



Romantic Dialogues: Anglo-American Continuities, 1776-1842

Richard Gravil

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Romantic Dialogues, first published in 2000, contributed to the modern recovery of a transatlantic dimension in literary studies. Part 1 of the book reassesses the events of 1776 as a painful amputation, severing one part of a close-knit republican community from the other. It looks at English visions of America, from Blake's America, to Barbauld's Eighteen Hundred and Eleven, and at Romantic Americans such as Samuel Williams, William Ellery Channing, Gilbert Imlay and Estwick Evans, who absorbed England's Romantic revolution long before America's literary awakening took place. It considers, also, the periodical wars that followed the War of 1812, America's aspiration to an intellectual emancipation to match its political independence; and the kinds of continuing relationship with 'the old home' to be found in James Fenimore Cooper, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Elizabeth Palmer Peabody.

Part 2 explores numerous barely recognised transactions between English Romantic poets and the canonical writers of the 'American Renaissance'. Starting with Cooper's struggle with Edmund Burke in *The Pioneers*, it places Emerson's *Nature*, Thoreau's *Walden*, the romances of Poe and Hawthorne, Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Whitman's 'Song of Myself', in an Atlantic context. These writers still had English ears: inheriting the blissful dawn that took place in England between Blake's *Songs* and Wordsworth's *Prelude*, they amplified the English poets' celebration of nature, liberty and imagination—and 'human nature seeming born again'—but, equally Romantically, they came to mourn the fatal compromises in America's experimental polity. Diverging somewhat from these themes, this edition includes a new chapter on William Cullen Bryant and an Epilogue on how the prosody of Whitman and Dickinson responded to the music of Tennyson, whose songs, Whitman memorably said, entered into the American character 'inland and far West, out in Missouri, in Kansas, and away in Oregon, in farmer's house and miner's cabin'.

Reviews:

'How this study is received will say as much about the recovery of serious interest in literary history as about the work's quality. Learned, rigorous in testing its assertions, mordant and spirited in its expression, *Romantic Dialogues* makes an important claim: that American Literature of the nineteenth century knowingly attempted to fulfill the visionary promises of British Romanticism... What was reborn in the American Renaissance he writes, was 'as much Romanticism as America'. It is as if in the works of Whitman and Melville the ghosts of Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge were posing a British alternative to Victorian conservatism.... He makes one wonder how one ever read the American text at all without the British context. An extraordinary achievement... This is real work'

—Robert Weisbuch, *New England Quarterly*:

'Challenging the conventional notion that American literature emerged from Emerson's early essays, Gravil positions Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge as its true progenitors: just as Locke's libertarian political writings bore their greatest fruit in Jefferson's famous manifesto, so the English romantics' most characteristic notions of liberty and selfhood were fulfilled in the United States and its literature. ... Gravil's deft and learned application of key texts in British Romanticism to works by Thoreau, Melville, Dickinson, Whitman and Hawthorne powerfully challenge the easy presumption of an autochthonous American writing.'

—Kurt Eisen, *American Literature*

‘ ... a major study, alert to and at home with textual nuance and larger questions ... persuasively proving and describing a series of intricate, intertextual relationships: Gravid allows for uniqueness and difference; there is no ‘Englishing’ of his American authors, but a brimmingly revelatory stream of suggested connections. Romantic Dialogues is a ground-breaking study which bears witness to a generous, vigilant, and witty critical intelligence.’

—Michael O’Neill , Symbios

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