

**Henry James's *Hawthorne* and American Romanticism:
A Study in Literary Conflict**

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**“Re-reading American romance: Text, Context, Meta-text”:
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In 1879, fifteen years after the death of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James published *Hawthorne*. Although overlooked by many Jamesian scholars and out of press for many years, James's biography is a critical American text, not only in terms of what it tells us about Hawthorne but, as importantly, what it tells us about James himself, about his perspective on literature, history, and nation and—more specifically—his conflicted views on the American romance. What emanates most clearly from *Hawthorne*, and what critics have historically focused on, is James's overt and often patronizing attempt to distinguish his own literary perspectives from those of his predecessor; we have come a long way, James insists, from the provincial simplicity of Hawthorne's historical romances. As one reads through the biography more closely, however, one recognizes clear struggle and conflict in the text, between James's conscious attempts to distance himself from literature of the early Republic and his ultimately deep-seated attraction to antebellum, romantic literary culture. Ultimately, James's biography reveals a certain sense of nostalgic longing for a time in American culture before the birth of realism, a time when the terms “historical” and “romance” could co-exist, and the illusory—rather than the real—shaped literary production.

On the surface, James's biography is an insulting, hyperbolic dismissal, what Richard Brodhead refers to as a “systematic reduction,” of the American romantic tradition (135). For this reason, the book was not well received with the American public. As Dan McCall notes in his “Foreword” to the text, American readers asked: “Who was this traitor to his native land, this expatriate snob who had ‘gone British’ and thumbed his London nose at his predecessor's achievements?” (viii). Even Howells recognized in the text a note of “high treason” (qtd. in McCall viii). Not unlike Mark Twain's infamous speech two years earlier at an *Atlantic Monthly* dinner, when Twain openly mocked Romantic literary culture—telling a blatantly insulting joke about Emerson,

Holmes, and Longfellow, as they sat in the audience—James's discussion of Hawthorne seemed a great affront to the writer and to America's entire literary heritage.

James's affront comes through first and foremost in his consideration of Hawthorne's literary style. He begins the text, for example, not by noting what Hawthorne embodied but rather what he lacked:

He was *not* a man with a literary theory.... He had certainly *not* proposed to himself to give an account of the social idiosyncrasies of his fellow-citizens, for his touch on such points is always light and vague, he has *none* of the apparatus of an historian, and his shadowy style of portraiture *never* suggests a rigid standard of accuracy. (my italics 3-4)

Using an abundance of negatives, James defines Hawthorne, and the American romance in general, in terms of absence, and he suggests that where these writers were “exquisite,” they redeemed themselves by being “intensely and vividly local,” by focusing on that small “crevice” of New England with which they were familiar (3). The problem with romance, for James, is ultimately a problem of deficiency, of a “general vacancy in the field of vision” (35).

Almost immediately, James ties this vacancy to a national and cultural condition. He complains that “the flower of art blooms only where the soil is deep, that it takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature, that it needs a complex social machinery to set a writer in motion” (2). In the following now infamous quote, James describes America in terms of what it lacks:

No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country-houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages, no ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great Universities nor public schools—no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class—no Epsom nor Ascot! (34)

This famous quotation draws up, as James himself says, the “absent things in American life.” While many critics, including James's contemporaries, have felt that James was blatantly dismissing his

mother country, “thumb[ing] his London nose” at America, his reading, however, seems primarily focused on a specific *moment* in American history. Many overlook, for example, that James quickly qualifies this hyperbolic statement by specifying its connection to “the American life of *forty years ago*” (my italics 35). The affront on American life, in general, remains, but it belies James’s larger intent in this text: to create a fundamental distinction between the American romance and realism. As Richard Brodhead suggests, “James’s historiography cordons Hawthorne off in an epoch that is now extinct, bearing no discernable relation to James’s own” (138). Despite his move to Europe, Henry James was still an American writer and – not unlike Twain, Howells, and other up-and-coming realists – he wanted to carve a new literary space for himself. His dismissal of nineteenth-century American culture, in particular his association with its absence, worked toward this end.

For this reason, James spends less time analyzing Hawthorne’s specific works and more time reading his work in context of the larger nineteenth-century American literary romantic movement. Thus, he spends one chapter entirely devoted to “Brook Farm and Concord.” Here, James finds the opportunity to mock both the Brook Farm project and Transcendentalism in general; he condescendingly calls the Brook Farm experiment “an amusement of the Transcendentalists—a harmful effusion of Radicalism,” which he argues was ultimately “unusual, unfashionable, unsuccessful” (61). And although they were not directly involved with Brook Farm, James includes an extended commentary on Thoreau and Emerson. Thoreau is quickly dismissed as “worse than provincial—he was parochial” (76). While Emerson is given more respect – described as “admirable and exquisite,” as “the Transcendentalist par excellence” – James’s depiction of the entire period as a “little epoch of fermentation” qualifies even his highest praise (66). This qualification is evident in one of James’s more generous moments when he notes, “one envies, even, *I will not say* the illusions, of that keenly sentient period, but the convictions and interests—the moral passion” (my italics 68). In one brilliant rhetorical phrase, James both admires that “moral passion” of the romantic tradition

and, at the same time, says that which he “will not say,” that such passion was based purely on “illusions.” As McCall tells us, “what James so graciously gave with one hand he swiftly took away with the other” (viii).

For James, the crucial historical moment in America, the moment that separated the illusory from the real, was the Civil War. He tells us that the “Civil War marks an era in the history of the American mind,” that the postbellum American will be “a more critical person than his complacent and confident grandfather. He has eaten of the tree of knowledge” (114). He argues that, in their later years, his romantic literary predecessors felt this great shift; with the outbreak of civil war, “their illusions were rudely dispelled, and they saw the best of all possible republics given over to fratricidal carnage. This affair had no place in their scheme, and nothing was left for them but to hang their heads and close their eyes” (114). James proposes a full stop here, a “period” in the syntax of American history. This stop offers the American writer a place to begin anew, and, in this way, he succeeds in carving out that space for the American Realist who, unlike his “complacent and confident grandfather,” now knows better. *Hawthorne*, Brodhead tells us, “is the work of a recently emerged author bent on putting the tutors of his youth behind him” (138). Thus, while he quietly applauds Hawthorne’s talents, he turns the tutor into the naïve student, whose “creative fancy” endowed the author with, in his concluding words, “I may *almost* say, an importance” (145).

James’s commentary on Hawthorne and, more generally, his entire literary period is *so* patronizing, at times even humorous, that it becomes easy to miss a more subtle tone in the text, a tone that contradicts such brazen criticism. Throughout his biography, James venerates the Hawthorne tradition of American romanticism even as he critiques it. Regardless of his equivocations, for example, he reveals a deep respect for Hawthorne. First and foremost, the text itself acts as its own celebration of Hawthorne’s life; as Dan McCall tells us “James wrote the book for the *English Men of Letters* series; he was the only American contributor, Hawthorne the only

American subject" (vii). James honors Hawthorne as *the* American "man of letters," as a man "of genius" and "eminence, as a "master of expression" (1-2). Hawthorne becomes James's representative American, emblematic of the nation's literary promise; he tells us that Hawthorne "has the importance of being the most beautiful and most eminent representative of a literature" (2), emphasizes his July 4th birth, and associates him with "the clearest Puritan strain" (4-5). Before *Hawthorne*, few texts had been written about American authors and, as such, James was promoting a new national literature.

In addition to his praise of Hawthorne, one is particularly struck by James's admiration, almost *veneration*, of Emerson. As discussed, James incorporates an entire chapter on Brook Farm and Concord into his text. While the section on Brook Farm relates directly to Hawthorne's *Blithedale romance* and is therefore apt, his section on Concord seems somewhat extraneous. One might argue that James includes a commentary on Concord simply in order to dismiss the entire Transcendental movement. Yet, while he rudely dispels Thoreau, his section on "the admirable and exquisite Emerson" not only flatters but *honors* the romantic philosopher:

He was the Transcendentalist *par excellence*. Emerson expressed...the value and importance of the individual, the duty of making the most of one's self, of living by one's own personal light, and carrying out one's own disposition... He talked about the beauty and dignity of life, and about every one who is born into the world being born to the whole, having an interest and stake in the whole.... He insisted upon sincerity and independence and spontaneity, upon acting in harmony with one's nature, and not conforming and compromising for the sake of being more comfortable. He urged that a man should await his call, his finding the thing to do which he should really believe in doing, and not be urged by the world's opinion to simply do the world's work. (67)

James goes on for another page to extol Emerson before he concludes by saying: "There were faulty parts in the Emersonian philosophy; but the general tone was magnificent; and I can easily believe that, coming when it did and where it did, it should have been drunk in by a great many fine moral appetites with a sense of intoxication" (68). What James tries to mask here, by qualifying and historicizing Emerson's success, is his *own* intoxication with that "exquisite" figure. His use of

stylistic repetition – “he reflected,” “he talked,” “he insisted,” “he urged” – emphasizes Emerson’s brilliance and reveals his personal fascination with the philosopher’s rhetoric. His section on Emerson represents a major tonal shift in the text and becomes a stunning eulogy; it illustrates a moment where James sheds his aloof air and, instead, personally embraces this romantic figure and more largely romanticism. As much as James may have been trying to cordon off these figures and relegate them to an extinct past, Emerson seems to escape James here and proves a persistent presence in the young Realist’s life.

Another factor contributes to this reading. While critics, starting with Howells’s review in 1880, tend to focus on James’s superfluous use of the word “provincial” in the text, none consider another frequently used word: “natural.” While “provincial” finds its way into the text around a dozen times, we find that “natural” appears almost four times that often. James’s use of the word “natural” is particularly revealing as it offers an alternate vision of American romanticism. “Provincial” – defined as “limited in perspective, narrow, and self-centered” – is rarely viewed as a complimentary adjective and, when it is, only in its association with the questionable term “quaint.” “Natural,” on the other hand, offers a rival interpretation of the same subject, where what may initially seem provincial now becomes redefined as free from affectation, inherent, organic. And it is exactly in this light that James so frequently describes Hawthorne and the Transcendentalists. In speaking of Hawthorne’s character, for example, he refers to his “natural shyness and reserve” (21), his “easy and natural feeling about all his unconventional fellow-mortals” (37), and his “beautiful, natural, original genius” (144). His writing is described as “charming and natural” (32), as having “purity and spontaneity and naturalness of fancy” (45), and as offering “a sort of straightness and naturalness of execution” (95). In his discussion of Thoreau, among an otherwise unflattering description, James’s one kind word is his admission of the philosopher’s “extreme natural charm” (76). Finally, James ties the genius of these writers to their “natural” surroundings, noting the

“magnificently natural character” of Salem in 1818 (the year of Hawthorne’s birth) and the overall “state of things” in New England as “extremely natural” (14, 23). Thus, against this façade of provincialism, James paints a very different picture of these writers; they possessed, he suggests, a pristine, spontaneous relationship with their environment, the type of relationship that Emerson very clearly promotes in his own writing.

The frequency with which James utilizes the word “natural” calls attention to the text’s deep-seated conflict between nature and history, a binary often associated with those literary terms “romance” and “realism.” James evokes this contrast when he says, quite early in the text, that “History, as yet, has left in the United States but so thin and impalpable a deposit that we very soon touch the hard substratum of nature” (10). The result of this “thin and impalpable” deposit is, in part, what James attributes to “the importance of the individual in the American world.” It is precisely this lack of deeply entrenched history that allows for “the newness and youthfulness of society, and...the absence of keen competition” in Hawthorne’s world. He tells us:

The individual counts for more, as it were, and, thanks to the absence of a variety of social types and of settled heads under which he may be easily and conveniently pigeon-holed, he is to a certain extent a wonder and a mystery. An Englishman, a Frenchman...judges quickly, easily, from his own social standpoint and makes an end of it. He has not that rather chilly and isolated sense of moral responsibility which is apt to visit a New Englander in such processes; and he has the advantage that his standards are fixed by the general consent of the society in which he lives. (40)

While James appreciates the history of Europe, the sovereign, the court, the aristocracy, the clergy, the country gentlemen, the palaces, the castles, Oxford and Eton, all that America lacks, his appreciation of European history is just as easily undercut when he describes what they sacrifice for that “high civilisation” (34); in place of the individual in Europe, we find a set of fixed standards and simple “pigeon-holes” that prevent individual choice. Thus, although James still finds an occasion in this passage to undercut America by labeling European history an “advantage,” there exists an undeniable desire in this passage for that “wonder” and “mystery” of the American individual.

As discussed, James sees the Civil War as America's major historical marker. For James, it is the moment that not only alters the "national consciousness" but also allows the American writer to escape the "provincial" and become a more critical, rational and sophisticated thinker. As much as James welcomes this historical shift, however, there is also a subtle sense of longing, a sense that such history has replaced that natural "state of things" with something far less organic. Towards the end of the biography, James examines, once again, the figure of the antebellum American:

Our hero was an American of the earlier and simpler type—the type of which it is doubtless premature to say that it has wholly passed away, but of which it may at least be said that the circumstances that produced it have been greatly modified. The generation to which he belonged... the immense, uninterrupted material development of the young Republic; and when one thinks of the scale on which it took place, of the prosperity that walked in its train..., of the hopes it fostered and the blessings it conferred, of the broad morning sunshine..., in which it all went forward, there seems to be little room for surprise that it should have implanted a kind of superstitious faith in the grandeur of the country, its duration, its immunity from the usual troubles of earthly empires.... From this conception of the American future the sense of its having problems to solve was blissfully absent; there were no difficulties in the programme, no looming complications, no rocks ahead. (112)

James pegs the innocent nature of "our hero" as somewhat tragic, as a figure who would soon fold under the weight of "fratricidal carnage." In critiquing Hawthorne's naïve vision of history, however, James also struggles with the downside of history, its "problems," "difficulties," and "complications." To the end, James appears to relish his authoritative tone, his ability to "put his predecessor in his place" (Brodhead 134). Yet, in the process he continually slips, and that "anxiety of influence" gives way to open admiration, even yearning, for an earlier literary period when that thin deposit of history lay over the "hard substratum of nature," and the writer could embrace the illusory as the real.

Works Cited

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ORIGINAL CALL FOR PAPERS

"Romancing America: Authorship, National Identity, and the Writing of Historical romance"

In his book on Hawthorne, Henry James famously enumerated the many absences—intellectual, social, and civic—that contributed to the impoverished state of early American culture. In this context, Washington Irving complained in 1812 that "in a nation where everyone is busy . . . literary leisure is confounded with idleness" (xii). The challenge for early American writer, it seems, was not only that they had to create literary works for the public's consumption within a context of relative cultural scarcity, but that they also had to invent the terms by which those literary productions would be viewed as meaningful within an increasingly industrious society. Consequently, the historical romance in America, as it was practiced by Irving, Cooper, Sedgwick, Hawthorne, among others, might be best viewed as a discourse of negotiation and anxious self-authorization. This panel will examine the American historical romance as it was employed by its practitioners to simultaneously address vexing questions about American identity, the role of authorship, and historical origin. Please send 250-word abstracts to Sean Kelly via email (sean.kelly@wilkes.edu) by September 30, 2009.