The Form of American Romance

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Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

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The idea of romance has long been an important one to writers and readers seeking to establish the borderlines that will circumscribe the field of American fiction by setting it apart from other national literatures. Such demarcations of a literary corpus, however, are accompanied by theoretical and practical difficulties. Recent questionings of American romance as a formal and generic category have disturbed the serene methodological self-assurance that characterized earlier studies of the American novel by reminding us of the extent to which, in Fredric Jameson's words, "categories, such as those of genre . . . are implicated in the literary history and formal production that they were traditionally supposed to clarify and neutrally to describe." Nevertheless, while we may question the taxonomic certainty of generic categories we must also recognize that, as Derrida has shown, "there is no genreless text." And indeed American romance illustrates in a remarkable way the principle

Before going about putting a certain example to the test, I shall attempt to formulate, in a manner as elliptical, economical, and formal as possible, what I shall call the law of the law of genre. It is precisely a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy. In the code of set theories, if I may use it as least figuratively, I would speak of a sort of participation without belonging—a taking part in without being part of, without having membership in a set.

—Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre"
of contamination that for Derrida marks the idea of genre. For even the individual texts generically identified as such by a subtitled designation, as in *The Scarlet Letter: A Romance*, seem at the same time to resist confining generic categories and to violate their formal purity by the blurring and crossing of borderlines. Such texts suggest that we must consider the category of genre theoretically rather than to take it for granted as a transparent concept whose meaning we can know unequivocably and can use as an unexamined starting point for interpretation. So while my study, for the most part, works with texts from the established canon of the American novel arranged in traditional canonical ways, it does so in a fashion designed to question and unsettle traditional categories. It attempts at once a theoretical and reflexive approach to the concept of American romance by focusing on the question of form, taking “form” as a term for the enabling principles of a work rather than for its external shape. My guide here is Ortega y Gasset’s discussion of literary genre in his admirable *Meditations on Quixote*. Seen from his perspective American romance becomes not merely the name of a fictional form but of a fictional content which “reaches fulfillment in the process of its expansion or manifestation.” It becomes at one and the same time “a certain thing to be said and the only way to say it fully” (ii3). But for the writers that I discuss there is an incompatibility between the shaping power and that which is shaped, and this problem of form enters into their works as an essential theme, with the result that they stage the process of their own self-engendering. My first chapter attempts a description of the manifestation and temporal unfolding of the basic tendencies or directions that constitute that process by placing them within the larger context of some of the fundamental aspects that mark the novel as a form. I am not, in short, claiming that American fiction has a history exclusively its own. It is not my intention to strengthen what one critic has called the “myth of American exceptionalism.” But I shall argue that for the writers that I discuss the author’s place or situation as an American becomes a metaphor for his artistic concerns, and
the dark, magical, and dreamlike narratives that he produces bring to the foreground the problem of fictional form in an especially interesting way. However, the concept of literary form as I understand it is one that resists a purely theoretical description, one that must emerge narratively from the process of rigorously interpreting individual texts. Hence I follow the initial chapter with careful readings of five American novels. This focus on individual texts, while it may seem at times to lead away from the main line of the argument, is intended, rather, to suggest new ways of conceiving it, of allowing a sense of the form of American romance to arise out of the process of reading itself.

Now, as Northrop Frye has shown, romance is the paradigm of all storytelling, and, for that reason, perhaps, since the Renaissance it has been defined in terms of its problematic relation to a reader. Indeed A. C. Hamilton argues that “of all the genres only romance enchants or ‘takes’” the readers by drawing them into the text in order to absorb and possess them. Hence the experience of reading becomes the essential theme of romance, a fact that leads Hamilton to suggest that reader response criticism offers the most useful approach to the form.

Since I shall argue that the act of reading generates the enabling energy of American romance and take advantage of the insights of a number of critics whose works are associated with the recent refocus of criticism on the reader, I want to emphasize here that I am not primarily concerned with developing or using a theoretical model of reading. My main interest is not with readers reading but rather with the implications of the ways reading is represented in certain American texts. More specifically, I am concerned with exploring the curious and troubling moment where the act of reading appears to mark and disturb the American novelist’s passage from life to writing and to entangle experience with an intertextual system of relationships. By describing the unique and special problem that that moment generates in five American texts, I want to sketch a “history” of American romance that will complicate the question of its uniqueness by illustrating ways in which it is exemplary.
As Joseph Riddel has noted, the historical moment that the American critical fable identifies as marking the beginning of a distinctive native voice coincides with the one the French see announcing the advent of modernism. And, perhaps for similar reasons, the “history” of the American novel echoes in a remarkable way the preoccupations of both domestic and European critics of the novel. This relationship forms the subtext that I try to articulate in the notes to the first chapter while I focus directly on the problem of elaborating a genealogy of American romance, but one that is understood to be constructed rather than natural, or, to use Edward Said’s formulation, one that emphasizes a relationship of affiliation rather than one of filiation or natural descent.

A word about the novels that form the line of relationships that I chart. The ones that I discuss may seem somewhat arbitrarily chosen, but no choice of examples is an entirely innocent one, and my selection privileges the novels in several senses. They are, first of all, texts that focus on the formal implications of the problems of writing and reading in a way that has a long genealogy in the history of the novel as well as a specific importance in the configuration of its development in America. Each has been chosen with the others in mind with the hope that the interplay of my examples will suggest the nuances of my argument. For instance, in all the novels that I discuss echoing is a figure of representation which carries with it a set of associated themes including broken or substitute genealogical relations, problems of originality and repetition, fragmented voices, and misdirected, delayed, or torn letters, and these issues become the enabling impulses that seek their fulfillment in the form of the individual novels. Moreover each of my novels occupies an exemplary position in a particular authorial career and hence illustrates its author’s struggle with his chosen form in especially revealing ways. Finally, taken together, the five novels chart a line of development that provides representative examples of what literary history calls romanticism, realism, modernism, and postmodernism and hence suggest a certain story about the continuity of the
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American novel. But this is a story whose plot must emerge from the readings of the individual texts, readings that I have tried to organize in such a way that they will echo one another and thereby convey my sense of the enabling themes that each text shares with the others and will make possible a concluding description of the form of their relationship.

In preparing this study I have incurred a number of debts and take pleasure in acknowledging them here. First I want to thank my colleagues at Arizona who read and commented on portions of the manuscript: Patrick O'Donnell, Suresh Raval, and Charles Sherry. More than ever I am grateful for the continuing support of my old friends Homer Brown, John Rowe, and Joseph Riddel. Their enduring friendship and the example of their scholarship have provided a large part of the enabling energy for my study. A major portion of the book was written during my tenure of a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, and I am deeply grateful for the free time it provided.