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978-0-521-55532-6 - Covenant and Republic: Historical Romance and the Politics of Puritanism

Philip Gould

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

THE HISTORICITY OF HISTORICAL FICTION

One of the early American republic's most hostile critics of the Salem witchcraft trials, Charles Wentworth Upham, concluded his *Lectures on Witchcraft* (1831) with some rather pointed remarks about his own era. Upham, a Unitarian minister, argued that the episode held particular meaning for contemporary New Englanders. As if his immediate audience might be too obtuse to interpret the lesson of Salem correctly, Upham instructed them in no uncertain terms to read the hysteria of 1692 as a political trope for an immediate problem. "[W]henver a community," he warned, "gives way to its passions . . . and casts off the restraints of reason, there is a delusion that can hardly be described in any other phrase. We cannot glance our eye over the face of our country, without beholding such scenes. . . . It would be wiser to direct our ridicule and reproaches to the delusions of our own times, rather than to those of a previous age, and it becomes us to treat with charity and mercy the failings of our predecessors, at least until we have ceased to imitate and repeat them."¹ One is struck immediately by the sense of urgency with which Upham displaces colonial history with a contemporary crisis, one where the people's civic behavior is contingent upon the faculty of reason. (In fact, in Chapter 5 I take up the politics of faculty psychology surrounding the period's historical literature about the Salem witchcraft trials.) Chastising his readers to get out of the seventeenth century, Upham rather abruptly reorients them to nineteenth-century politics, as though their obsession with their ancestors' foibles has dulled their capacity for self-examination.

Upham's exhortation, I believe, actually raises crucial theoretical and methodological issues for reading historical literature about Puritan New England. Indeed, critics of this genre might

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do well to heed his call. Such a reorientation significantly affects our understanding of both the historicity and the canonicity of historical fiction. Instead, modern criticism generally has assumed that the textual signs of historical literature fundamentally represent a colonial past, even though it acknowledges that the genre may have contemporary relevance. In this study of the emergence of historical romance about Puritanism during the 1820s, I have challenged this assumption. Here's why.

One reason involves the stature of Nathaniel Hawthorne. The long, imposing shadow that Hawthorne casts on the entire genre of the historical romance of New England dates back quite some time, and has distorted both the texts and the contexts that precede his work. Whether motivated by high regard, or even by skeptical revision, critics of the genre consistently situate Hawthorne at the hermeneutic center of things. For both traditionalists and revisionists, admirers and detractors, he has managed to serve as an interpretive touchstone, an apparently fixed standard by which we measure either the aesthetic deficiencies or (more recently) the relatively progressive politics of both his immediate predecessors and his contemporaries.² As Jane Tompkins has shown, the political contexts for Hawthorne's critical reputation extend back into antebellum America and "to the social and institutional structures that shaped literary opinion."³ Such a claim, of course, is part of a larger project in American literary studies examining the politics of canon formation, which involve in this case the cultural and ideological contexts contributing to both Hawthorne's reputation and that of an elite coterie of literary kingpins around whom F. O. Matthiessen defined "the American Renaissance."⁴

The modern roots of Hawthorne's reputation lay largely in the skeptical intellectual currents of postwar liberalism. As both Thomas Hill Schaub and Russell Reising have noted, Hawthorne became something of a trope for the "new" liberalism that arose during the late 1930s and 1940s out of the wreckage of Leftist politics in America.⁵ Disenchantment with the Soviet Union, particularly in the wake of Stalin's purge trials and his nonaggression agreement with Nazi Germany in 1939, propelled a self-consciously centrist and "anti-ideological" movement in American liberalism. Revisionist liberals scorned the naively optimistic progressivism of older liberals; they associated pure reason and ideology with the fallacies of Marxist dogma; viewed mass culture with a new horror that resonated with the specter of Russian and German totalitarianism; and generally embraced a "realistic"

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political vision derived from a Christian postlapsarian view of human nature that displaced an older idealism with a hard-eyed recognition of irony and tragedy, and a class-conflict model of history with a consensual one. Hence the invention of an “American” mind. Liberals, moreover, co-opted an older Hegelian and Marxist discourse of the “dialectic” of history and psychologized it to signify the contradictions of the mind, a maneuver that in effect minimized the importance of social realism in life and in literature. This new suspicion of ideology, historical determinism, and moral crusading was expressed in various forms: Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.’s notion of “the vital center” to American politics; the historian Louis Hartz’s belief that American history was essentially free of the class conflict describing Europe; or even the distinction Lionel Trilling drew between a static “ideal” and a the complex, irresolvable tensions of a literary “idea.”⁶ The polarities of the new liberalism, as Schaub notes, contrasted “totalitarianism and democracy, utopianism and politics, certitude and ambiguity” and maintained that reality itself is essentially “an experience of complexity that has its generative roots in the ineradicable conflicts of the private self.”⁷

Influential works on Hawthorne during the 1950s and 1960s inscribe the predispositions of liberal politics. The very premise of Richard Fogle’s *Hawthorne’s Fiction: The Light and the Dark* (1952) is to defend his subject from being “naive and old-fashioned.” As Fogle praises Hawthorne’s “pervasive irony” he proudly upholds a writer wielding moral allegory for psychological ends, one whose work is “enriched with ambiguity” and “so entirely un sentimental.”⁸ Such praise for Hawthorne is premised on the same ideology that led Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., to deride “the sentimental abstractions of Doughface [i.e., progressive] fantasy.”⁹ As Harry Levin’s *The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville* (1958) attests, Hawthorne’s sense of innate depravity (“the dark wisdom of deeper minds” characterizing Poe and Melville as well) made him attractive to postwar liberals, who themselves were engaged in an ideological project of rejecting the principles of reason, progress, and perfection.¹⁰ When Frederick Crews published his Freudian study of Hawthorne, *The Sins of the Fathers* (1966), he decidedly intended to rescue his subject from a host of critics who had tried to turn him into a genteel, optimistic, politically involved man of the world. The contrast Crews drew between the false view of Hawthorne as a “dogmatic moralist,” a “plodding democrat and religious tutor,” and the more profound one of a “self-divided, self-tormented man” actually

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encodes a much larger political and cultural debate over human nature and artistic consciousness that was taking place between traditional and revisionist American liberals.¹¹

The legacy of postwar liberalism has shaped as well more recent evaluations of Hawthorne and the antebellum practice of historical romance. In the name of “complexity,” “ambiguity,” and “irony,” influential critics have placed Hawthorne at the center of a nineteenth-century literary genre, revealing as much about their own political inheritance as they do about Hawthorne’s historical craft. For example, at the end of the Introduction of the influential *Hawthorne and the Historical Romance of New England* (1971), Michael Davitt Bell argues that the “problem for patriotic historical romancers was immense. They were torn between the patriotic impulse to idolize the [Puritan] founders as heroes and the romantic impulse to criticize them as enemies to independence and individual liberty.”¹² As Bell examines these writers’ various attempts to resolve this tension, a host of presumably lesser practitioners are cast as confused progressives – not unlike those troubled idealists of the postwar era whom Schlesinger calls “Doughface” idealists – who cannot shed the premises of progressive history. As opposed to these “confused” writers, who were unable to reconcile contradictions about Puritanism, Hawthorne exploited such ambiguities for “artistic” purposes. Hence what distinguishes Hawthorne from his peers in effect is his ability to grasp a new liberal understanding of the inherent irony of historical process. The value of historical irony is not lost on George Dekker, whose monumental, erudite *The American Historical Romance* (1987) lauds Hawthorne’s sense of how “historical circumstances create situations ironic, comic, and tragic by curtailing or liberating the human actors’ potential for understanding or action.”¹³ For Michael J. Colacurcio, in *The Province of Piety: Moral History in Hawthorne’s Early Tales* (1984), Hawthorne’s “historical prescience” makes him an apt parallel to Perry Miller himself, one who sees, for example, the malaise of the New England Way among third-generation Puritans in “Young Goodman Brown;” Hawthorne also shows “ambivalence about ‘the meaning of America’” and “hatred of every sort of historical absolutism” in “Endicott and the Red Cross.”¹⁴ Moreover, the ideological medium of revisionist liberalism has sustained Hawthorne’s reputation as a historical romancer specifically against literary rivals such as Lydia Maria Child, Catharine Maria Sedgwick, and John Neal whose works are filled, as one critic claims, with “anachronisms” and “improbabilities.”¹⁵

One might see the recent dissent from this tradition as an

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attack on the “sins of the fathers.” The critical recuperation of writers like Lydia Maria Child, Catharine Maria Sedgwick, and others owes much of its success to Rutgers University Press’s American Women Writers Series, which during the 1980s began to reprint important editions of works by nineteenth-century American women writers. The critical editions of *Hobomok* and *Hope Leslie* are filled with important scholarly notes and accompanied by introductory essays that provide important biographical and critical material, all of which makes a case for rethinking Child’s and Sedgwick’s place in the American canon. These writers certainly *did* know something about colonial history. According to the editor of *Hobomok*, Carolyn L. Karcher, Child “went about writing an alternative history of the Puritan experiment – one that highlighted its underside and shifted the focus from the saints to the sinners, from the orthodox to the heterodox, from the white settlers to the Indians, from the venerated patriarchs to their unsung wives.”¹⁶ Likewise, Mary Kelley maintains that in writing *Hope Leslie*, Sedgwick successfully interrogated Puritan historians – William Bradford, John Winthrop, William Hubbard – whose work she knew well.¹⁷

Just as significant as the obvious revisionism here is a less immediately apparent line of continuity between these two schools of critics of historical romance. Whereas liberal critics once praised Hawthorne for rewriting the historical record of seventeenth-century New England, revisionist critics praise Hawthorne’s female predecessors during the 1820s for virtually the same thing. The essential difference here is the substitution of antipatriarchalism for irony as the elixir of legitimacy. Such a reevaluation of women’s historical fiction quite rightly disrupts the traditionally exclusive nature of the nineteenth-century American canon. But the interpretive continuities here, I would argue, tend to reshuffle canon hierarchies rather than reexamine their premises. By locating the genre’s “historicity” in the seventeenth century, critics of this historical literature of New England consistently have assumed a stable relationship between text and context, a fact that ultimately obscures the many ways in which these novels do not merely make analogies between past and present but actually inscribe *contemporary* history.

Before proceeding, I should acknowledge that virtually all critics of the genre do argue that historical fiction had some sort of contemporary relevance in the early republic. Colacurcio, for example, argues rigorously for Hawthorne’s ironic treatment of the standard democratic pieties of his day, perhaps best exemplified by George Bancroft’s historical theories of the evolutionary

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progress of liberty in America, even though Hawthorne was publishing much of his work in James P. O'Sullivan's *United States History and Democratic Review*.¹⁸ Likewise, for Kelley, Sedgwick's historicism carries out an "investigation into the roots of American moral character"; for Karcher, Child uses history to provide early national Americans with an "alternative vision of race and gender relations."¹⁹ Most recently, Nina Baym has put women's historical romances into the broader context of all of women's history-writing, maintaining that a novel like *Hope Leslie* attacks Puritanism because colonial/patriarchal origins were incompatible with the cultural refinement of America.²⁰ Even Baym's cogent assessment, however, overlooks significant cultural tensions between premodern and modern ideologies in the post-Revolutionary era (a subject which I take up in Chapter 3). For all of these critics, historical fiction revises the past as a way of sending political messages germane to the early republic. Yet they all assume that the literary materials of historical romance – its language and love plots, its stern patriarchs and rebellious women, the conventions of marriage and miscegenation – fundamentally represent the colonial past.²¹

Even cultural critics of historical fiction make similar assumptions. Both Lawrence Buell and David Reynolds have articulated how the rivalries between Unitarians and Orthodox Calvinists during the early nineteenth century made the historical romance of New England a major site of sectarian warfare.²² As Buell has shown, the Unitarian embrace of belles lettres as a surrogate source of biblical authority quickly made historical romance a Unitarian possession. Yet even his notion of "the historicity of historical literature" concerns the issue of whether or not the genre "captures the past." Under the influence of Sir Walter Scott, the argument goes, American historical novelists pursued a "mixed mode" of documentary mimesis and imaginative liberation that inevitably led to problems fulfilling antebellum critics' demand that fiction show a fidelity to historical fact.²³ As opposed to critics emphasizing the religious culture of nineteenth-century New England, Lucy Maddox recently has argued that contemporary cultural assumptions about race and Indian removal inform a wide variety of antebellum literature. Maddox contextualizes the treatment of race in historical fictions such as *Hobomok*, *Hope Leslie*, and *The Scarlet Letter* (as well as in other genres), showing how in varying ways male and female writers negotiated race within the prevailing cultural ideologies of the day. Despite her sense of these novels' significance to early republican politics, however, Maddox fundamentally sees *Hobomok* and *Hope Leslie* as

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representations of colonial history that imply comparisons and analogies to the nineteenth century: “Working backward from their own circumstances in the early years of the nineteenth century, when women . . . are sufficiently liberated to debate ideas with men and publish novels that revise male-transmitted history, they can argue the changed status of women is the result of a process of reform begun nearly two-hundred years before by the small rebellions of a few spirited and intelligent women against the Puritan patriarchy.”²⁴ So for all of these readers of historical romance – liberals, cultural critics, feminists, and revisionists – the cultural logic of this literary genre works according to the principle of historical analogy.

This brief survey of the field cannot help but simplify the complexities of these valuable critical studies. But it does begin to show a line of critical continuity regarding the historicity of historical literature that helps to clarify my own approach to the genre. This book is indebted to the above critics, but its methods and motives involve two crucial, related strategies of displacement. One of them concerns the issue of the American canon. In what follows I displace the issue of canon hierarchies with a cultural dialogue that was taking place in “history-writing”²⁵ during the early republic. This period I am defining as the time between the end of the American Revolution and the 1830s, a period that, of course, witnessed the emergence of historical fiction in general and the historical romance of New England in particular. This cultural dialogue concerned the nature of citizenship in the early republic, and the subject of Puritan history provided an important (though not exclusive) discursive site for it. The second strategy involves the recovery of fiction’s cultural signification by displacing Puritan history with early republican history. I read historical texts as culturally specific expressions of the post-Revolutionary era.

To do this, I incorporate both older and newer modes of historical criticism. At the time of this writing, it has been roughly fifteen years since the publication of Stephen Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980) and the beginnings of what became the “new historicism.” As one will see, my methods have been influenced by the new historicism, particularly the ambivalent signification of the “subject” of history, which positions writers as both agents of textual authority and vessels of cultural ideologies, as well as the theoretical equivalence this methodology draws between the “historicity of texts” and the “textuality of history.”²⁶ Fifteen years after the fact, however, there

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should be no theoretical qualms about employing both newer and more traditional historicist methods. I take seriously those primary sources which early nationalists consulted in reconstructing Puritan history: who read what, who borrowed what from whom, and so on. But I articulate the historical transmission of Puritan sources in the context of early national culture and politics, in order to show how such borrowing (or outright stealing) was mediated by immediately resonant ideologies. Instead of analyzing, as others have done, Puritan history as an analogue for the early republic, I divest these narratives of their colonial garb altogether. Anyone who carefully reads historical fiction of the 1820s soon sees that these texts speak a language of anachronism, one fraught with immediate social, political, and ethical concerns. Puritanism is much less a stable analogue than a protean metaphor for the early republic.

The metaphoric significance of Puritanism registers the central civic and political issues of the day that revolved around the subject of republican “virtue.” In *Patricide in the House Divided: A Psychological Interpretation of Lincoln and His Age* (1979), George Forgie has argued: “It was taken for granted from the start that the survival of the Republic for any length of time would depend heavily on the virtue of its citizens. Character was perceived to be the point of contact between individual lives and national fate.”²⁷ Early nationalists continually groped for new definitions of republican citizenship, and, in doing so, refashioned the meaning of “virtue” in new, complex, and often inconsistent ways. The meaning of this key word was devilishly elusive during this era, and a host of troubling questions lay behind its signification. What kinds of personal and civic qualities were necessary to republican life? What were the terms of political association? How could women be expected to fulfill a political role in the republic without really being citizens at all? Hence this discourse of virtue (which included a related lexicon of “industry,” “vigor,” and “valor,” as well as “benevolence,” “affection,” and “refinement”) signified in highly contextual ways that were contingent upon gender, class, race, purpose, audience, and personal sensibility. Sometimes these rhetorical and ideological factors collided. Forgie’s study of a “post-heroic” generation following the American Revolution psychologizes the domestication of political discourse and the transferal of authority from real fathers to Revolutionary fathers as a way of securing the future of the republic. I extend this concept from the Revolutionary to the Puritan fathers themselves, and yet rediscover the cultural role of patriarchal/histori-

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cal authority in political rather than psychological terms. Puritanism afforded an arena in which early nationals negotiated the contemporary meanings of republican “virtue.” The period’s cultural politics of Puritanism, in other words, can be understood as a function of its complex political culture.

If we are to articulate the cultural politics of a literary genre, we should read it in the same context that early nationals did – that is, in this case, alongside the other kinds of historical writing, such as the election-day sermons, commemorative orations, biographies, as well as state, regional, and national histories. All of these saturated early republican letters. History and historical fiction were intimately related genres during this era. As I show throughout, they at once complemented and competed with one another over the ideological stakes of republican “virtue.” There is, of course, a purely theoretical rationale for reading these genres together. The study of historiography as a fictional mode of discourse, in which historical “reality” is as much created as recorded, has held significant critical attention for more than twenty years.²⁸ The chief spokesman for “metahistory,” Hayden White, has argued that historical writing can be nothing more or less than a discursive act. As much as poets do, historians impose what White has called “poetic figurations” (e.g., metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, irony) on historical “facts” that themselves have no meaning without a “tropological” system of relations with which they can be conjoined – or “emplotted” – into narrative form. The facts of any historical narrative, in other words, cannot exist without an overarching “story” (e.g., romance, comedy, tragedy, or satire). Historical narratives are “verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have in the sciences.”²⁹

Such a dismantling of generic borders, however, only affirms *ex post facto* the entanglement between fiction and history during the post-Revolutionary era. Historical fiction emerged during the 1820s in context of an already established, thriving literary industry of historiography. As others have noted, history-writing of all sorts held a significant place in early national letters.³⁰ After all, over 85% of the nation’s best sellers during the 1820s were books of history, a trend that paralleled the rise of state historical societies.³¹ Not only adults but schoolchildren were readers of these new texts. One crucial factor behind the proliferation of written histories was the rise of public education in early-nineteenth-century America. Between the time that religious dis-

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establishment (under Thomas Jefferson's leadership) began in Virginia in 1786, to its final eradication in Massachusetts in 1833, public schools were increasingly institutionalized in America.³² The study of history in these new public schools became a formal and separate discipline. During the 1820s, moreover, a number of states required by law that history be taught in state-supported schools.³³ In 1827, for example, six years before the formal disestablishment of religion in Massachusetts, the state legislature passed a law requiring that history be part of the public school curriculum.³⁴ Moreover, this new industry of history textbooks led to the creation of journals, such as the *United States Literary Gazette* and the *American Journal of Education*, to review and often promote them.³⁵ History-writing was becoming the New Word of the republic.

This New Word was sanctioned by its capacity to inculcate virtue in republican citizens. A quick glance at the period's primary sources reveals a peculiar brand of didacticism shaped by the experience of the American Revolution. An essayist for the *North American Review*, for example, declared that the chief value of history-writing was to make "us better and more valuable members of society." Unless we diligently study the "truths" that history afforded, the writer asked, "how shall we ever improve ourselves, and thus act beneficially upon society; or develope [sic] those germs of virtue and knowledge which exist within us?"³⁶ Popular history-writers like Emma Willard, founder of the Troy Female Seminary, framed their productions in similar ways: "And may not these generous feelings of virtue arise, respecting nations as well as individuals; and may not the resolution which the youth makes, with regard to himself individually, be made with regard to his country, as far as his future may extend?"³⁷ Even *The Christian Spectator*, a forum for stodgy Orthodox Calvinists, who viewed novel reading suspiciously, allowed that historical fiction in the tradition of Scott offered characters whose "virtue" consisted of "those principles which hold society together, and keep the world from falling into chaos."³⁸ Such patriotic didacticism modulated discussions of historical fiction as well. Like nationalist history, historical fiction theoretically instructed readers in republican behavior. The Massachusetts jurist Rufus Choate even claimed that historical fiction did a better job than history did of entertaining readers. Its didactic mission, however, of "hold[ing] up to our emulation and love great models of patriotism and virtue" was essentially the same as history's.³⁹

The ideological intimacy between historiography and histori-