

Chapter 1

Toward the “Great American Novel”

Romance and Romanticism in the Age of Realism

The idea of the Great American Novel was implicit in the quest for “literary nationalism” well before the Civil War of 1861–5; and it became a call for national unity and national cultural achievement after the war. The idea and the phrase were crystallized in an essay titled “The Great American Novel” by John W. De Forest in *The Nation* in 1868. De Forest speculated that this mythical entity would be both a great epic poem of the people and the story of their everyday lives. But for the rest of the nineteenth century the most persistent question about this hypothetical construct was whether it would be a romance of idealism and great, out-of-the-ordinary happenings or a novel of ordinary everyday life.

Romance and *novel* are the two literary forms or genres at the center of the debate between realists and romantics at end of the century. The term *romance* has a long pedigree, going back more than three centuries in English, but we’ll begin with a nineteenth-century American definition. The first edition (1828) of Noah Webster’s *An American Dictionary of the English Language* reads in part: “ROMANCE... A fabulous relation or story of adventures and incidents, designed for the entertainment of readers; a tale of extraordinary adventures, fictitious and often extravagant, usually a tale of love or war, subjects interesting to the sensibilities of the heart, or the passions of wonder

and curiosity.”¹ To clarify the definition of *romance*, Webster compares it with the novel: “*Romance* differs from the *novel*, as it treats of great actions and extraordinary adventures” and “soars beyond the limits of fact and real life, and often of probability.” It will be useful to keep this original distinction in mind as we explore their coalescences and diversions in the American “romance tradition.”

A “Library of Romance” in the Age of Realism

One of the popular series of fiction prior to the Civil War was called the “Library of Romance,” published by Samuel Coleman of New York. What about romances *after* the war? In an essay on the “Romance Tradition” in American fiction (*ACAF*, 2009), William J. Scheick provides an extensive list of romances in the period between the Civil War and World War I – along with an illuminating examination of types and subtypes. He begins with a comment on the ambiguity of terms and the interconnection between romance and novel.² Beginning with the historical shifts in meaning from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, Scheick comments:

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The definition of romance did not get any clearer with the rise of the novel during the eighteenth century, when romance was *generally* understood to refer to improbable, imaginative, and symbolic stories distinctly different from the novel. Such a broad distinction, critically impressionist at best, was complicated by early nineteenth-century authors, especially Walter Scott and Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose hybrid fictions combined the factual properties of the novel and the imaginative reach of romance. By the end of the nineteenth century this hybrid form was very popular, despite the fact that some critics – fervid apologists for literary realism such as William Dean Howells – struggled in vain to distinguish between romance and the novel. (35)
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By the 1890s, as Scheick makes abundantly clear, the body of Anglo-American romances was characterized by remarkable popularity and bewildering variety, which Scheick has schematized under three large categories: *eventuary romance*, which emphasizes plot and action; *aesthetic romance*, which emphasizes a somewhat more passive aspect of “aesthetic appreciation”; and *ethical romance*, which breaks down boundaries between fact and fiction and generates a variety of forms that balance the “ethos of storytelling” with “life” or “realism.” Edgar Rice Burroughs’s *Tarzan of the Apes* (1914) would be an example of event-centered romance; some of the romance forms that

Henry James experimented with (such as *The Turn of the Screw*) could exemplify the aesthetic mode; and works by writers like Richard Harding Davis, John Kendrick Bangs, Stephen Crane, Mary Austin, or Jack London represent varieties of ethical romance in Scheick’s schema.³

These categories, labels, and definitions provide useful loci for anyone entering the somewhat chaotic world of both popular and serious romance. Here, however, I would propose a simpler categorical scheme for American romance in the 1865–1914 period:

- 1 the general *historical epic*, including varieties we can call ancient, biblical, medieval, and pious;
- 2 the specifically *American historical romance*, including the picaresque forms of romances of the Revolution, the Frontier, and the Civil War;
- 3 *fantasy, mystery, and gothic*, including utopian or dystopian futurist projections and variations on the fantastic, the grotesque, and the arabesque.

How plentiful, after the Civil War, were these romances? Here is a brief overview supplementing Scheick.

(1) *General historical epics*

Among the most popular were varieties of historical romance set in bible lands or Rome and chivalric tales of King Arthur and the knights of old. Lew Wallace’s *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880) was a phenomenal best seller. Wallace also wrote a number of other romances, including *The Fair God* (1873), set in Mexico (inspired by Prescott’s *Conquest of Mexico*), *The Boyhood of Christ* (1888), and *The Prince of India* (1893). The works of F. Marion Crawford (1854–1909), especially his pseudo-historical Italian family chronicles, known as the “Saracinesca” tetralogy – *Saracinesca* (1887), *Sant’ Ilario* (1889), *Don Orsino* (1892), and *Corleone* (1896) – were also popular. And he produced a number of other romances like *Zoroaster* (1885), *Khaled* (1891), *In the Palace of the King* (1900), and *Via Crucis* (1898). Charles Major’s love story of Mary Tudor, *When Knighthood Was in Flower* (1898), set off an avalanche of imitations; but his treatments of British royalty and the knightly tradition were hardly the first on the American scene. Sidney Lanier had published *The Boy’s King Arthur* in 1881; and Mark Twain not only took advantage of the Arthurian craze with *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* in 1889 but also wrote several other “historical” romances set in the medieval-renaissance era, including *The Prince and the Pauper* (1882), *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc* (1896), and *The Mysterious Stranger* texts (posth. pub. 1916; 1969).

(2) *American historical romances*

Typical of the sentimental romances of the Old South were Thomas Nelson Page’s *In Ole Virginia* (1887), a collection of stories, and *Red Rock* (1898), which nostalgically glorifies life in the antebellum South and defends the motives of the Ku Klux Klan. It was a runaway best seller. So was Thomas Dixon’s *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905), one of a trilogy of novels that chronicles the overturning of the “Black Plague of Reconstruction” and the “redemption” of the ways of the Old South.⁴

Other American historical romances produced in this period include S. Weir Mitchell, *Hugh Wynne, Free Quaker* (1897); Mary Johnston, *To Have and To Hold* (1900); James Maurice Thompson, *Alice of Old Vincennes* (1900); Mary Catherwood, *The Romance of Dollard* (1889); James Lane Allan, *The Choir Invisible* (1893, 1897); Ellen Glasgow, *The Battle-Ground* (1902); Winston Churchill, *Richard Carvel* (1899), *The Crisis* (1901), *The Crossing* (1903).

Frontier romances of the American West were also the rage – from the dime novels of the 1860s to the 1890s to Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* (1902) and Zane Grey’s *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912). Cowboys, and occasionally “Indians,” replaced the knights and soldiers of old, just as in some of the old romances of James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851). Dime novels were originally short, action-packed narratives of the American Revolution and the Civil War and the Western Frontier, often published in yellow or blue paper covers, selling for ten cents a copy.

Meanwhile, more serious romanticized frontier stories featuring the Indian as the “Child of Nature” continued the pre-Civil War tradition of the tragic “Noble Red Man” best known in poems by William Cullen Bryant and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and in prewar fictions by James Fenimore Cooper, Lydia Maria Child, and Catharine Maria Sedgwick. The subtext of Helen Hunt Jackson’s *Ramona* (1884) moralized on the plight of Native Americans and other minorities. Emerging Native American literature tended to be autobiographical or polemical nonfiction rather than romances; but some novels by authors with actual Native American blood were beginning to appear very late in the nineteenth century, such as Sophia Alice Callahan’s novel *Wynema: A Child of the Forest* (1891).⁵

(3) *Fantasy, mystery, and gothic romances*

Under the general heading of fantasy, mention may be made of several utopian/dystopian romances: Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (1888), William Dean Howells, *A Traveler from Altruria* (1894) and its sequel *Through the Eye of the Needle* (1907), Jack London, *The Iron Heel* (1907), Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland* (1915), and Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee*

in *King Arthur's Court* (1889). But utopian critiques and gothic tales by Howells, Twain, James, Bierce, and Wharton more often than not tend toward epistemological ambiguity. Works of simpler fantasy like *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) by L. Frank Baum (1856–1919) were more popular. *The Wizard of Oz* was the first of a series of fifteen connected novels that were continued by others well into the middle of the twentieth century.⁶ Equally popular was Edgar Rice Burroughs (1875–1950), whose *Tarzan of the Apes* (1914) was the first of more than thirty volumes involving the romanticized "ape man." Less well known today but very popular in their time were his stories of lost lands, the inner earth, and his Mars, Venus, and Moon stories. His first published novel, *A Princess of Mars* (1912), was followed by some sixty other sci-fi and fantasy works. James Branch Cabell wrote a sequence of half-ironic medieval-renaissance fantasy romances, set in the made-up French province of "Poictesme." Beginning with *Chivalry* (1907), Cabell produced some eighteen volumes in the series, collecting them in 1927–30.

Gothic romances of physical terror, psychological horror, and supernaturalist mystery also continued to be popular. One of the most famous was *The King in Yellow* (1895) by R. W. Chambers (1865–1933), a collection of ten stories, the first five of which are fantastic tales, and the second five more "realistic" though "strange." The latter are mainly sentimental narratives about young love among Anglo-American artists in Paris. Other of Chambers's more or less supernaturalistic works are *The Maker of Moons* (1896), *The Mystery of Choice* (1897), and *In Search of the Unknown* (1904). Chambers's fantastic stories had an important influence on early twentieth-century science fiction in America; and his detective hero, Mr Keen, in *Tracer of Lost Persons* (1906), influenced the rise of the American detective story in the early twentieth century.

F. Marion Crawford collected seven ghostly sea stories in *Wandering Ghosts* (1911), one of which, "The Upper Berth," is still routinely anthologized. Crawford's previously mentioned *Khaled* (1891) is an especially effective orientalized supernaturalist romance. Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935) wrote a classic story of ambiguous psychological gothic, "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), a must for readers interested in both the gothic tradition and the rise of feminist literature.

Ambrose Bierce (1842–c.1914) collected twenty-six short horror stories and sketches in *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* (1891). Re-titled *In the Midst of Life* (1898), the book contains the famous psychological gothic "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," a stream-of-consciousness, time-dislocation narrative about the last moments of a Civil War prisoner's execution. Other tales include the haunting story of a little girl's psyche, "The Eyes of the Panther," and the grim horror story "Chickamauga," in which a deaf child moves as

though in a dream through the smoke and fog of a Civil War battlefield strewn with corpses. In *Can Such Things Be?* (1893), Bierce collected another two dozen stories, sketches, and anecdotes, including the intricately narrated occult classic "The Death of Halpern Frayser" and several other well-known gothics, like "The Middle Toe of the Right Foot," "The Damned Thing," "A Psychological Shipwreck," and "The Man and the Snake." More than a simple gothic writer of horror stories, Bierce explored the uncertainties of perception and employed impressionist techniques as skillful as Stephen Crane's.

William Dean Howells collected three longish stories of the "occult" in *Questionable Shapes* (1903); other of his (somewhat) supernaturalist romance stories and novellas are found in *Between the Dark and Daylight: Romances* (1907). His novel, *The Undiscovered Country* (1880), explores spiritualism, mesmerism, and psychological bondage, and *Shadow of a Dream* (1890) is a minor masterpiece of psychological gothic. Edith Wharton wrote at least a dozen "ghost" stories, the best known of which are "The Eyes" (1910), "Kerfol" (1916), and the subtly chilling "Afterward" (1909). Louisa May Alcott wrote a number of "thrillers" early in her career, including *The Mysterious Key* (1867), *The Abbott's Ghost* (1867), and a work now celebrated as proto-feminist, *Behind a Mask: or, A Woman's Power* (1866).

Leon Edel's edition of *Henry James: Stories of the Supernatural* (1949; rpt. 1980) contains seventeen tales. The best known, other than *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), are "The Jolly Corner" (1908), "Maud-Evelyn" (1900), "The Great Good Place" (1900), "The Friends of the Friends" (1896), "The Altar of the Dead" (1895), and "Sir Edmund Orme" (1891). Edel also includes *The Beast in the Jungle* (1903); although the tale is hardly a supernatural story or a romance, an argument for realistic psychological gothic might be made. One of the best of James's stories in the mode of gothic romance is the earliest, "The Romance of Certain Old Clothes" (1868). A weirdly suggestive twist on the "vampire" story is found in James's art-novel, *The Sacred Fount* (1901), a work of social and psychological realism.

Romanticism and Realism: The Historian's Paradox

If we go a little further back into literary history and contextualize the *novel* and the *romance* within the larger concepts of *romanticism* and *realism*, we immediately get into a more complicated area. The basic point to remember is that the terms presented here are theoretical and historical labels for large idea clusters, a useful shorthand.

The simplest definition of *romanticism* is as a historical period in Eurocentric cultures from about the 1770s through the 1850s (depending on the country).

Realism may be initially defined as a period from the 1850s to a decade or so past World War I.⁷ But to go any further in a meaningful way, we are faced with the historian’s paradox: to know one thing you have to know what preceded it, and to know that you have to know what preceded that, and so on. The problem is to be comprehensive but pragmatic, keeping in mind that, although cultural ruptures may occur, time is an ongoing continuum, not a series of discrete periods.

A related problem involves terminology: when idea complexes like Darwinism and Freudianism, or impressionism and expressionism, become associated with a time period, some people have trouble seeing the terms as applicable to any other period. But Darwin and Freud were working with data previously explored by others, and each tried to describe what he thought to be actual phenomena independent of a specific time limit. Theories of evolution preceded Darwin, and the idea of the human unconscious and of subconscious motivation preceded Freud. Thus, before Freud or “Freudianism” were watchwords, American writers like Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ambrose Bierce, William Dean Howells, and Henry James were exploring repression, obsession, and compulsion, concepts later given systematic names by Freud.

Similarly, the features of the artistic movement known as *expressionism*, associated primarily with the period from 1910 to the early 1930s, may provide useful insights into the movement from which it mainly came: *impressionism*, associated with a period beginning in the 1870s and overlapping with expressionism (see Chs 8 and 20). In short, to try to understand *realism* without a grounding in the preceding period, and some knowledge of what came after, is not just narrowly provincial; it may also prompt misunderstandings of the texts involved.

Positive and negative romanticism

One way of understanding Romanticism (with a capital *R*) as ideology, as variant literary practices, and as historical movement is to see it as having two complementary aspects, equally powerful. One has been called “positive” or “optative” romanticism, which is optimistic and forward-looking – symbolized by light, organic growth, and the outward-and-upward spiraling helix. Its inverse twin has been labeled “negative” or “dark” romanticism, which is pessimistic or skeptical – symbolized by darkness, decay, and the downward-and-inward spinning vortex.

It would be convenient to divide the American romantics into the light and the dark – with Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman as the “children of the light” – and Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville as the “sons of darkness.” But that is

misleading; aspects of the affirmative and the skeptical crisscross in their writings, creating disturbing mixtures of transcendental optimism and gothic and grotesque apprehensiveness. For the “negative romantic,” the great Quest for Truth involves a journey through idealist despair, nightmarish doubt, and occasionally qualified affirmation. In many of the negative romantics, any affirmation is shadowed by skepticism and dark humor. But it is important to remember that the negative romantics did not totally oppose or disavow the optimism regarding man and nature that the optative romantics believed in, and which they maintained was everywhere evident. The negative romantics were interested in but highly skeptical of such propositions. Romantic writers like Coleridge and Byron in England, and Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe in America, had one foot in the often skeptical neoclassic world of static mechanism and another foot in the positive romantic world of dynamic organicism. Unable to reconcile those two worlds, and skeptical of each worldview individually, the negative romantics have seemed to critics like Morse Peckham to be lost between worlds or worldviews.⁸ Often their attempt to embrace both the negative and the positive resulted in what was called *romantic irony*: a mode of taking things both seriously and un-seriously at the same time.

It was the optimism and faith in progress of the positive (or “optative”) romantics that the late-century realists and naturalists saw themselves as opposing and correcting. Instead, they would show life as it “really” is – the actual “way things happen.” But they were also indebted to the negative romantics. This brings us again to the vigorous debate in post-Civil War America over the idea of the “Great American Novel.”

The Romance of the “Great American Novel”

In the Introduction, we noted that Richard Chase in *The American Novel and Its Tradition* presented the classic scholarly formulation of the “romance-novel” as the basic American genre in fiction. Chase examined the long-standing notion of an essential distinction in form, style, and worldview between the American and the British novel. Responding to what the English critic F. R. Leavis had labeled “the great tradition” of the socially realistic British novel, Chase designated as its American counterpart the romance tradition. Chase argued that classic American fiction, rather than predominantly realistic and linear, was mythopoeic and symbolic, informed by irony and indirection. In its focus on isolated romantic heroes (positive or negative), American fiction tended to be psychological and metaphysical; although it also dealt with large socio-political issues, it was primarily the imaginative shape of radical skepticism, the

"profound poetry of disorder." A self-conscious, ambivalent American romance tradition, he claimed, extended beyond the Civil War, beyond the turn of the century, and up to the time of the writing his book.

Historical stages 1780–1920

The idea of a form or genre designated as the "Great American Novel" was itself a romantic idea, including a vague notion of the idealistic combined with the realistic, and inexorably evolving over time to a higher form of art and insight in a model society. This concept derives in part from the progressive social archetype of the transcendental philosopher G. F. W. Hegel (1770–1831), who called the desired unity of the existential human condition and the great society: *Humanität*. The historical configurations of romanticism, romance, novel, realism, and idealism (along with naturalism) in specifically American literary history play into this Hegelian idealism. The large contours of the romance/novel argument are clearer in the context of the romanticism/realism debate. Invocations of a Great American Novel began in the early nineteenth century during the period of "literary nationalism," garnered support and evoked a somewhat clearer definition in the middle of the century, and reached an apogee at the turn of the nineteenth century into the twentieth. A comprehensive chronicle of criticism on American fiction from the end of the eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth reveals three successive historical stages.

(1) 1780s–1860s

The first stage, a period of intensifying nationalism from the Revolution to the Civil War, led directly to energized discussions of whether the novel or the romance was the representative and most characteristic American genre. Although dominated by questions of a uniquely "American" literature, this period also exhibits growing interest in experimentation and the freedom of open forms, whether native or imported.

(2) 1860s–1890s

In the second stage, the issues of the romance and the novel were of general interest and widely debated as aspects of a unique American literature. New literature from abroad, along with the conduct of the Civil War, led to the rise of the realist novel as distinguished from popular or sentimental romance. At the same time, earlier attempts to stretch fictional form beyond the confining limits of the conventional novel or romance fostered further

attempts in the late nineteenth century to produce transgeneric works of romance and realism, along with the expansion of critical theory.

(3) 1880s–1920s

In the third stage, from the late 1880s to 1915 and beyond, the realism or naturalism furor of postbellum fictional theory was in essence a reprise in new terms of the novel versus romance debate of the first part of the nineteenth century. The terms of the issue now were the opposition of realism/naturalism to “idealism,” in part a variant term for optative romanticism and transcendentalism. But, as mentioned, American naturalism displays as many affinities with dark or negative romanticism as with the new realism.

In the late 1880s and the 1890s, the term *idealism* became a watchword. In the critical writings of the time, the realism/idealism question is directly reflected in the novel/romance issue. The novel/romance distinction provides insight into the ongoing dialogue on the nature of reality in western culture – one informing not just literary narratives but a broad spectrum of western art, philosophy, psychology, and politics. The ebb and flow of the rival claims of romanticism and realism in American letters from the late 1700s through the early 1900s suggests that the novel/romance issue was a version of the perpetual debate on the “real” and the “ideal” shaping western tradition – including the conflicts of empiricism versus transcendentalism, of mimetic versus symbolic representation, of prose versus poetry, of history versus fiction – and of romanticism versus realism.

Moreover, the gradual importation of literary realism from France at mid-century created a renewed interest in genre definition. Along with this European influence, a revitalized nationalist spirit in America prompted American critics and authors to refocus their attention on the creation of a “truly” American literature in terms of the pursuit of the Great American Novel. The nature of this imagined entity became one of the major questions that preoccupied American writers from the Civil War to World War I and beyond.

The Great American Romance-Novel?

As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, John William De Forest provided a manifesto for “The Great American Novel” in 1868.⁹ The idea had been around for decades, but this evocative piece became so celebrated that it gave increased currency to the term for more than another hundred years. De Forest suggests that the time for a real American “epic” has not yet come: to “write a great American poem is at present impossible, for the reason that the nation has not

yet lived a great poem . . ." (31). But the great American work of prose fiction may perhaps be "possible earlier" than a great national epic poem (32). The novel would be something along the lines of everyday life as portrayed in the novels of William Makepeace Thackeray and in the combined realism and romance of Victor Hugo and Honoré de Balzac. But we don't "as yet" appear to have the "literary culture to educate" our own "Thackerays and Balzacs" (36). Not to mention Anthony Trollope, Charles Dickens, or George Sand, he adds. For De Forest, the task of the Great American Novel was to paint the American *national* spirit while also being a "picture of the ordinary emotions and manners of American existence" (31). It will be the result of "painting the American soul." It will aspire to the romance of Irving, Cooper, Hawthorne, and others but "within the framework of a novel" (32).

De Forest's concept of a "national" masterwork is in fact a realist-romance *concordia discors*, and in this context he makes special reference to Nathaniel Hawthorne at the beginning of his essay. He writes that Hawthorne, who had "the greatest of American imaginations," was too provincial, too much focused on the particulars of a region, especially New England eccentrics. And yet, at the same time, contrariwise, Hawthorne's characters were not of the present world around us, but were dreams drawn from too far away. His characters are just as apt to be "natives of the furthest mountains of Cathay or of the moon as of the United States of America" (32). His talent was constricted by the romance form. No one *else*, however, has come close to the Great American Novel – with one exception. The "nearest approach" is Harriet Beecher Stowe's flawed prewar novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). De Forest argued that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a great novel despite, and in part because of, its insistent romance elements. In that book, he asserts, Stowe presents a "national breadth" to the large picture of the country, along with "truthful outline of character, natural talking, and plenty of strong feeling" (33). De Forest's praise for these four elements in Stowe's novel – mythic national scope, true characters, natural speech, and strong emotions – reveals the tension of realism and romance that characterizes his own novels.

He writes that we have all actually seen "such Northerners" and "such Southerners" as Mrs Stowe depicts, as well as "such negroes, barring, of course, the impeccable Uncle Tom." Conditions shape character; the brutal conditions of slavery would not have allowed such a noble character to develop. And yet, while objecting to such romanticizing, De Forest conceives of the Great American Novel as the lived "poem" of a people: something like the great epic romances from the *Iliad* to *Orlando Furioso* (31). Apparently Uncle Tom is not (and apparently cannot be) an epic hero. For what De Forest at this point calls the "Great American Poem" will not be written until "democracy" has done its *full* work.

Frank Norris and the romance of the Great American Novel

The critics' quest for the Great American Novel after the War Between the States often sounds like a quest for the Great American Romance, though they themselves did not always see it that way. Many of the *avant-garde* fiction writers thought they were writing things totally new. The new naturalists even saw themselves as going beyond the sometimes namby-pamby realists. But at least one major late-century naturalist writer, Frank Norris (1870–1902), saw *avant-garde* realism in fiction as a partial return to the romance.

Around 1900, Norris wrote several essays on the concept of realist romance, including one on the "Great American Novelist," collected in *Essays on Authorship* in the 1903 edition of his *Complete Works*.¹⁰ Norris addresses the idea of the Great American *Novelist* as a mistaken or degraded version of a Great American *Novel*. Like Poe before him, Norris mocks literary nationalism, attacking the concept of a truly great writer as somehow belonging to one country. Many "people who deplore the decay of American letters are accustomed to refer to the absence of a G.A.N. as though there were a Great English Novelist or a Great French Novelist." But ask "any dozen" people for a name and you will get "at least a half-dozen different names." The truly *great* novelist would not "belong to any particular geographical area" but would be the "heritage of the whole world." For instance, when one thinks of Tolstoy, it is "as a novelist first and as a Russian afterward."

But if we want to "split hairs," he writes, let's say that even if *the* Great American *Novelist* is "yet to be born," it may be that we can still talk about "A Great American Novel." But what would it be? First of all, it would have to be realistic as well as romantic, which means it would be regional or "sectional." The United States is "a Union, but not a unit, and the life of one part is very, very different from the life in another." Look at the works of our very best writers: "Bret Harte made a study of the West as he saw it, and [W. D.] Howells has done the same for the East. [G. W.] Cable has worked the field of the Far South and [Edward] Eggleston has gone deep into the life of the Middle West." But a great novelist needs to go "deep enough" into the hearts and lives of his regional characters to "strike the universal substratum," to "find elemental thinking" common to the Creole, the Puritan, the Cowboy, the Hoosier, the Greaser, the Buckeye, the Jay Hawk. This, however, involves a paradox: if an "American novelist should go so deep into the lives of the people of any one community" as to find the commonality with people a thousand miles away, he "would have gone *too* deep to be exclusively American . . . He would have sounded the world-note; he would be a writer not national, but international . . ." The "thing to be looked for is not the Great American Novelist but the Great Novelist who shall also be an American" (IV, 292).

Other of Norris's essays confirm that, whatever a Great American Novel would be, it would combine the romantic with the realistic. The best known of the *Essays on Authorship* is titled "A Plea for Romantic Fiction" (IV, 341–4). In it, Norris (following the lead of others but extending their ideas to naturalism) advocated a semi-intermediary position that is further articulated in "The Responsibilities of the Novelist," the lead essay of *Essays on Authorship* (IV, 255–9). Here Norris formulates the theoretical groundwork for the reinscription of the transgeneric romance-novel in naturalist narratives that combined the techniques of literary realism with romantic form. Norris contends that American literary naturalism is not merely a pessimistic or extremist offshoot of realism. Rather, naturalist fiction is the product of the contestatory negotiations of the rise of realism with a continuing romance tradition.

The question of whether the Great American Novel would be a realist novel or an idealist romance was bedeviled by the further question of the many hybrid forms or subgenres. Were the new forms of what seemed to be yet another genre, naturalism, to be figured in? These issues were analyzed from a variety of angles by critics in the 1880s and 1890s, resulting in even more bewildering exfoliations of taxonomy.

The contrary impulses of fixing upon the genre of a work while demanding freedom from preconceptions are particularly insistent in nineteenth-century debates on the defining limits of various types of fiction. Position statements regarding oppositions and negotiations of novel/romance, for example, appeared before the Civil War and continued through the end of the century, registering increasingly complicated notions of the "transgeneric." Theoretical concepts of "hybrid" forms emerged. These involved notions of transactions between novel and romance, the production of a new form that suspends or transcends both, as well as negotiation among subtypes like frontier romance, oriental romance, psychological romance, and so forth. The "new novel," as envisioned by American critics and novelists of the late nineteenth century, featured variants within a continuum of modes, and contesting strategies within an intentionary text, including irony, humor, and parody. The interconnections of genre conventions and reader expectations will help form the basis for discussions in the following chapters of some classic American works not only as individual art objects but also as cultural artifacts.

Notes

1. Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, Vol. II (1828). Note that a "love" story is only one of several characteristics cited. For detailed

- discussion, see *NGd*, Introduction, Chs 1–3, notes, and that book’s “Bibliographical Resources,” 221–35.
2. *ACAF* tries to provide a guide to the fictions of the post-Civil War era that makes clear the literary history of opposition, contrast, and intergenerational accommodation in the period. Thus Scheick’s “Excitement and Consciousness in the Romance Tradition” follows the first essay by Glazener on realism. This loose pattern connecting the themes and forms of romanticism and realism continues throughout the *Companion*.
 3. For a fuller treatment in a transatlantic context, see Scheick’s *The Ethos of Romance at the Turn of the Century* (1994).
 4. *Reconstruction* refers to the period beginning more or less at the end of the Civil War and extending to the presidential election of 1876, during which the Union tried to “reconstruct” the economic, political, and social ruin of the Old South by imposing a series of voting laws regarding readmission to the Union.
 5. For an overview, from a more or less political point of view, see Gerald Vizenor, *ACAF* (2009), 222–39. Also see Utley (1984).
 6. Attempts have been made by critics to see the *Wizard of Oz* as a political fiction, especially as an “allegory” of populism and the McKinley Era. In Littlefield’s “The Wizard of Oz: A Parable on Populism” (1964), the Wicked Witch is a symbolic Robber Baron controlling the common man (the little people, the Munchkins), the Scarecrow is a Midwestern landowner farmer, the Tin Man is an industrial worker (even though a woodsman), the Cowardly Lion is William Jennings Bryan, the Wizard is the President, and so on. These “allegorical” meanings are arbitrary, and Littlefield later admitted they had no basis in fact; but his article has generated a series of blanket additions by others.
 7. An 1853 article on Honoré [de] Balzac in the *Westminster Review* is often cited as the first use of the literary term *realism* in English. In 1855, the French artist, Gustave Courbet, set up a “Pavillon du Réalisme” in Paris to exhibit his works; and in 1856, a journal titled *Le Réalisme* appeared, the same year as Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (see next chapter). Also see Chs 2 and 20 of the present volume.
 8. Peckham suggested the term “negative romanticism” as more precise than Mario Praz’s “dark romanticism.” It has been the subject of critical debate; but I prefer it for the very reasons given in Peckham’s originating essay, “Toward a theory of Romanticism” (1951), as well as for its parallelism to “positive” or “optative” romanticism and its partial congruence with “romantic irony.” It is important to understand that as a critical term “negative” romanticism does not mean *anti*-romanticism, but rather the negative or skeptical *side* of romanticism.
 9. *The Nation* article is reprinted in *Critical Essays on John William De Forest*, ed. Gargano (1981), 31–37. For further context, see H. M. Jones (1965 [1948]).
 10. IV, 290–2. *Essays on Authorship* contains 25 essays and articles on literary theory, authorship in general, and the pragmatics of publishing. One of the

important essays referenced later in the present volume is “The Mechanics of Fiction,” IV, 313–16; also see Lamb (1997).

See also

Abrams (1953); Bakhtin (1981); M. D. Bell (1980); Budick (1994); Cady (1971); Chase (1957); Dekker (1987); Fedorko (1995); Haight (1939); Hoffman (1972); Howells (1959); Kennedy (*ACAF* 2009); Kerr (1972); Light (1965); Link (2004); J. Martin (1967; esp. Ch. 2, “The Great American Novel,” 25–80); Norris (1903, 1964, 1986); Perosa (1983 [1978]); Stromberg (1968); G. R. Thompson (1989, 2001); West (1989). Cf. references at the end of the preceding chapter.

