

AMERICAN NOVELS CONTRASTED TO BRITISH

from *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957)

Richard Chase

My main theme is the relation between the romance, or romance-novel, and the novel proper.... As to my main purpose, it is: to assess the significance of the fact that since the earliest days the American novel, in its most original and characteristic form, has worked out its destiny and defined itself by incorporating an element of romance. This purpose has led me to propose a native tradition of the novel. I understand this tradition, inevitably, as springing from England, but as differing from the English tradition by its perpetual reassessment and reconstitution of romance within the novel form.

Thus I am interested mainly in defining the leading characteristics of the American romance-novel, as it may be called--that freer, more daring, more brilliant fiction that contrasts with the solid moral inclusiveness and massive equability of the English novel. As Thoreau says, the imagination has a place for "wildness" as well as for more solid and domesticated virtues...

I try to define "romance" in the first chapter. For the moment, let me say that the word must signify, besides the more obvious qualities of the picturesque and the heroic, an assumed freedom from the ordinary novelistic requirements of verisimilitude, development, and continuity: a tendency towards melodrama and idyll; a more or less formal abstractness and, on the other hand, a tendency to plunge into the underside of consciousness; a willingness to abandon moral questions or to ignore the spectacle of man in society, or to consider these things only indirectly or abstractly.

To keep the record straight, let me say that I agree with the usual modern opinion that James is the greatest American novelist and critic of the novel.... [He] was more the romancer than his own theories, strictly applied, would have allowed him to be. But what I am most interested in is that farther realm of fiction which the American novelists have explored and occupied--moved, as they have been, by what James himself called a "rich passion for extremes." In this trans-Jamesian realm of fiction there are certain special virtues. Among them are the "intellectual energy" that Brockden Brown prized, the profundity described by Melville as "the blackness of darkness," a certain intrepid and penetrating dialectic of action and meaning, a radical skepticism about ultimate questions....

The best American novelists have found uses for romance far beyond the escapism, fantasy, and sentimentality often associated with it. They have found that in the very freedom of romance from the conditions of actuality there are certain potential virtues of the mind, which may be suggested by such words as rapidity, irony, abstraction, profundity. These qualities have made romance a suitable, even, as it seems, an inevitable, vehicle for the intellectual and moral ideas of the American novelists. They have used romance to introduce into the novel what one may roughly describe as the narrow profundity of New England Puritanism, the skeptical, rationalistic spirit of the Enlightenment, and the imaginative freedom of Transcendentalism. In doing so they have created a brilliant and original, if often unstable and fragmentary, kind of literature....

One may point to the power of romance to express dark and complex truths unavailable to Realism. The inner facts of political life have been better grasped by romance-melodramas, as they may be called--such as those of Dostoyevsky and Malraux--than by strictly realistic fiction....The compulsion Melville finds, and praises, in both Hawthorne and Shakespeare, leads to some desperate gambits. And the intense desire to drive everything through to the last turn of the screw or twist of the knife, which distinguishes American writers from English, often results in romantic nihilism, a poetry of force and darkness.... [Gothicism]

In the first chapter, I try to bring out certain contrasting characteristics of the American novels as opposed to the English, in an attempt to account for the obvious fact that although most of the great American novels are romances, most of the great English novels are not--the fact, in other words, that the

tradition of romance is major in the history of the American novel but minor in the history of the English novel....

The American novel tends to rest in contradictions and among extreme ranges of experience. When it attempts to resolve contradictions, it does so in oblique, morally equivocal ways. As a general rule, it does so either in melodramatic actions or in pastoral idylls, although intermixed with both one may find the stirring instabilities of "American humor."... By contrast, the English novel has followed a middle way. It is notable for its great practical sanity, its powerful, engrossing composition of wide ranges of experience into a moral centrality and equability of judgment... The profound poetry of disorder we find in the American novel is missing, with rare exceptions [Emily Bronte, D. H Lawrence], from the English....The English novel...follows the tendency of tragic art and Christian art, which characteristically move through contradictions to forms of harmony, reconciliation, catharsis, and transfiguration....

For whatever reason--perhaps the nagging scrupulosity of the Puritan mind has something to do with it--the American novel has sometimes approached a perfection of art unknown to the English tradition, in which we discover no such highly skilled practitioners as Hawthorne, Stephen Crane, Henry James, or Hemingway.

Richard Chase

See Hawthorne's Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*

These are the most useful ideas in this book. Otherwise Chase makes a great many dubious and false generalizations. Nearly all critics are either overviews or close readers (New Criticism). None I know are good at both. Chase is a useful overviewer up to a point, but a very obtuse close reader, as of works by Melville and Faulkner.

Michael Hollister (2018)