

BENEATH  
THE  
AMERICAN  
RENAISSANCE

THE  
SUBVERSIVE  
IMAGINATION  
IN THE AGE  
OF  
EMERSON  
AND MELVILLE

DAVID S. REYNOLDS

FOREWORD BY SEAN WILENTZ

BENEATH  
THE AMERICAN  
RENAISSANCE

ALSO BY DAVID S. REYNOLDS

*Mightier than the Sword: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Battle for America*

*Waking Giant: America in the Age of Jackson*

*John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights*

*Walt Whitman*

*Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography*

*Faith in Fiction: The Emergence of Religious Literature in America*

*George Lippard*

EDITED AND COEDITED WORKS

*Uncle Tom's Cabin. The Splendid Edition*, by Harriet Beecher Stowe

*Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass: 150th Anniversary Edition*

*A Historical Guide to Walt Whitman*

*Venus in Boston and Other Tales of Nineteenth-Century City Life*, by George Thompson  
(with Kimberly Gladman)

*The Serpent in the Cup: Temperance in American Literature* (with Debra J. Rosenthal)

*The Quaker City, or, The Monks of Monk Hall*, by George Lippard

*George Lippard, Prophet of Protest: Writings of an American Radical*

# BENEATH THE AMERICAN RENAISSANCE

The Subversive Imagination in the Age  
of Emerson and Melville

DAVID S. REYNOLDS

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

# OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press, Inc., publishes works that further  
Oxford University's objective of excellence  
in research, scholarship, and education.

Oxford New York

Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi  
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi  
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece  
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore  
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Copyright © 1988 by David S. Reynolds

First published by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1988

Published by arrangement with Alfred A. Knopf, an imprint of The Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc.

First issued as an Oxford University Press paperback, 2011

Foreword copyright © 2011 by Sean Wilentz

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.

198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

[www.oup.com](http://www.oup.com)

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,  
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise,  
without the prior permission of Oxford University Press.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Reynolds, David S., 1948-

Beneath the American Renaissance : the subversive imagination in the age of Emerson and Melville / David S. Reynolds.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-978284-0 (pbk. : acid-free paper)

1. American literature—19th century—History and criticism. 2. Literature and society—United States—History—19th century. 3. Popular literature—United States—History and criticism. 4. Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 1803-1882—Contemporaries. 5. Melville, Herman, 1819-1891—Contemporaries. 6. Social problems in literature. 7. Sensationalism in literature. 8. Social norms in literature. 9. Women in literature. I. Title.

PS208.R49 2011

810.9'355—dc22 2010043769

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America  
on acid-free paper

To my beloved wife, Suzanne

*This page intentionally left blank*

# CONTENTS

Foreword, by Sean Wilentz	ix
Acknowledgments	xiii
<i>Introduction</i>	
THE OPEN TEXT:	
<i>American Writers and Their Environment</i>	3
 PART ONE	
GOD'S BOW, MAN'S ARROWS:	
<i>Religion, Reform, and American Literature</i>	
 1. The New Religious Style	15
2. The Reform Impulse and the Paradox of Immoral Didacticism	54
3. The Transcendentalists, Whitman, and Popular Reform	92
4. Hawthorne and the Reform Impulse	113
5. Melville's Whited Sepulchres	135
 PART TWO	
PUBLIC POISON:	
<i>Sensationalism and Sexuality</i>	
 6. The Sensational Press and the Rise of Subversive Literature	169
7. The Erotic Imagination	211
8. Poe and Popular Irrationalism	225



9. Hawthorne's Cultural Demons	249
10. Melville's Ruthless Democracy	275
11. Whitman's Transfigured Sensationalism	309
PART THREE	
OTHER AMAZONS:	
<i>Women's Rights, Women's Wrongs, and the Literary Imagination</i>	335
12. Types of American Womanhood	337
13. Hawthorne's Heroines	368
14. The American Women's Renaissance and Emily Dickinson	387
PART FOUR	
THE GROTESQUE POSTURE:	
<i>Popular Humor and the American Subversive Style</i>	439
15. The Carnivalization of American Language	441
16. Transcendental Wild Oats	484
17. Whitman's Poetic Humor	507
18. Stylized Laughter in Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville	524
<i>Epilogue</i>	
RECONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM	
<i>Literary Theory and Literary History</i>	561
<i>Notes</i>	569
<i>Index</i>	605

# FOREWORD

Sean Wilentz

David Reynolds's *Beneath the American Renaissance* altered how critics and readers approach American literature. Reynolds had the essential insight that the mainstream American culture of the 1830s through the 1850s was nowhere near as dull and proper as previous writers had assumed. Instead of perceiving the great writers of the period as alienated rebels, Reynolds sees them as very much a part of a broader American popular culture that expressed the tensions, frustrations, and aspirations of the era in novels, stories, and poems that can hardly be called genteel. By Reynolds's lights, American culture, or at least large swatches of it, could be frank, coarse, and at times frightening. The genius of the seven major authors he covers—Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, Poe, Whitman, and Emily Dickinson—arose not from a determined rejection of the society around them but from their rearticulating of perennial metaphysical and artistic concerns within this less familiar American context. Reynolds explores his authors' engagements with the works of the George Lippards, John Neals, and Fanny Ferns and with the surrounding worlds of popular humor, melodramas, urban fiction, and other entertainments, as well as their absorption in Shakespeare and the Bible.

Reynolds's title is a play on words. Nearly half a century before this book first appeared, F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Melville* had redefined the basic terms in which American literature was then understood. The conventional scholarly wisdom at the time held that, at least until the Civil War, American writing was in every way inferior to its Anglo-European counterparts. Matthiessen toppled that prejudice, and in the process established the half-decade from 1850 to 1855 as a watershed in American cultural history. Matthiessen found in the works of Emerson, Melville, Hawthorne, and Whitman, above all, a fresh efflorescence of American sensibility that, although marked by the Puritan heritage, rebelled against what had become the pallid stodginess of the

age. But by reaching beneath Matthiessen's *Renaissance*, Reynolds aims to detect with greater exactness the subterranean cultural currents that fed the imaginations of the same great American writers. Reynolds aims, as well, to give full due to a host of long-forgotten writers, both men and women, who fostered what he called "the subversive imagination."

Looking back after nearly a quarter century, *Beneath the American Renaissance* is every bit as identifiable as part of a broader intellectual shift as its predecessor was. Matthiessen wrote at the moment when the so-called New Critics insisted on taking the work under scrutiny as the primary focus of critical discussion. So it was with Matthiessen, who cut through what had become a flaccid critical historicism with brilliant close readings of the mid-nineteenth-century American masters. Matthiessen thereby completed what can only be described as a revolution in taste, overthrowing the domination of the genteel Brahmin tradition in American literary studies (identified with the works of Longfellow, Whittier, and Lowell, among others) in favor of the more unsettling Whitman, Melville, and Emerson. And in elevating these literary renegades, Matthiessen also explored their connections to classical literature, not least of the Elizabethan age, especially Shakespeare. He thus presented the best of American literature not as imitative but as bearers and renewers of the greatest literary traditions.

Reynolds wrote his book at the height of scholarly enthusiasm for an even more democratic approach to the history of American culture, born of the social upheavals and iconoclastic politics and culture of the 1960s and 1970s. The scope of his research, and his effort to enlarge the canvas of American literary culture, certainly reflected those enthusiasms and impulses. Yet Reynolds's book, although plainly linked to other scholarship of the day, was also singular, as in many ways it remains, and not just in its ambition or its cogency. Tellingly, Reynolds did not (as so many critics and historians of a quarter century ago did) abjure what had become the canonical writings of mid-nineteenth-century America. Nor did he try to dissolve individual literary works into the lives of their authors or the wider world they inhabited. Instead, he showed how America's literary masterpieces absorbed the whirling forces of a tangled popular culture, yielding uniquely resonant, culturally rooted symbols and characters. He also brought attention to many neglected noncanonical writings that are worthy of study on their own.

After Reynolds's exploration of the unsounded depths of American culture, the nation itself, and not just its literary exemplars, looked very different than they had previously. Standard accounts of the Jacksonian and pre-Civil War decades stress the emergence of a bifurcated nation. In the North, a particular form of individualist evangelical Christianity blended with more secular imperatives of progress and self-making to create a distinctive world of "go-ahead" money-grubbing exuberance, tempered by a do-gooder humanitarianism that would hold back the worst excesses of egoism and attempt to perfect the world. In the South, a culture of honor, shame, and professed patriarchal duties at once emerged out of and reflected the spreading cotton kingdom of chattel slavery, ennobled by a very different kind of Christian evangelicalism that vaunted personal holiness and obedience. But Reynolds takes us into places that these portrayals pass by—carnivals, street bookstalls, cheap oyster houses, public execution scaffolds, barrooms, museums of the grotesque, phrenologists' offices, as well as the

imaginative terrain of pulp fiction and popular almanac America. It is here that he finds so much of the cultural raw material that informed and enriched the lives of ordinary Americans—and that became essential to *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby-Dick*, *Walden*, and *Leaves of Grass*, not simply by acting as props and fodder, but in helping to form their visions of human possibilities and impossibilities.

The connections are by no means always simple or direct. But by poking around in long-forgotten publications (including tracts and cheap newspapers as well as books), Reynolds finds materials that the authors of the American Renaissance could assume that their audience took for granted but whose meaning is utterly lost upon modern readers. Thus absent a familiarity with the enormous, didactic pro-temperance literature of the 1840s—to which Walt Whitman actually contributed—it is impossible to comprehend Melville's darker imagery about the crew of the *Pequod*. Without a thorough knowledge of the urban penny-press, pioneered by the *New York Sun* in the early 1830s, entire layers what Reynolds calls Edgar Allan Poe's "rational manipulation of the sensational" evaporate. Whitman's frank eroticism becomes all the more startling when read as a corrective to the guilt-ridden sexuality of the era's popular romances. Some of the most cryptic of Emily Dickinson's poems become far less so when read in the context of Dickinson's fascination with sensational journalism and popular literature in general.

Reynolds's effort to rearrange the locus of the American Renaissance has not met with universal approval, especially among scholars and writers who prefer (either with approval or their own alienation) to see America in the pre-Civil War decades as a more staid if highly dynamic nation, a place where a civilizing (some would say stultifying) hand tamed the wildness of the raw new republic, only to plunge into a horrific civil war born of the original sin of slavery. But some of the richest writings about the period of the American Renaissance have been deeply indebted to Reynolds and the broadening of the scope of literary history and analysis that his book did so much to advance. Some of this Reynolds has done himself, most notably in his excellent study *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography*. In the proliferating revisionist critical approaches that have preoccupied Americanists of late—environmentalist, feminist, queer, race-related, and transnational, among others—we can sense the appreciation of the cross-fertilization between major and noncanonical literature that Reynolds charted in detail. Other writers have explored the intense ambiguities and underground energy of blackface minstrelsy, militia musters, medicine and pseudoscience, and numerous other sensational and spectacular features of American life before the Civil War. By joining David Reynolds in reaching below the usual folds of American cultural and literary history, they have discovered a very different cultural landscape than earlier generations of critics deemed important or even pertinent. They have given fresh meaning to Whitman's famous claim, in "Song of Myself," that "[t]he United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem."

In various ways, many of these commentators have carried forward Reynolds's project of what he called reconstructive criticism—the effort to reconstruct as fully as possible the socio-literary milieu of American literature through the exploration of noncanonical writings. This method, substantiated by original research and informed by theory, offers an approach

different from either historically sterile formalist aesthetics or the presentism and political posturing of some recent criticism. The time is propitious for this reconstructive approach to intensify and spread, not only in literary studies but in other disciplines as well, since many rare works that once had to be hunted down in archives are now available online. Melville's insight that geniuses "are parts of their times . . . and possess a correspondent coloring," or Whitman's notion that the poet is "the age transfigured," applies in fact to many geniuses of different periods—writers, musicians, and artists from Shakespeare and Beethoven through Chagall and Calder to Pynchon, Philip Roth, and Bob Dylan and beyond—who have been extraordinarily responsive to demotic voices within their respective cultures. We are now better equipped than ever to bring alive the fullness of their vision, and to rescue their lesser known contemporaries from undeserved oblivion, by tapping into the kinds of hidden cultural energies that Reynolds reveals in his landmark book.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the National Endowment for the Humanities for awarding me a year-long research grant through the American Antiquarian Society, permitting me to accomplish much of the research required by this book. I am extremely grateful to the fine staff of the American Antiquarian Society and to the staffs of the Columbia University Library, the Bobst Library at New York University, the New-York Historical Society, the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Library of Congress, the Newberry Library, the Northwestern University Library, the Bancroft Library at the University of California, the Houghton and Widener Libraries at Harvard University, and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Among those who first stimulated my interest in American literature and culture were my professors Leo Marx, Henry Nash Smith, Richard Bridgman, Larzer Ziff, and Henry F. May. Those who expressed support for *Beneath the American Renaissance* early on included Alan Trachtenberg, Daniel Aaron, and Kenneth Silverman. I profited greatly from the editorial assistance of Robert Gottlieb, A. S. Mehta, and Jane Garrett.

I thank Shannon McLachlan at Oxford University Press for having faith in *Beneath the American Renaissance* and expertly overseeing its reissue.

My greatest debt is to my wife Suzanne, who not only understood my long hours at the library but also intelligently read the manuscript and made many helpful suggestions.

*This page intentionally left blank*

BENEATH  
THE AMERICAN  
RENAISSANCE



*This page intentionally left blank*

## *Introduction*

# THE OPEN TEXT: AMERICAN WRITERS AND THEIR ENVIRONMENT

The pre-Civil War period, identified by F. O. Matthiessen as the "American Renaissance," has long been recognized as the richest in America's literary history, the period that produced Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, Poe, Whitman, and Dickinson. This study compares the major literature with a broad range of lesser-known works, combines literary analysis with social history, and discusses writings of various geographical regions and of both sexes. It attempts to bridge the gap between criticism that treats literature as self-referential and cultural history, in which the uniqueness of the literary text often gets lost. American literature was generated by a highly complex environment in which competing language and value systems, openly at war on the level of popular culture, provided rich material which certain responsive authors adopted and transformed in dense literary texts.

Delving *beneath* the American Renaissance occurs in two senses: analysis of the process by which hitherto neglected popular modes and stereotypes were imported into literary texts; and discovery of a number of forgotten writings which, while often raw, possess a surprising energy and complexity that make them worthy of study on their own. An understanding of the antebellum context questions the long-held notion that American authors were marginal figures in a society that offered few literary materials. The truth may well be that, far from being estranged from their context, they were in large part created by it. Each of their careers illustrates in a different way Emerson's belief that the writer "needs a basis which he

cannot supply; a tough chaos-deep soil, . . . and this basis the popular mind supplies.”<sup>1</sup>

To study the cross-influences and dynamics between the major and minor writers is to participate in the democratic spirit of the major authors themselves, all of whom in various ways expressed their profound debt to lesser writers. As suggested by the above quotation, the relationship Emerson perceived between popular and elite culture was hardly one of hostility or antithesis: rather, it was one of reciprocity and cross-fertilization—almost of symbiosis. Other authors had remarkably similar ideas on the topic. Melville, in his essay on Hawthorne, wrote: “[G]reat geniuses are parts of the times; they themselves are the times, and possess a correspondent coloring.”<sup>2</sup> In his semiautobiographical portrait of Pierre Glendinning, Melville explained that even the most apparently trivial literature contributed to his author-hero’s creativity: “A varied scope of reading, little suspected by his friends, and randomly acquired by a random but lynx-eyed mind . . . poured one considerable contributory stream into that bottomless spring of original thought which the occasion and time had caused to burst out in himself.”<sup>3</sup> Melville himself was a lynx-eyed reader quick to discover literary possibilities in randomly acquired minor literature. Many of his works are heavily indebted to his variegated reading, which seems to have been done in the spirit of a character in *White-Jacket* who says that “public libraries have an imposing air, and doubtless contain invaluable volumes, yet, somehow, the books that prove most agreeable, grateful, and companionable, are those we pick up by chance here and there; . . . those which pretend to little, but abound in much.”<sup>4</sup> Hawthorne too was a voracious reader of what he called “all sorts of good and good-for-nothing books,” including crime pamphlets, almanacs, and newspapers.<sup>5</sup> He explained his attraction to ephemeral literature as follows: “It is the Age itself that writes newspapers and almanacs, which therefore have a distinct purpose and meaning. . . . Genius . . . effects something permanent, yet still with a similarity of office to that of the more ephemeral writer. A work of genius is but the newspaper of a century[.]”<sup>6</sup> Whitman, whose early fiction and poetry provides a classic example of a writer discovering his powers by experimenting with popular modes, once wrote: “[A]ll kinds of light reading, novels, newspapers, gossip etc., serve as manure for the few *great productions* and are indispensable or perhaps are premises to something better.”<sup>7</sup>

To explore the contemporary cultural backgrounds of literary works is to complement the critical literature that focuses on American writers’ debt to classic literary sources. One of F. O. Matthiessen’s reasons for labeling this period the “American Renaissance” was his perception of extensive borrowings on the part of American writers from the Elizabe-

thans, particularly Shakespeare.<sup>8</sup> More recently, Harold Bloom has described a phenomenon he calls “the anxiety of influence,” whereby each major author is described as waging a titanic struggle to get free of the overwhelming influence of classic writers.<sup>9</sup> While such struggles are indeed visible in American writers, it has not been recognized that one of the main weapons wielded by the American writers against oppressive literary influence was a native idiom learned from their own popular culture. The truly indigenous American literary texts were produced mainly by those who had opened sensitive ears to a large variety of popular cultural voices.

Those writers now recognized as “major” had, of course, a profound debt to classic literature; but the key factor to understand is that, unlike some of their contemporaries, they transformed classic themes and devices into truly American texts by fusing them with native literary materials. *Moby-Dick* is a good example of this phenomenon. Melville has often been called America’s most Shakespearian writer and *Moby-Dick* his most Shakespearian work. The fact is that *Moby-Dick*, despite certain Shakespearian scenes and characters, is *not* America’s most Shakespearian work. That honor goes to a series of forgotten plays written in the 1850s and 1860s by Poe’s friend Laughton Osborn, plays that have been deservedly ignored because they sheepishly attempt to duplicate both the form and the content of Shakespeare’s plays. *Moby-Dick*, in contrast, gives a fully Americanized version of Shakespeare and other classic sources precisely because it democratically encompasses a uniquely large number of antebellum textual strategies. The anecdotal sermon style, the visionary mode, the Oriental dialogue, dark temperance, city-mysteries fiction, sensational yellow novels, grotesque native humor—these are some of the forgotten popular genres that Melville grafts together to forge symbols that possess stylistic plurality as well as broad cultural representativeness.

The major American writers knew that their compelling metaphysical and artistic concerns—like those of Shakespeare in his day—were produced by a general fermentation of ideas and styles at their unique historical moment. One way to explain these writers’ debt to their age is to identify specific “sources.” But source study takes us only so far toward comprehending the complex process of literary genesis and flowering, and it does not often lead to larger conclusions about the writer’s place in society and history. Emerson perceptively noted that more influential than sources is the temper of the age, which becomes a cultural determinant of the themes and style of great literature. As he writes in *Representative Men*: “[T]he ideas of the time are in the air, and infect all who breathe it. . . . We learn of our contemporaries what they know without effort, and almost through the pores of our skin.”<sup>10</sup> Literary genius, in Emerson’s

view, lies in “being altogether receptive; in letting the world do all, and suffering the spirit of the hour to pass unobstructed through the mind.”<sup>11</sup> The present book describes the socioliterary “air” surrounding the major writers and explores the process by which this air seeped through the pores of their skin. Sources do concern me, but only insofar as they illuminate what Emerson called the “spirit of the hour” nurturing the writer’s “great genial power.” The major texts can be more fully appreciated when considered in the context of the socioliterary factors that suddenly made literary sources, national history, and personal experience available to literary artists as materials for symbolic, timeless literature.

To investigate this subject is to address a central issue of modern literary theory: the bearing that exterior circumstances and the social world have upon the literary text. This book attempts to bring together literary and social analysis by showing that the special richness of major literary works was to a great degree historically determined. It studies literary texts as products of a sudden fluidity of textual modes and strategies perceived and recorded by certain authors, whose special sensitivity to outside forces is heightened by unusual biographical factors. It suggests that certain writers of a specific historical period produced literary texts precisely because of their keen responsiveness to their social and literary environment.

The view of the major writers as alienated rebels has become deeply ingrained in our view of American literature. It has become common to view high literature as an isolated act of rebellion or subversion against a dominant culture. Indeed, several schools of critics have argued that the most distinctive characteristic of American literature is its rejection or transcendence of social concerns. Lionel Trilling in *The Liberal Imagination* (1950) anticipated many later cultural theorists, most notably Richard Chase, by defining classic American literature as an alternate reality distant from social life.<sup>12</sup> Several generations of close readers, from the New Critics through the poststructuralists, have emphasized the supposedly autonomous nature of literary works, placing them at a distance from a popular culture regarded as tame and simplistic. Psychoanalytic critics have typically argued that major authors projected in their works private fantasies and aggressions in reaction against a banal culture that provided no outlet for the tabooed. More recently, with the rise of new historical methodologies in literary criticism, this notion of the alienation of American authors from their society is beginning to be questioned.<sup>13</sup>

The interpretation of the major writers as isolated subversives reifies the existing canon and ignores the open nature of literary texts. It should be recognized that the major writers saw themselves as distinctly democratic artists committed, in Melville’s words, “to carry republican progressive-

ness into Literature” and to immerse themselves so deeply in their time and culture that their works actually became, in Whitman’s phrase, “the age transfigured.”<sup>14</sup>

This book suggests 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. Literariness—distinguished by special density and by demonstrable artistry of language or structure—is an intrinsic quality of certain works that can justifiably be called “major”; but it is misleading to remove these works from their context or to ignore unfamiliar writings that in time may also be designated as major.

The emergence of America’s national literature in the first half of the nineteenth century resulted, in large part, from a dramatic shift in the rhetorical strategies of popular social texts. Many different kinds of social texts suddenly lost their semiotic equivalences and became colored by a radical infusion of the imaginative. Popular sermons became increasingly dominated by secular anecdote, humor, and pungent images. Popular reform literature moved from staid, rational tracts on the remedies of vice to sensational, often highly metaphorical exposés of the perverse results of vice. Newspapers went through an especially momentous change. The rise of the brash, garish penny papers, supplanting the stodgy sixpennies of the past, brought a new hyperbolic emotionalism and rather amoral exploitation of the tragic or perverse. Even certain papers that tried to remain objective mirrored a society whose republican ideals were mocked by the institution of chattel slavery in the South and wage slavery in the North. On all fronts, it seemed that signifiers were being harshly torn from signifieds, as religious, political, and even journalistic signs suddenly lacked reliable referents.

One outcome of this shift in social texts was an equally dramatic rise in the number and variety of imaginative texts. Since the overwhelming majority of antebellum imaginative texts have been neglected by modern critics, most generalizations about the literary backgrounds of the major literature have been built on shaky foundations. Investigating the total range of fiction volumes, pamphlets, and periodical literature of the day, I have found that the period between 1800 and 1860 witnessed the emergence of two conflicting popular modes, the Conventional and the Subversive, and a third mode, Romantic Adventure, which occupied a kind of middle ground. During the 1830s and 1840s the cultural influence of the three modes grew so enormously that they became a fertile source of thematic conflict and stylistic complexity within the major texts. And the remarkable five years (1850–55) that produced *The Scarlet Letter*, *Representative Men*, *Moby-Dick*, *Pierre*, *Walden*, *The House of the Seven Gables*, and *Leaves*

of *Grass* also witnessed the simultaneous crescendoing of the conflicting popular modes, creating a kind of cultural explosion that contributed greatly to the energy and ambiguity of the major literature.

The deep affinities between the major writers and their popular contemporaries may be bypassed in selective readings in the unfamiliar literature of the day, creating a lopsided view of antebellum popular culture, one that greatly exaggerates the importance of Conventional literature while neglecting the immense cultural power of what I call Subversive literature, which was bizarre, nightmarish, and often politically radical. The tendency has been to view the works of writers like Melville and Hawthorne as a revolt against a sentimentalized, optimistic literary culture. A complete review of the volumes listed in Lyle Wright's bibliography of early American fiction reveals that the proportion of Conventional volumes published in the United States, when weighed against the other two modes, actually dropped dramatically after 1820 and remained at a relatively modest level until the Civil War. Before 1800, Conventional fiction constituted nearly 60 percent of the volumes produced, whereas the figure hovered around 20 percent for the 1820–60 period. The proportionate number of Subversive and Romantic Adventure volumes, in contrast, rose from about 20 percent before 1800 to more than 55 percent for the 1841–50 decade.<sup>15</sup> Surprisingly, very little has been written on the Subversive and Romantic Adventure modes, which not only became increasingly influential as time passed but also broke new literary ground that was cultivated by the major writers. As we continue to look for forgotten literature to be added to the growing American canon, a good place to begin our search is among these feisty, sometimes highly problematic novels.

Subversive fiction, which was often highly irrational and rebellious, can be distinguished from the third kind of imaginative text, Romantic Adventure, which was action-packed and sometimes dark but usually stylistically restrained. While the Subversive had roots in eighteenth-century British criminal and Gothic fiction, it took on distinctly American characteristics when reinterpreted by authors who wished to find literary correlatives for the horrific or turbulent aspects of perceived reality in the new republic. The symbolic outcry of Melville's Ahab as he watches the *Pegquod* sink—"The ship! The hearse! . . . Its wood could only be American!"—speaks for a whole line of indigenous Subversive texts.<sup>16</sup> There developed an intensifying debate between those who wanted to retain what was regarded as the calmness and polish of British prose and those, on the other hand, who called for a distinctly American wildness, roughness, and savagery, even at the expense of all past literary rules.

Much of this book is devoted to showing the ways in which the social and literary environment became riddled with moral mixtures and am-

biguities that prompted various literary responses. Conventional literature tried to avoid or defeat these ambiguities; Romantic Adventure either evaded or objectified them; Subversive literature allowed them to erupt volcanically in often chaotic, fragmented fashion.

When we arrive at the small group of literary texts we find a compact explosiveness of image that occurs because an unusually large variety of cultural codes and strategies are fused. Literary texts brought a measure of self-consciousness and control to the literary response, as certain authors began to manipulate the modes and play them off against each other. The typical literary text of the American Renaissance is far from being a "self-sufficient text," sealed off from its environment. It is indeed what one might call an "open text," since it provides an especially democratic meeting place for numerous idioms and voices from other kinds of contemporary texts. These idioms and voices often conflict to create paradox and irony. But they also *fuse* consistently to create a kind of stylistic implosion resulting in extraordinary compaction of image. Emerson's "transparent eye-ball," Hawthorne's scarlet letter, Melville's white whale, the water of Walden Pond, Whitman's grass leaves—all such complex images represented an enormous compression of varied cultural voices in an explosive center. In the literary text, ambiguity or mystery itself becomes a central issue consciously treated. In Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, mystery forms the basis of an exultant individualism and an affirmation of stylistic potency; in Melville, Hawthorne, and Dickinson this potency coexists with more problematic ponderings of ambiguity. It is when each specific contemporary textual strategy is stripped of merely local, time-specific referents and fused with other contemporary textual strategies and classical devices that a new universality is achieved.

The arrival at literariness after an immersion in the popular is repeatedly scrutinized throughout this book. In most cases, it can be said that literary texts were produced only after the major authors had gained firsthand exposure to competing value systems and literary modes. Emerson, for instance, was distinguished from his rather elitist fellow Boston liberals by his rapturous recognition of the rhetorical innovations of the popular preacher Edward Thompson Taylor, the homespun sailors' parson whose poetic sermons epitomized the infusion of the imaginative in popular social texts. Indeed, Emerson's major essays possess native rhetorical fire largely because they are full of the kind of explosive imagery Taylor and others had popularized. Whitman, too, was strongly influenced by the innovative social texts of Father Taylor and other popular speakers. If *Leaves of Grass* has a unique expansiveness, it is because as a popular author earlier in his career Whitman had experimented with every conceivable popular rhetorical voice, from the piously Conventional to the gro-



tesquely Subversive. Similarly, the richness of *Moby-Dick* results largely from Melville's wide-ranging experimentation with popular strategies in his earlier novels.

As will be seen, American writers followed a roughly similar career pattern of early experimentation with popular modes followed by self-conscious mixture of the modes, then stylization of the modes in highly complex literary texts, and sometimes in late career a recoil away from the purely literary toward other forms of expression. In the literary text, which usually is produced in mid-career, we witness a coalescence of competing systems manifested in central images that are irreducible to a single meaning.

To note the unique complexity of the literary text is not to elevate it to the dubious heaven of aporia or indeterminacy. The distinguishing quality of the literary text is not radical subversiveness but unique suggestiveness and great reconstructive power. During the American Renaissance, the proliferation of popular social and imaginative texts was liberating, since it released rich images for literary use, but at the same time it was potentially disturbing, since it threatened to bring about a complete inversion of values and an obliteration of genuine emotion. The major writers sought in their central texts to incorporate as many different popular images as possible and to reconstruct these images by imbuing them with a depth and control they lacked in their crude native state. Uniquely attentive to conflicting voices within their contemporary culture, they transformed a wide array of popular modes and idioms into literary art by fusing them with each other and with archetypes derived from classic literature and philosophy. Their adaptation of an unusual variety of their own culture's popular literary strategies made their works time-specific and culture-specific. Their fusion of these strategies with classical archetypes aided their effort to lend resonance to themes and devices that remained formless or undirected in their popular form. The density of their best works results from this willed reconstruction and intensification of a varied range of popular images.

Exploring the heterogeneous writings that engendered the major literature reveals the inadequacy of hermetic "close readings" that have long dominated analysis of the American Renaissance. The present book rejects the notion of a "definitive" close reading, recognizing that the literary text is a rich compound of socioliterary strands, each of which stems from a tremendous body of submerged writings that have been previously hidden from view. The sections of this book deal successively with religion, reform, sensationalism, women's issues, and humor, tracing the process by which forgotten texts within each dimension were brought to preliterary status and then were assimilated and transformed in literary texts. The

writers we have learned to regard as major were those who were particularly attentive to differing socioliterary phenomena and especially inventive in their efforts to reconstruct them artistically. Their full cultural representativeness and simultaneous reconstructive originality become clear when we revisit them several times, from different angles of vision.

*This page intentionally left blank*

---

*Part One*

---

GOD'S BOW, MAN'S ARROWS:  
*Religion, Reform, and  
American Literature*

*This page intentionally left blank*

## THE NEW RELIGIOUS STYLE

A CHIEF reason for the rise of literary texts in the antebellum period was a widespread shift in the style of popular religious discourse from the doctrinal to the imaginative. Between 1800 and 1860, popular sermon style, which had in Puritan times been characterized primarily by theological rigor and restraint of the imagination, came to be dominated by diverting narrative, extensive illustrations, and even colloquial humor. In addition, the mainstream churches, knowing they had to compete with novels for the public's attention, began issuing thousands of tracts which increasingly featured moral stories. At the same time, a spirit of piety permeated much secular fiction and poetry. What was once the province of theologians became largely the business of creative writers. By 1841, William Ellery Channing, the leading liberal minister of the day, could concede: "The press is a mightier power than the pulpit."<sup>1</sup>

Critics have long had difficulty locating the major writers in the religious and philosophical context of early-nineteenth-century America. Most have made a strong contrast between the major literature and popular religious writings. A careful look at several major writers' careers, however, suggests that here as elsewhere the standard critical view must be qualified: authors such as Emerson, Whitman, Melville, and Dickinson were in fact distinguished among their literary contemporaries by the breadth and intensity of their responsiveness to experimental developments on the popular religious scene.

The widespread search for replacements for bygone religious texts and

dogmas produced a fluidity of genres that contributed directly to the emergence of America's national literature. The gap between sermons and novels, between religious poetry and secular poetry, between sacred allegory and earthly story—in short, the gap between doctrinal social texts and entertaining imaginative texts—suddenly became far narrower than it had been in Puritan times. Previously sacrosanct themes and genres were made available for purely stylized use by American writers. The major literature was produced at this crucial watershed moment between the metaphysical past and the secular future, between the typological, otherworldly ethos of Puritanism and the mimetic, earthly world of literary realism.

The transfer of religion from dogma to the imagination had dramatic repercussions among sophisticated thinkers. Emerson moved from early use of bold illustrations in his Unitarian sermons through a delighted witnessing of even more imaginative sermonizing by evangelical preachers to his final view of the poet as priest. Whitman's famous statement "The priest departs, the divine literature comes" was prepared for by a long period during which he took pleasure in the increasingly secular religious style, a style he often experimented with in his early poetry and fiction. For Hawthorne and Melville, this new style opened up both bygone American Calvinism and sacrosanct texts such as the Bible and *Pilgrim's Progress* for nondogmatic use in modernized allegories and metaphysical fictions. Emily Dickinson, who was extremely sensitive to sermon style and to popular religious literature, discovered psychological, metaphorical reapplications of traditional religious forms and images. Poe progressed from early imitation of popular religious styles (especially the visionary mode) to a nonreligious aesthetic which equated poetic effect with supernal beauty.

Much of the symbolic resonance and thematic complexity of the major texts results from a fusion of elements from two distinctive phenomena of the antebellum religious context: the new sermon style, especially evident in frontier revival preaching; and images from popular fiction and poetry dealing with religion. Stylistic alternatives to threatened faith were being frenetically produced by literally hundreds of antebellum writers. A large floating pool of reconstructive devices were thereby offered to the major authors by their popular religious culture. The major writers distinguished themselves by absorbing a stunning variety of these devices and rechanneling them in literary art.

### Emerson's Progress

While Emerson's philosophy and style had a powerful impact upon numerous American writers, it is important to recognize that he himself

was the product of a larger change in the style of popular religious discourse. Specifically, a previous change in American sermon style prepared the way for his artistic appropriation of religious imagery.

Colorful illustrations had characterized American revival preaching from the time of Solomon Stoddard's mass religious "harvests" in the 1670s and had become widely used by Great Awakening preachers like Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield. Edwards's *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* (1741), produced by the Great Awakening, became the most famous sermon ever preached by an American precisely because of its extensive use of powerful, horrifying illustrations, such as the comparison of man to "a spider or some loathsome insect" dangling over the pit of hell and of God to an archer whose bow is bent and whose arrow is always ready to be "made drunk with your blood."<sup>2</sup> It should be noted, however, that colonial sermons, including Edwards's, were numerically arranged expositions of biblical passages that followed the traditional Ramist format of "Text," "Doctrine," and "Proof" (or "Application"). Examples were used solely for their didactic message rather than for their entertainment value. Despite the vigor of his images, Edwards was typical in following the tripartite format. In all his sermons he was especially cautious to achieve a tactful synthesis of reasoned doctrine and apt illustrations; he specifically warned ministers to avoid numerous "physical impressions on the imagination" that might lure listeners away from grace into the realm of "mere nature."<sup>3</sup> A hatred of "Romish" impurities, a respect for scholastic authority and doctrinal consistency, and a belief in the depravity of the natural world from which most illustrations are drawn—all of these notions contributed to a generally conservative style even among the most forward-looking colonial preachers.

A truly informal, indigenous preaching style did not begin to emerge until the Second Great Awakening (1798–1815).<sup>4</sup> The earliest and most daring pulpit storytelling in the antebellum period occurred among a group of preachers—Southern blacks—who at first addressed only their fellow slaves but who were destined to attract increasing attention among white mainstream Protestants. We are all familiar with the unparalleled sensation created by Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom*, whose graphic religious stories showed how, in Stowe's words, "the negro mind, impassioned and imaginative, always attaches itself to hymns and expressions of a vivid and pictorial nature."<sup>5</sup>

What needs to be highlighted is that this innovative use of imagination by black religionists had been an important element in American popular culture ever since the 1790s, when black evangelist Harry Hoosier had accompanied Francis Asbury through the Southern frontier retelling Bible stories in a lively dialect. Even more anecdotal than Hoosier was the



Virginia Baptist John Jasper, who had a remarkable talent for “*stringing together picture after picture*” and for making “a story vivid and familiar to an audience.”<sup>6</sup> This typical use of folk storytelling techniques—evident throughout the century in the sermons of black preachers like Lemuel Haynes, Uncle Jack, and Harry Evans—was characterized especially by vernacular dramatizations of the Bible and by secular stories about the conflict between the powerless and the powerful. It is significant that Melville’s *Moby-Dick* is full of references to black religious practices, from the passionate black preacher Ishmael witnesses when he first enters New Bedford through the colorful rituals of the humane Queequeg to the entertaining sermon delivered to the sharks by the black cook, Fleece. It is also notable that Whitman developed a powerful fascination with the black preachers and orators who became prominent in New York during the antebellum period. The pictorial style of blacks was an especially creative prototype for American writers who were seeking imaginative replacements for the doctrinal preaching of the past.

An even more important stylistic change during the Second Great Awakening was initiated by white frontier evangelists such as Peter Cartwright, Barton Warren Stone, and James McGready. The fictionalized pulpit anecdotes of these hardy frontier circuit riders and camp-meeting revivalists impelled the rapid growth of the Methodist and Baptist churches. The religious frenzy at camp meetings—manifested in such “exercises” as dancing, barking, shouting, and running—was sparked in large part by emotional, illustrative sermons preached by unlearned ministers to frontier congregations who had little interest in theological niceties. Between 1805 and 1825 the new revivalism was brought to the Northern cities by immensely popular evangelists such as John Summerfield, Lorenzo Dow, and the entertaining “mechanick preacher” Johnny Edwards, all of whom accelerated the general tendency from doctrinal to imaginative sermonizing.

At the same time that American sermon style was being dramatically altered on the popular level, it was also affected by intellectual currents from abroad, most notably European Romanticism and the Scottish Common Sense philosophy. Romanticism helped engender the widespread interest among American preachers (especially Boston liberals) in extemporaneous sermons springing from intuition and punctuated by examples from the natural world and from secular literature. Scottish rhetoricians such as George Campbell and Hugh Blair called for a simplified “popular eloquence” based upon practical example rather than abstruse metaphysics.<sup>7</sup>

Emerson was distinguished among his liberal contemporaries by his openness to *both* the foreign intellectual influences and the new American

revival style. A principal element of the complexity of his major writings is the cross-fertilization and, on occasion, the resounding collision between the polished Unitarian style and the vibrant, popularly oriented revival style. He moved from early fascination with the intellectual sources of change to a hearty interest in the kind of torrid popular evangelical preaching that his Brahmin colleagues generally dismissed as crude and chaotic. He produced literary texts precisely because he imported into his prose the warmth and color of a popular idiom that most liberals snobbishly castigated.

The artistic implications of the changing pulpit style were quickly recognized by Emerson, as can be seen in his early journals. His first exposure to the change came while he was a Harvard senior in 1820, when Edward Everett, having just returned from a five-year stay in Germany, where he imbibed European Romantic thought, initiated a revolution in sermon style among Unitarians by delivering a sermon abounding, as Emerson later recalled, "in daring imagery, in parable," giving the young Emerson one of his first lessons in "the magic of form."<sup>8</sup> For a while Emerson was frightened by the prospect of sermon technique becoming more highly valued than religious content. He lamented in his journal in 1823 that "there is a danger of a *poetical* religion from the tendencies of the age," and he expressed fear that soon religion would "consist in nothing else than the progressive introduction of apposite metaphors."<sup>9</sup> Despite these initial reservations, he was coming to believe that his own mental strength was imagination rather than reason, and in 1824 he expressed delight that "the preaching most in vogue at the present day depends chiefly on imagination for its success."<sup>10</sup> By the time he assumed the pastorate of Boston's Second Church in the late 1820s, he was actually prepared to take imaginative flights beyond the sermon form altogether. Only 25 percent of his sermons at Second Church were concerned with doctrinal issues, and his introduction of what he called "new forms of address, new modes of illustration" shocked even the informal Rev. Henry Ware, Jr., who upbraided Emerson for using irreverent imagery in the pulpit.<sup>11</sup> Emerson's reply to Ware shows how crucial his stylistic experimentation was to the expansion of his philosophical vision. "I have affected generally a mode of illustration rather bolder than the usage of our preaching warrants," Emerson explained, "on the principle that our religion is nothing limited or partial, but of universal application, and is interested in all that interests man."<sup>12</sup>

And then came Father Taylor. During the 1830s, the crucial transitional period when Emerson abandoned the Unitarian pulpit and moved to Transcendentalist philosophizing, the maturation of his literary consciousness owed much to the image-filled sermons of Edward Thompson Taylor,

the popular evangelical minister of the Seamen's Bethel Church in Boston which Emerson often attended and where he sometimes was a guest preacher. Father Taylor proved to be an important figure in America's literary renaissance. Not only did he profoundly affect Emerson, but he became the prototype for Father Mapple in *Moby-Dick* and was admired by Thoreau and Whitman (who called Taylor America's only "essentially perfect orator").<sup>13</sup>

While Emerson's relationship with Taylor is well known, the social and literary ramifications of this relationship merit further discussion. Taylor's sermons were explosive social texts that fused the mild theology of Boston liberalism with the daring imagery of colloquial revivalism. Taylor had been raised in the streets of Richmond, Virginia, and had sailed before the mast as a privateersman in the War of 1812 before becoming successively a farm laborer, a cobbler, a tin peddler, and at last a Methodist preacher. His unusual rhetoric grew directly from the volcanic soil of American popular culture. Known for his "great hot heart," he brought to the American pulpit a secularized, showmanlike style that would be unmatched in imaginative vigor until the advent of post-Civil War preachers like T. De Witt Talmage and Dwight Moody.

Ushering Southern argot and seamen's slang into the center of the Brahmin establishment, Taylor, who called himself "a Unitarian graft on the Methodist stock," preached extemporaneous, free-flowing sermons filled with racy anecdotes and striking metaphors. In the middle of one typical sermon, tracing the moral descent of a country boy ruined by city vices like gambling and drinking, Taylor lifted his hand and whispered, "Hush-h-h, he is cursing his mother—shut the windows of heaven, *shut* the windows." He treated divine matters with a new familiarity, as is shown by his homely advice: "Don't burn the candle down to the end in sin and then give God the snuff." Taylor became a genuine friend of Emerson, whom he defended against all detractors even after Emerson abandoned formal Christianity. When asked if Emerson was headed for hell, he declared with characteristic jauntiness: "Go there; Why, if he went there he would change the climate and the tide of emigration would turn that way." His images, according to one listener, "went right home like the arrows from the bow of the Conqueror no other man could draw."<sup>14</sup> In the vivid but otherworldly Puritan preaching of Jonathan Edwards, *divine* arrows were thought to be aimed at man's heart. By Taylor's time, it was clear that all the arrows were man-made, and God's bow was firmly held in human hands.

Although Taylor amused and befriended many Boston liberals, Emerson was alone among his contemporaries (Whitman and Melville excepted) in realizing the full significance of Taylor's stylistic innovations. On the

most obvious level, Taylor's brash self-confidence pushed Emerson toward his famous assertions of self-reliance. Believing that all other preaching seemed "puny" and "cowardly" beside Taylor's, Emerson said that when you see Taylor "instantly you behold that a man is a Mover."<sup>15</sup> Indeed, it was no very great distance from Taylor's boast: "I am no man's model, no man's copy, no man's agent" to Emerson's advice: "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string" or "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist."<sup>16</sup> More subtly, Taylor's oratory showed the possibilities of a new *stylistic* self-reliance whereby the emphasis in religious discussion shifted from dogmatic content to creative image, from doctrinal exposition to fluid poeticizing. Taylor's manner, Emerson noted, showed that "Form seems to be bowing Substance out of the World," as "Taylor's muse" is "a panorama of images from all nature & art."<sup>17</sup> Calling Taylor "the Shakespeare of the sailor & the poor," he wrote of a typical Taylor sermon: "The wonderful & laughing life of his illustration keeps us broad awake. A string of rockets all night."<sup>18</sup> Emerson declared that Taylor "rolls the world into a ball & tosses it from hand to hand."<sup>19</sup>

The new sermon manner, as initiated by the frontier revivalists and perfected by Taylor, was simultaneously *all* style and *no* style, and some of the tensions in our major literature derive from this paradoxical combination. The new popular sermons were filled with unusual images that showed the nineteenth-century religionist's search for poetic alternatives to doctrine. These images, however, were usually unpremeditated, unrestrained. This combination of artifice and artlessness was noticed by the major authors. Emerson and Whitman, for instance, called Taylor a natural poet on the level of Robert Burns or the great Renaissance writers; on the other hand, they stressed there was no plan, no reason, no connections behind Taylor's imagery.

An equally important literary manifestation of the new sermon style was a humanization and secularization of religious discourse. Popular preachers like Taylor, Dow, and Summerfield were above all *human* in delivery and message. They not only spoke the language of their congregations but also expressed the universal human feelings of love, friendship, revenge, gaiety, terror. To be sure, emotion had been summoned into American preaching by Edwards, Whitefield, and other eighteenth-century preachers; but even the most colorful early preachers had been careful to warn constantly against confusing religious affection with human feeling. Their nineteenth-century successors were not so cautious. A forcefully *secular* emotionalism had arisen during the camp-meeting revivals of the Second Great Awakening and, despite loud resistance from orthodox theologians and rationalistic liberals, was destined to take on progressively more humanized forms as its influence broadened in the course of the century.

The major literary texts were produced at a moment of cross fire between opposing sermon styles—between the polished but rational style of Boston liberals and the emotional, often wildly imaginative style of the revivalists. Emerson's progression in the 1830s from illustrative but still stodgy Unitarian sermons to the highly imagistic, energetic prose of his major works owed much to his rapturous response to the revival style that liberals like Alcott, Brownson, and Channing dismissed. Having filled his journals and letters of the 1833–36 period with enthusiastic remarks about Father Taylor's preaching, Emerson incorporated both the creativity and humanism of the revival style into his major essays and addresses, produced between 1836 and 1844. His comment on Taylor's ability to roll the world in a ball and toss it from hand to hand was expanded and made universal in *Nature*, in which he says that the imaginative person "tosses the creation like a bauble from hand to hand, and uses it to embody any caprice of thought that is upper-most in his mind."<sup>20</sup> His demand in his 1841 lecture "The Poet" for flexible form, passionate feeling, and native materials in American poetry was linked directly to Father Taylor, for he declared that the poetic genius may be found "in some lowly Bethel by the seaside where a hard-featured, scarred, and wrinkled methodist whose face is a network of cordage becomes the poet of the sailor and the fisherman, whilst he pours out the abundant streams of his thought through a language all glittering and fiery with imagination."<sup>21</sup>

Emerson's mature style was not a duplication of the new religious idiom but rather an adaptation and expansion of this idiom, which in Emerson achieves a special force because it is combined with sophisticated philosophical ideas. Emerson once praised Swedenborg for engrafting high philosophy upon the popular Christianity of his day; Emerson himself did the same with the religion of his period. That the philosophy without the popular idiom was not enough is suggested by the arid, often rarefied prose of most of Emerson's Transcendentalist associates. Only Emerson, who fully recognized the imaginative vivacity of the popular religious style, could write: "The religions of the world are the ejaculations of a few imaginative men."<sup>22</sup> Only he, having responded to the fluid imagery of popular speakers, could declare in a typically homely metaphor that "all symbols are fluxional; all language is vehicular and transitive, and is good, as ferries and horses are, for conveyance, not as farms and houses are, for homestead."<sup>23</sup>

Emerson's Divinity School Address (1838) comes closest, among antebellum social texts about religion, to achieving literary status because it applies inventive imagery (much of it obviously indebted to the popular religious style) to the subversion of the doctrines and forms of traditional Christianity. While preparing the Address, Emerson had expressed disgust

in his journals at the frigid sermons of a Unitarian colleague, Barzillai Frost, while he again commended the warm sermon style of Father Taylor, which he said reflected a new vibrant style of American oratory also evident in popular speakers like Daniel Webster. In the Address itself Emerson uses the daringly humanistic popular idiom to undercut the formal, elitist style represented by Frost. The two styles collide most memorably when Emerson tells the story of going one winter Sunday to hear a preacher whose sermon "had no one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined . . . The capital secret of his profession, namely, to convert life into truth, he had not yet learned."<sup>24</sup> "The true preacher," Emerson stressed, "can be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life,—life passed through the fire of his thought."

Throughout the Address, Emerson enacts this enthusiasm for the new secular sermon style by using imagery from the natural world, popular literature, and his own experience, imagery that by turns allures and repels but that always entertains. The above attack on the formal preacher sticks in the reader's brain because it is barbed with a striking image sharper than any of Father Taylor's stylistic arrows: "A snow storm," Emerson recalls, "was falling around us. The snow storm was real; the preacher merely spectral; and the eye felt the sad contrast in looking at him, and then out of the window behind him, at the beautiful meteor of snow. He had lived in vain." This rhetorical use of earthly imagery characterizes the entire Address, from the opening paragraph, in which Emerson invitingly rhapsodizes on "this refulgent summer," to the conclusion, in which he gives the metaphorical mandate: "now let us do what we can to rekindle the smouldering, nigh quenched fire on the altar." At moments, Emerson arrestingly juxtaposes the grotesque and the lovely, as when he says, "the word Miracle, as pronounced by Christian churches . . . is Monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain." At other times, he dazzles us with a rapid string of shifting images, as when in three successive sentences he calls the religious sentiment mountain air, the embalmer of the world, myrrh, storax, chlorine, rosemary, and the silent song of the stars. At all points in the Address, Emerson takes the free-flowing sermon style and the humanized religion of his day to its natural conclusion: the subversion of dogmatic Christianity and the joyous assertion of poetic creativity. When he concluded the Address by defining the sermon as "the speech of man to men,—essentially the most flexible of all organs, or all forms," he was taking to a new extreme the imaginative, secular ethos of American public orators. In doing so, he was choosing artistry and humanity above Christianity. It is small wonder that the Address was widely denounced as "the latest form of infidelity" and that Emerson was not

invited to address the Divinity School for nearly thirty years. He had been swept by a swelling wave in American popular culture toward new poetic revelations that temporarily alienated him from his more elitist Unitarian brethren but eventually earned him popular favor and enduring fame.

### Other Archers

The same popular religious currents that influenced Emerson contributed in different ways to Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Melville's *Moby-Dick*, and some of Emily Dickinson's poetry. It might seem strange to mention Melville's "wicked" novel in the same breath as Whitman's expansively optimistic poem and Dickinson's cryptic verses; but the new religious style was adaptable to any metaphysical vision and any genre. As Emerson had noted, preaching had suddenly become the most flexible of forms, available for either affirmative or skeptical use by American writers.

Whitman once declared to his follower Horace Traubel that he could not "have written a word of the *Leaves* without its religious rootground," a confession corroborated by his statement in the 1872 preface to *Leaves of Grass* that the "one deep purpose" that underlay all others in writing the poem was "the Religious purpose."<sup>25</sup> It is well known that Whitman's Quaker background powerfully influenced his sensibility. In particular, the Quaker belief in spontaneous expression of the "inner light," divorced from creeds or churches, prepared the way for Whitman's poetic singing of himself. It is also well known that Emerson's writings, which Whitman discovered in the early 1850s, gave Whitman a final impetus toward his poem—in Whitman's now famous words: "I was simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil."<sup>26</sup> What has been overlooked are the popular religious forces, particularly the evangelical sermon style, that helped bring Whitman to a simmer.

Over the course of the two decades (1835–55) that constituted the "long foreground" of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman regularly attended the revivals that swept through the working-class districts of New York City during this period. Like Emerson, Whitman was particularly attentive to the *style* of the fiery preachers he witnessed. In New York City, popular sermons were particularly open to specifically stylistic appreciation because they were the product of a new urban evangelism based as much on pulpit showmanship and verbal pyrotechnics as on otherworldly message. This is not to underestimate the seriousness of the revivals for all concerned; particularly in the dark years after the Panic of 1837, evangelical religion reflected very real tensions, frustrations, and hopes on the part of New York's working classes. However, the evangelical denominations, finding themselves in a

mushrooming mass market, had to develop new techniques of persuasion. They had to compete against each other, against the popular press, and against secular entertainments like stage melodramas and P. T. Barnum's museum for the attention of a working-class population increasingly made up of rowdies and roughs. By force of circumstances, sermon style was simplified and enlivened, while pulpit performers became more crowd-pleasingly theatrical.

Sources of both inspiration and diversion for the masses, the revivals were for Whitman a schoolroom of popular emotion and of stylized religion. The same boisterous firemen and streetcar drivers that Whitman rubbed shoulders with at the Old Bowery Theater were also frequenters of revivals. They hollered at the entertaining sermons of a preacher like John N. Maffitt with the same frenzy that they hurled rocks and fruit at actors they didn't like at the Old Bowery. The most important of "our amusements" in the late 1830s, Whitman later recalled, were "the churches, especially the Methodist ones, with their frequent 'revivals.' These last occurrences drew out all the young fellows, who attended with demure faces but always on the watch for deviltry." To reach such impish congregations, popular preachers had to fashion especially sharp arrows. As Whitman explained: "The galleries of the church were often sprinkled with the mischievous ones who came to ridicule and make sport; but even here the arrows of prayer and pleading sometimes took effect."<sup>27</sup>

Having abandoned creeds early in his manhood as result of his exposure to radical Quakerism and free thought, Whitman was particularly well situated to view the new sermon style with combined sensitivity and detachment. He developed a lifelong affection for the sermons of such pulpit showmen as Father Taylor, Elias Hicks, Henry Ward Beecher, John N. Maffitt, and T. De Witt Talmage. Because of his broadly nonsectarian outlook, Whitman could revel in the power and style of these sermonizers while discarding their doctrines. He responded with special warmth to what he called the "latent volcanic passion" of Taylor and Hicks. "Hearing such men," he declared, "sends to the winds all the books, and formulas, and polish'd speaking, and rules of oratory." It might seem paradoxical that here he praises Taylor for discarding all rules of oratory, while in the same breath he calls Taylor America's "essentially perfect orator."<sup>28</sup> Once again, we see a major writer learning from popular culture the artful artlessness that is reflected in the writer's own works.

In one sense, *Leaves of Grass* is the nineteenth-century's most stylized, least spontaneous poem, since it was constantly reshaped and amended through numerous editions in Whitman's long lifetime; on the other hand, it is volcanically emotive and "styleless," breaking all poetic rules. Doubtless this studied spontaneity owed much to the crafted carelessness that



Whitman perceived among the new breed of mass manipulators in the American pulpit.

In *Leaves of Grass* itself we see that humanistic religious style and word play (separated from any vestige of doctrine) has become for Whitman its own source of fecundity and regeneration. The popular preachers had begun the secularization of religious discourse that reaches fruition in Whitman's poem, in which the poetic fusion of the divine and the earthly produces combinations that have startling energy. If the preachers had treated the divine with an offhanded familiarity, Whitman outdoes them all by calling God "the great Camerado, the lover true for whom I pine."<sup>29</sup> If they had ushered warm human emotion into sermons, Whitman takes the further step of welding together sacred biblical imagery and common human beings:

By the mechanic's wife with her babe at her nipple interceding  
for every person born,  
Three scythes at harvest whizzing in a row from three lusty angels  
with shirts bagg'd out at their waists,  
The snag-tooth'd hostler with red hair redeeming sins past and  
to come[.]<sup>30</sup>

If Elias Hicks and Father Taylor could fill their sermons with homely nature imagery, Whitman could take such imagery to new extremes, calling a morning glory at his window more satisfying than "the metaphysics of books" and a mouse "miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels."<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, *Leaves of Grass* as a whole may be regarded as a sermon—a sermon, that is, of the distinctly experimental nineteenth-century American variety, in which the sacred and the secular, the mystical and the lowly are interwoven with remarkable ease. The poem's prophetic tone, its stately biblical cadences, its numerous references to the soul and to God: all of these religious elements give it a sermonic flavor. But the poem's variety of religious illustrations and applications make it a sermon of the broadest, most comprehensively human kind. Witness the bold reapplications of religious images in the following lines from "Song of Myself":

Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I  
touch or am touched from;  
The scent of these arm-pits is aroma finer than any prayer,  
This head is more than churches or bibles or creeds.<sup>32</sup>

or,

Why should I wish to see God better than this day?  
I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and  
each moment then,  
In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own  
face in the glass;  
I find letters from God dropped in the street, and every one  
is signed by God's name,  
And I leave them where they are, for I know that others will  
punctually come forever and ever.

These and many similar inspirational lines in *Leaves of Grass* show Whitman simultaneously adopting and transcending the new religious style of his American contemporaries. As intrigued as were popular preachers by secular alternatives to doctrine, none was so daring as to call armpit odor finer than prayer or body parts greater than bibles and creeds. As inventive as many of them were in coining images, none generated the energy produced by the delightful metaphor of God's letters being dropped daily in the streets. Whitman's lines have universal appeal because they usher the nineteenth-century religious style toward the comprehensively human and the imaginatively poetic.

Whitman's expectation that *Leaves of Grass* would become a best-selling poem was no doubt based partly on his awareness that striking religious imagery had become immensely popular in America. Like Emerson, however, Whitman had been carried by a strong popular impulse to new literary heights that could not be immediately appreciated by the masses. Protestant America before the Civil War was accustomed to mixing religion freely with humanity but was unwilling to go so far as to place armpit stench above prayer or poets above priests. It would take several decades for pulpit discourse to become so secularized that both Emerson's and Whitman's religious images would not raise eyebrows.

It would take even longer for America to accept two other products of its popular religious culture, Herman Melville and Emily Dickinson. The stylization of religion was especially iconoclastic in these writers' works, for it was used to communicate a dark vision that recalled Puritan Calvinism and that appeared at odds with nineteenth-century liberalism. Even though Melville and Dickinson in their characteristic moments seem distanced from the optimistic mainstream, their writings still bear the strong imprint of the new religious style.

Early in *Moby-Dick*, after describing Father Mapple's prow-shaped pulpit, Melville writes: "What could be more full of meaning?—for the pulpit is ever this earth's foremost part; all the rest comes in its rear; the pulpit leads the world."<sup>33</sup> Leads the world, and "leads" *Moby-Dick* too, Melville

might have added. Melville's creative exploitation of secularized religious images throughout the novel would almost certainly have been impossible if the "prow" of the popular American pulpit had not broken up the ice fields of doctrinal Calvinism in the decades prior to the writing of *Moby-Dick*. It is significant that Melville devotes three of the first nine chapters of the novel to Father Mapple, who is not only based on the foremost representative of stylistic change, Father Taylor, but whose sermon can be seen as a kind of culmination of the popular anecdotal pulpit style.

While the source for the hymn in *Moby-Dick* has been identified as a hymn of the Protestant Dutch Reformed Church (the church in which Melville was raised),<sup>34</sup> neither the hymn nor Mapple's sermon has been studied in its popular religious context. The most notable aspect of the hymn is that Melville boldly makes several changes in the original hymn, which describes a struggling soul's vision of hell and its subsequent salvation by God. By converting the "I" of the original hymn into Jonah and the surrounding moral terrors into a whale, Melville transforms a rather pedestrian exemplum on hell and redemption into a stirring narrative of capture and escape. Melville's humanization of the divine lends an especially folksy touch, as he has Jonah being rescued by God, who "flew to my relief, / As on a radiant dolphin borne" (in the original hymn, God flies to the sinner on the more traditional "cherub's wings"). By refashioning a church psalm, Melville was following a popular nineteenth-century tendency—the imaginative embellishment of sacred poetry—whose highest product would be Emily Dickinson's poems, almost all of which are structurally adapted from hymns.

Father Mapple's sermon culminates the popular movement toward imaginative pulpit style. The connections between Father Mapple and Father Taylor are obvious enough: both delivered anecdotal sermons to rough sailor congregations while perched theatrically on an elevated pulpit decorated with ship gear and backed by a wall painting of a seascape. A contemporary account of Taylor's preaching is similar in spirit to Melville's description of Mapple. According to the account, Taylor could make his listeners "feel the ship alive under them as he stood on his quarter deck, and the saltiness of the sea; could raise the storm and salts would lose track of Sunday in the Bethel, shout 'long boat, *long boat*, and be ready to cast her loose.'"<sup>35</sup> Clearly, this is the kind of overwhelming effect Melville was trying to reproduce in his portrayal of Father Mapple, who spins several sensational "yarns" for his "shipmates" from his lofty prow-pulpit while a storm rages outside. To add even more drama, Melville invents several special effects, such as Mapple's climbing to his high pulpit on a rope ladder.

While the connection between Taylor and Mapple has been recognized

before, what has been overlooked is that Mapple's sermon is an improvement on a whole genre of popular antebellum sermons: i.e., fictionalized retellings of the Jonah story. Jonah sermons were in fact very common in popular magazines and tracts written for American sailors. For example, such sermons appeared from 1829 onward as a regular column (titled "Worship at Sea") in the widely read *Sailor's Magazine and Naval Journal*, which Melville mentions in *Redburn*. Contributed to the magazine by popular preachers, these sermons ambitiously wove sailor's slang and creative metaphors into the biblical narrative, thereby producing a mixture of the imaginative and the sacred that directly anticipated Father Mapple's salty sermon. The 1839-40 volume of *Sailor's Magazine* alone contains six separate Jonah sermons filled with colloquial images such as "Carry no leaks out with you; I mean, known sins," or "When the storm breaks in upon you, keep the pump going; I mean repentance," or "If you would be above fear in storms, then commit the helm to him, as your pilot, whom the winds and the sea obey."<sup>36</sup>

Melville's contribution to this popular sermon genre is both an intensification of creative poeticizing and a simultaneous amplification of the brash confidence asserted by Father Taylor and the other popular preachers. Critics have long puzzled over the meaning of Mapple's sermon. In the sermon and in the novel as a whole, however, the precise message is dispersed and deflected by religious symbols whose dazzling verve and multiplicity becomes itself the truest "meaning." The sermon is well positioned at the beginning of the novel, for it enables Melville to rhetorically defeat the doctrinal sermonizing of the past through an exercise in modern-day imaginative sermonizing, thereby freeing Melville to fuse the divine and the earthly with a new boldness throughout the rest of the novel. The colloquial, metaphorical style of Mapple's Jonah sermon is evident from the start: "Shipmates, this book, containing only four chapters—four yarns—is one of the smallest strands in the mighty cable of the Scriptures."<sup>37</sup> Such homely, familiar imagery governs the entire sermon. To be sure, Melville uses the traditional tripartite sermon format of Text, Doctrine, and Application, and a controlling structure is indicated by Mapple's opening announcement of a "two-stranded lesson" to be derived from the biblical story. But the formal sermon outline is adopted only to be transformed, since Mapple's highly embellished retelling of the Jonah story overwhelms clarity of lesson. Most of the sermon reads like an exciting adventure story, with pungent dialogue and graphic descriptions of setting and character—an adventure story with metaphysical overtones, rather like *Moby-Dick* as a whole. Witness the colloquialisms and human touches in a typical passage from the sermon, describing sailors' suspicions about Jonah as he boards the Tarshish ship:

In their gamesome but still serious way, one whispers to the other—"Jack, he's robbed a widow"; or, "Joe, do you mark him; he's a bigamist"; or "Harry lad, I guess he's the adulterer that broke jail in old Gomorrah, or belike, one of the missing murderers from Sodom." . . . Frightened Jonah trembles, and summoning all his boldness to his face, only looks so much the more a coward.

This kind of bold narrative embellishment enlivens the whole sermon, so that when Mapple concludes by praising the person who "ever stands forth his own inexorable self" and who is "only a patriot to heaven," we realize that Melville is asserting a stylistic as well as thematic self-reliance. The popular Jonah sermons had been full of nautical imagery but had always been cautious to note that *God* was the "pilot" and man the common sailor; Mapple, in contrast, calls himself "the pilot of the living God," the "speaker of true things" who "gives no quarter in the truth." The sermon which had begun as an ostensibly structured exposition of a biblical text had become an eloquent exercise in creative imaginings that led to a final declaration of man's capacities as a truth seeker.

It is no wonder that the letters Melville wrote to Hawthorne as he worked on *Moby-Dick* were so full of religious imagery that Melville had to apologize once for "falling into my old foible—preaching" and that elsewhere he could daringly pretend he and Hawthorne were divine: "I feel that the Godhead is broken up like the bread at the Supper, and that we are the pieces."<sup>38</sup> By "preaching" creatively throughout *Moby-Dick* Melville had taken the new humanistic, nondoctrinal style of the popular pulpit to almost Promethean artistic extremes. Like Emerson and Whitman, Melville was liberated by popular embellishments of religion to find a kind of redemption in the very *process* of truth seeking through creative stylization and inventive reallocation of religious symbols. In *Moby-Dick*, the fusion of the divine and the earthly has gone so far that biblical archetypes like Ishmael, Ahab, and Jonah can be imported directly into the modern adventure novel; religious images like hell, devils, angels, and the crucifixion can be connected with all sorts of characters and events; an "ungodly, god-like" whaling captain can be portrayed as a kind of secular preacher aiming both metaphysical and literal "arrows" at a mythic leviathan who seems to embody the living God.

While popular sermon style helped Whitman and Melville produce massively expansive literary texts, it pushed Emily Dickinson toward stylistic concision and metonymy. In a writer like Melville, changing sermon style leaves obvious evidence within the literary text. In Dickinson's highly elliptical, indirect poems, the connections between extrinsic religious change and intrinsic textual performance are less clear. Less clear, perhaps, but

no less important. Dickinson's private writings show that, if anything, she was even more attentive to sermon style and popular religious literature than either Emerson or Melville.

Many of the central tensions in Emily Dickinson's poetry result from the collision between the old and the new sermon styles. Dickinson was well positioned to feel every tremor produced by the collision. Her father, Edward Dickinson, was an avowed devotee of the old-style doctrinal preaching: he typically called a well-reasoned sermon by the conservative David Aiken "an intellectual feast," while he branded an imaginative sermon by the more liberal Martin Leland as "Unclean—unclean!"<sup>39</sup> Edward Dickinson also had a puritanical distaste for light literature. Emily recalled that her father read "lonely & rigorous books" and advised his children to read only the Bible.<sup>40</sup>

She had a particularly vivid memory of her brother Austin coming home one day with Longfellow's novel *Kavanagh*, hiding it under the piano cover, and making hand signs to Emily about the book. When the children later read the novel, their father was incensed. While it may seem strange that so apparently innocent a novel as *Kavanagh* should provoke such a storm, we should recognize how revolutionary the novel was, given the strictly doctrinal standards of Edward Dickinson. Longfellow's novel dramatizes the collapse of theological preaching, represented by the departing Rev. Pendexter, and the ascendancy of imaginative religion, embodied in the handsome young preacher Arthur Kavanagh. Kavanagh's piquant pulpit illustrations and stories lead one character to exclaim: "Such sermons! So beautifully written, so different from old Mr. Pendexter's."<sup>41</sup> Emily Dickinson mentioned the novel often in her letters and felt a special kinship with the novel's heroine, Alice Archer, a gloomy, dreamy girl who sublimates her hopeless infatuation for Kavanagh in poetic visions—in much the same way that Emily herself may have been driven to a kind of poetic frenzy by her unrequited passion for a real-life Kavanagh, the Rev. Charles Wadsworth.

Critics have long pondered the Wadsworth-Dickinson relationship, hard evidence of which is frustratingly slim. It is known that while visiting Philadelphia in 1855, during her only trip outside of Massachusetts, Emily most likely was taken to hear Wadsworth preach at Arch Street Presbyterian Church. It is also known that Wadsworth later visited her at least twice in Amherst, that two volumes of his sermons were given to her, that she probably read many of his other sermons in newspaper reprintings, and that she developed strong feelings toward him. Some believe that Emily's great "terror" in 1862 and her incredible poetic productivity that year was a response to Wadsworth's removal to Calvary Church in San Francisco (hence the double pun involved in Emily's description of herself as "the

Empress of Calvary"). Intriguing as the relationship is, the much debated issue of Emily's feelings for Wadsworth is far less relevant than the fact that in the mid-1850s, just at the moment when she was beginning to write serious poetry, she was deeply moved by a preacher who must be regarded as one of the antebellum period's foremost innovators in American sermon style.

Her response to Wadsworth had been prepared for by an increasing preference for imaginative preaching, often against her father's wishes. In 1851 she probably went to hear the popular Henry Ward Beecher, who was visiting Amherst giving a lecture, significantly, on "Imagination." By 1853 she could go into raptures over a notably anecdotal sermon on Judas and Jesus given by the visiting preacher Edwards A. Park, a sermon whose secular emphasis she later described: "It was like a mortal story of intimate young men."<sup>42</sup> The Martin Leland sermon that her father dismissed as "unclean" was imaginatively liberating for her, as she mimicked Leland's theatrical manner and repeated sections of the sermon aloud. Also in the early 1850s, she befriended the popular author and editor Josiah G. Holland, whose liberal religious views were criticized by one conservative paper as "creedless, churchless, ministerless christianity."<sup>43</sup> By aligning herself with several of the most progressive religious stylists of the day, Emily Dickinson was launching a silent but major rebellion against the doctrinal tradition valued by her father.

Her excitement about Wadsworth, therefore, can be viewed as a natural outgrowth of her increasing attraction to the new religious style. One newspaper compared Wadsworth to an earlier pulpit innovator, John Sumnerfield, but stressed that "Wadsworth's style . . . is vastly bolder, his fancy more vivid, and his action more violent. . . . [His topics are] peculiar, and quite out of the usual line"; he is typically "rapid, unique and original, often startling his audience . . . with a seeming paradox."<sup>44</sup> Mark Twain would also be struck by the uniqueness of Wadsworth's pulpit manner, noting that he would often "get off a first-rate joke" and then frown when people started laughing.<sup>45</sup> In short, Wadsworth's style was adventurous, anecdotal, and very imaginative, with a tendency to the startling and paradoxical. Emily Dickinson once praised his "inscrutable roguery" and seemed to copy his impish style in many poems and in her message to J. G. Holland: "Unless we become as Rogues, we cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven—."<sup>46</sup> The jocular familiarity with which she generally treats divine and biblical images doubtless owes much to the new sermon style which Wadsworth perfected.

While Wadsworth can be seen as a groundbreaker for Emily Dickinson's imaginative treatment of religion, three other figures on the popular religious scene—Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Sara Willis Parton, and Don-

ald Grant Mitchell—also made important contributions. Higginson has gained notoriety as the rather condescending editor who, despite voluminous correspondence with Emily Dickinson and two visits with her in Amherst, only published a few of her poems and never recognized the immensity of her genius. Although he proved only partly sympathetic, we should recognize the reasons that he was singled out by Emily Dickinson as her literary judge, preceptor, and confidant. He had made a dramatic move from religion to social activism and professional authorship. Beginning as a Unitarian minister devoted to every progressive reform of the day, in the early 1850s he had declared: “We need more radicalism in our religion and more religion in our radicalism.”<sup>47</sup> By the early 1860s, when he was editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, his religious radicalism had brought him to the verge of a devotion to imaginative style that evidently appealed to Emily Dickinson. In the *Atlantic* article appealing to young contributors to which she responded, Higginson endorsed the metonymic imagination by noting that “there may be years of crowded passion in a word, and half a life in a sentence”; he echoed Ruskin’s notion of the “instantaneous line”; and he declared that a book is the only immortality.<sup>48</sup> It is little wonder that this man who combined liberal religion, radical activism, and devotion to literature would seem to hold promise to Emily Dickinson, who herself was in several senses influenced by these elements of the American scene. What Higginson did not understand was that she had gone beyond secularized religion to a new form of stylization and artistic manipulation, while he remained in the realm of rebellion and earnest activism. Socially he was far more radical than she precisely because linguistically she was far more radical than he. His religious liberalism had pushed him toward a devotion to metonymy and the instantaneous poetic line but not to an understanding of the weird images, jolting rhythms, and half rhymes that filled her poetry.

The other popular figures, Sara Willis Parton (“Fanny Fern”) and Donald Grant Mitchell (“Ik Marvel”), were stylistically closer to Emily Dickinson than Higginson. Although Emily never met or corresponded with these best-selling authors, she loved their writings, which were distinguished by a colloquial freedom with religious topics and a self-consciously quirky style enacting their distaste for the doctrinal preaching of their youths. Parton, who was singled out for praise by Hawthorne and who was the first woman to publicly praise Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, treated biblical topics with a jaunty zest verging on feminist boldness. Her *Fern Leaves from Fanny’s Port Folio*, a book Emily Dickinson read aloud to her family, includes several daring religious passages such as this: “Eve wasn’t smart about that apple business. I know forty ways I could have fixed him—without burning my fingers, either. It makes me quite frantic to think I lost



such a prime chance to circumvent the old sinner."<sup>49</sup> To many critics, Parton was faulty on both religious and stylistic grounds: one reviewer typically lambasted her "irreverence for things sacred" and her use of "disjointed fragments" instead of continuous narrative.<sup>50</sup> Today we can understand such apparent flaws as products of an antebellum author brandishing her imaginative powers in an effort to subvert the stylistic rigidities of the past. Emily Dickinson would go beyond Parton's disjointed style by making each stanza and sometimes each line an imagistic fragment.

In this regard she also outdid the purposefully disconnected style of Donald Grant Mitchell, whose best-selling novel *Reveries of a Bachelor* (1850) provoked much rapturous praise from Dickinson in her letters. Mitchell's volume is not a story but rather a series of images that float through the mind of an idle bachelor who sits before his fire fabricating thought-phantoms of the past, the present, and the future. Mitchell announces that these images lack "unity of design" since he records them "as they came seething from my thought, with all their crudities and contrasts."<sup>51</sup> This stylistic flexibility is connected with Mitchell's advocacy of a kind of preexistentialist philosophy that dispensed with religious doctrines altogether and placed total faith in an imaginative engagement with the Eternal Now. Emily Dickinson, who more than any other antebellum writer realized the momentousness of the Present, may have been responsive to Mitchell lines such as "Thought alone is delicate to tell the breath of the Present," or "if you bring such thought to measure the Present, the Present will seem broad; and it will be sultry as Noon, and make a fever of Now."

Mitchell, like Sara Parton and Emily Dickinson, had been raised in a conservative religious household where theological preaching was valued, and like them also he quietly rebelled against this stylistic orthodoxy in works filled with completely secularized use of religious imagery. For instance, the traditional Christian notion of the afterlife is demythologized and made psychological when Mitchell envisages "our souls" running "beyond time and space, beyond planets and suns, beyond far-off suns and comets, until, like blind flies, they are lost in the blaze of immensity, and can grope their way back to our earth and time by the cunning of instinct." Reading such a passage, we invariably think of the numerous Dickinson poems which defy all barriers of time and space by soaring freely into the afterlife. Given the imaginative reapplication of sacrosanct themes throughout *Reveries of a Bachelor*, it is small wonder that Dickinson once paid Mitchell one of her highest compliments: she wrote a friend that when Mitchell died she would want to die too, since there would be no one left on earth to interpret her life for her.<sup>52</sup>

It is an oversimplification to say that in her own poetry Dickinson brings

together Wadsworth's humor and energetic paradoxes, Higginson's belief in the instantaneous line, Sara Parton's pert biblical retelling, and Mitchell's experimental style and philosophy. Still, it is helpful to know that such imaginative revisions of religion were going on all around Dickinson and that she was extraordinarily responsive to them. By her own confession, she came to detest theological preaching ("I hate doctrines!" she declared after one old-fashioned sermon), and she devoured every example of the new religious style that came within her rather limited purview. Significantly, the religionists she praised warmly possessed both the modern stylistic adventurousness and the old concern for ultimate questions such as Time, Death, the Other World, and so forth. Even in cases (like Mitchell's) where they had rejected formal Christianity, they hadn't become so secular that they altogether abandoned Puritanism's contemplation of the Infinite. She once commented that the only way to tell if a poem is good is to ask whether after reading it you feel like the top of your head has been taken off. She seemed to apply the same rule to the sermons she attended and the books she read. A religious work, in her eyes, must possess both striking imagery and a sense of ultimacy; theology or moralizing is secondary to the work's *effect* upon the imagination. For instance, she disdained three Baptist tracts about "pure little lives, loving God, and their parents, and obeying the laws of the land"—purely secular pious stories that, in her words, "dont bewitch me any."<sup>53</sup> In contrast, even though she was skeptical about Christian doctrines, she could revel in the Rev. Aaron Colton's "enlivening preaching, . . . his earnest look and gesture, his calls of *now today*."<sup>54</sup> Similarly, she could be totally captivated by "a splendid sermon" from Edwards A. Park, which left the congregation "so still, the buzzing of a fly would have boomed out like a cannon. And when it was all over, and that wonderful man sat down, people stared at each other, and looked as wan and wild, as if they had seen a spirit, and wondered they had not died."<sup>55</sup> The combined imagery here of the fly, death, and religion seems to anticipate Dickinson's famous poem "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died." At any rate, we should note that in both the poem and her letter describing Park's sermon, it is not theology or Christianity that counts but rather the existential impact of a momentous situation.

What new religious stylists like Wadsworth and Mitchell had finally taught Emily Dickinson is that religion could be freely applied to many secular situations and expressed through startling imagery. Because of Dickinson's extensive use of witty conceits, many critics have likened her to the metaphysical poets of the Renaissance or to the American Puritan poet Edward Taylor. There is, however, a crucial difference between the metaphysicals and Dickinson that is too often ignored: all the creative flights of the metaphysicals are finally confined by Christian doctrine,

whereas Dickinson soars adventurously beyond doctrine by mixing the sacred and the secular, the Christian and the pagan. And she had been taught how to achieve this mixture by her popular religious culture.

One of her poetic responses to the new religious style was the redefinition of church, sermons, and worship along totally secular lines. Witness the reduction of religious images to the world in the following stanzas:

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church—  
 I keep it, staying at Home—  
 With a Bobolink for a Chorister—  
 And an Orchard, for a Dome— . . .  
  
 God preaches, a noted Clergyman—  
 And the sermon is never long  
 So instead of getting to Heaven, at last—  
 I'm going, all along.

(#324; c. 1860)

This poem may be regarded as a clever adaptation of the antebellum religious style: not only does it shift worship from the church to nature and sing praise to short sermons, but it actually converts God into an entertaining preacher obviously trained in the new sermon style. A similar fusion of the sacred and the secular is visible in the poem that begins "To hear an Oriole sing / May be a common thing— / Or only a divine," in which the last phrase arrests the reader with its offhandedly casual treatment of the holy. Sometimes this casualness is taken to playful extremes, as when she refers to God as "Papa above!" watching down upon a "mouse," who asks for the privilege of living forever "Snug in seraphic Cupboards." Among the many other Dickinson poems that daringly reapply sacred imagery are "These are the days when Birds come back—," "There's a certain Slant of light," and "Mine—by the right of the White Election!" In these poems such images as holy communion, sacrament, hymns, the doctrine of election are detached totally from their sacred referents and fused with either nature or the human psyche. In still other poems she displays a jaunty freedom with the Bible, as in "The Bible is an antique Volume," which includes a series of secular reenactments of sacred imagery, such as calling Eden "the ancient Homestead," Satan "the Brigadier," and sin "a distinguished Precipice / Others must resist."

While these poems show how Dickinson's religious imagination had been fueled by the ever-broadening applications of secular images in antebellum sermons, their dazzling variety points up the fact that she had been carried beyond mere sermonic breadth toward truth and humanity

in a larger sense. That is, the creativity of the modern sermons she loved had carried her beyond the sermon form to a total liberated view in which God and man, the other world and this world could be mutually illuminating and virtually interchangeable. Dickinson always retained her respect for modern preachers but in time realized how far she had gone beyond even the most imaginative among them. In a late poem she could indicate her realization that she had stepped beyond the broad sermon into another realm:

He preached upon "Breadth" till it argued him narrow—  
 The Broad are too broad to define  
 And of "Truth" until it proclaimed him a Liar—  
 The Truth never flaunted a Sign—  
 Simplicity fled from his counterfeit presence  
 As Gold the Pyrites would shun—  
 What confusion would cover the innocent Jesus  
 To meet so enabled a Man!

(#1207; c. 1872)

Here Dickinson uses the tools of antebellum imaginative preaching—paradox, humor, startling metaphor, stress upon the human Jesus—to undermine preaching itself. Even the broadest preacher, she suggests, is trapped somehow by creed, by the belief that truth flaunts "a Sign." In Emily Dickinson's expansive field of vision, there is no single sign but rather a rich array of shifting signs, none of which holds the truth but all of which suggest it. Let us not forget, however, that this very expansiveness itself owed much to the new religious style. The day she had angered her father by losing herself in a Longfellow novel about a contemplative girl infatuated with a creative preacher, her imagination had begun its flight beyond the boundaries of doctrine toward stylistic freedom.

### Heavenly Plots and Human Artifacts

Like sermons, popular religious fiction and poetry were becoming increasingly dominated by imagination and secularism. The genres that were to affect the major texts most directly were allegory, visionary fiction, and Oriental tales.

The most traditional religious genre, allegory, was affected by the general secularizing tendency. Rigorously precise Puritan allegories illustrating Calvinist theology, such as Joseph Morgan's *The History of the King-*

*dom of Basaruah* (1715), are light-years distant from the scores of popular nineteenth-century allegories that freely treated social issues such as temperance, slavery, and interdenominational warfare. In contrast to Morgan's sober, restrained Puritan allegory, the nineteenth-century ones are enlivened by a relaxed, sometimes colloquial style and a broad range of fiery passions. In Edmund Botsford's *The Spiritual Voyage Performed in the Ship Convert* (1814) an allegorical journey of the ship of faith is modernized by a vernacular perspective; Botsford portrays an ill-spoken crew of genial Christians waging war on the likes of Will All-Joy, Harry Fair-Speech, and Jack Rest-on-Prayer. Hawthorne's college chum George B. Cheever produced numerous updated allegories, most notably the controversial best-seller *Deacon Giles' Distillery* (1835), a kind of popularized "Young Goodman Brown" in which demonic nightly rituals in a distillery produce hellish firewater that threatens to poison the American population. Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, in the meantime, was updated by several writers of different religious persuasions, from the Calvinist Aaron Lummus in *The Life and Adventures of Dr. Caleb* (1822) to the Universalist D. J. Mandell in *The Adventures of Search for a Life* (1838). All of the popular allegories preached a simplified faith of good works, clean living, and belief in God's goodness and man's perfectibility. Eventually, American allegory would become so secularized that it could be wholly integrated into domestic fiction: witness the use of Bunyanic imagery throughout Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, in which each of the four heroines is described carrying her little bundle of sin through her personal Vanity Fair toward a Celestial City that promises to be merely an idealized version of her earthly home. The most important thing to recognize is that by the early 1830s religious allegory, once a quite rigid genre used for illustration of Puritan doctrine, had become a most flexible and adaptable one, fully available for purely literary manipulation by writers like Hawthorne and Melville.

Poe complained that Hawthorne was "infinitely too fond of allegory" and that "the strain of allegory . . . completely overwhelms the greater number of his subjects, and . . . in some measure interferes with the direct conduct of absolutely all."<sup>56</sup> In Poe's eyes, allegory destroyed the verisimilitude, diminished the originality, and exaggerated the didacticism of Hawthorne's fiction. To be sure, a good number of Hawthorne's lesser tales share the preachiness and optimism of most popular pious allegories. "A Rill from the Town Pump" advocates temperance like many of the reformist allegories of the period. "Little Annie's Ramble," "Sights from the Steeple," "The Vision of the Fountain," "The Threefold Destiny," "The Great Stone Face," and "Little Daffydowndilly" are other tales in which Hawthorne uses allegorical elements in tales whose morals sometimes seem embarrassingly conventional. However, even these benign

tales are significant because they show Hawthorne participating in the popular movement toward updated allegory. By adapting allegory to suit modern needs, Hawthorne, like lesser authors of the day, was modifying a sacrosanct Puritan form by mixing it with contemporary themes and styles. Hawthorne sounds much like many of the popular allegorists of his period when he introduces "The Threefold Destiny" by saying that the tale is not "a story of events claiming to be real" but rather an allegory like those produced by "writers of the last century," with the crucial difference that "I have endeavored to give a more life-like warmth than could be infused into those fanciful productions."<sup>57</sup> If tales like "The Threefold Destiny" (in which a New England villager wanders for years in search of love, power, and riches only to find them upon returning home) perhaps give more weight to didactically allegorical elements than to human ones, they at least show Hawthorne trying to add even more life and vigor to traditional allegory than his contemporaries were doing. Indeed, Hawthorne's later theory of the romance as a "neutral territory" where the real and imaginary mingle seems to have grown directly out of his many early attempts to make new variations on the combined allegorical and realistic mode of his contemporaries.

We should not be too harsh on Hawthorne, therefore, for his writing a number of rather pedestrian allegories reflecting the simplified liberalism of his period. We should rather take note of the extraordinary range of his lesser tales, which weave allegory into defenses of a large variety of moral causes and viewpoints, including temperance, Sunday schools, the worth of toil, the happiness of home life, nature's beauty, the goodness of children, and so forth. If the cheerful moral of tales like "Little Daffydowndilly" or "Little Annie's Ramble" seems distant from the dark message of "Young Goodman Brown," "Ethan Brand," or "The Minister's Black Veil," we should not charge Hawthorne with prevarication or self-contradiction. Instead, both "Little Daffydowndilly" and "Young Goodman Brown" should be seen as alternate versions of a stylistic exercise in modernized allegory. Hawthorne himself was often unclear about the exact message of his fiction—for instance, as he reread proofs of *Mosses from an Old Manse* in 1854, he wrote his publisher, "Upon my honor, I am not quite sure that I entirely comprehend my own meaning in some of these blasted allegories."<sup>58</sup> His permutations of the updated allegory were so various and mingled that specific meaning was often compromised. Again, we see a sophisticated writer producing complex literary texts because of his enthusiastic response to a popular literary movement, in this case the movement toward secularized allegory.

Henry James noted that Hawthorne had a profound knowledge of such Puritan doctrines as total depravity, predestination, and perseverance of

the saints but did not sincerely believe in any of them—he could detach himself from them and handle them objectively. I would add that Hawthorne's very detachment from these doctrines was in large part induced by a popular religious culture that had loosened allegory from its dogmatic underpinnings and had made it available for modernization by nineteenth-century writers. In his best fiction, Hawthorne took the modernizing tendency several steps further than the lesser writers. Certain of his works have gained well-deserved fame because of their success in mixing allegory with New England history in a way that transferred Puritan doctrines from dogma to psychology and Puritan style from religious typology to secular symbol. In other works, Hawthorne applies allegory to nineteenth-century issues in a way that turned contemporary allegory against itself; his ironic updating of Bunyan in *The Celestial Railroad*, for example, satirizes attempts by nineteenth-century liberals to make the passage to heaven smooth and painless. Bunyan's portrait of a lonely pilgrim struggling against countless emblematic perils is overturned in Hawthorne's depiction of a modern railroad train (operated by Mr. Smooth-it-away) that easily carries loads of liberal believers over the Slough of Despond, through Hill Difficulty, and to the gates of the Celestial City. In both his Puritan and his modern works, Hawthorne was using a popular genre (secularized allegory) to achieve nondogmatic renderings of religious topics.

Allegory suited Hawthorne primarily because it provided a safe means of delivering dark, unconventional themes. His manipulation of secularized allegory for new literary ends is most evident in works like "Young Goodman Brown" and "The Minister's Black Veil." By skillfully combining the allegorical and the human in these tales, Hawthorne is able to retain the didactic framework of allegory while at the same time making a universal statement about the darker aspects of human nature. The numerous allegorical elements (e.g., the emblematic character names, the pink ribbons, the snakelike walking stick, the forest, and so forth in "Young Goodman Brown"; or the Rev. Hooper's veil, which is called "a type and a symbol," in "The Minister's Black Veil") would seem to suggest that these tales have some doctrinal message about the revelation of sin, like a Puritan allegory enforcing Calvinism. But because of enlivening realistic and secular elements (e.g., both stories involve tragically strained relationships between a man and his family and friends), the tales are removed from the realm of doctrine and are made thematically dense and universal. The long-standing debate about whether Hawthorne is a Puritan, "Christian" writer, on the one hand, or a forward-looking psychological author, on the other, is really a moot issue. Hawthorne is in fact able to bring together *both* Puritan *and* psychological themes in a creative center because Puritan beliefs had been effectively liberated from theology by the nine-

teenth-century secular allegorists. The stylistic foundation of Hawthorne's tales, the humanized allegories of his contemporaries, becomes his chief means of reinterpreting past religion. When he wished to probe "the power of blackness," allegory proved a convenient disguise because of its didactic aura. As a professional writer whose tales appeared in many popular periodicals and giftbooks, Hawthorne did not wish to alienate the conventional segment of his reading public with bald expressions of cynical or misanthropic views. As a result, he adopted a favorite device of his religious culture, allegory, so that even when he applied this device to subversive ends, many readers and reviewers were unaware of the subversion. The *Southern Quarterly Review* was typical in commending his tales as "quiet, gentle, fanciful,—clothing naked facts in pleasing allegory, and beguiling to truth and virtue, through labyrinths of fiction."<sup>59</sup> As Melville noted, Hawthorne was generally regarded as "a pleasant writer, with a pleasant style," when in fact a deep gloom often lurked behind his surface cheer.<sup>60</sup>

If secularized religious allegory prepared the way for some of Hawthorne's most intriguing effects, another popular genre, Oriental fiction, had a more widespread effect on the nineteenth-century literary imagination. All the major writers of the American Renaissance at one time or another paid homage to Oriental tales, which they usually praised as philosophically enriching and aesthetically liberating. Emerson typically said that all Oriental tales underscore "the one miracle of intellectual enlargement," revealing "things in their causes, all facts in their connections."<sup>61</sup> One of Whitman's literary goals, as he wrote in "Passage to India," was to "Eclaircise the myths Asiatic, the primitive fables . . . eluding the hold of the known, mounting to heaven!"<sup>62</sup> For both Poe and Emily Dickinson, Oriental fiction was a primary symbol of the unfettered imagination. Hawthorne and Melville often used Oriental motifs as a means of generating artistic and philosophical flexibility.

Ever since its first appearance in eighteenth-century American magazines, Oriental fiction was an important vehicle among progressive thinkers for escaping both the stylistic and doctrinal rigidities of Puritan Calvinism.<sup>63</sup> After the American Revolution, freethinkers such as Thomas Paine had provoked unprecedented wrath among orthodox religionists by arguing, among other things, that Christianity was a man-made religion on the same level as Oriental religions such as Islam and Hinduism. Hoping to avoid the ferocious obloquies hurled upon the likes of Paine, many rationalists and liberals chose to promote their unorthodox views obliquely through Oriental tales, which used the East-West dialogue technique to deny the specialness of Christianity and to promote a nonsectarian faith in human perfectibility and divine benevolence. In Royall Tyler's *The Alge-*



*rine Captive* (1797) a New England Calvinist, taken captive by Algerians, learns from a Mullah the "gentle precepts" of Islam, including man's perfectibility and God's benevolence.<sup>64</sup> Benjamin Franklin, who learned to be extremely cautious in expressing his deistic views, safely dramatized these views in "An Arabian Tale" (1779), in which an Oriental magician is sorely puzzled about the problem of evil until he is consoled by a beautiful vision of the Great Chain of Being revealed by a kindly angel. Benjamin Silliman in *Letters of Shahcoolien* (1802) underscores the aesthetic appeal of Oriental religion, praising the "rich, brilliant" poetry and "flights of imagination" in Hindu scriptures.<sup>65</sup> Throughout *Salmagundi* (1808) Washington Irving criticizes mainstream religion through the portrayal of an Oriental visitor to America who writes letters home filled with caustic comments such as "into what ridiculous errors these nations will wander who are unenlightened by the precepts of Mahomet, our divine prophet."<sup>66</sup> Likewise, an Oriental visitor in George Fowler's *The Wandering Philanthropist* (1810) is confused by America's baffling variety of sects and promotes a nonsectarian faith in good works. These and many other early Oriental tales exposed the intolerance of most Christians and imaginatively revealed in the lush exoticism of Oriental religions. By the time of William Ware's best-selling novel *Zenobia* (1838)—whose title character is probably the prototype for both Poe's "Psyche Zenobia" and the Zenobia of Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*—Oriental fiction had become philosophically sophisticated and freely mixed with secular adventure. In several of Melville's early novels this combined Orientalism, adventure, and philosophy would be taken toward literary art.

Closely allied to Oriental fiction were visionary tales, or imaginary visions of angels and the afterlife. From the late eighteenth century onward visionary tales offered a means of getting a direct view of the divine, which in Puritan times had been considered ineffable and totally otherworldly. Many popular writers throughout the antebellum period used visionary devices to rhetorically defeat gloomy religion, to enjoy the beauties of celestial bliss, and to generate a spirit of cheer and hope. A typical strategy in visionary fiction, from *The Golden Age* (1785) by "Celadon" through Sylvester Judd's *Margaret* (1845), was to depict a character who is tormented by doubt or by oppressively theological Christianity and who finally is solaced by a reassuring, beautiful angel. Nearly all the major authors would exploit the popular visionary mode, since it allowed the American writer to objectify the divine and apply it symbolically in psychological or realistic fiction.

The redirection of Oriental and visionary devices by two major writers, Poe and Melville, illustrates how such popular devices could lead, on the one hand, to a nonreligious literary aesthetic and, on the other, to broadly

metaphysical fiction. The quite different literary ends reached by two authors rooted in similar popular modes suggest the fertility and flexibility that these modes had gained by the 1830s.

Because of the perennial interest in Poe's influence on the French symbolists and decadents, Poe is often portrayed as a lonely visionary who rebelled against a pragmatic, businesslike American society. Baudelaire initiated the myth that Poe launched "an admirable protest" against a utilitarian culture. "The day that he wrote 'all certainty is in dreams,' " declared Baudelaire, "he drove his own Americanism down into the region of inferior things."<sup>67</sup> Baudelaire was unaware that Poe was very much a product of nineteenth-century Americanism in all its complexity. In an early letter to John Neal, Poe enthusiastically quoted Shelley's comment on Shakespeare: "What a number of ideas must have been afloat before such an author could arise!"<sup>68</sup> This comment applies well to Poe himself, since numerous popular literary currents fed into his art. Of all our major writers, Poe was the most obviously engaged in popular culture: he struggled constantly as a writer of fiction and poetry for popular magazines, he reviewed countless popular books, and he dreamed of founding a popular periodical that would make him rich. It is a testament to the fecundity of antebellum popular culture that one of Poe's most sophisticated and influential theories—art for art's sake—was directly related to his adoption of the Oriental and visionary modes that had been commonly used by American writers since the late eighteenth century.

Poe had much firsthand exposure to these modes. It is interesting to note that he had singled out as pioneers three American novelists—Brockden Brown, John Neal, and Catharine Sedgwick—who had themselves in fact made imaginative variations upon visionary devices. Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798), in which a visionary religionist murders his entire family at the command of angels, was the first in a line of American novels (later to include Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*) in which otherworldly visions were stripped of simple cheer and placed in a more ambiguous realm of distorted perception. Likewise, in such Neal novels as *Logan* (1822) and *Seventy-Six* (1823) characters are not only constantly besieged by visions but are carried to irrational heights by explosive passions that distort perception of exterior reality. Catharine Sedgwick's *A New-England Tale* (1822) and *Redwood* (1824) were the first American novels to weave visionary imagery extensively with secular scenes and characters, as Sedgwick realistically portrays angelic "spirit-women" that anticipate some of Poe's heroines. Like such early fiction, much popular American poetry that Poe praised was making innovative secular applications of visionary or Oriental devices. In his most famous critical statement, "The Poetic Principle," the American works he used as models included a Nathaniel Parker

Willis poem about an "unseen company" of spirits that surrounds a poor city girl; Longfellow's "Waif," which envisages human cares stealing away "like the Arabs" folding "their tents"; and an Edward Coote Pinkney poem that sings praise to an angel-woman who is "less of earth than heaven."<sup>69</sup> Critics have long been mystified by Poe's attraction to seemingly ordinary poets such as Pinkney, Maria Brooks, Frances Sargent Osgood, and Estelle Anna Lewis; but when we take note that Poe usually highlights passages in which these poets try to conjure up a sense of heavenly bliss or angelic beauty we understand that his attraction stems largely from the appeal of visionary and Oriental devices.

Significantly, such devices abound in Poe's own poetry. Several poems in his first published volume, *Tamerlane and Other Poems* (1827), show Poe adopting the popular visionary mode and at the same time transforming it, guiding it away from didacticism toward psychological reverie and symbolist aesthetics. In popular visionary poems, dreams of angels or the afterlife had commonly provided respite from life's cares by assuring the dreamer of God's kindness and the beauty of heaven. In Poe poems such as "Dreams" and "Spirits of the Dead," visions are likewise presented as desirable escape mechanisms giving a foretaste of heavenly bliss; but Poe emphasizes the sheer mystical delight of the dreaming *process*, distinct from any clear religious *message*. "Oh! that my young life were a lasting dream!" exclaims the persona of "Dreams," as he rapturously tells of reveling in "dreamy fields of light / . . . In climes of mine imagining / . . . with beings that have been / Of mine own thought." The speaker goes on to rhapsodize over the "vivid colouring of life" given by dreams "Of Paradise and Love—and all our own!" The visionary mode here begins to be summoned into the human psyche, as dreams are no longer passively experienced for their religious lesson but rather are actively conjured up for their regenerating beauty. This self-conscious manipulation of visionary devices is also evident in "Imitation," in which the speaker says his early life was brightened by the presence of spiritual beings which his spirit would not have seen had he not seen them with his "dreaming eye." "Spirits of the Dead" seems much closer than these poems to the popular visionary literature, since it portrays a graveyard scene in which a depressed person is comforted by spirits of deceased friends who appear in "visions ne'er to vanish." But even here Poe revises the popular mode, as he forgoes the usual concrete descriptions of spirits or heaven on behalf of a delicate atmospheric indefiniteness that leads to the final image of the graveyard mist, which is called "a symbol and a token— / . . . A mystery of mysteries!" Similarly, in "Stanzas" nature's mystical beauty is called "a symbol and a token / Of what in other worlds shall be—and giv'n / In beauty by our God."

If in his first poetry volume Poe explored the purely creative and symbolic potential of the visionary mode, in his second, *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane, and Minor Poems* (1829), he took a further step toward aestheticism by using Oriental devices. Although American writers had long exploited Orientalism as a vicarious source of lushness and beauty, virtually all had mixed aesthetic appreciation with philosophical or religious commentary. Poe's "Al Aaraaf" retains vestiges of the popular religious framework; the title is Poe's renaming of Al Orf, the star of purgatory in the Koran, which Poe describes as "a medium between Heaven and Hell where men suffer no punishment, but yet do not attain that tranquil & even happiness of heaven." This image of an Oriental afterlife is pure fantasy typical of many American popular writers. Where Poe departs from the crowd is his stress throughout the poem upon wild aestheticism (symbolic of poetic rapture) and his complete disregard for the religious comfort predominant in the popular literature. For Poe, Al Aaraaf symbolizes the mediating condition of the poet, who is tied to the earth but always straining toward heaven. On the star lives Nesace, the Spirit of Beauty, along with many other angels, unspoiled by knowledge, who live in a union with beauty that is made intensely blissful because they know it is not eternal. After a certain period everyone on Al Aaraaf dies forever, since, as Poe explains, "an eternity even of bliss" would destroy the angst needed to feel the full power of beauty. Poe here has pushed a common popular mode—fictional rendering of an Oriental afterlife—toward a premodern exemplum that anticipates Wallace Stevens's famous notion: "Death is the mother of beauty."

Poe made further important permutations of visionary and Oriental devices in many of his later poems. In "Israfel" (1831) he again borrows from the Koran, this time singing praise to the angel Israfel, the sweetest singer in the Muslim heaven, whose passionate celestial music embodies Poe's highest poetic ideals. In "The City of Sin" and "The Sleeper" (both 1831) we begin to see Poe's movement toward the arabesque, as horrifying aspects of death (the luridly lit, silent death city; a lover contemplating the decaying corpse of his lovely Irene) are invested with a kind of perverse, ornamental beauty. "The Raven" (1845) and "Annabel Lee" (1849) have become Poe's most famous poems in part because visionary fantasy is combined with arabesque terror and placed wholly in the psyche of a bereaved narrator. "The Raven" gains supernatural overtones from alternating bright and dark visionary images (angels, heaven, hell, demons, God) that are projected on the imperturbable raven by the terrified, increasingly frenzied student. The narrator of "Annabel Lee" explains, in a purely imaginative rather than religious context, that the envious angels in heaven killed his child-love, but that neither heaven's angels nor hell's

demons can separate him from her, since he sleeps with her in dreams each night in her tomb by the sea. In each of these poems, visionary devices are skillfully stylized because they are produced by the consciousness of a disturbed narrator.

The centrality of the visionary mode in Poe's work is evident not only in his ubiquitous use of angel or afterlife imagery but also in his poetic theory. Poe defined the poetic sensibility as "no mere appreciation of the Beauty before us—but a wild effort to reach the Beauty above," "an ecstatic prescience of the glories beyond the grave." Poetry, closely allied to music, strikes notes "which *cannot* have been unfamiliar to the angels."<sup>70</sup> It is the Rhythmical Creation of Beauty; its sole arbiter is taste, and it has only collateral relations with the intellect or the conscience. By Poe's time, many popular American writers had separated religion from the intellect and placed it in the realm of the creative imagination, bound to the celestial principally by the secular visionary mode. Poe took this secularizing process to its natural aesthetic ends. Having explored the celestial beauty of both beatific and horrific sensations in much of his poetry, he turned in his theoretical criticism to an equation of poetic effect with supernal beauty. Liberated from dogma by his extensive experimentation with the popular visionary mode, Poe came to the conclusion that beauty had nothing to do with Christian doctrine and was only tangentially related to reason or conscience. For him, poetry was the Spirit of Beauty on a mythological Arabian star; it was the Oriental angel Israfil strumming his lyre in the heavens; it was the pulsating rhythm of a bereaved outcry for the lost Lenore or the distant Annabel Lee. In Poe's eyes, it was indeed very religious, but religious in a completely aesthetic sense, divorced from truth. Poe had arrived at the threshold of a modern poetics as a result of his intimate awareness of the visionary and Oriental devices of his day.

A similar stylization of the visionary occurs in some of Poe's better tales. True, Poe could write rather preachy visionary fiction which shows him directly imitating the more conventional popular writers. Witness his "Conversation of Eiros and Charmion" (adapted from S. Austin's popular apocalyptic tale, "The Comet"), in which two spirits in heaven discourse on the bliss of the afterlife as contrasted with the terrors of a human population doomed by an approaching comet. Also quite ordinary is "The Colloquy of Monos and Una" and "The Power of Words," two more tales in which heavenly spirits converse about poetic and philosophical matters. Another of Poe's religious dialogues, "Mesmeric Revelations," promotes the idea of God as the highest material essence. While these tales reflect the more didactic strain of American visionary fiction, in other tales Poe seems to follow the lead of some of his favorite fictionists, such as Brockden Brown and John Neal, in exploring the visionary not as a vehicle of

religious comfort but rather as a product of the irrational mind. The visionary mode becomes truly psychological in well-known works like "Ligeia," "The Black Cat," and "The Fall of the House of Usher." In such works Poe studies the agitated imagination *creating* visions in the heat of passion, opium, or madness. Visions in these tales provoke terror instead of comfort—more important, we are never sure whether the visions are real and the dreamer reliable. Does Ligeia come to life in the body of Rowena? Does Madeleine Usher walk out of her tomb? Does the image of the gallows appear on the black cat's breast? Poe precludes definite answers to such questions, since all visions are filtered through the maddened psyches of flawed narrators. Visionary and Oriental images become thoroughly demythologized and secularized when seen through the haze of the irrational. The narrator of "Ligeia," an old man whose mind has been warped by long opium use, vaguely recalls the loveliness of Ligeia when she became excited: "at such moments was her beauty—in my heated fancy thus it appeared perhaps—the beauty of beings either above or apart from the earth—the beauty of the fabulous Houri of the Turk."<sup>71</sup> It is precisely the uncertainty of visions—the possibility that all visions are "perhaps" merely produced by "heated fancy"—that is the main point of these tales, which call attention to their own artificiality and fictionality. In Poe's hands, the visionary mode is deconstructed just as surely as the House of Usher sinks into the tarn. Visionary devices are no longer used to communicate a religious message; they are coolly manipulated by the creative stylist to illuminate the operations of the subversive imagination.

While Poe developed a nonphilosophical literary theory by observing the purely aesthetic implications of the popular visionary and Oriental modes, Melville produced broadly philosophical fiction precisely because he exploited the other common application of these modes by American writers: i.e., the voicing of progressive ideas through rhetorical accounts of exotic peoples and their religions. Ever since the late eighteenth century, American writers had commonly used fictions about faraway peoples or about angelic visitations as a safe means of airing liberal, sometimes quite skeptical notions. With remarkable frequency, the encounter with foreign beliefs in these popular works creates a *dialogue* that undermines religious certainty by exposing Christianity as just one among many world religions. More often than not, these works criticize American religion as intolerant, gloomy, and corrupt. But the criticism is shielded not only by diverting narratives of exotic adventure but also by passages in which the writer pays obligatory lip service to Christianity. While Oriental devices provided an oblique means of undercutting traditional religion, the visionary mode was frequently used as a reconstructive device. After attacking conventional religious beliefs or practices, the writer could call in an angel

or other religious figure to comfort the doubting protagonist and offer a religious alternative, usually a nonsectarian faith of good works and hope.

Melville used both the skeptical religious dialogue and the reconstructive visionary mode in much of his fiction and poetry. Dialogues with foreign religions were common not only in Oriental tales but also in popular travel narratives that influenced Melville. During the two decades before the publication of Melville's first novel, *Typee* (1846), there emerged two contrasting kinds of religious dialogue in travel narratives about voyages to the South Sea Islands. One line of narratives—including William Ellis's *Polynesian Researches* (1829), Frederick Debell Bennett's *Narrative of a Whaling Voyage Round the Globe* (1840), and John Codman's *Sailors' Life and Sailors' Yarns* (1847)—endorsed the efforts of white Christian missionaries to convert and civilize the South Sea pagans. Although Melville lifted much factual information from Ellis and Bennett, he was clearly more powerfully drawn to the more skeptical dialogues in a contrasting line of popular narratives, including Nathaniel Ames's *Nautical Reminiscences* (1832), John H. Amory's *Old Ironside* (1840), Charles W. Denison's *Stories of the Sea* (1844), and George Little's *The American Cruiser* (1846). These works can be viewed as updated Oriental tales because they combined entertaining sea adventure with religious dialogues that exposed the corrupting influences of Christians on simple South Sea Islanders. Amory in *Old Ironside* laments that the peaceful, virtuous islanders have been "contaminated by intercourse with men called Christians."<sup>72</sup> Ames in *Nautical Reminiscences* uses even stronger language, citing the ruination of the South Sea Islanders as evidence that "those who profess and call themselves Christians are by far . . . the greatest scoundrels on the face of the earth."<sup>73</sup> Denison in *Stories of the Sea*, likewise remarking on "the cupidity and cunning of men from christian shores," declares he would rather dwell in the Sandwich Islands "than to be among civilized men, who act like the worst of all cannibals—the cannibals of the human heart!"<sup>74</sup>

It should be noted that such skeptical remarks had to be voiced with extreme caution: Ames's attacks on Christianity in *Nautical Reminiscences* stirred up such a furor in religious circles that in his next novel, *An Old Sailor's Yarns*, Ames announced, "I have studiously endeavored to steer my footsteps clear of the tender toes of every religious sect except the Catholics; whom, in imitation of the Protestant clergy and laity all around me, I have handled without mittens whenever I could get the chance."<sup>75</sup> Melville faced a similar problem in writing his first two novels. Like several travel writers before him, he wished to use the fictional dialogue with foreign peoples as a means of undercutting what he considered corrupt Christianity; but he didn't want to alienate his religious readers. In *Typee* and *Omoo*, therefore, he was careful to dilute his criticism of Christian

missionaries with much exotic adventure and with perfunctory paeans to Christianity. The British edition of *Typee* did contain enough bald attacks on the missionaries to induce Melville, at the request of his New York publishers, to excise some thirty pages of potentially sacrilegious material when preparing the American edition. Both the original edition and the expurgated Revised Edition, however, similarly use the popular device of indirectly questioning established religion by studying the customs of foreign peoples.

The contrast in *Typee* between unspoiled, tolerant pagan islanders and vicious, querulous Christians is typical of the sensibility behind popular Oriental tales and travel narratives, as is the ironic exposure of warring Christians and short-lived religious conversion in *Omoo*. Melville knew, as he wrote his publishers about *Omoo*, that his early fiction was "calculated for popular reading, or for none at all,"<sup>76</sup> so he adopted the common device of satirizing mainstream religion through exotic adventure, blunting the edge of the satire by paying occasional lip service to Christianity (e.g., he has the narrator of *Typee* interject pious remarks such as "In truth, I regard the Typees as a backslidden generation. They are sunk in religious sloth, and require a religious revival").<sup>77</sup> His canny use of popular devices paid off, for *Typee* and *Omoo* were generally well received and became his most immediately popular novels.

Just as Poe's early experimentation with visionary techniques led him toward literary aesthetics, so Melville's early adoption of the exotic-dialogue device led him toward a more sophisticated mixture of popular modes in *Mardi*. *Mardi* has been so often viewed as a philosophical work establishing the symbolic-quest motif to be repeated in *Moby-Dick* that we are apt to forget that the novel, which received surprisingly favorable reviews in its day, is heavily indebted to devices that had been commonly used by his contemporaries. As many critics have noticed, *Mardi* is full of references to such elite sources as Plato, Seneca, Rabelais, Burton, Browne, Shakespeare, Montaigne, and Coleridge. What has been overlooked is the fact that all these classic sources are fused and transmuted through Melville's innovative mixture of three popular religious modes of his day: secularized allegory, Oriental fiction, and the visionary mode.

Although, as will be seen, many other popular genres influenced *Mardi*, the religious ones are primarily responsible for the stylistic complexity and thematic density of the novel. Melville outdoes even Hawthorne in the ambitious updating of allegory, for he permits secular adventure to flow into a capacious allegory in which scores of past and present religions, writers, and social movements become successively embodied in a symbolic landscape. As in his first two novels, Melville voices severe doubts about the Christian church here, but he expresses these doubts through



a narrative whose fascinations even his harshest critics found hard to resist. Melville's main rhetorical ploy is to air highly skeptical ideas through an Oriental philosopher, Babbalanja, and then to ward off possible charges of infidelity by having this character be converted to a simplified Christianity as a result of an inspiring celestial vision.

Many American fictionists before Melville had similarly expressed unconventional philosophical ideas through the Oriental mode and then recoiled at the end from the skeptical conclusions toward which their narratives seemed to be tending. Frequently in popular literature, a restless doubter is comforted by an angel or a reassuring vision of the afterlife. This is exactly how Babbalanja is converted in chapter 188 ("Babbalanja relates to them a Vision"). Having severely questioned numerous philosophies and religions throughout the novel, Babbalanja dreams of an angel who gives him an inspiring vision of heaven and advises him to seek no more "in things mysterious; but rest content, with knowing naught but Love." Babbalanja, like many a popular hero, adopts a creedless, nonsectarian faith based upon good works. Giving up his fruitless quest, he settles on the island of Serenia and says, "Let us do: let us act. . . . While we fight over creeds, ten thousand fingers point to where vital good may be done."<sup>78</sup> Melville departs from previous American writers in both the depth and the variety of the skeptical questions asked before the doubter's conversion, as well as his refusal to end the novel with the conversion: at the end, the young seeker Taji is still looking for his lost Yillah. But we should note that Taji has not voiced many skeptical views in the novel. The main skeptic, Babbalanja, has been converted and comfortably placed in Serenia, while Taji, who has figured mainly as an adventure hero, can be sent after Yillah without Melville's laying himself open to the charge of utter infidelity. While accepting the basic premises of popular religious modes, Melville is taking them to new stylistic and philosophical heights.

In *Moby-Dick*, the popular Oriental device of replacing church religion with a broad nonsectarianism is treated less artificially than it had been in *Mardi*, as the dialogue between Christianity and paganism becomes fully humanized. The developing relationship between the Presbyterian Ishmael and the cannibal Queequeg is a metonymic enactment of the deconstructive and reconstructive religious dialectic that had governed many Oriental tales and some travel narratives. Numerous writers of exotic fiction had rhetorically shown Orientals or South Sea Islanders to be more virtuous than Christians; Charles W. Denison, as we saw, went so far as to say he would rather live with real cannibals than with civilized "cannibals of the human heart." Melville gives this message a new ironic twist when he has Queequeg, who is dismayed by the iniquities of Christians, reflect: "We cannibals must help these Christians."<sup>79</sup> Just as numerous popular

Oriental tales had rhetorically portrayed fictional pagans pitying unenlightened American Christians, so Melville has Queequeg feel sad that a sensible young man like Ishmael "should be so hopelessly lost to evangelical pagan piety." Ishmael, too, becomes a genial embodiment of the religious-dialogue theme when he comes to admire Queequeg and to decide: "I'll try a pagan friend, . . . since Christian kindness has proved but hollow courtesy."

When Melville seems to be directly borrowing from strictly conventional travel books, he undercuts them. For instance, John H. Amory's *Almonuc: or The Golden Rule. A Tale of the Sea* (1840) had described a young sailor who succeeds in converting to Christianity many South Sea Islanders and profane seamen (including a tyrannical captain) by always applying the Golden Rule. Ishmael likewise follows the Golden Rule, but only to end, ironically, by participating in pagan practices: he knows that as a good Christian he should do as he would be done by, that he would wish Queequeg to join him in his Presbyterian worship, and that therefore he must "turn idolator" and join the cannibal in his ritual.<sup>80</sup> Having used the Ishmael-Queequeg relationship as a dialogic means of breaking down narrow religious distinctions, Melville goes beyond the most secular of the religious fictionists by affirming a humanistic spirit of piety. He has Ishmael inform the bigoted Quaker Bildad that Queequeg is "a born member of the First Congregational Church . . . of this whole worshipping world." This catholicity of vision is enforced through the entire novel by the portrayal of the crew of the *Pequod*, a conglomeration of all creeds and races "federated along one keel" in pursuit of the white whale—that is, humanity in all its diversity commonly engaged in explaining the infinite.

While Melville in *Moby-Dick* follows the religious-dialogue device to an inspiringly democratic affirmation of human togetherness and interdependence, there was good reason for Melville to call this novel a "wicked" book that was broiled in hellfire, since visionary and Oriental devices, which in *Mardi* had offered solace, are in the end exposed as mere fantasy and wish fulfillment. True, Melville does still recognize the redemptive possibilities of these devices. As seen, he fully comprehends the optimistic spirit behind the Christian-pagan dialogue convention. Also, he twice uses the visionary mode in the usual hopeful way: the angel in the wall painting behind Father Mapple's pulpit smiles upon a sea-tossed ship and seems to promise salvation for all persevering humans; and Ishmael, after tenderly squeezing the hands of his fellow sailors in the sperm vat, has a comforting visionary dream—"In visions of the night, I saw long rows of angels in paradise, each with his hands in a jar of spermaceti."<sup>81</sup> Only a nineteenth-century American like Melville, keenly aware of the colloquially irreverent piety of Father Taylor and of popular visionary writers like