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978-0-521-49538-7 - *The Complicity of Imagination: The American Renaissance, Contests of Authority, and Seventeenth-Century English Culture*

Robin Grey

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

### *ANTEBELLUM AMERICA AND THE CULTURE OF SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND*



This study examines the significant relationship between four antebellum nineteenth-century American authors and the writers, culture, and politics of seventeenth-century England. The relationship is a rich and complex one, but critical treatment has been only intermittent, and the connections noticed by scholars have been disparate, or confined to instances of local and explicit literary indebtedness. Even when F. O. Matthiessen noted the “vogue” for seventeenth-century writers among “American Renaissance” authors, his analysis emphasized many of the New Criticism’s preoccupations with “the metaphysical strain,” and in the tradition of T. S. Eliot, focused upon the formal features of seventeenth-century poetry and its tendency toward Neoplatonic “transcendence” of history. However inadvertent, the enduring effect of Matthiessen’s interpretation has been both to aestheticize and to dehistoricize the American authors’ interest in seventeenth-century English culture.<sup>1</sup> Following Matthiessen, several commentators have suggested that seventeenth-century English writers offered American authors a source of transhistorical “humanist” values, or a convenient repository of arcane and antiquarian lore.<sup>2</sup> More recently, critics have noted Matthiessen’s heavy reliance upon Shakespeare in the formation of his American literature canon: Elizabethan (and Caroline) literature became a “means of securing English Renaissance validity for American Renaissance figures.”<sup>3</sup>

I would like to argue instead for an “American Renaissance” whose writers were sufficient in their own agency, confident in their own powers, and deeply enough read in the earlier period to revise those earlier cultural artifacts for their own distinctive aesthetic, social, and sometimes political purposes. This study in fact complicates the ways Americans defined their individual and

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national identities, as well as their relationship with their historical predecessors, both English and American. My inquiry suggests that we should approach the nineteenth-century Americans' interest in seventeenth-century English culture less as the legacy of a single intellectual and Puritan religious tradition (Winters, Miller, Bercovitch, Chase), or as a literary "vogue" (Matthiessen), or as a psychological reaction to an "anxiety of influence" (Bloom, Weisbuch), or as a version of the English Romantic response to the Enlightenment (Chai).<sup>4</sup> Nor should the American authors' interest in early modern England be seen as one entirely informed by impulses toward containment or the restriction of radical impulses in America (Bercovitch, Stavely, Van Anglen).<sup>5</sup> Rather, I propose that their interest in the seventeenth century was initiated by common necessities rooted in the historical conditions of American society, but variously interpreted. Accordingly, nineteenth-century American writers consciously absorbed literary, philosophical, and political strategies gathered from their wide reading in the earlier period in order to interrogate both the orthodoxies of the American Whigs and the radical ("Young American") Democratic agenda in the antebellum Northeast.<sup>6</sup> The fact that nineteenth-century Americans were deeply conversant with the literature and controversies of early modern England and saw them as instructive has been largely overlooked, and now deserves to be reexamined.

Matthiessen's willingness to associate antebellum American literature with English literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries derived from a desire to carve out a separate field of American literary study through an initial process of legitimating association with English culture. But the absence among Americanists of sustained examination of the connections between English and American literatures and cultures may also be the legacy of the "American Puritan origin" paradigm so ably defined by Perry Miller and later modified and extended by Sacvan Bercovitch.<sup>7</sup> Although Bernard Bailyn, in his important work on the American Revolutionary period, has emphasized transatlantic connections between American colonists and the spokesmen of the English Civil War period (Milton, Harrington, Algernon Sidney) and Opposition "Country" party politics in eighteenth-century England,<sup>8</sup> American Puritan covenant theology has been, through the continuing efforts of Bercovitch, credited (perhaps exaggeratedly so) as the dominant source of national mythology and, in turn, of national identity. Indeed, the American Puritan argument, as Americanists well know, both confirmed a desirable

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aesthetic autonomy from English culture and upheld nationalist boundaries within humanist academic fields of study, particularly in the American academy.<sup>9</sup> The extent of educational specialization expected in the American academy has only continued to obscure the once-intimate connections between the two cultures. Modern American scholars, moreover, continue to resist exploring direct links and to define American cultural identity apart from English culture because of their assumption that the only response on the part of antebellum Americans to British culture was one informed by a sense of inferiority. Without doubt, nineteenth-century American authors suffered some degree of intimidation by their English counterparts, as Albert von Frank has vividly demonstrated, but that response was far from unvarying.<sup>10</sup>

The four major American authors I examine exhibited an intense uneasiness concerning how accurately and assuredly the prevailing Whig notions about language, knowledge, and social conduct (promoted in such American universities as Harvard and enforced by criticism in such contemporary periodicals as the *North American Review*, the *Christian Examiner*, and the *American Whig Review*) shaped the dominant American discourse. Suspicious of the way in which Whig values reinforced and perpetuated each other, yet also dismayed by the lack of discrimination in the literary values of Democratic nationalists, Emerson, Fuller, Thoreau, and Melville did not, however, devise a shared idiom as an alternative to either the English neoclassicism proffered by the Whigs or the recourse to local idioms and Anglophobia practiced by many of the Young American literary Democrats.<sup>11</sup> Instead, they relied on their individual resourcefulness both in seeking out the writings of the earlier period and in appropriating their various strategies.

Some of the distinctive qualities of nineteenth-century American literary practices emerged as a result of the efforts of its writers to recover and assimilate seventeenth-century English heterodoxies in response to a particular nexus of circumstances in America perceived by them as an aesthetic as well as political predicament. "American Renaissance" prose is remarkable as much for its departure from the genial lucidity of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century American prose as for its eclecticism and extravagance. These qualities arose in part from the American writers' assimilations of seventeenth-century heterodoxies – including prose styles, archaic epistemological categories, and doctrinal heresies – which they adapted and used to challenge a

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variety of values within their culture. American authors were quick to employ English texts that were associated with the discrediting of traditional authority. But they also revised texts considered “conservative” in their own time – like the writings of Sir Thomas Browne or Izaak Walton – for ironic or unsettling purposes. By disconcerting or provoking those nineteenth-century readers who relied on the conventional modes of discourse and categories of knowledge, these writers often challenged the educated and cultured conservative hegemony. At the same time, by selectively assimilating rather than eschewing English texts, they offered an alternative to the literary values of the unsophisticated Democratic nationalists (Cornelius Matthews, for example). In this way these authors provided a powerful critique of the philosophical and rhetorical foundations of the antebellum culture of the Northeast, and they engaged in reshaping the culture and reformulating its alternatives.

No doubt other nineteenth-century authors might have been included here – Emily Dickinson and Nathaniel Hawthorne come most readily to mind. Dickinson was steeped in the poetry of George Herbert and Henry Vaughan no less than the prose of Sir Thomas Browne; and Hawthorne profoundly assimilated Milton’s writings. I have chosen these four, however, for the characteristic ways in which they illustrate engagement with early modern English culture: a “representative” eclecticism (as in the case of Thoreau); a personal identification with the circumstances of an earlier figure (Emerson and, more indirectly, Fuller); and an affinity of intellect and sensibility, however imaginatively interpreted (Melville).

My work differs from the recent studies of Thomas Gustafson, Michael Kramer, Donald Weber, and Philip Gura, who emphasize language theory and practice, rhetoric, and alternative canons, but do not share my emphasis upon the ways that the literature and politics of an earlier age are imaginatively exploited so as to interrogate nineteenth-century orthodoxies.<sup>12</sup> Other recent studies by Stavely and Van Anglen have sought to connect the cultures on both sides of the Atlantic, but these analyzed exclusively the Puritan theological basis for challenges to authority, or in the case of Van Anglen, the ambivalent Unitarian desire both to suppress and to accommodate “antinomian” impulses in a culture otherwise law-abiding, “Arminian,” and optimistic about effectual individual agency. David Reynolds has valuably documented the tensions within American culture created by a competing canon of popular American literature and its stereotypes – but that canon arose within American society, not outside of it.<sup>13</sup>

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I stress instead the broad interrelationship between the English and American cultures, and between American literature and politics that so much characterizes antebellum nineteenth-century America. I draw upon nineteenth-century political orations, reviews, political and literary journals, and selected sermons to understand the conditions that shaped antebellum literary texts and prompted American authors to turn – sometimes imperiously, sometimes reverently – to the English seventeenth century. As evidenced by the abundance of politicoliterary journals in the United States in the nineteenth century, literature and politics were not necessarily regarded as separate discursive modes. Indeed, Orestes Brownson announced in 1838 in the *Democratic Boston Quarterly Review*, “We would have no literary man avoid party questions, in politics, religion, or philosophy; but we would have every man who loves Humanity and craves progress, discuss those questions as a judge, not as a pleader.”<sup>14</sup> Both through an examination of the cultural and intellectual conditions prevailing in the antebellum Northeast and through a series of close readings, my study highlights the strategic dimensions of literary texts, examining how the literary imagination helps to shape events, values, and assumptions in both the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Moreover, this study examines the aesthetic and rhetorical dimensions of the literary texts, as well as those of political and polemical texts.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, among Americans the popularity of Madame de Staël’s treatise *De la Littérature Considérée dans ses Rapports avec les Institutions Sociales* (1800; trans. 1813) suggests that nineteenth-century writers were deeply concerned with the relation between political democracies and the production of vital national literatures.<sup>16</sup> The anonymous author of an 1847 article on “Nationality in Literature,” published in the *Democratic Review*, noted that

Madame De Stael’s great work on the influence of literature upon society, was written . . . “to show that all the peculiarities in the literature of different ages and countries may be explained by a reference to the condition of society, and the political and religious institutions of each; and at the same time to point out in what way the progress of letters has, in its turn, modified and affected the government and religion of those nations among whom they have flourished.”<sup>17</sup>

While the English Romantics – particularly Coleridge, Lamb, and Keats – were partly responsible for introducing nineteenth-century American writers to seventeenth-century English culture,

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it is also clear that the Americans' knowledge of the literature and events of this period was not exclusively refracted through the English Romantic writers. Rather, as I hope to demonstrate in this study, their familiarity was often gained through their own intensive and individualized reading in the period. James Freeman Clarke, an 1829 graduate of Harvard and a Transcendentalist, acknowledged in his autobiography his fellow classmates' sometimes overlapping but often discrete interest in both the Romantics and the seventeenth-century writers – all in opposition to the official classical and neoclassical Harvard curriculum:

When I recall what my classmates were interested in doing, I find it was not college work, which might have given them rank, but pursuits outside of the curriculum . . . We unearthed old tomes in the college library, and while our English professors were teaching us out of Blair's "Rhetoric," we were forming our taste by making copious extracts from Sir Thomas Browne, or Ben Jonson. Our real professors of rhetoric were Charles Lamb and Coleridge, Walter Scott and Wordsworth. I recall the delight which George Davis and I took in an old copy of Sir Thomas Browne which we stumbled upon in the college library. We had scarcely heard the name; but by a sure instinct we discovered the wit, originality, and sagacity of this old writer.<sup>18</sup>

Even more assiduously, Thoreau devoted nearly three years to reading and transcribing early modern English literature after graduating from Harvard. Melville brought back from his trip to England folio editions of Sir Thomas Browne's writings; and Emerson's journals are filled with excerpts from his readings in the prose and poetry (much of which he appears to have committed to memory), as well as the theology and history of the period. Moreover, observing that Margaret Fuller's "English reading was incomplete," Emerson took credit for expanding her familiarity: "I believe I had the pleasure of making her acquainted with Chaucer, with Ben Jonson, with Herbert, Chapman, Ford, Beaumont and Fletcher, with Bacon, and Sir Thomas Browne."<sup>19</sup> Fuller, quite on her own, read biographies of seventeenth-century authors, translated the Latin poetry of Lord Herbert of Cherbury, and sought out arguments for companionate marriage in Milton's divorce tracts.

Knowledge of seventeenth-century English culture and literature among educated Americans was in fact extensive and nu-



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anced. A reviewer discussing Sir Thomas Browne's writings in the *American Whig Review* in 1848 (one among many such articles in the 1830s and 1840s) expected his audience to know that Browne's style had recently "been a topic of much animadversion" – presumably among Whig critics, who were more often admirers of neoclassical styles. He also assumed that they were so familiar with the writing of Browne's contemporaries, "Owen Feltham, Abraham Cowley, and John Milton," that a comparison of their styles was unnecessary.<sup>20</sup> Contemporary reviewers of Melville and Thoreau, moreover, frequently noticed what many scholars today have tended to overlook in these authors' writings – the many resonances, allusions, and explicit appropriations of seventeenth-century English texts.

The literature and politics, particularly of pre-Restoration England, were regularly enlisted in the debates about current events in antebellum America. Indeed, as late as the conclusion of the American Civil War, a commissioner appointed by Jefferson Davis entreated Lincoln to negotiate with the Confederate South rather than insist on complete surrender: "Mr. Hunter . . . in illustration of the propriety of the Executive entering into agreements with persons in arms against the acknowledged rightful public authority, referred to repeated instances of this character between Charles I, of England, and the people in arms against him." "All I distinctly recollect about the case of Charles I," replied Lincoln, "is, that he lost his head in the end."<sup>21</sup> Americans' acquaintance with such diverse texts as Milton's polemical tracts, Clarendon's *History of the Rebellion*, King Charles I's *Eikon Basilike*, Cromwell's speeches, Browne's *Religio Medici* and Harrington's *Oceana* is everywhere apparent in the nineteenth-century politicoliterary journals of both Whigs and Democrats, in orations, in personal libraries, and in the literary texts of the four writers highlighted in this study.<sup>22</sup> The library of Edward Everett, the Whig governor of Massachusetts, contained a number of seventeenth-century English texts (considerably outnumbering those of colonial American origin), including the writings of Donne, Herbert, Matthew Hale, Jeremy Taylor, Algernon Sidney, Milton, William Chillingworth, Locke, Hobbes, Cromwell, and, in seventeenth-century first editions, Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Charles I's *Eikon Basilike*.<sup>23</sup> Thoreau, in a lyceum lecture, heralded Carlyle's edition of Oliver Cromwell's letters and speeches, and later favorably compared John Brown at Harpers Ferry to Cromwell. Both Emerson, in "Woman" and "Courage," and Fuller, in *Woman in the Nineteenth-Century*, incorporated excerpts from Lucy Hutchinson's memoirs

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of her husband, the English regicide John Hutchinson, assuming the American public's familiarity with her *Memoirs of the Life of Colonel Hutchinson*, first published in 1806 and republished several times in the late 1840s.<sup>24</sup> The discovery and publication of Milton's *On Christian Doctrine* in 1825, moreover, became the occasion for new editions of his prose and reevaluations of the theological, social, and political implications of his prose tracts.

From the frequent references to seventeenth-century English literature and politics in American periodicals, we can infer that allusions to events and texts of that period, as well as the assimilation of seventeenth-century prose styles and epistemological practices, would be perceived by American antebellum contemporaries as an attempt to interrogate various forms of authority based on the experiences of that earlier period. For example, in an 1846 assessment of "Imaginary Commonwealths" for the *Democratic Review*, J. Sullivan Cox, a Democratic supporter of Manifest Destiny, adapted Milton's ecstatic vision of an impending civil millennium in England.<sup>25</sup> Cox borrowed imagery from Milton's *Areopagitica* both to highlight the *translatio* of freedom from England to America ("man for ever flying westward from civil and religious thralldom") and to sanctify the motives of a Jacksonian "western commonwealth in America" through association with Milton's famous text (Cox, 184).<sup>26</sup>

In *Areopagitica*, Milton had interpreted prophetically the increasing turmoil of London (that "shop of war") as a sign of the imminent approach of an earthly civil and spiritual millennium. He addressed the collective wisdom of Parliament in this state of heightened expectation: they must not suppress radical sectarian activity by imposing censorship, for that would impede the apocalyptic struggle between truth and falsehood. Similarly, in order to glorify America's Manifest Destiny and the Mexican War by associating both with an apocalyptic struggle for definitive democratic perfection, Cox addressed the collective wisdom of Democratic America with exalted expectations recalling those of Milton when he described his mystical vision of the godly English commonwealth. But in Cox's account, the hope has been transferred to the Americans, who have become, like the inspired Englishmen of Milton's day, reformers of worldly institutions and visionary aspirants to "the perfection of a purer existence, 'kindling their undazzled eyes at the full mid-day beam, purging and scaling their long abused sight at the fountain itself of heavenly radiance'" (Cox, 184; Milton, *CPW*, 2:558). Following Milton's prophetic model, Cox implies that with earthly fulfillment of



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ideal nationhood so near, the conflict must not be halted or impeded.

But the American commonwealth Cox envisioned differed in one crucial way from Milton's. Cox tellingly revised Milton's "Temple of the Lord" image, an architectural metaphor for the English church and commonwealth in the earthly millennium. Milton acknowledged the necessity – even in the millennium – of accommodating (sectarian) differences: "when every stone is laid artfully together, it cannot be united into a continuity, it can but be contiguous *in this world*" (*CPW*, 2:555; my emphasis). Milton claimed, "the perfection consists in this, that out of many moderate varieties and brotherly dissimilitudes . . . arises the goodly and gracefully symmetry that commends the whole pile and structure." He insisted that these differences were the very basis of collective effort and the best means of wresting truth from falsehood by conflict (*CPW*, 2:555; Cox, 185). Cox, however, replaced Milton's word "contiguity" in reference to the arrangement of building blocks in this ideal edifice of a church-state. Rejecting tolerance of acknowledged differences, and inscribing uniformity instead of unity in the image of a continent unbroken by national boundaries, Cox ultimately hoped for "not a mere 'contiguity' of materials, but one continuous pile of mild majesty and chaste magnificence" (Cox, 185). Indeed, Cox's final appropriation from *Areopagitica* is that of the "enraptured beholder" visualizing Truth's torn body reassembled as "one immortal feature of loveliness and truth" (and "perfection" in Milton's version) (Cox, 185; *CPW*, 2:549). For Cox, whose article is a paean to the nobility of expanding American values along with its territories – tacitly understood as Texas and Oregon – Milton's image of Truth restored may well have served to render imaginatively an American continent undivided by boundaries and eventually healed from the strife created by the Mexican War.

Some have argued that Jonathan Edwards was the exclusive source for Americans' hope for a "civil millennium" on earth; he invested "revolution" with sacred and providential implications and divested it of destructive connotations.<sup>27</sup> Yet clearly, in such seventeenth-century English texts as John Milton's prose works (*Of Reformation* [1641], *Areopagitica* [1644], and *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* [1649]), American radicals and dissenters, at least as early as the American Revolution, had found inspired visions of a future millennium.<sup>28</sup> And while Milton regarded history as sacred and providential, he did not eschew but rather embraced apocalyptic conflict and turbulence as necessary. In-

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deed, it seems that Cox turned to one of Milton's best-known texts – one associated with the English Revolution – precisely for its ability to render acceptable both conflict and disruption for an eventual earthly national fulfillment.

American Whigs and Democrats often adopted contrary views of early modern England to suit their competing political agendas. In fact, American periodicals (many of which were the organs of one or another of the political parties) chose different aspects of seventeenth-century English culture as sociopolitical and cultural touchstones. As Daniel Walker Howe has noted, the events of the English Revolution provided conservative American Whigs with a repertoire of figurations for anarchy and the perversions of absolute power, equating, for example, Andrew Jackson's and Martin Van Buren's use of executive power with the autocracy of Charles I and Charles II.<sup>29</sup> According to Sacvan Bercovitch, Reginald Horsman, and David Levin, many of these same Americans also conservatively reinterpreted the upheavals of the Great Migration (the emigration of English Puritans to America) and the American Revolution as events that instead represented a reassuring paradigm of progressivism and gradualism. They did so, according to these scholars, in order to bolster their own authority, defuse the incendiary implications of past rebellions, and maintain an ideology of "progress" led by an Anglo-Saxon, Puritan vanguard.<sup>30</sup>

Whigs and Democrats, moreover, constructed dramatically different arguments from the very same seventeenth-century English cultural artifacts. A case in point is James Harrington's utopian vision in *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656), read by such early Opposition ideologues as John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, who were in turn read widely by the American colonists in *Cato's Letters* (1720s). In the same article on visionary commonwealths for the *Democratic Review* cited above, J. Sullivan Cox examined Harrington's *Oceana* along with Plato's *Republic* and More's *Utopia*. In the midst of the Mexican War over the annexation of Texas, Cox analyzes these three commonwealths to assert the nobility of high principles and visionary schemes that it is America's "destiny" to realize ("By us must these fair visions be realized" [Cox, 185]), and America has begun already to make them "manifest" (Cox, 184). Cox stressed the importance of *Oceana* as a model of republican ideals that, according to Democratic principles, America had implemented: agrarianism, the division and balance of powers in government, the secret ballot, equal rotation, and, by replacing primogeniture with labor capitalism ("that