

The House That Matthiessen Built · *Ed Folsom*

“Every spirit builds itself a house; and beyond its house, a world; and beyond its world, a heaven. Know then, that the world exists for you. . . . Build, therefore, your own world.”

—Emerson

IT'S UNIMAGINABLE what the world of American literary scholarship would now sound like if F. O. Matthiessen had decided to stay with one of his original titles for *American Renaissance*, his monumental study of American writers of the mid-nineteenth century. He had been thinking of thematic titles—*Literature for Democracy*, *Man in the Open Air*, *From East to West*—that would capture an action, track a process, instead of a taxonomic title that would peg a period, build a structure around a rich flourishing of symbolic action. He had toyed with one title, *The Great Age in American Literature*, that offered a sort of Nick Carraway judgment of the authors and the years that he focused on, but it's difficult now to picture our college curriculums studded with courses in the “American Great Age.” They *are* studded, of course, with classes in the “American Renaissance,” just as the scholarship dealing with the period is filled with texts that name themselves in relation to the title Matthiessen settled on (a title that was suggested to him by Harry Levin after the book had been accepted—on the condition that Matthiessen help subsidize it—by Oxford University Press). Matthiessen's title derives from Melville's own comparison of his age to the Elizabethan Renaissance, but until Matthiessen named the period, the phrase was not part of the cognitive map by which the nation's literature was known. Now, however, the name is the most familiar one on the map, and in recent years it has come to sound like an incantation in the titles of critical studies dealing with mid-nineteenth century writers: *The American Renaissance Reconsidered*, *Visionary Compacts*:

A review of Leon Chai, *The Romantic Foundations of the American Renaissance*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987; David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988; Jeffrey Steele, *The Representation of the Self in the American Renaissance*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987.

American Renaissance Writings in Cultural Context, American Renaissance: New Dimensions, American Renaissance and the American West, Manhood in the American Renaissance, Style in the American Renaissance, Myth and Literature in the American Renaissance, The Romantic Foundations of the American Renaissance, The Representation of the Self in the American Renaissance, Beneath the American Renaissance, even American Hieroglyphics: The Symbol of the Egyptian Hieroglyphic in the American Renaissance. Each year a new volume of *Studies in the American Renaissance* appears, supplementing the quarterly appearance of *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance*. Matthiessen's title has become so much a part of our working vocabulary that it now reappears in odd guises to signal new areas of our literature that need to be taken seriously: so Kenneth Lincoln calls his book on Amer-Indian literature *Native American Renaissance*, and Albert Gelpi, arguing for a culminating period in American poetry, calls his study *A Coherent Splendor: The American Poetic Renaissance, 1910–1950*. The sweep of Matthiessen's vast book, for an entire generation of scholars, came to seem comprehensive, even natural; he built and named the structure that we have learned to inhabit and have grown accustomed to: a structure to house our "great" writers and to exclude the others.

This is the house that Matthiessen built. Its style is neo-Renaissance, its classic lines modulated to answer American demands, account for American experience, move with the American landscape. It is a smaller house than its imposing facade would lead you to believe: only five large rooms, two in the front with floor-to-ceiling windows, airy, light; two in the back with a couple of very small windows, shaded by a thick stand of evergreens directly behind the house; and one sunroom attached to the side of the house, with easy access, both to the friendly open spaces of the front yard and to the darker woods out back. The layout of the house is idiosyncratic, to say the least: you must enter through the largest of the front rooms, the Emerson room. From there you can go directly into the other front room, the Thoreau room, and you can enter through an opposite doorway the side sunroom, the Whitman room. Oddly, you cannot get to the two dreary back rooms from either of the front rooms. You must go through the Whitman sunroom, out around back, and enter one of two small weathered doors to get into the Hawthorne or Melville rooms—the former cold and dark, with only the embers of a dying fire, the latter quite damp and decorated in a nautical motif. The house was

clearly designed for solitude; you sometimes wonder why all these rooms were even put under one roof instead of being built as separate smaller structures, as were the bizarre Poe quarters, a small geometrically precise place built back in the woods on swampy ground with no visible support; you can't see it from the main house, though from the back room you can occasionally hear eerie sounds emanating from it. It is not in the American Renaissance style, and it's definitely not part of the house Matthiessen built.

The occupants of this neo-Renaissance rooming house have never been equally content living there. Thoreau, one comes to believe quite quickly, really would prefer a small structure of his own, but he is resigned to living in such close proximity to Emerson, dependent on him for access. Emerson, on the other hand, seems quite satisfied, even smug, in his elegantly furnished room with its comfortable fire and wonderfully transparent large windows offering a sunny Eastern view. Whitman occasionally looks into Emerson's room, but for the most part occupies himself with going in and coming out of his swinging screen door. Hawthorne and Melville peer out of their grimy small rear windows into the dark woods out back; sunlight seldom penetrates their rooms, which are connected to each other by a large arched doorway that is barely visible in the dying firelight. Occasionally out back they can see the figure of Whitman darting into the woods — sometimes, it seems, in the direction of Poe's weird little sinking cottage — and then back out around the house toward the sunny front yard again and down the road toward town, but they never see Emerson and Thoreau. They only hear them through the solid walls, and what they hear is a strange and insane muttering, like a baby's babbling, which, oddly enough, is what Emerson and Thoreau hear on the rare occasions when they are aware of sounds coming from the back of the house.

The house that Matthiessen built *is* a rooming house. While Matthiessen gave the original occupants long-term leases, they *can* — now that Matthiessen is gone and a whole new series of caretakers have taken their turns at overseeing the place — be moved out and replaced by others, or they can be forced to accept roommates, but of course any new occupants must adapt themselves to the odd living arrangements. Any new resident will quickly find himself assigned to a room that does not bear his own name, but rather the name of one of the original occupants, and if, say, he is

assigned to the Emerson room, why then certain modes of behavior are expected of him. The masculine pronouns are appropriate here, because this rooming house was built for males only. The exclusivity now seems unfortunate, but when it was built, the possibility of female residents was not even considered. It goes without saying that separate shacks for people of various racial or ethnic minorities are out of sight, if they exist at all.

Many who complain about the cramped and exclusive nature of the Matthiessen house forget that when it was built, it was itself a kind of architectural counterstatement: it may seem elegant and exclusive to us now, but it was originally built as an alternative to an already decaying but still imposing European-style mansion, where dress codes and a genteel code of manners were enforced, and where the residents—more homogeneous even than those in Matthiessen's house, and certainly better connected—dined together in real style. The older mansion was built early in the nineteenth century and was kept in remarkably good repair well into the twentieth. That house is still standing, though currently quite run-down, and few take it seriously anymore. Many forget about it completely, now that we have the Matthiessen house—it's strange how fashions change—as the domicile of the wealthy and privileged.

One response to Matthiessen's exclusivity has been to move more people into his house as it is. Recently things have gotten quite crowded, with some visitors overstaying their welcome, so modest additions to the house have been allowed, though not everyone is convinced that this has happened. No addition has been permitted, of course, that would alter the original lines—and certainly none would ever be permitted that would threaten the structural integrity of the place; the mansion is, after all, on the National Historical Register. From certain perspectives, you can see these temporary-looking additions; but the most striking views have been preserved, and so from the most memorable perspectives, the house looks unchanged from when it was originally constructed. But the tacked-on additions *have*—to the horror of some—permitted the first women guests, and in a few rare cases it appears that a woman might even be considered a resident, as long as she behaves herself and keeps to her assigned room, which is not as large or substantial as the original rooms, but which might eventually carry her name: the Dickinson room, the Stowe room, and the Fuller room have already become tentative additions.

The house is really not as old as it looks. We need to keep in mind that it was built in the 1930s and finished in 1941. Because of the venerable reputations of its original occupants, though, it quite quickly came to seem almost ancient and permanent—a ready-made monument. It is surprising, in these days of post-structuralism, that Matthiessen's house is left standing, relatively unchallenged. Sure, the property is protected, but the security is not nearly as tight as it once was, and it might even be possible for revolutionaries to blow up the whole structure, which would require those who are interested in such things to rebuild from scratch. If that were to happen, there are those who would be anxious to put up an exact replica of what came down, but there are others (and their numbers seem to be growing) who would argue for a new architecture, a new arrangement that responded more fully to the times: something, say, a little post-modern—eclectic, sprawling, open, self-deprecating, more democratic and surprising, with lots more rooms and maybe no main entrance.

Short of blowing up the mansion, some people (Jane Tompkins is one) have tried building competing houses, like the one not very imaginatively named "The Other American Renaissance," with an architecture every bit as odd as the original: "The Other" mansion, instead of a very few large rooms, contains many very tiny rooms (almost like closets) that all open out onto the same very large vista. There's much more of a domestic feel to this house than to the one Matthiessen built; it has kitchens and parlors everywhere, but the Susan Warner room, and the Maria Cummins room, and the Lydia Sigourney room, and the Harriet Beecher Stowe room (larger than the rest, since she *has* to be treated well else she might defect to the original American Renaissance home), all look out—through original windows warped by time—on a vast and distorted national scene, where the repressed power of these writers' morality and notions of Christian love and maternal duty perform a kind of cultural work. Visitors to "The Other" often come away feeling a bit claustrophobic but still inspired with the earnestness of the occupants' faith. One gets the impression that tourists once long ago flocked to "The Other," but that it suffered from many years of neglect before beginning to attract interest again, this time from architectural historians instead of the general populace. But again we must keep in mind that "The Other" was really only built a couple of years ago, and was built in direct response to the smashing success of Matthiessen's house, which had for a long time convinced tourists that it was the only show in town.

This American Renaissance house is one of the metaphors we live by in American literary scholarship. It is so fully assimilated into our ways of thinking about the field that we now explore it and undermine it and add on to it and check its foundations, but few of us dare question whether it even actually exists. Poststructural critics have done deconstructionist analyses of the occupants of the house, but few have analyzed whether the house itself is anything more than a deceptive construct of language that privileged a very few writers and a very brief period of time, and blinded us to all the other possible constructs of our literary past. We are less adept at deconstructing our critical than our literary fictions. The books under consideration here are all testaments to the staying power of the critical fiction that Matthiessen built. More than ever before, the “American Renaissance” seems something real, some palpable period of major works by major authors. A few of the recent books that incorporate Matthiessen’s title do contain examinations of Matthiessen’s configuration and probe the ideological motivations of his construction. But even while questioning the political origins of Matthiessen’s book, Donald Pease in *Visionary Compacts* builds a facsimile American Renaissance house that looks very much like the one he is challenging, with rooms for Emerson, Melville, Hawthorne, Whitman, and—in an increasingly popular reformation—one for Poe instead of Thoreau. Pease tends the grounds around the mansion—and the village green—and he tries to show how the imposing rooms of the house open out fully onto public areas as their occupants offered visionary compacts of communal identity to the nation, but the texts we read along the way remind us that dismantling the house is not at issue.

Matthiessen’s construction was so sound, so powerfully articulated, so sweeping, that the entire profession has more or less moved into the house he built for us, and we have adapted ourselves to the patterns of thought that Matthiessen offered. As Thoreau reminded us (before one of his recent eviction notices), moving into someone else’s house may seem easier than building your own, but it comes at a cost: with your mortgage, you purchase someone else’s vision of how many rooms you should have and how they should be arranged. Whatever of brilliance there is in Matthiessen’s configuration of our literary past, it is a construct of words by which a privileged few carry the burden of our past, while untold numbers of other voices are silenced.

Jeffrey Steele, David Reynolds, and Leon Chai are three new critics who have recently arrived, each to assume a mortgage on Matthiessen's mansion. Each one moves in and begins his remodeling, work that is based on the structures and assumptions of the "American Renaissance." Chai and Reynolds go down to the cellar and examine the foundations, looking for ways to strengthen any below-ground weaknesses. Steele is satisfied to stay upstairs and give us a tour of the main rooms, taking us "in" the American Renaissance instead of "beneath" it, illuminating the rooms with a kind of light that wasn't around when the occupants were actually writing—the light of psychoanalytical and rhetorical theory, and lots of other theories, too—so we see the rooms quite vividly, even if the light is artificial and we know the rooms—not even wired for electricity—were never intended to be illuminated this way. Reynolds and Chai use more traditional lamps to illuminate the more obscure underpinnings of the house. Some major parts of the foundation remain obscure—it's very dark down there—and the lanterns flicker and dim at key moments, but both inspections reveal previously unknown aspects of what the house is built on.

Reynolds's book is finally the most interesting (and troublesome) of the three, rivaling Matthiessen's in length, carrying on Henry Nash Smith's project of identifying the "popular imagination" and the ways that it influenced, infected, and was transformed by our literary artists. Smith, of course, saw his own work as a direct response to Matthiessen: "Matthiessen's program remains as an ideal and a challenge," he said, noting how "Matthiessen was much less interested in the relation of literary masterpieces to social processes or to non-literary aspects of culture." Asserting that "there is always something to be learned from attempting to place ourselves within a writer's intellectual and cultural horizon," Smith devoted himself to an immersion in "the preferences of the book-buying public" of mid- and late-nineteenth-century America, investigating with horror just what the emerging democratic readership was actually consuming. While Smith brought to the surface many forgotten names and genres, from Ned Buntline dime Westerns to Susan B. Warner domestic sentimental novels, he seldom did so with the intention that we *read* or seriously reconsider these books, but rather on the assumption that they confirmed our (i.e., Matthiessen's) good judgment. Looking at the "low-brow" and "middlebrow" literature of the time could help us learn "something new" about the "masterpieces of our fiction." We wouldn't dis-

cover new masterpieces, or question the old ones, we would only better understand how our great writers had to struggle against the demands of a reading public that variously sought salaciousness, sensation, moral piety, and easy reading, a readership that “craved not challenge but reassurance.”

At first, Reynolds sounds as if he is on a different quest — he even tells us that his immersion in the depths beneath the American Renaissance has a dual purpose: not only “to reconstruct as completely as possible the socio-literary milieu of literary works through an exploration of a broad array of forgotten social and imaginative texts,” but also to begin “making possible the rediscovery of lost literature.” But the effect of his massive work is to accomplish the first part of this goal while making the second part seem more distant than ever, for in the vast scattered forgotten territory of words that Reynolds explores in antebellum America, he finds precious few worth serious study, and none that should join the top ranks. Reynolds rests easy in the belief that there are “viable reasons that Emerson’s essays, *Walden*, *Moby-Dick*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *Leaves of Grass* have emerged as the classic texts of the antebellum period,” and those reasons are that they are “both intellectually challenging and emotionally moving” with “suggestiveness” and “artistic order.” There is a maddening insistence on such terms, which always remain unexplored and usually undefined. Reynolds never questions what the ideological biases of such measures of “classic” status are, he simply assumes the accuracy of the measures, as did Smith. So Reynolds’s revisionist call finally comes out sounding tortured and distant: “we should earnestly seek lost stars in the literary galaxy without ignoring the diamonds that are already caught in Time’s strainer or the classics that have passed the examination of the ages.” This mildly reformist call is issued in earnest, but what is most earnestly held to is his faith in the idea of “classics” as objectively rising through time on their own artistic merits. Reynolds’s book will reassure those who don’t want to believe that our “classics” are an unstable group of works representing the cultural interests of powerful groups who express their ideologies through their identification and interpretation of the “major texts.”

There’s no New Historicism in this book, then, but rather Henry Nash Smith with a vengeance. Reynolds surveys Smith’s subliterate world with a kind of relish and comprehensiveness that Smith himself never approached. As such, it is an impressive accomplishment. Though often

repetitive and predictable, and though it frequently forces its arguments, the book offers the most complete catalogue we have of the popular culture that mid-nineteenth-century American writers were inhaling and often wallowing in; we get a sense in this book of just what the nineteenth-century counterparts were to MTV and *Penthouse* and *Ms.* and Dr. Pepper commercials and skateboarding and Jimmy Swaggert scandals and Jane Fonda workout tapes and Harlequin Romances. It is great fun to see how Melville and Hawthorne and Emerson and Thoreau were absorbing and using the sensational and pornographic and outrageous cultural emissions of their time, as well as how they were absorbing the new sermons and the reformist tracts and the oh-so-very-moral writings.

When Reynolds makes a reformist gesture, though, it is very much off-hand and often overstated, as when he tells us that “Of all the oversights of literary and social historians of America, few are more heinous than the almost complete neglect of Laura Curtis Bullard.” Bullard, Reynolds goes on to argue, should be studied, for after all she “was one of the discriminating American women who had an unreserved appreciation for the poetry of Walt Whitman.” For Reynolds, that’s one entitlement to serious regard: she likes the right people. But mostly, he goes on, she deserves consideration for the way she turns women’s rights writing into art. Most women’s rights novels, says Reynolds, “lack literariness,” but Bullard in *Christine* composes the kind of “tightly written, ardent novel” that Reynolds identifies with great art, a novel that “becomes women’s *literature* when it refuses to be women’s *propaganda* and asserts its power as an expression of universal themes.” The couple of pages Reynolds devotes to *Christine*, however, will not convince traditionalists to add the novel to their syllabi, especially when those two pages are weighed against the dozens devoted to the “real” writers of the American Renaissance.

Matthiessen called this period “The Age of Emerson and Whitman,” acknowledging the writers he saw as the beginning and ending of his configuration; Reynolds changes the designation for no particular reason to “The Age of Emerson and Melville.” But whatever the designation, there is no mistaking who’s in control: the photographic insert in Reynolds’s book opens with “The Major Authors of the American Renaissance,” and the configuration is striking—the literary cosmos seems recentered, with photos of Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville (the familiar “Matthiessen plus one” formulation), all in orbit around

Emily Dickinson, the surprising center! But it turns out to be trick-photography. Dickinson gets far less attention than the others and is relegated to an annex to the original house. Here it's called the "American Women's Renaissance," where Dickinson resides as the "Strongest Amazon." While she makes a brief appearance in the section of the book dealing with how the popular new eclectic, imaginative sermon style influenced major writers (where it is suggested that Dickinson's "excitement about [Reverend Charles] Wadsworth . . . can be viewed as a natural outgrowth of her increasing attraction to the new religious style"!), almost all of Reynolds's comments about her are exiled to his chapter on the women's movement and the literature of women's rights. While the main male writers reoccur in all the chapters, Dickinson is absent in the sections on topics like sensationalism, sexuality, and humor, and by the time we get to the epilogue to the book, she has actually vanished, as all the major writers *except* Dickinson make their final appearance there. It's as if Reynolds has almost forgotten that he had assigned her space in the mansion, and her appearance in the photo at the center of the American Renaissance comes to seem like a calculated misrepresentation.

There is much valuable insight in Reynolds's book as he demonstrates the ways that our familiar literature builds upon images, themes, representations, topics, styles that would have been familiar in the times of the writers but that have become forgotten in ours, thus warping our critical perspectives. Reynolds insists that the "great" writers were never satisfied to actually write literature that was truly reformist, or sensationalistic, or outrageously funny; instead, in assimilating reform literature, they wanted to "explore the *imaginative* rather than the *political* possibilities of reform rhetoric, so that popular reform was chiefly important as a training ground in zestful, defiant writing" (this construction, here applied to Whitman, stands in stark opposition to most recent representations of the poet, which reconfigure him as an actively political poet). Reynolds is out to demonstrate that "during the American Renaissance literariness resulted not from a *rejection* of socioliterary context but rather from a full *assimilation* and *transformation* of key images and devices from this context." To effect such a transformation of unformed popular imagination, the great writers had to learn to blunt the social effects of reformist literature, cleanse the salacious effects of erotic literature, solemnize the uproarious effects of humorous literature. There are times when Reynolds

makes our “great” writers appear to be those who managed to take all the fun out of the burgeoning, roiling written words of mid-nineteenth-century America—the ones we continue to read, he argues, are those who finally taught the unruly folk the lessons of “literariness.”

For Reynolds, then, popular culture is not to be trusted. The American Renaissance thus emerges as a literature that was once dipped in some wild liquid, but has risen above it and dried out nicely. Reynolds offers a wonderfully evocative and informative overview of the boisterously democratic “b’hoy” and “g’hal” subculture—it is one of the highlights of the book—and he is convincing about how important it is to our understanding key parts of major works, but by the time he reads the “b’hoy” back into the major works, the exuberance that defined the subculture seems well-tamed: “Whitman’s boy was the b’hoy taken seriously, reinterpreted by a thoughtful poet with a profound devotion to the aesthetic and the moral.” The Renaissance writers in this study generally emerge, then, not as the social radicals, not as energetic innovators, but as the conservative tamers, the moral guardians. Reynolds’s view of the “major” writers is far more conservative than Matthiessen’s. It’s a post-AIDS American Renaissance, where the writers we have come to depend upon offer us a “*cleansing rhetoric*,” where “Voyeuristic fantasy is stripped of malice and is conveyed through refreshing, baptismal images of nature,” where “Instead of smacking his lips over a voluptuous woman, [Whitman] declares himself the lover of the ‘voluptuous coolbreathed earth.’” From this point of view, *Leaves of Grass* never was a shocking work: “The common scholarly view that *Leaves of Grass* failed because it was too shocking for its day is almost a direct reversal of fact.” Instead of American literature appearing to be a radical departure from classical norms, a turning of sacred texts vernacular, our literature *transcends* the vernacular and becomes art rising pristine after a baptism in filth.

Reynolds calls his methodology “reconstructive criticism,” suggesting the necessity to “reconstruct . . . the socioliterary milieu of literary works through the broad array of forgotten social and imaginative texts,” with the goal of new interpretation and “the rediscovery of lost literature.” But, despite all the new names along the way, Reynolds “reconstructs” the original Matthiessen house and renews the long-term leases of its inhabitants.

Reynolds examines the above-ground foundations of the house that Matthiessen built, the popular culture foundations just above the surface but obscured now by ornamental shrubbery that over the years has made us forget exactly what materials the main structure was placed on. Leon Chai, however, looks at the deeper foundations, a more rarefied and less accessible substructure. Chai's title—*The Romantic Foundations of the American Renaissance*—is more interesting than it first appears: Matthiessen's book could have been called, I suppose, *The Renaissance Foundations of American Romanticism*, since at the time he wrote he was renaming what was frequently known as the "American Romantic" period. So Chai is restoring the Romantic legacy to what has become, through Matthiessen, known as the Renaissance. In tracing the Romantic Foundations of the American Renaissance, then, Chai slips into something like a mixed metaphor: "it" is the "American Renaissance" only because Matthiessen heard many Shakespearean echoes in that writing and because he believed the major writers experienced something like a rebirth of power during a five-year period in the mid-nineteenth century. Chai is much more interested in direct influences than Matthiessen ever was. And, even as he evokes Matthiessen's naming and uses a related configuration of the main rooms, he doesn't really set out to adapt or realign Matthiessen. In fact, he does a pretty good job of ignoring him: unlike Reynolds and Steele, Chai does not evoke Matthiessen in his opening pages, and Matthiessen makes an appearance only in a few dismissive footnotes, as if Chai is so far down in the foundations supporting Matthiessen's house of great writers that Matthiessen's own readings of those writers apparently have come to seem to Chai distant and superficial. In one case Matthiessen didn't dig deeply enough and so could "miss this particular aspect" of Melvillean debt to Goethe and Hölderlin and Wordsworth, or, concerned only with the sunlit surface of a key passage of *Billy Budd*, Matthiessen "saw in it 'a familiar strain of Melville's imagery'" when he should have seen echoes of Mesmer, Lavater, and Balzac.

Chai, however, still occupies Matthiessen's main structure without much questioning, setting out only to make minor modifications to the floorplan: his "inclusion of Poe necessarily alters somewhat the shape of the American Renaissance," he says, giving Poe something like a front porch where his roots in the Enlightenment and Rationalism serve as an entryway to the Emerson room. Whitman and Thoreau are evicted—

Chai seeing them as too dependent on Emerson and no longer worthy of their own rooms – and Margaret Fuller gets to be a temporary guest: all of these modifications, of course, are common ones in recent years.

Chai's book is often heavy going; he counts on the reader's easy familiarity with the intellectual history of European Romanticism, and he wanders over a remarkable number of topics, from the development of historical consciousness to the emergence of the concept of literary tradition, from the secularization of religion to pantheism, from the foundations of science to the shift from allegory to symbolism. The book clusters lots of brilliant small essays under broad topics, and within each small essay (focusing on one author's relationship to some aspect of a major intellectual development) extraordinarily subtle distinctions are drawn: it is not a book to read at one sitting. Chai regularly cuts across cultures and languages and disciplines, bringing a great deal to bear upon every specific text that he deals with, always working toward the development of a romantic notion of consciousness and self. Reading Chai's book along with Reynolds, we become aware of how we have turned our "classic" writers into the first postmodernists – the American Renaissance authors were, on the combined evidence of these texts, fully steeped in Schleiermacher and John Neal, Leibniz and George Thompson, Cuvier and Mike Walsh, Schilling and Mason Locke Weems. They were melding together in their fractured texts the highest and the lowest, creating easy confluences of the most ephemeral and marginal pop culture with the most revered and difficult traditional high culture, reaching to science and philosophy and religion and adventure fiction and pornography and joke-books. It didn't start with Pynchon, this wildly allusive and clashing field of juxtapositions (it probably is a trait of all writers at all times, something we would realize if we only had a better grasp of the historical analogues for our own ephemerality) – and it is inspiring to see the once-maligned nineteenth-century American writer finally revealed as a master of allusiveness, painting a wild canvas thick with culture.

It is a different kind of allusiveness we encounter in Jeffrey Steele's book. Matthiessen is the first critic evoked, but within a dozen pages we encounter Harold Bloom, Hans Robert Jauss, Walker Gibson, Rudolf Bultmann, Wolfgang Iser, Georges Poulet, Paul Ricoeur, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and of course Sigmund Freud. That's only the beginning.

Like Chai, Steele is interested in the development of the notion of the self, and while he pays lip service to Romantic origins of the concept (noting Matthiessen's acknowledgment of Coleridge's innovative psychological diction), Steele is finally not interested in the history of the concept of self but rather in how contemporary notions of the self can be used to better understand representations of the self in American Renaissance writers. There is a proleptic quality to Steele's argument as we see "the nineteenth-century debate over the nature of the self recapitulated in the later disagreements of Jung and Freud, and then again in the conflicting views of phenomenological writers and Lacan." This is the kind of juxtaposition we frequently get in this book, and reading it along with Chai, there's an uneasy sense of the antebellum self getting squeezed on one side by Schleiermacher, Schiller, and Herder, and on the other by Freud, Jung, and Lacan: the represented self in Hawthorne and Emerson and Melville begins to feel a bit stretched out of shape, as if there is very little of it actually left represented in *their* texts. The proleptic quality seeps into all aspects of Steele's arguments, even into his metaphors (he images Whitman's absorptive self at one point as threatening "to reach a critical mass analogous to that achieved in an out-of-control nuclear reactor"). But Chai's and Steele's studies fit neatly together, the one viewing the American Renaissance as the culmination of one long development of concepts of the self and of modes of representing that self, the other viewing the American Renaissance as the engendering moment for a new development of concepts of self and modes of representation that are at the heart of literary debates today.

The major argument going on in the American Renaissance house, according to Steele, is "a debate over the nature of the self," whether it is "transparent or opaque." This debate, Steele argues, is the identical one that divides modern psychological and critical theory. According to this view, the brighter front rooms of the Renaissance mansion, the Emerson and Thoreau rooms, are frequented by Jungians, phenomenologists, and hermeneutic theoreticians, while the Freudians and deconstructionists hang around out back with Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville. Your own orientation all depends on whether you see the unconscious as the realm of spirit or the realm of irrational forces. And that's the point, Steele argues: as readers of these texts, we are all put in the position of having to internalize the proffered representation of the self in order to understand the text.

The American Renaissance writers, then, create representations of the self that they want their audience to believe in; they are engaged in “psychological mythmaking,” rhetorical exercises to “dramatize for their readers roles they are motivated to inhabit.” So Steele gives us readings of the major works as “rhetorics of regeneration,” where “Song of Myself,” for example, establishes “a general pattern that the reader has been seduced into adopting, assimilating the insights of a democratic—but also patriarchal—consciousness. The poet molds us into a new form of identity, shaping our very souls.” The writers “teach their respective audiences the kind of ethical and psychological response that each poet most desires.” This noble goal is then undermined by the proto-deconstructionist work of Melville and Poe and Hawthorne who reveal the faults and self-contradictions in Emerson’s and Whitman’s and Thoreau’s rhetorically created reliant selves.

All three of these books portray American Renaissance writers as masters of transformation: for Steele, working with a rhetorical model, the writers want to transfigure their readers; for Chai, working with a historical model, the writers transfigure their Romantic predecessors; for Reynolds, working with his “reconstructionist” model, the writers seek to transfigure the subliterate materials of popular culture. Perhaps the most revealing way to conclude this discussion of the current state of the house that Matthiessen built is to look at how Reynolds, Chai, and Steele each treat the transfiguring powers of the one female guest that they all invite in: Margaret Fuller. In Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance*, we’ll recall, Fuller merits only passing mention as someone who occasionally talked or corresponded with Emerson, or as the possible model for Hawthorne’s Zenobia. In his reconfiguration of the period, Steele offers the most enthusiastic embrace of Fuller; he is interested in her primarily because she is heavily influenced by Emerson and thus reveals some aspects of Emerson’s thought that might otherwise have gone unnoticed; specifically, she “reveals the ways in which Emerson’s model of the self depends upon a masculine conception of the spirit,” and she proceeds to offer “a feminized model of psychic energy and its expression,” something that is sorely missing in the American Renaissance as we have inherited it. Steele thus gives Fuller a real room, as much room as he gives to Emerson or Thoreau or Whitman. Building on Bell Gale Chevigny’s work, he investi-

gates the ways Fuller “analyzes the expense—for both men and women—of repressing the female.” He discusses how she undid the stereotypical domestic female personality of mid-nineteenth century America, demonstrating to the culture how its assumptions of women’s essential character “was a fabrication and, hence, could be changed and strengthened.” She made the politically explosive gesture of taking Emerson’s concept of self-reliance to heart and applying it to the supposedly rigid categories of sexual identity: “What would happen, Fuller must have asked herself, if the ‘God within’ were feminine as well?” In one of the most illuminating sections of his book, Steele then tracks the “body of female archetypes” that Fuller employs in her writing to challenge “the androcentric assumptions of Transcendentalism”—her use of the Osiris/Isis myth, the Cupid/Psyche myth, Minerva, the Eleusinian mysteries, all of which form the mythological deep structure of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. She employs the Emersonian language of mystery but replaces the male gods with female archetypes, thus “translating Emerson’s image of ‘universal man’ into images both of universal woman and universal androgyne.” “Locating the ‘idea of woman’ in women’s souls,” Fuller revolutionizes the representation of female self in the American Renaissance, and she transforms the possibilities of self-conception for her readers. Through her development of the image of the androgyne and of the powerful virgin, Fuller delivered the gift of self-reliance to women, who could now conceive of themselves apart from men.

Chai’s examination of Fuller supplements Steele’s but departs from it in key ways. Chai says he included Fuller in his study to indulge “some personal preferences,” believing that her literary criticism is especially undervalued, but she appears only twice—both times briefly—remaining a distinctly minor figure when compared to the main men. In one chapter Chai traces the origins of Fuller’s ideas about “comprehensive” criticism to Schiller, but, in the more interesting passage on Fuller, Chai (like Steele) is interested in her androgynous conception of the self, an entity that “consists not of a single nature but in effect of two natures—masculine and feminine—combined in different proportions.” Chai’s analysis leads, predictably, to a far less political conclusion than Steele’s, as he probes for the intellectual sources of Fuller’s idea and seeks its evolution in the dialectical faculties of Kant and Schiller, in Herder’s consideration of the conformity of the two sexes to each other, in Goethe’s elemental energy existing

below physical and spiritual energies. In Chai's reading, instead of offering a new self for women, Fuller's goal "is not the development of women in the ordinary sense but rather of the feminine nature, which will in turn lead to the elevation of all humanity of [sic] a higher and more spiritual stage." Instead of advocating female separation from males, Fuller is creating a culminating romantic conception of self, where there can exist "a truly creative dialectic within the self, whereby each nature enriches the resources of the other" — the feminine giving access to realms beyond the rational, the masculine offering order, the combination of both offering "a deeper and richer mode of thought." The self, then, can reach its full potential only by recognizing and nurturing the endless dialectic within: "the interaction of man and woman upon each other." So *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* "exemplifies [Fuller's] affinities with the whole Romantic mode of thought, especially with its concept of a fruitful opposition by which two opposing forces produce, through their action upon each other, a yet higher stage of reflection." And Fuller pushes this concept beyond her romantic forebears by emphasizing how the two forces do not just act upon each other, but actually interpenetrate, absorb each other's natures. Her emphasis on this absorptive quality allows her to specify the power of the "feminine nature," a receptiveness to foreign natures that allows rational understanding to evolve into felt experience. Fuller's concept of the feminine nature is a transforming and defining moment in romantic thought, yielding "the element which imparts to the self its receptivity and its sensibility."

Such discussions seem a long way from the Fuller that appears in Reynolds's book. She makes only a brief appearance there; clearly she is not one of the "lost luminaries" that Reynolds is out to rediscover. But *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* does get analyzed as a sort of literarefying of some subliterate writing: here Fuller's work is seen as the transmutation into art of the female moral exemplar novel, the kind of novel Catharine Sedgwick wrote, celebrating the moral heroine and carrying "protofeminist implications." So in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* Fuller offers "explicitly feminist versions of Sedgwick's fictional themes." Instead of inventing conceptions of a female self by reconfiguring Emerson's world with the great Goddess myths, or by reworking Schiller's ideas of dialectical faculties, Fuller here picks them up from popular litera-

ture. In Reynolds's view, she is not as interesting as she could be because she does not draw fully enough on the most sensationalistic women's novels—"the dark brooding and revolutionary rage that characterized many literary expressions of what were called 'woman's wrongs.'" Instead she admires the relative "saneness and moderation" of writers like Sedgwick, a preference which "carried over into her own formal, sometimes stiff prose." We can sense Reynolds's disappointment in her: "Fuller endorses women's rights in non-sensational fashion, without using grotesque images or startling paradoxes. . . . In a typical moment she brings up the topic of women victimized by dissolute men but skirts [!] the issue by writing: 'I would give instances that would startle the most vulgar and callous; but I will not. . . .'" Fuller cares more about "principles" than "startling particulars," Reynolds notes, so topics that generated great sensational novels "are mentioned by Fuller only in brief, passing sentences." In Reynolds's book, all of the deep psychological and philosophical speculations of Steele and Chai concerning the sources of Fuller's radical model of a self simply flatten out to this: "she views woman as 'a harmonizer of the vehement elements,' and so she avoids violence and quirkiness in her own prose."

Margaret Fuller as revolutionary mythologizer of a new self, or as innovative heir of European romantic conceptions of the self, or as principled transformer of sensational literature into stiff prose: take your pick. At least she is there to be considered in all three of these ambitious books about the American Renaissance, and that fact alone says a good deal about the current state of affairs at the house that Matthiessen built.

Note

Matthiessen's work, of course, is *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941). For details about the history of the composition and publication of *American Renaissance*, see Louis Hyde, ed., *Rat and the Devil: Journal Letters of F. O. Matthiessen and Russell Cheney* (1978); George A. White, "Ideology and Literature: *American Renaissance* and F. O. Matthiessen," *Tri-Quarterly* 23/24 (Winter/Spring 1972), 430–500; and Kermit Vanderbilt, *American Literature and the Academy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsyl-

vania Press, 1986), 469–480. Tompkins’s “Other American Renaissance” is detailed in her *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 147–185. For the inclusion of Poe, see Donald Pease, *Visionary Compacts: American Renaissance Writings in Cultural Context* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987). Smith’s study is *Democracy and the Novel: Popular Resistance to Classic American Writers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). And for readings of Whitman emphasizing his political activism, see Pease again, as well as Betsy Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Robert Shulman, *Social Criticism and Nineteenth-Century American Fictions* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987); and M. Wynn Thomas, *The Lunar Light of Whitman’s Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

YANNIS RITSOS
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