

ture—again, meaning *American* culture? His description of the chimera of “multiculturalism” is devastating, his account of the erasing of English Canada’s British heritage is saddening, and his chronicle of the problems of bilingualism sobering. But he passes a bit too lightly over the notion that the true heritage of English Canada, however manipulated by the nationalists, is the establishment of a second English-speaking society in North America that is less individualistic, less violent, less competitive, more oriented toward community, and more reliant on government than is the exuberant United States. Many Canadians, nationalists or not, see these characteristics of their country as worth preserving, indeed, as being the reason for even having a country. The question facing Canadians in today’s world of competitive trading blocs is how to preserve their identity while at the same time creating a more open economic relationship with their rambunctious neighbor to the south.

—Joseph T. Jockel '88

**BENEATH THE
AMERICAN
RENAISSANCE:
The Subversive
Imagination in the
Age of Emerson
and Melville**

by David S. Reynolds
Knopf, 1988
625 pp. \$35

The decades of the 19th century when Poe, Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, and Dickinson flourished marked the arrival of an American literature that finally bore comparison with other national literatures. So extraordinary was the outpouring—during the 1850s alone *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby Dick*, *Walden*, and *Leaves of Grass* appeared—that critics and historians have readily adopted F. O. Matthiessen’s term for

the era, the “American Renaissance.” No other period in American literary history has received anywhere near the same attention.

But no work since Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance* (1941) comes close to the length of David Reynolds’ study. Reynolds, director of Whitman studies at Rutgers University, Camden, offers his book as a model of what he calls “reconstructive criticism.” This approach, he explains, “calls upon the historical critic to reconstruct as completely as possible the socioliterary milieu of literary works through the exploration of a broad array of forgotten social and imaginative texts.”

Cleaving to his method, Reynolds makes available the results of his Herculean reading of long-ignored sermons, reform tracts, popular journals, and cheap novels, assigning their themes to categories such as “Conventional,” “Subversive,” and “Romantic Adventure,” and arranging the fictional characters who recur time and again under the stereotypes he finds to have prevailed. He proceeds topically, treating religious reform, sensationalism, sexuality, women’s issues, and popular humor. With each, he first discusses the popular literature so as to establish his categories; he

then turns to the major writers to show how they reflected them.

Not surprisingly, certain works, such as *The Scarlet Letter*, are visited over and over again, with the unfortunate result that this long book becomes, at last, too long a book. The excitement Reynolds generates with his discovery of neglected literary trends and his plot summaries of delightfully outrageous threepenny novels eventually pales and then fades into tedium as the exposition ticks back and forth between the categories of popular literature and their reappearance in the major works.

This is a pity, for Reynolds' knowledge of the popular genres is unmatched. It adds a vital dimension to works we thought we knew well. But his method is so insistent that, finally, whatever has been added to our reading of, say, *Moby Dick* is all but lost in the often petty details that pile up against it like sand blown by an unceasing simoon.

One cannot read *Beneath the American Renaissance* without taking a great deal of local information from it. Now that Reynolds has exposed them, the influence of popular sermon styles on Emerson, for example, or the effect of frontier humor styles on Melville become recognizable aspects of their work. And it is valuable to learn—for who other than Reynolds has read so many cheap novels for us?—how many stereotyped fictional cousins Hester Prynne, Ishmael, and Whitman's "I" had.

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But, even here, Reynolds' method does a disservice by indiscriminately insisting on too much. The unhappy Arthur Dimmesdale of *The Scarlet Letter* does bear some faint resemblance to the hypocritical clergymen of highly popular novels such as those of George Lippard, ministers who preach morality from the pulpit and practice seduction in the parlor. Reynolds labels this persistent character the "reverend rake." When the metronome sounds its inevitable tick, however, and poor Dimmesdale is required to exemplify the label in order to fulfill the method, one wants the music to stop. Dimmesdale, after all, had relations with but one parishioner, and if there were a seduction, as opposed to a mutual passion, then surely Hester, and not he, was the seducer.

If in one way Reynolds insists on too much, in another he sees too little. Although many of the stereotypes he locates in American popular literature were undoubtedly used and modified by the major writers, one cannot stop at popular literature in identifying their origin: The same stereotypes lie behind the characters of Spenser, Shakespeare, and Fielding as well.

Strikingly, with his unparalleled knowledge of the many neglected works of the period, Reynolds finds none that make a bid for a place on the shelf occupied by the recognized masterworks. In his epilogue, he notes that there are "a good number of unfamiliar writings that merit attention on their own," but in his comprehensive survey no such meritorious works emerge. Whatever else is reconstituted in Reynolds' book, the American canon of great literature remains intact.

—Larzer Ziff '87