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**AMERICAN ROMANTICISM AS A LITERARY-HISTORICAL
CONSTRUCTION****ROMANTYZM AMERYKAŃSKI JAKO KONSTRUKT
HISTORYCZYNOLITERACKI**

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Perhaps surprisingly, in the three standard surveys of American literary history that were published in the second half of the 20th century the term “romanticism” does not appear very often. In the classic *Literary History of the United States* edited by Robert E. Spiller et al. (rev. ed. 1953) it was used for the first time in relation to William Bartram’s *Travels* (1791), an aftermath of the botanist’s exploration of Florida, Georgia, and the Carolinas in 1773–1778. The author of that particular section, Frederick B. Tolles, had an association with Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan,” which let him ignore an obvious fact that both Bartram’s trips and the book itself preceded *Lyrical Ballads* and “Kubla Khan,” the latter written in 1797 and published in 1816. Some more attention was paid to romanticism, both British and American, by Tremaine McDowell in the section about the literature of New England in the 1820s, where he mentioned not only Bryant, but also Richard Henry Dana, Sr., a poet, fiction writer, and critic largely forgotten today even by scholars specializing in the period. McDowell’s two-paragraph account of Dana’s career is almost adequate, except for a claim that he “refused”¹ to contribute to the *North American Review*, having been rejected as its editor-in-chief after Edward Tyrrell Channing quit to concentrate on his professorial duties at Harvard². In the chapter on Poe, supplied by F.O. Matthiessen as

¹ *Literary History of the United States*, ed. R.E. Spiller et al., New York 1953, p. 286.

² See D. Hunter, *Richard Henry Dana, Sr.*, Boston 1987, pp. 40–41.

a sort of apology for not including him in *American Renaissance*, “romanticism” does not appear at all, to pop up again in the following section by David Bowers, titled “Democratic Vistas”. Bowers first makes a reference to a number of European romantics inspiring the dissident Unitarians, and then offers the reader a general formula a bit out of the blue, “the romanticism of Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Hawthorne, and Whitman”³, clearly echoing Matthiessen’s 1941 subtitle. To borrow a phrase from Thoreau, “American romanticism” as a well-defined and described movement is “nowhere to be seen” in Spiller’s impressive collective enterprise.

The *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, another one-volume history of American literature with Emory Elliott as General Editor (1988), has even less to tell the audience about romanticism. For the first time, the word appears in reference to Charles Brockden Brown as the “head of the American romantic tradition”⁴, then, in passing, in reference to Hawthorne⁵, and finally, in connection to Hawthorne again as well as to transcendentalism: “The transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson and his followers was, among other things, an American variant of European Romanticism (...)”⁶. To be sure, Poe is not called a Romantic even once, according to Matthiessen’s earlier decree. On the other hand, Leon Chai, author of *The Romantic Foundations of the American Renaissance* (1987), a comprehensive study of English, German, and French inspirations of Hawthorne, Emerson, Fuller, Amos Bronson Alcott, Poe, and Melville, has no doubt that the Southern poet from Boston was a romantic drawing not only from Coleridge, as in “Letter to B____,” but also from Shelley, Cousin, and Kant (Chai 273–279, 367–375)⁷. For Chai, the “American Renaissance” period – plus Poe – is for sure a valid frame of reference with no need to extend it in any direction, but American-European romantic affinities seem just as relevant to him. In institutional terms, the *Columbia Literary History of the United States* has more authority and cultural power, however, *The Romantic Foundations of the American Renaissance*, published a year later, is a coherent and well-argued proposal not to be underestimated or disregarded either.

Of the eight volumes of the new *Cambridge History of American Literature*, whose General Editor was Sacvan Bercovitch, two – volumes 2 and 4 – cover the period of, respectively, 1820–1865 and 1800–1910. Volume 2 (1995) is entitled *Prose Writing*, volume 4 (2004) *Nineteenth-Century Poetry*, which means that both can be expected to consider American romanticism, if it ever existed. As it turns out, though, this is not so sure: in volume 2 the noun “romanticism” refers mainly as a background term to its British and German varieties influencing in some ways certain American writers who are not called romantics explicitly, with the exception of – surprise, surprise! – Richard Henry Dana, Jr. and the historian William Prescott, while as a specific designation of an “intellectual movement” it appears once, referring to the

³ *Literary History of the United States*, *op. cit.*, p. 355.

⁴ *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, ed. E. Elliott, New York 1988, p. 178.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 225.

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 426–427.

⁷ See L. Chai, *The Romantic Foundations of the American Renaissance*, Ithaca and London 1987, pp. 273–279, pp. 376–375.

male and female US “literary traditions of the 1850s”⁸. In volume 4 the situation is somewhat different since romanticism was chosen as a proper context for Dana, Sr., Poe, Whitman, and Dickinson, yet once more as a movement it is addressed only in its British version⁹. A conclusion that can be drawn from all the three “literary histories” is unmistakably just one: for some reason, contemporary American literary historians who are responsible for the canon do not really seem to need romanticism as a label at all, approaching texts and facts written and produced in the United States more or less at the time when German, English, and French authors, as well as Polish, Russian or Hungarian ones, did not mind being called precisely “romantics,” and they are still called so by the local critical establishment and by the common readers.

When in 1983 Jerome McGann reconsidered in a Marxist way the “romantic ideology” in Britain and Germany, he began his argument with a quote from Rene Wellek’s famous essay “The Concept of Romanticism,” originally published in 1949:

If we examine the characteristics of the actual literature which called itself or was called “romantic” all over the continent, we find throughout Europe the same conceptions of poetry and of the workings and nature of poetic imagination, the same conception of nature and its relation to man, and basically the same poetic style, with the use of imagery, symbolism, and myth which is clearly distinct from that of eighteenth-century neoclassicism. This conclusion might be strengthened or modified by attention to other frequently discussed elements: subjectivism, medievalism, folklore, etc. But the following three criteria should be particularly convincing, since each is central for one aspect of the practice of literature: imagination for the view of poetry, nature for the view of the world, and symbol and myth for poetic style¹⁰.

Thirty-four years ago, rewriting the romantic blueprint, McGann still did not decide on the New Historicist approach, analyzing, for instance, Byron’s and Keats’s poetry not in their socio-historical context, but as products of the ironic consciousness engaged in a “critique of ideology”¹¹. When in 2003 Lawrence Buell came up with a rereading of Emerson for the early 21st century with its liberal anti-essentialist and anti-nationalist bias, he admitted that the author of *Nature* was a romantic, claiming, however, with a reference to Heidegger, that the programmatic text of transcendentalism owed its romantic features to the German fragment aesthetics.¹² Fourteen years earlier, Wai-chee Dimock in her *Empire for Liberty* explored Melville’s fiction as a document of the US imperialism. Dimock did not need “romanticism” as a descriptive tool, turning a writer who met Wellek’s criteria almost perfectly into a victim of false consciousness – a tension between the sovereign authorial subjectivity and the

⁸ *The Cambridge History of American Literature. Volume Two: Prose Writing 1820–1865*, ed. S. Bercovitch, Cambridge 1995, p. 77.

⁹ See *The Cambridge History of American Literature. Volume Four: Nineteenth-Century Poetry, 1800–1910*, ed. S. Bercovitch, Cambridge 2004.

¹⁰ R. Wellek, *Concepts of Criticism*, New Haven 1963, pp. 160–161.

¹¹ See J.J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology. A Critical Investigation*, Chicago and London 1983, pp. 130–136.

¹² See Buell, *op.cit.*, pp. 109–114.

politics of the book market combined with that of American territorial expansion. In other words, both Buell and Dimock approached “romantic” figures from the canon in terms that suited their specific coherent projects, distant from any kind of critical consensus based on the idea of “romanticism.” One showed Emerson as a prophet of multi-culturalism, the other showed Melville as a crypto-imperialist.

The case of the author of *Billy Budd* makes one think of the literary historian’s crucial dilemma: when did something which may be called “American romanticism” start and when did it come to an end? Was its starting point 1836, the year of the publication of *Nature*, and did it expire in 1857, when Melville published *The Confidence-Man*, a novel featuring the caricatures of Emerson and Thoreau? Is then *The Last of the Mohicans* (1825) a romantic narrative? What about Poe’s *Tamerlane* (1827)? And finally, what to do with the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855), which marked the beginning of Whitman’s long career? Most likely, the first American to use the adjective “romantic” in writing was the Rev. James Marsh, who in July 1822 published in the *North American Review* a long essay on the *Present Literature of Italy*, based on Lodovico di Breme’s account of the current Italian literary debates, issued in 1816 in Milan. Marsh, later the editor of Coleridge’s *Aids to Reflection* for the American reader, clearly knew what that adjective meant since he made references to Mme de Staël and Friedrich Schlegel as well as quoted from di Breme:

The author has before said, that “the romantic is a distinct form of literature can no longer be a matter of question. The only desideratum is a more complete and better defined system of rules adapted to it.” ... It seems to be on the ground that romantic literature is *essentially* distinguished from classical, and that the principles of the former only are suited to the *materiel* on which modern genius is employed, that he wishes a *ragion poetica* capable of developing our impressions¹³.

As Marsh’s review essay provoked no response even from the sophisticated Boston public, it can be remembered only as a curiosity contributed to the most elitist American periodical of the times by an outsider – a young Congregationalist clergyman who could read Italian, French, and German though he never visited Europe, and graduated from the provincial Andover Theological Seminary founded in 1807 as a result of the Unitarian takeover of Harvard. Having provided, contrary to his intentions, an inspiration for Emerson and other transcendentalists, Marsh remained an outsider till the end of his days, dying prematurely as President of the University of Vermont in 1843. Still, that outsider did what others did not dare to do before him, including Bryant, author of brilliant Wordsworthian poems published in the *North American Review* in 1817 and “Essay on American Poetry” published a year later, and Dana, Sr., who enthusiastically praised Wordsworth in his scandalous review of Hazlitt’s *Essays on the English Poets* of 1819 that cost him the editor’s position. In fact, the ground was there: already in the first issue of the *North American Review* of September 1815 Walter Channing proved in his “Essay on American Language and Literature” to have

¹³ J. Marsh, *Present Literature of Italy*, “North American Review” 1822, no. 36, p. 113.

read Mme de Staël, too, and realized, probably thanks to Herder, that truly American poetry, rooted in the local folklore just as Wordsworth's poems were rooted in the English one, was created by Indians, unfortunately *a priori* excluded from the literary circles as "savages" speaking incomprehensible tongues¹⁴. Romanticism was in the air, but the word itself remained taboo. Dana's expulsion from the *North American Review* was a significant warning against extravagance, amplified as late as in 1829 by Alexander Everett, who in a learned piece titled "History of Intellectual Philosophy" fulminated against the "wild and vague poetical imagery"¹⁵ of German thinkers and poets of the romantic era.

The *North American Review* did not offer a convenient tribune to those American poets and critics of the 1820s who favored the romantic idea of literature and romantic diction. However, in 1825 Bryant received a golden opportunity to share his literary beliefs with at least a fraction of the public interested in such matters. In April that year, the New York Athenaeum, a club and a library, invited him to deliver a series of talks focused on poetry and its prospects in the United States. Already in his first lecture, "On the Nature of Poetry," the author of "Thanatopsis" stressed the key role of both the poet's and the reader's imagination in the production and reception of the poetic speech:

The imagination is the most active and the least susceptible of fatigue of all the faculties of the human mind; its more intense exercise is tremendous and sometimes unsettles the reason; its repose is only a gentle sort of activity; nor am I certain that it is ever quite unemployed, for even in our sleep it is still awake and busy, and amuses itself with fabricating our dreams. ... Poetry is that art which selects and arranges the symbols of thought in such a manner as to excite it the most powerfully and delightfully. The imagination of the reader is guided ... by the poet, and it is his business to guide it skillfully and agreeably; but the imagination in the mean time is by no means passive. It pursues the path which the poet only points out, and shapes its visions from the scenes and allusions which it gives¹⁶.

Besides, Bryant told his audience that the poetic speech is that of "passion": "The language of passion is naturally figurative, but its figures are only employed to heighten the intensity of the expression; they are never introduced for their own sake"¹⁷. In the subsequent lectures, he addressed the question of "national literature as a matter of pride"¹⁸ (Godwin 25) and the superiority of original poetry to the poetry of imitation. Since he could not predict the listeners' reaction to such a literary program (and he moved to New York to start a career in journalism), all the four talks included also

¹⁴ See *The American Literary Revolution 1783–1837*, ed. R.E. Spiller, Garden City, NY 1967, pp. 113–120.

¹⁵ A.H. Everett, 1846. *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays. Second Series*, Boston 1846, p. 436.

¹⁶ *The Prose Writings of William Cullen Bryant. Volume First. Essays, Tales, and Orations*, ed. P. Godwin, New York 1964, pp. 6–7.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 25.

evidence of his classical erudition, but their general message was unambiguous: even though the term “romanticism” did not appear in Bryant’s agenda, it was essentially romantic. The problem is that the lectures were published for the first time in 1868, when they could be appreciated only as an interesting testimony of the bygone days.

In what could, and perhaps still can be the – yet unwritten – history of American romanticism, absent from the acknowledged literary histories, there are more untimely texts, published too late to influence the course of the US culture. One of them is Washington Allston’s “Lectures on Art,” delivered to a friendly audience of two, Longfellow and Cornelius Conway Felton, in 1833–34 but released in print in 1850; another Dana, Sr.’s two-volume *Poems and Prose Writings* including his conservative romantic essays and gothic fiction from the early 1820, also issued in 1850. One thing is their little or no influence on the potential contemporary recipients, the other actual presence in American intellectual and literary heritage as it is known to us today. Apparently, the editors of the twentieth-century historical projects from Spiller to Bercovitch accepted Emerson’s dictum from his journal of 1838:

Oh my country! In thee is the reasonable hope of mankind not fulfilled. It should be that when all feudal straps & bandages were taken off an unfolding of the Titans had followed & they had laughed & leaped young giants along the continents & ran up the mountains of the West with the errand of Genius & love. But the utmost thou hast yet produced, is a puny love of beauty in Allston, in Greenough; in Bryant; in Everett; in Channing; in Irving; an imitative love of grace. A vase of fair outline but empty...¹⁹

As to Dana, Sr., when Emerson was delivering his “American Scholar” oration to the elite of Harvard, Boston, and the State of Massachusetts, he was sitting in one of the front rows, having written a few years before an essay “The Past and the Present” (1833) which was an *avant la lettre* polemic with the assault upon history made in *Essays. First Series*. Emerson, however, chose to ignore his opponent completely although both of them felt obliged to contribute to the nation’s culture. In conclusion, one may argue that the three main features of international romanticism according to Wellek – “imagination for the view of poetry, nature for the view of the world, and symbol ... for poetic style” – were all present in American literature already at the end of the second and in the third decade of the 19th century. It was not a strong presence indeed, to be later suppressed by the transcendentalist dominant, yet after all, when the Transcendental Club enjoyed its heyday, it was also a rather marginal element of the intellectual life of Unitarian Boston and the whole country. The picture in which it looms large came into being many years later, gradually fixed by Octavius Brooks Frothingham and eventually by Matthiessen. Last but not least, what Emerson and his predecessors shared was the nationalist impulse, so characteristic of many emancipatory romanticisms in Europe: German, Polish, Ukrainian, Russian, and Hungarian. Bryant, Irving, and even Allston were cultural nationalists just as much as most

¹⁹ *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Vol. VII*, ed. W.H. Gilman, Cambridge, MA 1969, p. 24.

transcendentalists. If they differed from Emerson in that respect, it was the difference in tone, not in desire – as everyone knows, their detractor turned the lack of history, which they deplored, into a unique advantage. At this point, one comes across a major paradox: in today's American Studies many efforts have been taken to deny "American exceptionalism," while the denial of romanticism actually makes the United States exceptional in comparison to other countries where the romantic ideology and literature also drew inspiration from neighbors, sometimes, as in the cases of Poland and Ukraine, as culturally overpowering as Britain was in relation to her former colonies in North America. For sure, there are all kinds of arguments against correcting Spiller, Elliott, and Bercovitch. Possibly number one is the origin of transcendentalism in the local New England theological debate. However, under the circumstances the choice seems to be clear: either "America" officially did not have its romanticism, which means that it is exceptional, or American romanticism did exist, and the US is not as exceptional as it may seem to be.

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Streszczenie

Chociaż badacze zgodnie przyjmują, że w historii literatury amerykańskiej romantyzm jako prąd ideowy i literacki zaistniał i odegrał nader istotną rolę, zarówno historycznoliterackie syntezy od połowy XX wieku do czasów współczesnych, jak i sami myśliciele i pisarze na ogół kojarzeni z amerykańskim romantyzmem konsekwentnie unikali tego terminu. Bywa on często zastępowany terminem „transcendentalizm”, obejmującym bostońskie środowisko R.W. Emersona, mimo iż skądinąd w opozycji do niego sytuowany jest „czarny romantyzm”

E.A. Poe'go. Artykuł podejmuje problematykę skomplikowanej genezy i trudnych początków amerykańskiej formacji romantycznej od drugiej dekady XIX wieku, a także porusza kwestię zamknięcia romantyzmu w USA, która wydaje się szczególnie enigmatyczna. Tak czy inaczej, używane przez poetów i pisarzy romantycznych z oceanem pojęcia oraz dykcja, jak również ujawniane przez nich inspiracje, bezsprzecznie dowodzą powinowactw z romantykami europejskimi, w tym zwłaszcza W. Wordsworthem i S.T. Coleridge'm.

Summary

The paper focuses on the paradoxical absence of the term “romanticism” from the US literary-historical discourse in the 20th and 21st centuries. In the major histories of American literature that have been published since the 1950s “romanticism” is virtually missing, mentioned in passing only a few times in each comprehensive overview of the nineteenth-century US print culture. What makes the situation most unusual is the fact that romanticism definitely occupied a significant place in the evolution of American letters both in its variant described by Rene Wellek (transcendentalism, poetry of William Cullen Bryant, Whitman, and Dickinson), and in its “dark” variety represented by Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, and Richard Henry Dana, Sr.). The paper includes analyses of the early, abortive attempts to introduce romanticism in American culture in the second and third decades of the 19th century, as well as some of its later manifestations.

Biogram

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