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# *Introduction: Writing, Reading, Romanticism*

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The question of "the text" has come increasingly to the center of attention in recent years and accordingly deserves some scrutiny here at the outset. In both their historical and technical aspects the major texts of the American literary tradition have come to be seen as somewhat problematic. In the first place, questions have quite properly been raised about the reliability of texts transmitted to us typically in surprisingly haphazard fashion. Quite literally, we have discovered that we did not know what we were reading – whether, for example, variations from edition to edition or from manuscript to first printing in periodicals or in pamphlet form and on to first book edition, could be ascribed to the author, to friends, relatives, or literary executors, or indeed to publishers and printers. In some cases manuscripts no longer exist or have not been found, and the same is true for galley and page proofs. Naturally, the problems vary from author to author.

James Fenimore Cooper, for example, was long considered a careless author who composed quickly and never bothered to revise, but recent textual scholarship suggests that this is not true.[1] Poe's literary estate was left, after his bizarre and premature death, in the hands of a malicious "executor" (Rufus Griswold) who altered some things to suit his own devious ends. Several of Emerson's most important pieces – "The American Scholar" and the Divinity School Address, in particular – were delivered orally only once for a specific audience from scripts that no longer exist. There is much evidence to suggest that Emerson altered these talks when he turned them into printed pamphlets, and we know that they were further changed when they were gathered into *Nature; Addresses, and Lectures* in 1849. Likewise, the seven states of *Walden*, like the seven layers of Troy, have been archaeologically exhumed.[2] Which versions, in both cases, should we study? To what extent, if any, was the composition of Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* influenced by his abolitionist mentors, Wendell Phillips and William Lloyd Garrison? It was



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frequently charged, rightly or wrongly, that slave narratives were not entirely the work of their named authors.[3]

Whitman, as we know, was a notorious and tireless reviser, and *Leaves of Grass* grew and changed considerably in the course of Whitman's long career. To this day some critics prefer the 1855 *Leaves*, some the third edition of 1860, but most readers have gotten their Whitman from the so-called death-bed edition of 1891–2. It is true, in any case, that there is an enormous amount to be learned about Whitman's project from the early editions, especially from the 1855 *Leaves*, with its important prose preface and startling appearance. Later I shall draw attention to the significance of Whitman's first English edition in 1868. Of course, the most perplexing example of textual problems concerns Emily Dickinson who, as most readers are aware, published few of her poems in her lifetime and left the rest in a variety of manuscript forms – some on the backs of envelopes or on odd scraps of paper, others neatly copied and tied into packets or fascicles, but all notable for their bewildering word variants and odd punctuation and orthography. Her first editors, Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd, who selected material for the original slim volumes that appeared in the 1890s, have long been blamed for their emendations and intrusions, but their task was formidable, and their decisions were naturally guided by the standards and tastes of their time. Still, students of American literature breathed a collective sigh of relief when Thomas Johnson published the Harvard "variorum" edition in 1955. Subsequent investigation, however, raised serious questions about his procedures. And so the Harvard University Press was persuaded by R. W. Franklin to bring out in 1981 an expensive two-volume facsimile of the reconstituted fascicles, with little flaps of paper tipped in where Dickinson pinned them to her manuscript. In what amounts to a challenge to many of the now standard versions of Dickinson's poems, we can finally return to Dickinson's own original form of nonpublication as the "text" of most authority – or at least of greatest interest.

For more than a generation now, scholars of American literature have been busy reediting the major authors of the canon according to complex and sometimes contradictory principles of textual reconstruction. In the world of intellect at least, universities are known more for their scholarly editions than for their football teams (the Ohio State Hawthorne, the Northwestern Melville, the Harvard Emerson, the Yale Edwards, the Princeton Thoreau). I must admit that I do not root for all these editing teams with equal enthusiasm, for some of them play according to odd rules, though they are all *supposed* to be faithful to what is called – with varying degrees of disingenuousness – "final authorial intention." The

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trouble is that they manufacture eclectic "ideal" texts; that is, they do not as a rule reproduce any single contemporary edition such as an author or a reader could have laid hands on. Instead, starting with a manuscript or first edition as copy-text, they make emendations according to their own principles and critical judgments. Their aim is a "perfect" text, but it turns out in some cases to be perfect only in the sense in which the mad scientist Aylmer, in Hawthorne's "The Birth-mark," produces a "perfect" wife – a mortuary Georgiana, that is, replacing the real, breathing one, blemished as she may have been, loved or hated by her contemporaries.

One striking instance of this textual tampering occurs in the new Harvard edition of Emerson's works. The editor of Volume 1, *Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*, tells us that he decided to accept Emerson's subsequent revisions of the first printings of his work only when they expand the text, on the principle, presumably, that more is better. As a result Emerson is frequently denied that great gift of laconic wit or wisdom that strengthened with the years. In the famous "transparent eye-ball" passage in *Nature*, for example, Emerson wrote in 1836 concerning his spiritual exhilaration on crossing the bare common: "Almost I fear to think how glad I am." But by 1849 he had decided to say instead, marvelously: "I am glad to the brink of fear." Since the second version, which we have all known for years, contains one word fewer than the original one, it has been rejected in the Harvard edition. What is the difference? Consider the two sentences again: "Almost I fear to think how glad I am"; "I am glad to the brink of fear." Though it took Emerson thirteen fateful years to think how glad he was, he finally mustered the courage to realize it was "to the brink of fear." That kind of emotional brinksmanship – barely visible in the 1836 text of *Nature* – represents Emerson's own version of the Romantic agony. Keats had already written of Joy "whose hand is ever at his lips / Bidding adieu" and of "aching Pleasure . . . Turning to Poison while the bee-mouth sips," and Dickinson would refine the notion:

> For each ecstatic instant
> We must an anguish pay
> In keen and quivering ratio
> To the ecstasy. (Poem 125)

This is, admittedly, a dramatic example of how much difference the choice of text can make, but others come to mind. For years I had students buy the Modern Library *Selected Writings* of Emerson because it was cheap and ample, but it was also amply supplied with mistakes – and

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the plates go uncorrected to the present.* So, for example, they print the last sentence of *Nature* as follows: "The kingdom of man over nature, which cometh not with observation – a kingdom such as now is beyond his dream of God – he shall enter without more wonder than the blind man feels who is gradually restored to sight." But that is wrong, for Emerson wrote: "who is gradually restored to *perfect* sight." We notice immediately the difference in cadence. But the word provides a crucial climax to *Nature* in other ways. Emerson begins his treatise by insisting that "we must trust the perfection of the creation" and goes on to exemplify that trust by describing his own "perfect exhilaration" on the bare common. Since the next sentence, as we have seen, tells us that Emerson is "glad to the brink of fear," we are implicitly invited to test, perhaps question, that concept of a perfect creation. How content can a man be with the restoration of "perfect sight" when he knows what it means to be blind? Paradise, Emerson would note later, "is under the shadow of swords."[4] In any case we see how the fate of our reading can hang on the omission – or possible misprinting – of a single word. In the admirable edition of Emerson prepared by Stephen Whicher for Houghton Mifflin in the 1950s and widely used since, Emerson can be heard in "The Poet" calling for a new American bard (and we are brought to a Whitmanian boil as we read) who will sing "our log-rolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes and Indians, our boats and our repudiations. . . ." Here an alert reader will stop and wonder: "our *boats* and our repudiations"? The pairing seems wrong, the logic off. And, indeed, another fine Emerson scholar, William Gilman, preparing his own Signet Classic Emerson in the 1960s, noticed the oddity and made a likely emendation that is now standard. He prints "our *boasts* and our repudiations," and that is undoubtedly what Emerson wrote, since especially in the Jacksonian period American *brag* was a household word. Thoreau would both ratify and refine that familiar native propensity in *Walden*: "If I seem to boast more than is becoming, my excuse is that I brag for humanity rather than for myself."[5]

Although there is no general agreement among Americanists regarding the "best" texts of our major authors (indeed I observe that most scholars cite the CEAA or CSE "approved" texts dutifully without considering the issues involved), informed opposition to the textual "scientists" has materialized in recent years. In particular, Jerome J. McGann, himself a textual scholar and distinguished student of English

* I was startled to notice recently that a new anthology of American literature, published by Harper, though claiming to use the Harvard Emerson text, has in fact been set from the Modern Library, with all the errors faithfully reproduced.

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Romanticism, has argued for a conception of "the text" that avoids the pitfalls of the scientific model of an "ideal" text by favoring a model responsive to the status of every literary text as a cultural artifact.[6] Viewing an individual literary text as a nexus of "arrangements" among author, editor, printer, reader, and critic, McGann helps us to conceive of texts as cultural performances informed by all the conditions of their creation, production, and reception. To introduce a "new" version of a text that never existed in cultural space-time as if it were somehow superior to a particular existent text that was, in Stevens's phrase, "the cry of its occasion," is to misunderstand the nature of cultural exchange. Any first or subsequent edition that was read and discussed has the integrity and authority peculiar to every artifact that circulates in the social body. That process helps to define it as much as "authorial intention." In a Romantic context, in particular, the notion of a text as "organic" might equally be derived from its place in the social body as an inseparable element of the larger Gestalt. It derives its life from that setting and gives vitality back to the setting in turn. In addition, an individual text viewed as a performance might be said to have the Romantic virtue of immediacy – of being charged with the energy of specific utterance. Thus the original version of Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*, published in 1845, bristles with the abolitionist fervor of the period of the Mexican War and is equally energized by the terse, unsophisticated, even blunt power of Douglass's first appearances, in contrast to the flaccid expansions of his life story characteristic of the later, well-known public figure. It is a text that will always have its own "authority," though responsible opinion may decide in favor of other versions that answer to different cultural imperatives.

*2*

As is by now well known, even outside the academy, the question of "reading" has become a central issue in literary study, along with the equally vexed question of "writing." Phillipe Sollers noted some twenty years ago that "today the essential question is no longer that of the *writer* and the *work*, but that of *writing* and *reading*" – *écriture* and *lecture*.[7] These concepts have been brought to the fore, Jonathan Culler observes, "so as to divert attention from the author as source and the work as object and focus it instead on two correlated networks of convention: writing as an institution and reading as an activity." By "writing as an institution" is meant "a set of written texts printed in books," texts being viewed as semiological systems whose decoding is to be accomplished according to various linguistic structures and rules. Reading is seen as an activity, indeed, an unabashedly creative one, that is accomplished according to

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the competence of the reader in dealing not only with linguistic structures but also with the various traditions of literary writing antecedently available.[8]

This mode of interpretation, as Culler tells us, is "based on poetics itself, where the work is read against the conventions of discourse and where one's interpretation is an account of the ways in which the work complies with or undermines our procedures for making sense of things." Although such a mode of interpretation "does not, of course, replace ordinary thematic interpretations, it does avoid premature foreclosure – the unseemly rush from word to world – and stays within the literary system for as long as possible."[9] This way of focusing on the text differs from the so-called New Criticism in that it does not start from the premise that significant literary works are necessarily "harmonious totalities . . . complete in themselves and bearing a rich immanent meaning."[10] Meaning is not simply given, whether by authorial intention or otherwise, but is to be worked out "with respect to a system of conventions which the reader has assimilated." This *readerly* theory of writing, which insists, as Ferdinand de Saussure says, that literature is a "system that recognizes only its own order,"[11] is intended to function as a salutary corrective to some of the naive procedures of traditional literary history and biographical criticism and as such to send us back to our texts with renewed interest and confidence in our work as readers. "The absence of an ultimate meaning," as Jacques Derrida writes, "opens an unbounded space for the play of signification." In his view, each reader is invited to become a kind of Nietzschean superman reentering a semiological and semantic Garden of Eden where everything is possible and we are free to participate in "the joyous affirmation of the world's play and the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs which has no truth, no origin, no nostalgic guilt and is presented simply for the activity of interpretation."[12]

It might be argued that this is Romantic reading par excellence – a realm of virginal texts perpetually teasing us out of thought in a Faustian quest that has no end because the pleasure of the text is infinite foreplay, free of any obligation to settle down and raise a family of determinate meanings. Let us, as Roland Barthes puts it, scatter, postpone, gear down, and finally discharge meaning. In our love affair with our texts we shall promise anything but deliver only the joys of literary dalliance. And if our pleasure is blocked by indifference or boredom, we shall find ways of enlivening the game of reading, for boredom can act as a provocation, enabling us "to make the text interesting by inquiring how and why it bores us." This sort of active involvement with the text can allow us to read in unconventional ways, to pay attention, citing Culler, to "the fragment, the incongruous detail, the charming excess of certain descrip-

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tions and elaborations, the well-constructed sentence whose elegance exceeds its function, or the flaws in a grand design."[13] These procedures, I am suggesting with only slight hyperbole, represent a romantic way of reading appropriate to Romantic texts, with their ambivalences, contradictions, open-endedness, ironies, ennuis, and peculiar gaieties of language.

But although we may allow ourselves to become excited by the possibility of unbounded freedom in interpretation, we ought not be entirely surprised to discover our Romantic saturnalia finally reined in by the invisible chain of necessity that always binds us. We cannot after all free ourselves entirely from meanings that are urged on us by historical considerations. We can, to follow Derrida again, only *imagine* escaping from the usual terms of literary discourse in order to allow other kinds of intellectual attention to operate.[14] We can resist history for the sake of our freedom, but we must finally reenter it for the sake of our sanity. So while we may willingly and happily grant the autonomy of the text as it opens before us in the mysterious silence of its absent presence, waiting to be uttered or read into being, we must also insist that it has a history – as personal expression, as part of the generic tradition to which it belongs, as cultural witness.[15]

Perhaps we can best analogize the status of the text to our sense of ourselves. Naturally, we exist most vividly for ourselves in the strong, though arguably specious, moment of our present experience. But, of course, we also have memories, and although it is frequently difficult for us to specify the mode or degree of reality to be ascribed to our past, we *know* that we have evolved as creatures of time and think as much about our lost worlds as we do about those we inhabit or hope to conquer. We are not content only to improvise the text of our present being. We need also to relive and reinterpret the texts we have already inscribed, and we tend to do so in terms of our historical moment (I was a child of the thirties or the forties or the fifties . . . ). As Roy Harvey Pearce observes:

> [At the center of our awareness of our humanity] we know ourselves to be, momentarily at least, neither conditioned nor contingent. But at the perimeter of that awareness, we know ourselves as in all things conditioned and contingent. On the one hand we are vital existences who may well be perverted or glorified, but nonetheless never deprived of our individual vitality, so long as we have at least the awareness that we exist. On the other hand, we are acculturated creatures whose least gesture can always be accounted for in someone's encyclopedic register of the life-style which obtains at our particular moment in history. We are both of these at once; so it has always been, so it must always be.[16]

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Just as we can never fully realize or understand ourselves except in and through history, so, too, literature is "an expression *in* history"; it is thus not a question of history versus literature, but rather of "history (*our* history) via literature," and we must emphasize that *via*, for the means whereby history is transmitted is not easy to apprehend, since – as Pearce remarks – "a literary work carries the past into the present . . . not just as a monument endowed with the sort of factuality from which we may infer its previous mode of existence, but rather as a somehow 'living' thing from whose particularity of form we may apprehend that existence and to a significant degree share in it." Literature is not merely a "document," nor is reading a work of literature a matter of simple historical research (whatever that may be), but rather – Pearce again – "a transaction with persons in history, a continuing dialogue. Mastery of the theory of this dialogue – which would be a plenary theory of historical criticism – is a problem to be solved by a psycholinguistics and a poetics as yet beyond our ken." To reiterate, we would have to understand more not only about how we read but also about how our reading engages and reactivates the historical realities embedded or lurking in our texts.

The problems are superlatively exemplified, as Pearce notes, by a central cultural text like *The Scarlet Letter*. In our own time, Hawthorne himself has been investigated through this text by psychoanalytically inclined critics in terms of Oedipal difficulties or "a kind of libidinal timorousness." On the other hand, orthodox or neoorthodox critics have made much of the so-called *felix culpa* motif in the book, whereby sin or suffering is viewed as a mode of religious redemption. Now these approaches, as Pearce remarks,

> have yielded up valuable insights for us. But essentially they have not dealt with *The Scarlet Letter* so much as with its import and significance for the culture of its critics. They are deliberately ahistorical and must be accepted as such. I do not wish to dismiss such views but rather to suggest the possibility of another, superior to them at least in its attempt to make its center of interest the novel in relation at once to its historical situation and to ours, not just to ours. I should think that such an alternate view of *The Scarlet Letter* would fully grant that Hawthorne's culture had its constraining libidinal timorousness and its recusant Calvinism, but only to ask: what meanings could he create by evoking the possibilities for authentic human existence which that timorousness and that recusancy shaped and directed? What does it mean (not "how was it actually" – for these are different questions) to have existed in that Boston which Hawthorne's New England gave him the material to create? How was it possible to *live* then? How was it possible to live

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> in and through the forms (repressive and expressive) peculiar to *that* civilization? What sort of vital structure does Hawthorne create and how does its vitality partake of the vitality of his own culture and that earlier one which his own gave him to envisage?

We might rephrase and summarize the problem this way: *The Scarlet Letter* offers us a view of the seventeenth century in Boston from the perspective – from *a* perspective – of Boston in 1850; we, on the other hand, perceive both Hawthorne *and* the seventeenth century from our own perspective, but both views are mediated by the form of Hawthorne's fiction – as he used it, as we perceive it. It may seem impossible to read the book with all these perspectives actively engaged, but that only suggests how difficult is the task of responsible criticism. We are juggling a set of simultaneous equations, and an adequate response cannot afford to lose sight of any of these variables. To treat Hawthorne's book as nothing more than a system of encoded discourses available for certain operations of grammatical or rhetorical analysis is to leave it stranded as a cultural archive.

I have already referred to what I called "some of the naive procedures of traditional literary history and biographical criticism" in order to draw attention to the dangers involved in treating texts as determinate objects that are little more than direct transcriptions of their cultural moment and milieu or of their authors' lives and backgrounds. Like flowers that have escaped from human cultivation and struck out for the wild, literary texts can undergo strange transformations as they seek their fortunes with new readerships in different times and places. As Emerson says, "[O]ne must be an inventor to read well. . . . There is . . . creative reading as well as creative writing."[17] We must continue to cherish the opportunities for new life – in them, in us – inherent in our great books. From the point of view of our reading, we are invited to engage in that sort of archaeology described by Michel Foucault, which amounts to a kind of "rewriting" – or, in his phrase, "a regulated transformation of what has already been written."[18] But I am obliged to part company with Foucault when he denies validity to the history of ideas because, if I understand him, it tries to displace "discourse in its own volume" in favor of an account of how discourse comes into existence and to fruition through the operations of culture.[19]

If the history of ideas – which Foucault nicely defines as "the analysis of silent births, or distant correspondences, of permanences that persist beneath apparent changes, of slow formations that profit from innumerable blind complicities, of those total figures that gradually come together and suddenly condense into the fine point of the work" – if such history does violence to "the modalities of discourse," then it is rightly

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suspect. But surely it ought to be possible to identify historical components and continuities in our literary "discourse-objects" without curtailing our freedom as readers or removing them from the center of our interest and attention, for indeed that interest and that attention are to a large extent historically determined. We read our Irving and our Cooper and our Hawthorne and our Dickinson not simply for the pleasures of the text but in the belief that they are our veritable antecedents, indispensable elements in our collective self-definition. They are already in us as we reenter them; in Eliot's phrase, we are "the present moment" of their past. As we return to them with their work already in our bones, a circuit is completed whereby history and individual consciousness continually inform and give birth to each other. At all events, whatever historical frame we can invent in order to place our literary texts should never be taken as an "explanation," but rather as a mode of clarifying the terms of our knowledge. Such approaches must necessarily be tentative, since we can never reconstruct the past, or the "history of ideas," in a way that would adequately correspond to its presence or its passage for those living and creating in that actual field of energy.

*3*

The particular field of energy that concerns me in this book is, of course, American Romanticism. I am not content simply to denominate the material I am studying as "American literature in the first half of the nineteenth century"; rather, I believe it useful and possible to define a Romantic movement in this country as a way of understanding our literature from about 1820 to the Civil War (I shall treat Charles Brockden Brown as a transitional figure). Now this is, to paraphrase Melville, neither an uncontroversial nor an easy task, "the classification of the constituents of a chaos." Since at least the 1920s, when Arthur O. Lovejoy wrote a now famous essay on "The Discrimination of Romanticisms,"[20] the rubric has often and justifiably been used in the plural. We have arguments for "negative" and "positive" Romanticism as distinct phenomena: Romantic agony and Romantic exaltation, the abyss and the empyrean. We have debased Romanticism (sentimentality) and high, or visionary, Romanticism: the man (or woman) of feeling versus the prophet. We have Romantic sincerity and Romantic irony. The list can be extended, but the central question remains: Can one speak intelligibly of literary Romanticism *in general*?[21] Was there an international movement? If so, what were its characteristics, and do these apply meaningfully to the American situation? Can or should we lump European Romanticism together in opposing or comparing it to the American variety? Are there no important differences, for example, among the French, German, and English schools? Why do they occur at different

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