

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11000-6 - In Respect to Egotism: Studies in American Romantic Writing

Joel Porte

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In 1827 Emerson wrote in his journal: “It is said to be the age of the first person singular.” One could hardly ask for a more concise notation of the Romantic program. In this book, *In Respect to Egotism: Studies in American Romantic Writing*, Joel Porte offers a timely reassessment of nineteenth-century American literature, focusing on the general question of the American Romantic ego and its varying modalities of self-creation, self-display, self-projection, and self-concealment. The book begins by exploring the status of the “text” in nineteenth-century American writing, the relationship of “rhetorical” reading to historical context, and the nature of “Romanticism” in an American setting. It then proceeds through a series of chapters on the great authors of Romantic America individually – Brown, Irving, Parkman, Cooper, Poe, Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Melville, Douglass, Stowe, Whitman, and Dickinson.

Throughout his important new study, Porte offers provocative reassessments of familiar texts while at the same time casting an illuminating critical eye on less well-known territory. Readers of this book will come away with increased respect for the achievement of American Romantic writers.

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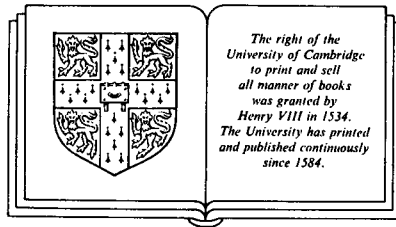
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For Helene

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“In most books, the *I*, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference.”

—Thoreau, *Walden*

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Preface

In 1982, when I produced the first draft of this book, I had in mind little more than a very loosely connected series of chapters on major American writers from Charles Brockden Brown to Emily Dickinson. Though I thought of them all as “Romantic” writers in some of the ways suggested in the Introduction, the book – perhaps with Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance* as a model – was not intended to have a single overarching thesis. As I proceeded, however, I became aware of a persistent concern in the unfolding chapters, namely, an interest in modalities of self-display or self-concealment – ways of figuring and disfiguring the self – discernible among American authors in this period. If that interest was continuous from writer to writer, it probably had less to do with there being something exceptional about American writing as such than with concerns and anxieties shared from one author to the next.

Simply put, American writing became a community project because the artists involved tended to think of themselves as pioneers engaged in clearing a common provincial imaginative space.¹ As part of that project they individually and collectively kept one nervous eye on the culture and creations of England and western Europe, which provided both the impetus and the challenge for their own careers. In Harold Bloom’s terms, they felt themselves to be both belated and empowered in respect to the antecedent culture. But, to repeat, those imperatives would be acted upon within a shared framework of new nationhood – implying new intellectual as well as new geographical territory.

The self, as Gertrude Stein reminds us, is radically responsive to its circumambient world:

After all anybody is as their land and air is. Anybody is as the sky is low or high, the air heavy or clear and anybody is as there is wind or no wind there. It is that which makes them and the arts they make and the work they do and the way they eat and the way they drink and the way they learn and everything.²

If the problem of self-development and self-articulation was, so to speak, in the land and air in nineteenth-century America, it was as likely to

affect native-born authors as it was immigrants stepping off the boat at the New World's ports of entry. Brash self-assertion alternating with crippling self-doubt – advancement and retreat, aggressive neologism giving way to shamed silence – were inescapable conditions of American life during the nineteenth century and willy-nilly informed America's first major burst of literary speech. These conditions could not be blinked away by the New World's self-creating artistic makers as they worked to appropriate their inherited language and the literary culture for which it stood.

Thoreau's pseudoapology from the first page of *Walden* stands as my epigraph to the whole project:

In most books, the *I*, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference.

Polite gentlemanly tradition may demand lexical self-effacement, as it frowns on one's putting oneself forward, but that will hardly serve as an inducement to saying something new. The upstart will always be taught to fear the too-frequent sound of his own voice, especially if he speaks in a nonstandard way. For Thoreau, however, to omit the first person is to wipe oneself off the literary map. "Most books" are written by other people. In order to make a difference, one must respect one's own voice.

There are, of course, other things to respect, other differences to make. But they all flow from the vitality of the articulating self as it fills its cultural space with new speech. One is obliged, however, to assert the claims of the first person, with a certain restraint and respect for others: there is, after all, a community of readers to be addressed who have their own stern claims and perfect circles. As Thoreau knew, John or Jonathan may become impatient with overly importunate literary manners. So he and his fellow American Romantic writers would learn to mask their claims for absolute singularity in the guise of bragging for humanity. Whether or not they succeeded in their claim to representativeness as literary voices remains, of course, an open question. But there can be little doubt that they did put themselves on the map, collectively helping to establish an American identity that continues to sound its distinctive notes among the competing egos of the modern world.

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Acknowledgments

Since this book draws on a long experience of studying, teaching, and discussing American Romantic writing, any specific record of indebtedness is bound to be incomplete. The work and example of my own teacher, Perry Miller, has naturally cast a long shadow over my career. Many other friends and colleagues helped, advertently or inadvertently, with advice, encouragement, information, and criticism. Among these (in no special order) are Daniel Aaron, Werner Sollors, John McWilliams, Albert Gelpi, Morton Paley, Michael T. Gilmore, Andrew Delbanco, Barbara Johnson, M. H. Abrams, Jonathan Bishop, Dan McCall, Allan Emery, Cushing Strout, Sacvan Bercovitch, Sandra Morris, Michael Strelow, Maurice Gonnaud, Boris Ford, Robert D. Richardson, Jr., Philip Gura, Stuart Levine, James Engell, and Stanley Cavell. I am also indebted to students at Harvard in English 70 and 170 for allowing me to try out some of these chapters in the classroom. That is equally true of students at Cornell, particularly those in my seminars on Transcendentalism and Hawthorne and Melville. I am grateful to other audiences – at Harvard, Cornell, Rhode Island College, the Hawthorne Society, the University of Kansas at Lawrence, the University of Colorado at Boulder, and Willamette University – for their kind reception of, and valuable response to, my work. Andrew Brown deserves thanks for his infinite patience during the many revisions of this study. And I must thank Dianne Ferriss for her expert editorial help. Finally, my wife, Helene, has shared the experience of writing this book from the start – beginning with a delayed Thanksgiving in 1982 while I finished a draft of the Melville chapter and continuing on through many conversations later at breakfast and dinner and everywhere else. Her support has been the sine qua non of my completing this book.

An earlier, and briefer, version of the Emerson chapter appeared in *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature, 9: American Literature*, edited by Boris Ford.

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