

CHRISTOPHER N. PHILLIPS

Introduction: The Very Idea of an American Renaissance

What was the American Renaissance? For F. O. Matthiessen, who coined the term in 1941, it was both a period and an event in American literary history. Focused on a narrow date range (1850–1855) and canon (five authors, all white males of the Northeast US), Matthiessen gave lengthy readings in his book *American Renaissance* of what he saw as the major texts of that period – Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*, among others. Yet at stake for Matthiessen was not simply identifying a watershed moment in the production of American literature; he aimed to show how “the possibilities of democracy” became powerfully central to American literature in those years and works.¹ In arguing that Melville, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Walt Whitman changed the national conversation about the ideal of democracy, Matthiessen changed the critical conversation about what we talk about when we talk about American literature. As Matthiessen himself argued, the idea of an American Renaissance is just as much about the present day’s memories and aspirations as it is about anything unique to the 1850s or the antebellum period. This volume takes up the era and authors Matthiessen identified and places them in new contexts and company, those that speak more directly to the current state of American literary studies and the world that field inhabits. Before discussing the American Renaissance as a slice of nineteenth-century history, however, this introduction will provide a brief history of where the idea of an American Renaissance came from and where it has gone since the 1940s.

While Matthiessen holds the claim to coining the term “American Renaissance,” the idea that a new era arrived in American literature with the rise of Emerson, Hawthorne, and their contemporaries is much older. Indeed, Dartmouth professor Charles F. Richardson referred to a

¹ F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941, repr. 1968), ix.

CHRISTOPHER N. PHILLIPS

“New England Transcendental Renaissance” in his 1880s work *American Literature, 1607–1885*, a cue picked up by Matthiessen’s forerunner at Harvard, Barrett Wendell, at the turn of the century.² In his *Literary History of America* (1900), Wendell identified what he called a “Renaissance of New England,” led by Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Greenleaf Whittier, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Russell Lowell, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Nathaniel Hawthorne.³ Other literary histories drew similar connections, from Vernon Parrington’s *Main Currents in American Thought* (1927–1930) to Fred Lewis Pattee’s *The First Century of American Literature* (1935) to Van Wyck Brooks’s *The Flowering of New England* (1936). Lewis Mumford went so far as to refer to the generation before the Civil War as the “Golden Day” in a 1926 book by that name; one thing that set Mumford’s work apart from the other studies mentioned above, and that made a major difference in Matthiessen’s thinking when he read Mumford as a student, was a revision of the canon of authors involved in that crucial era. Instead of the poets Longfellow, Whittier, Lowell, and Holmes, who had become increasingly identified in twentieth-century American literary criticism as “the genteel school,” Mumford championed “outsider” authors such as Melville, Whitman, and Thoreau. Matthiessen adopted Mumford’s canon, and he used the New York roots of Melville and Whitman along with his democratic theme to make his account of American literature much more national in scope than previous accounts had been. Richardson’s and Wendell’s Renaissances were self-consciously regional; Matthiessen’s rhetorically, if not geographically, encompassed the nation.

This new articulation of America’s literary coming-of-age through its engagement with democracy, coming as it did on the heels of the United States’s entry into World War II, was a powerful galvanizing force in the emergence of American Studies departments in the postwar years. R. W. B. Lewis’s *The American Adam* (1955), Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), and Leslie Fiedler’s *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960) all took the American Renaissance as a *locus classicus* for the themes and dynamics they each saw as central to American literature and culture. In an era dominated by New Criticism’s commitment to close reading of individual works and the decidedly Anglophilic definitions of literary value that

² Charles F. Richardson, *American Literature, 1607–1885* (New York, 1886–1889), 1:427.

³ This is the title of Book v in Barrett Wendell, *A Literary History of America* (New York: Scribners, 1900). On Richardson’s and Wendell’s influence on later directions in American literary historiography, see Claudia Stokes, *Writers in Retrospect: The Rise of American Literary History, 1875–1910* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Michael Boyden, *Predicting the Past: The Paradoxes of American Literary History* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2009).

Introduction

shaped the close-reading-friendly canon, it was highly useful for scholars in the newly recognized field of American literature to follow Matthiessen's insistence on "read[ing] the best books first" (a line he took from Thoreau) and to have a method for identifying a set of American works as the best. David Bowers's statement in Robert Spiller's influential *Literary History of the United States* echoes Matthiessen succinctly: "In quality of style, and particularly in depth of philosophic insight, American literature has not yet surpassed the collective achievement of Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman."⁴ That blend of stylistic mastery and philosophical weight was the magic formula for establishing these five authors as the heart of American literature for mid-twentieth-century critics.

This vital focus, both highly persuasive and eminently teachable – only five authors to cover, and focused on democracy – came at a price. Matthiessen celebrated the radical impulses of the abolition movement, citing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as evidence of the abolition movement's energy, but he refused to do more than mention Stowe's book or treat her or her contemporaries, Frederick Douglass and Frances E. W. Harper, as literary authors. While focusing on authors who thought of themselves as outside or at least in tension with the American mainstream, this conception of the American Renaissance served to obscure women, minorities, and even writers like Longfellow and Whittier who engaged the mainstream while taking radical stances on abolition and celebrating American cultural and ethnic diversity. Michael Davitt Bell has pointed out that at nearly the same time that *The American Renaissance* was published, Fred Lewis Pattee published his study *The Feminine Fifties* (1940), which treated the same period but focused on a very different canon: the women whose engagement with sentimental discourse united them in a cultural moment and enabled their popular success. Stowe, Susan Warner, Maria Cummins, and Fanny Fern exemplified this moment for Pattee, but as Bell points out, Pattee's reading of these authors amounted to the same thing as Matthiessen's silence on them: an update of Hawthorne's notorious characterization of his competition as a "damned mob of scribbling women."⁵ Not until after the foment of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and 1970s would such women authors, along with black and Native authors, find anything like a secure place in the American Renaissance.

⁴ David Bowers, "Democratic Vistas," in *Literary History of the United States*, ed. Robert E. Spiller, Willard Thorp, Thomas H. Johnson, and Henry Seidel Canby (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 1:345–57, 345.

⁵ Michael Davitt Bell, "Conditions of Literary Vocation," in *The Cambridge History of American Literature: Volume 2, Prose Writing 1820–1865*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 9–124, 74–6.

CHRISTOPHER N. PHILLIPS

The Renaissance story began to change dramatically in the scholarly telling in the 1980s as paradigms of cultural studies and the New Historicism engaged with the recovery work that continued through the decade. Sacvan Bercovitch's *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975) and *The American Jeremiad* (1978) had already begun to recast the American Renaissance not so much as a turning point as a new iteration of a long-running practice in American writing, which Bercovitch traced back to colonial New England; Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration Through Violence* (1973) also saw the American Renaissance as the culmination of an expansive myth-making project about the frontier stretching back to the Puritans. By the mid-1980s, several essay collections called for new concepts in considering the American Renaissance and American literary history more generally, including Bercovitch's *Reconstructing American Literary History* (1986), Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen's *Ideology and Classic American Literature* (1986), and Donald Pease and Walter Benn Michaels's *The American Renaissance Reconsidered* (1985). These collections urged the use of cultural studies, theoretical, and historicist methods in studying the American Renaissance, and three studies in particular helped to reshape scholarship in the field along these lines. Jane Tompkins's *Sensational Designs* (1985) offered a reassessment of the "cultural work" of sentimental fiction and a corollary rethinking of what counts as literary value and why; Pease's *Visionary Compacts* (1987) applied New Historicist contextualizations to American Renaissance texts highlighting the pressures of the impending Civil War, while also noting the pressures of the Cold War in the 1950s that made Matthiessen's American Renaissance so compelling to postwar English departments; and David S. Reynolds's *Beneath the American Renaissance* (1988) drew on extensive archival research to argue that what the New Critics most valued in Matthiessen's canon was in fact a result of authorial engagement with popular print – the very sentimental, sensationalist, and pulp materials that had earlier been rejected as unworthy of study. Eric Sundquist's *To Wake the Nations* (1993) put black writers such as Frederick Douglass alongside Melville and other Renaissance authors in bringing the dynamic new work in African-American literary scholarship into reconsiderations of American literary history, opening discussions of race and the American Renaissance at a new, much more holistic level. Before the so-called "culture wars" of the 1990s were challenging the hegemony of Western Civilization courses and the canons of European literature (including British literature), the American Renaissance was already a field in transition, a rich proving ground for new critical approaches and reconceived literary and cultural canons.

Introduction

By the time Timothy Powell's *Ruthless Democracy* (2000) made the case for a multicultural understanding of the American Renaissance, a period that saw the rise of female and minority authorship no less dramatic than the production of white male New Englanders, it had become clear that the question of *what* the American Renaissance was had shifted to *who* the American Renaissance was. Growing interest in African-American writers from Douglass to Frances Harper to Harriet Jacobs made not just white commentary on race but the voices of slaves and free blacks more central to the period; white women from Stowe to Susan Warner to Lydia Sigourney to Frances Sargent Osgood have also expanded and diversified the authorial voices included in a typical course. While Native American voices from the period, such as George Copway and John Rollin Ridge, have begun entering anthologies and syllabi more frequently, the Vanishing Indian ideology espoused by Matthiessen and his canon has been more tenacious than the bracketing of black and female voices has been. Mark Rifkin argues in *Settler Common Sense: Queerness and Everyday Colonialism in the American Renaissance* (2014) that the erasure of the Native lies at the heart of the literature of the American Renaissance as well as the culture that grounded it – and that grounds us today. This volume explores ways that the American Renaissance canon has been expanded and offers reflections on the possibilities for further expansion and integration.

Additionally, the questions of *where* and *when* the American Renaissance have become much more prominent in the scholarship of the field. Barrett Wendell voiced his unease over the label “America” in the introduction to his study, as that term had such hemispheric reach it seemed to him inappropriate to apply it to the United States alone (he was dismissed as a pedant for making this argument in 1900); he also was careful to identify his renaissance as regional, though he saw it as leading the nation by example and influence. Scholars continued recovering writers from the South, West, and Mid-Atlantic regions, and beginning with Lawrence Buell's *New England Literary Culture* (1986) scholars asked how a single region had succeeded in making a claim to represent the nation in its cultural expression. The “hemispheric turn” proved especially helpful in challenging the New England focus of antebellum literary studies, exemplified by Kirsten Silva-Gruesz's *Ambassadors of Culture* (2002) and Anna Brickhouse's *Transamerican Literary Relations and the Nineteenth-Century Public Sphere* (2004), the latter in particular taking Matthiessen head-on in challenging both his choice of authors and his claims to national representation. The American Renaissance was going on in upstate New York, Sacramento, Cincinnati, Havana, Lima, and Concord simultaneously, as it turned out.

CHRISTOPHER N. PHILLIPS

As the geography and demography of the American Renaissance has expanded in recent scholarship, so has the chronology. The now-standard inclusion of Poe (who died in 1849) hints at an expanded date range soon after Matthiessen's book first appeared. Bercovitch's earlier work already suggested a *longue durée* interpretation of the period, and recent works such as Jay Grossman's *Reconstituting the American Renaissance* (2003) have recast the period as one spanning many decades, even a century, as in Grossman's tracing of Emerson's and Whitman's 1850s writings back to divergent traditions of political discourse in the eighteenth century. Martin Kevorkian's *Writing Beyond Prophecy: Emerson, Hawthorne, and Melville After the American Renaissance* (2013) trailblazes what promises to be a fruitful line of scholarship in exploring what the Civil War and its aftermath changed in the writings of American Renaissance authors; Kevorkian argues that during and after the war, Emerson, Melville, and Hawthorne ceased to be American Renaissance authors, even though they kept writing.

Another productive way to pursue the *when* question recently has been looking not to the mid-nineteenth century but to the mid-twentieth century for the origins of the American Renaissance. Tellingly, Werner Sollors and Greil Marcus's *A New Literary History of America* (2009), a clear nod to Barrett Wendell's earlier work, discusses the American Renaissance not among the essays on the nineteenth century but in an essay on the twentieth, one that focuses on the motives and influences that shaped Matthiessen's study in his own historical moment.⁶ Following the lead of Pease's work, Christopher Castiglia's study of Richard Chase and Grossman's study of Matthiessen (including a biography in progress as of this writing), have further brought Cold War studies to bear on understanding the meanings and combinations that have constituted the American Renaissance in post-war English and American Studies departments.⁷ While the rich historical recoveries and reassessments of the mid-nineteenth-century United States are today more prolific than ever, we are at a moment in the history of the field when scholars are especially ready to take seriously Matthiessen's statement that his "double aim" in analyzing the literature he did was "to place

⁶ Robert Polito, "1924: F. O. Matthiessen Meets Russell Cheney on the Ocean Liner Paris, and American Literary History Emerges from Skull and Bones: A Judgment of Art," in *A New Literary History of America*, ed. Werner Sollors and Greil Marcus (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 564–9.

⁷ See Christopher Castiglia, "Cold War Allegories and the Politics of Criticism," in *The New Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. Robert S. Levine (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 219–32; Jay Grossman, "'Autobiography Even in the Loose Sense': F. O. Matthiessen and Melville," *Leviathan* 13.1 (2011): 45–57.

Introduction

these works both in their age and in ours.”⁸ And at one of many moments in the history of literary studies – very much like Matthiessen’s, in fact – when the relevance of the academic subject seems at issue, the question is a crucial one for us to ask.

This volume offers a rich range of engagements with the age of the American Renaissance, often circling back to the question of why we still study, teach, and learn from the writings of this era. Three main sections organize along lines of chronology and thematics. Part I, *Into the Renaissance*, looks at the origins and influences of 1850s American literature, focusing on foundational authors such as James Fenimore Cooper and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow as well as the pre-1850 works of figures like Emerson and Poe. It also considers several conceptual ways into the study of the period, from genre categories such as adventure fiction, the gothic, and transnational poetry to geographic frameworks of the local, the national, and the global, as well as balancing a focus on individual authors with considerations of “reader-based literary history,” digital humanities, and psychoanalytic and reader-response theories. Part II, *Rethinking the Renaissance*, focuses on the 1850s, placing figures like Melville and Hawthorne alongside such dominant figures and emerging celebrities of the day as Fanny Fern, George Copway, Susan Warner, and Frances Sargent Osgood, highlighting issues of race and gender, writing and labor, child studies and spatial studies. This section takes Matthiessen’s “age of Emerson and Whitman” into the latest “turns” of contemporary scholarship. And Part III, *Beyond the Renaissance*, stretches the era’s temporal boundaries through the tracking of authorial careers – nearly all the most-studied figures of the American Renaissance wrote for years after the Civil War – as well as considering the place of the Civil War in demarcating the end of the period.

In Chapter 1, Christopher N. Phillips presents a case study of a subscription library in the small city of Easton, Pennsylvania, where surviving loan records and library catalogs from the 1850s indicate that much of the American Renaissance on the Easton Library Company’s shelves appeared in magazines rather than in individual books, that sentimental writers gained an eager new audience toward the middle of the decade, and that the popularity of Hawthorne and Emerson was dwarfed by that of earlier writers like Walter Scott and, above all, Cooper. Jeffrey Walker explores the phenomenon of Cooper’s wide popularity in Chapter 2, giving readings of key novels such as *The Spy* and *Last of the Mohicans* while contextualizing Cooper’s career, as well as that of his Southern counterpart William

⁸ Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, viii.

CHRISTOPHER N. PHILLIPS

Gilmore Simms, within the rise of youth culture, the rhythm of the school year, and the prominence of summer leisure reading as a space for absorbing the masculine adventure mythologies by which Cooper sought to narrate a new nation.

Turning from the nation to the self, Russell Sbriglia argues in Chapter 3 that the gothic, as seen in the writings of Poe and Philadelphia radical George Lippard, offered a critique of the optimism expressed by Transcendental thinkers such as Emerson and Bronson Alcott. Rather than contradicting or dismissing Emerson's ideas, Poe and Lippard showed that they are in fact grounded not in rational liberation from superstition but rather in the dark depths of the irrational itself in ways that, as Sbriglia argues, has considerable affinities with today's psychoanalytic theories, and offers a startling critique of the assumptions of American liberal democracy.

Chapters 4 and 5 place the careers of three of the nation's most influential authors – Emerson, Hawthorne, and Longfellow – in the context of their New England roots and their international aspirations. Gavin Jones and Judith Richardson use the literary landmarks of Hawthorne's and Emerson's Concord homes as springboards for exploring how dependent Emerson's cosmopolitan *Essays* were on the local climates of Harvard, Concord, and the lyceum stage, and how Hawthorne used New England's past and present to show the interconnectedness of locales, as sailors, Indians, French, British, and other far-flung characters intersect in the port towns and woods of Massachusetts. Christoph Irmscher's chapter finds a similar play between home and the globe at work in the writings of Longfellow, a poet fluent in over a dozen languages who used the trope of reading-as-travel to introduce his American readers to a global literary scene, while also bringing American places and stories to audiences worldwide. Irmscher closes Part I of the volume with a reflection on the importance of multilingual, translated literature – “world literature,” as Goethe called it – for understanding how and why Longfellow's readers found him so appealing in his day.

Few topics were as central to the nineteenth-century United States as religion, and in Chapter 6 Zachary McLeod Hutchins highlights one of the central theological debates of the time: is the nation in spiritual decline, or will the rising generation lead America to a new age of virtue? Hutchins centers on a close analysis of Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* as a prime example of how a future-oriented embrace of youth culture led American Renaissance writers away from older religious orthodoxies to new possibilities of redemption. Debates over race were often just as heated and widespread as those over religion, and in Chapter 7 Barbara Hochman examines Stowe's ideas of race in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as well as in the array of texts – children's stories, a collection of documentary sources on slavery, a playscript – she wrote in

Introduction

response to the misreadings of her complex view of American racial politics, and the sexual violence endemic to slavery, that began with the first enthusiastic responses to her work.

Mark Rifkin argues in Chapter 8 that misunderstandings of the realities of Native American authorship in antebellum America led Matthiessen and those following him to assume that Native writing was not sufficiently “literary” to study. In an extended close reading of Anashinaabe writer George Copway’s *Life*, Rifkin shows that Copway’s invoking of the language of diplomacy and of his status as a chief among the Mississauga of the Great Lakes region was his strategy for gaining a white audience: Copway could only be “heard” by non-Native readers if he posed as representing his nation.

The many women writers of the “feminine fifties” have perennially been dismissed as poetesses bound by verse convention or sentimental “scribbling women” whose need for income disqualified them from the pedestal of detached genius (never mind how much Hawthorne and Melville relied on their writing to support their families). In Chapter 9, Alexandra Socarides investigates the trope of the woman as natural poet in periodicals of the 1850s, noting how an ideal imposed on women by male critics and poets became a winning literary strategy for Osgood, Alice Cary, and others, even as Osgood and Cary spoke to the real, painstaking labor of authorship and the ways in which their gender rendered that labor invisible. Jennifer L. Brady in Chapter 10 focuses on prose writers Fanny Fern and Susan Warner, whose interactive relationships with their readers through the feedback loop of fan mail and the presentation of the authors’ recognition of their readers created an economy of feeling that made such sentimental engagement an economic powerhouse for those skillful enough to master such writing.

Wyn Kelley closes Part II of the book with a reading of Melville, perhaps the era’s most towering figure in popular culture today, in Chapter 11. Focusing on the spatial worlds of the ocean and the city, two equally generative zones in Melville’s fiction, Kelley explains how the rise of spatial studies, geomapping, and related areas gives us new ways to understand Melville’s social commentaries and formal innovations, even as his fluid notions of place, space, and mapping offer salutary critiques of the scientific assumptions in the digital mapping platforms we now use to track voyages and territories.

A similarly fluid figure opens the book’s third part, as Walt Whitman’s seemingly contradictory personae over the course of his career form the subject of Chapter 12. There David Haven Blake places the young vigorous Whitman, “one of the roughs,” of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* alongside the ailing “Good Gray Poet” that became Whitman’s image in later life, pointing out that Whitman himself considered the years of the Civil War and

CHRISTOPHER N. PHILLIPS

following just as important to his poetic project as the antebellum years had been.

The changing needs, demands, and possibilities of authorship before and after the Civil War were perhaps most acutely felt by African-American authors, and Chapters 13 and 14 trace the remarkably polymathic careers of Frederick Douglass and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, two of the most influential black writers of their day. Zoe Trodd shows that Douglass, born a slave in Maryland and a successful orator, author, journalist, and publisher in the decades after his escape to Massachusetts, harnessed the technologies of writing, print, and photography to continually remake himself in response to the needs of his abolition efforts, the Reconstruction, and the ongoing need to perform the fundamental humanity of African-Americans. Harper, born into Philadelphia's black middle class, used poetry in addition to oratory, fiction, and journalism to gain a hearing among abolitionists, women's rights activists, and others during her long career. In Chapter 14 Melba Joyce Boyd uses the biblical figure of Ishmael, so central to understandings of the American Renaissance thanks to the narrator of Melville's *Moby-Dick*, to present Harper as a self-conscious subject of resistance and exclusion, for whom writing and speaking became a way to confront painful realities and argue for a stronger collective will for good among Americans.

Laura Dassow Walls explores a very different kind of outsider figure in Chapter 15, as she focuses on Thoreau's career from the Walden period to his final years, during which time Thoreau came to understand himself as a scientist among poets, and vice versa. Walls argues that Thoreau's liminal status on the edges of several different communities – farmers, philosophers, naturalists, writers, orators – made him a vital ambassador between those communities, rather than a “mere” Transcendentalist.

A brief coda closes the volume, as Phillips considers the importance of war writing for American Renaissance writers. For Americans of the 1850s, their world was a postbellum one, shaped by the Mexican War of the late 1840s, and the horrors of the subsequent Civil War reshaped, and indeed launched, a number of literary careers, but it does not demarcate the transition from romanticism to realism nearly as neatly as Matthiessen, the *Norton Anthology*, or other shapers of American literary history have led us to believe. The American Renaissance, in a way, expands all the way to our present moment, and it is hoped that this volume will offer new ways to connect the world of the 1850s to ours today.