented by the
 correspondence between Lowell and Carter published here. Guy R. Woodall's contribution is spread
across the two volumes: he calls attention to the collection of manuscript sermons by Convers
Francis, held by the Free Public Library at Watertown, Massachusetts. A number of "Sermons on
Religion" are reproduced in their entirety in the 1987 volume, whilst the 1988 volume presents five
"Sermons on Civic Morality and Reform" and four sermons on "Youth" preached at Harvard
Chapel.
Philip F. Gura untangles the complicated publishing history of Theodore Parker's *A Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity* and presents the text of the sermon as Parker claimed to have delivered it at Hawes Place Church in 1841. The letters written by Caroline Sturgis to Margaret Fuller between 1841 and 1846 are published for the first time, so too is Sophia Hawthorne's 1862 diary which is usefully indexed and annotated. And of particular interest to readers of Louisa May Alcott's letters will be the annotated calendar of the letters, which also appears in the 1988 volume.

*Studies in the American Renaissance* remains a very useful reference work which should find a place in most academic libraries.

**Notes**

1. R. C. De Prospo, "Deconstructive Poe(tics)," *Diacritics*, 18, 3 (Fall, 1988), 48.


