Introduction

THE OPEN TEXT:
AMERICAN WRITERS AND THEIR ENVIRONMENT

The pre–Civil War period, identified by F. O. Matthiessen as the "American Renaissance," has long been recognized as the richest in America’s literary history, the period that produced Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, Poe, Whitman, and Dickinson. This study compares the major literature with a broad range of lesser-known works, combines literary analysis with social history, and discusses writings of various geographical regions and of both sexes. It attempts to bridge the gap between criticism that treats literature as self-referential and cultural history, in which the uniqueness of the literary text often gets lost. American literature was generated by a highly complex environment in which competing language and value systems, openly at war on the level of popular culture, provided rich material which certain responsive authors adopted and transformed in dense literary texts.

Delving beneath the American Renaissance occurs in two senses: analysis of the process by which hitherto neglected popular modes and stereotypes were imported into literary texts; and discovery of a number of forgotten writings which, while often raw, possess a surprising energy and complexity that make them worthy of study on their own. An understanding of the antebellum context questions the long-held notion that American authors were marginal figures in a society that offered few literary materials. The truth may well be that, far from being estranged from their context, they were in large part created by it. Each of their careers illustrates in a different way Emerson’s belief that the writer “needs a basis which he
cannot supply; a tough chaos-deep soil, ... and this basis the popular mind supplies.”¹

To study the cross-influences and dynamics between the major and minor writers is to participate in the democratic spirit of the major authors themselves, all of whom in various ways expressed their profound debt to lesser writers. As suggested by the above quotation, the relationship Emerson perceived between popular and elite culture was hardly one of hostility or antithesis: rather, it was one of reciprocity and cross-fertilization—almost of symbiosis. Other authors had remarkably similar ideas on the topic. Melville, in his essay on Hawthorne, wrote: “[G]reat geniuses are parts of the times; they themselves are the times, and possess a correspondent coloring.”² In his semiautobiographical portrait of Pierre Glendinning, Melville explained that even the most apparently trivial literature contributed to his author-hero’s creativity: “A varied scope of reading, little suspected by his friends, and randomly acquired by a random but lynx-eyed mind ... poured one considerable contributory stream into that bottomless spring of original thought which the occasion and time had caused to burst out in himself.”³ Melville himself was a lynx-eyed reader quick to discover literary possibilities in randomly acquired minor literature. Many of his works are heavily indebted to his variegated reading, which seems to have been done in the spirit of a character in White-Jacket who says that “public libraries have an imposing air, and doubtless contain invaluable volumes, yet, somehow, the books that prove most agreeable, grateful, and companionable, are those we pick up by chance here and there; ... those which pretend to little, but abound in much.”⁴ Hawthorne too was a voracious reader of what he called “all sorts of good and good-for-nothing books,” including crime pamphlets, almanacs, and newspapers.⁵ He explained his attraction to ephemeral literature as follows: “It is the Age itself that writes newspapers and almanacs, which therefore have a distinct purpose and meaning. ... Genius ... effects something permanent, yet still with a similarity of office to that of the more ephemeral writer. A work of genius is but the newspaper of a century[.]”⁶ Whitman, whose early fiction and poetry provides a classic example of a writer discovering his powers by experimenting with popular modes, once wrote: “[A]ll kinds of light reading, novels, newspapers, gossip etc., serve as manure for the few great productions and are indispensable or perhaps are premises to something better.”⁷

To explore the contemporary cultural backgrounds of literary works is to complement the critical literature that focuses on American writers’ debt to classic literary sources. One of F. O. Matthiessen’s reasons for labeling this period the “American Renaissance” was his perception of extensive borrowings on the part of American writers from the Elizabe-
than Shakespeare. More recently, Harold Bloom has described a phenomenon he calls "the anxiety of influence," whereby each major author is described as waging a titanic struggle to get free of the overwhelming influence of classic writers. While such struggles are indeed visible in American writers, it has not been recognized that one of the main weapons wielded by the American writers against oppressive literary influence was a native idiom learned from their own popular culture. The truly indigenous American literary texts were produced mainly by those who had opened sensitive ears to a large variety of popular cultural voices.

Those writers now recognized as "major" had, of course, a profound debt to classic literature, but the key factor to understand is that, unlike some of their contemporaries, they transformed classic themes and devices into truly American texts by fusing them with native literary materials. *Moby-Dick* is a good example of this phenomenon. Melville has often been called America's most Shakespearean writer and *Moby-Dick* his most Shakespearean work. The fact is that *Moby-Dick*, despite certain Shakespearean scenes and characters, is not America's most Shakespearean work. That honor goes to a series of forgotten plays written in the 1850s and 1860s by Poe's friend Laughton Osborn, plays that have been deservedly ignored because they sheepishly attempt to duplicate both the form and the content of Shakespeare's plays. *Moby-Dick*, in contrast, gives a fully Americanized version of Shakespeare and other classic sources precisely because it democratically encompasses a uniquely large number of antebellum textual strategies. The anecdotal sermon style, the visionary mode, the Oriental dialogue, dark temperance, city-mysteries fiction, sensational yellow novels, grotesque native humor—these are some of the forgotten popular genres that Melville grafts together to forge symbols that possess stylistic plurality as well as broad cultural representativeness.

The major American writers knew that their compelling metaphysical and artistic concerns—like those of Shakespeare in his day—were produced by a general fermentation of ideas and styles at their unique historical moment. One way to explain these writers' debt to their age is to identify specific "sources." But source study takes us only so far toward comprehending the complex process of literary genesis and flowering, and it does not often lead to larger conclusions about the writer's place in society and history. Emerson perceptively noted that more influential than sources is the temper of the age, which becomes a cultural determinant of the themes and style of great literature. As he writes in *Representative Men*: "The ideas of the time are in the air, and infect all who breathe it. . . . We learn of our contemporaries what they know without effort, and almost through the pores of our skin." Literary genius, in Emerson's
view, lies in “being altogether receptive; in letting the world do all, and suffering the spirit of the hour to pass unobstructed through the mind.”

The present book describes the socioliterary “air” surrounding the major writers and explores the process by which this air seeped through the pores of their skin. Sources do concern me, but only insofar as they illuminate what Emerson called the “spirit of the hour” nurturing the writer’s “great genial power.” The major texts can be more fully appreciated when considered in the context of the socioliterary factors that suddenly made literary sources, national history, and personal experience available to literary artists as materials for symbolic, timeless literature.

To investigate this subject is to address a central issue of modern literary theory: the bearing that exterior circumstances and the social world have upon the literary text. This book attempts to bring together literary and social analysis by showing that the special richness of major literary works was to a great degree historically determined. It studies literary texts as products of a sudden fluidity of textual modes and strategies perceived and recorded by certain authors, whose special sensitivity to outside forces is heightened by unusual biographical factors. It suggests that certain writers of a specific historical period produced literary texts precisely because of their keen responsiveness to their social and literary environment.

The view of the major writers as alienated rebels has become deeply ingrained in our view of American literature. It has become common to view high literature as an isolated act of rebellion or subversion against a dominant culture. Indeed, several schools of critics have argued that the most distinctive characteristic of American literature is its rejection or transcendence of social concerns. Lionel Trilling in *The Liberal Imagination* (1950) anticipated many later cultural theorists, most notably Richard Chase, by defining classic American literature as an alternate reality distant from social life. Several generations of close readers, from the New Critics through the poststructuralists, have emphasized the supposedly autonomous nature of literary works, placing them at a distance from a popular culture regarded as tame and simplistic. Psychoanalytic critics have typically argued that major authors projected in their works private fantasies and aggressions in reaction against a banal culture that provided no outlet for the tabooed. More recently, with the rise of new historical methodologies in literary criticism, this notion of the alienation of American authors from their society is beginning to be questioned.

The interpretation of the major writers as isolated subversives reifies the existing canon and ignores the open nature of literary texts. It should be recognized that the major writers saw themselves as distinctly democratic artists committed, in Melville’s words, “to carry republican progressive-
ness into Literature" and to immerse themselves so deeply in their time and culture that their works actually became, in Whitman's phrase, "the age transfigured."¹⁴

This book suggests that during the American Renaissance literariness resulted not from a rejection of socioliterary context but rather from a full assimilation and transformation of key images and devices from this context. Literariness—distinguished by special density and by demonstrable artistry of language or structure—is an intrinsic quality of certain works that can justifiably be called "major"; but it is misleading to remove these works from their context or to ignore unfamiliar writings that in time may also be designated as major.

The emergence of America's national literature in the first half of the nineteenth century resulted, in large part, from a dramatic shift in the rhetorical strategies of popular social texts. Many different kinds of social texts suddenly lost their semiotic equivalences and became colored by a radical infusion of the imaginative. Popular sermons became increasingly dominated by secular anecdote, humor, and pungent images. Popular reform literature moved from staid, rational tracts on the remedies of vice to sensational, often highly metaphorical exposés of the perverse results of vice. Newspapers went through an especially momentous change. The rise of the brash, garish penny papers, supplanting the stodgy sixpennies of the past, brought a new hyperbolic emotionalism and rather amoral exploitation of the tragic or perverse. Even certain papers that tried to remain objective mirrored a society whose republican ideals were mocked by the institution of chattel slavery in the South and wage slavery in the North. On all fronts, it seemed that signifiers were being harshly torn from signifieds, as religious, political, and even journalistic signs suddenly lacked reliable referents.

One outcome of this shift in social texts was an equally dramatic rise in the number and variety of imaginative texts. Since the overwhelming majority of antebellum imaginative texts have been neglected by modern critics, most generalizations about the literary backgrounds of the major literature have been built on shaky foundations. Investigating the total range of fiction volumes, pamphlets, and periodical literature of the day, I have found that the period between 1800 and 1860 witnessed the emergence of two conflicting popular modes, the Conventional and the Subversive, and a third mode, Romantic Adventure, which occupied a kind of middle ground. During the 1830s and 1840s the cultural influence of the three modes grew so enormously that they became a fertile source of thematic conflict and stylistic complexity within the major texts. And the remarkable five years (1850–55) that produced The Scarlet Letter, Representative Men, Moby-Dick, Pierre, Walden, The House of the Seven Gables, and Leaves
of Grass also witnessed the simultaneous crescendoing of the conflicting popular modes, creating a kind of cultural explosion that contributed greatly to the energy and ambiguity of the major literature.

The deep affinities between the major writers and their popular contemporaries may be bypassed in selective readings in the unfamiliar literature of the day, creating a lopsided view of ante-bellum popular culture, one that greatly exaggerates the importance of Conventional literature while neglecting the immense cultural power of what I call Subversive literature, which was bizarre, nightmarish, and often politically radical. The tendency has been to view the works of writers like Melville and Hawthorne as a revolt against a sentimentalized, optimistic literary culture. A complete review of the volumes listed in Lyle Wright's bibliography of early American fiction reveals that the proportion of Conventional volumes published in the United States, when weighed against the other two modes, actually dropped dramatically after 1820 and remained at a relatively modest level until the Civil War. Before 1800, Conventional fiction constituted nearly 60 percent of the volumes produced, whereas the figure hovered around 20 percent for the 1820-60 period. The proportionate number of Subversive and Romantic Adventure volumes, in contrast, rose from about 20 percent before 1800 to more than 55 percent for the 1841-50 decade.15

Surprisingly, very little has been written on the Subversive and Romantic Adventure modes, which not only became increasingly influential as time passed but also broke new literary ground that was cultivated by the major writers. As we continue to look for forgotten literature to be added to the growing American canon, a good place to begin our search is among these feisty, sometimes highly problematic novels.

Subversive fiction, which was often highly irrational and rebellious, can be distinguished from the third kind of imaginative text, Romantic Adventure, which was action-packed and sometimes dark but usually stylistically restrained. While the Subversive had roots in eighteenth-century British criminal and Gothic fiction, it took on distinctly American characteristics when reinterpreted by authors who wished to find literary corollaries for the horrific or turbulent aspects of perceived reality in the new republic. The symbolic outcry of Melville's Ahab as he watches the Pequod sink—

"The ship! The hearse! . . . Its wood could only be American!"—speaks for a whole line of indigenous Subversive texts.16 There developed an intensifying debate between those who wanted to retain what was regarded as the calmness and polish of British prose and those, on the other hand, who called for a distinctly American wildness, roughness, and savagery, even at the expense of all past literary rules.

Much of this book is devoted to showing the ways in which the social and literary environment became riddled with moral mixtures and am-
biguities that prompted various literary responses. Conventional literature tried to avoid or defeat these ambiguities; Romantic Adventure either evaded or objectified them; Subversive literature allowed them to erupt volcanically in often chaotic, fragmented fashion.

When we arrive at the small group of literary texts we find a compact explosiveness of image that occurs because an unusually large variety of cultural codes and strategies are fused. Literary texts brought a measure of self-consciousness and control to the literary response, as certain authors began to manipulate the modes and play them off against each other. The typical literary text of the American Renaissance is far from being a “self-sufficient text,” sealed off from its environment. It is indeed what one might call an “open text,” since it provides an especially democratic meeting place for numerous idioms and voices from other kinds of contemporary texts. These idioms and voices often conflict to create paradox and irony. But they also fuse consistently to create a kind of stylistic implosion resulting in extraordinary compaction of image. Emerson’s “transparent eye-ball,” Hawthorne’s scarlet letter, Melville’s white whale, the water of Walden Pond, Whitman’s grass leaves—all such complex images represented an enormous compression of varied cultural voices in an explosive center. In the literary text, ambiguity or mystery itself becomes a central issue consciously treated. In Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, mystery forms the basis of an exultant individualism and an affirmation of stylistic potency; in Melville, Hawthorne, and Dickinson this potency coexists with more problematic ponderings of ambiguity. It is when each specific contemporary textual strategy is stripped of merely local, time-specific referents and fused with other contemporary textual strategies and classical devices that a new universality is achieved.

The arrival at literariness after an immersion in the popular is repeatedly scrutinized throughout this book. In most cases, it can be said that literary texts were produced only after the major authors had gained firsthand exposure to competing value systems and literary modes. Emerson, for instance, was distinguished from his rather elitist fellow Boston liberals by his rapturous recognition of the rhetorical innovations of the popular preacher Edward Thompson Taylor, the homespun sailors’ parson whose poetic sermons epitomized the infusion of the imaginative in popular social texts. Indeed, Emerson’s major essays possess native rhetorical fire largely because they are full of the kind of explosive imagery Taylor and others had popularized. Whitman, too, was strongly influenced by the innovative social texts of Father Taylor and other popular speakers. If Leaves of Grass has a unique expansiveness, it is because as a popular author earlier in his career Whitman had experimented with every conceivable popular rhetorical voice, from the piously Conventional to the gro-
tesquely Subversive. Similarly, the richness of *Moby-Dick* results largely from Melville's wide-ranging experimentation with popular strategies in his earlier novels.

As will be seen, American writers followed a roughly similar career pattern of early experimentation with popular modes followed by self-conscious mixture of the modes, then stylization of the modes in highly complex literary texts, and sometimes in late career a recoil away from the purely literary toward other forms of expression. In the literary text, which usually is produced in mid-career, we witness a coalescence of competing systems manifested in central images that are irreducible to a single meaning.

To note the unique complexity of the literary text is not to elevate it to the dubious heaven of aporia or indeterminacy. The distinguishing quality of the literary text is not radical subversiveness but unique suggestiveness and great reconstructive power. During the American Renaissance, the proliferation of popular social and imaginative texts was liberating, since it released rich images for literary use, but at the same time it was potentially disturbing, since it threatened to bring about a complete inversion of values and an obliteration of genuine emotion. The major writers sought in their central texts to incorporate as many different popular images as possible and to reconstruct these images by imbuing them with a depth and control they lacked in their crude native state. Uniquely attentive to conflicting voices within their contemporary culture, they transformed a wide array of popular modes and idioms into literary art by fusing them with each other and with archetypes derived from classic literature and philosophy. Their adaptation of an unusual variety of their own culture's popular literary strategies made their works time-specific and culture-specific. Their fusion of these strategies with classical archetypes aided their effort to lend resonance to themes and devices that remained formless or undirected in their popular form. The density of their best works results from this willed reconstruction and intensification of a varied range of popular images.

Exploring the heterogeneous writings that engendered the major literature reveals the inadequacy of hermetic "close readings" that have long dominated analysis of the American Renaissance. The present book rejects the notion of a "definitive" close reading, recognizing that the literary text is a rich compound of socioliterary strands, each of which stems from a tremendous body of submerged writings that have been previously hidden from view. The sections of this book deal successively with religion, reform, sensationalism, women's issues, and humor, tracing the process by which forgotten texts within each dimension were brought to preliterary status and then were assimilated and transformed in literary texts. The
writers we have learned to regard as major were those who were particularly attentive to differing socioliterary phenomena and especially inventive in their efforts to reconstruct them artistically. Their full cultural representativeness and simultaneous reconstructive originality become clear when we revisit them several times, from different angles of vision.
ABBREVIATIONS FOR FREQUENTLY CITED PRIMARY SOURCES


Notes to pages 3-6


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1 *EJ*, p. 344.
5 Quoted in Julian Hawthorne, *Hawthorne Reading* (Cleveland: The Rowfant Club, 1902), p. 64.
6 *Mosses*, pp. 20–21.
7 *NE*, p. 130.
10 *EL*, p. 627.
11 *EL*, p. 711.

While the present book shares with these studies a concern with the social dimensions of literary texts, it presents new readings and conclusions based upon discussion of the major literature in the context of numerous hitherto neglected writings.

15 I have arrived at these and other statistics relating to early American fiction after a comprehensive review of the volumes listed in Lyle Henry Wright, American Fiction, 1774–1850: A Contribution Toward a Bibliography (San Marino, Cal.: Huntington Library, 1957).
16 MD, p. 468.

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5 Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly (1852; rpt., New York: Collier, 1967), p. 83.
9 EJ, pp. 38 and 43.
10 EJ, p. 46.
12 R. W. Emerson, letter to Henry Ware, Jr., December 30, 1828, in LE, I, 257.