her faith faild her. She answer’d, No. Then Sp[ead] out her arms crying come! come! O pray for an easy[y] and quick Passage! She eagerly longed to depart to be with Christ. She retained her Senses till the very last moment when "fare well, fare well." with a very low voice, were the last words She utter’d. I sat the whole time by her bed Side, and Saw with Grief and Wonder, the Effects of Sin on the human race. Had not Christ taken away the envenom’d Sting, where had been our hopes? what might we not have fear’d, what might we not have expect’d from the dreadful King of Terrors? But this is matter of endless praise, to the King eternal immortal, invisible, that, it is finished. I hope her Son will be interested in Your Closet duties, & that the prayers which she was continually putting up. & wh. are recorded before God, in the Book of his remembrance for her Son & for me may be answer’d, I can Scarcely think that ar Object of so many prayers, will fail of the Blessings implor’d for him ever Since he was born. I intreat the same Interest in your best thoughts for my Self, that her prayers, in my behalf, may be favour’d with an Answer of Peace. We received and forwarded your Letter to the rev’d Mr. Occom, but first, took the freedom to peruse it, and am exceeding glad, that you have order’d him to draw immediately for £25. for I really think he is in absolute necessity for that and as much more, he is so loth to run in debt for fear he Shall not be able to repay, that he has not the Least Shelter for his Creatures to defend them from the inclemencies of the weather, and he has lost some already for want of it. His hay is quite as deteneceus, thus the former are in a fair way of being lost, and the latter to be wasted; It were to be wished that his dwelling house was like the Ark, with appartments, to contain the beasts and their provision; He said Mrs. Wheatley and the rev’d Mr. Moorhead were his best Friends in Boston, But alas! they are gone. I trust gone to receive the rewards promis’d to those, who offer A Cup of cold water in the name & for the sake of Jesus—They have both been very instrumental in meeting the wants of that child of God, Mr. Occom—but I fear your patience has been exhausted, it remains only that we thank you for your kind Letter to my mistress it came above a fortnight after her Death.— Hoping for an interest in your prayers for these [and then] Sanctification of this bereaving Providence, I am hon’d Sir with dutiful respect ever your obliged

and devoted Humble Servant  Phillis Wheatley

6. i.e., his meditations and prayers.
other southern or backwoods humorists to be subliterary, despite the fact that Irving had influenced such writing and had delighted in reading it.

THE SMALL WORLD OF AMERICAN WRITERS

Perhaps most important, paintings like the one by Schussele (and the similar wishful fad of depicting famous literary people in cozy association through the then-new technique of composite photography) capture the fact that in the nineteenth century the American literary world was very small indeed, so small that most of the writers in this period knew each other, often intimately, or else knew much about each other. They lived, if not in each other’s pockets, at least in each other’s houses, or boardinghouses: Lemuel Shaw, from 1830 to 1860 chief justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Court, and Herman Melville’s father-in-law after 1847, for a time stayed in a Boston boardinghouse run by Ralph Waldo Emerson’s widowed mother, the Longfellows summered in the 1840s at the Pittsfield boardinghouse run by Melville’s cousin, a house where Melville had stayed in his early teens; in Pittsfield and Lenox, Hawthorne and Melville paid each other overnight visits, in Concord the Hawthornes rented the Old Manse, the Emerson ancestral home, and later bought a house there from the educator Bronson Alcott and made it famous as the Wayside; in Concord the Emersons welcomed many guests, including Margaret Fuller, and when the master was away Thoreau sometimes stayed in the house to help Mrs. Emerson with the children and the property. The popular Manhattan hostess Anne Lynch assigned the young travel-writer Bayard Taylor to write a Valentine for a slightly older travel-writer, Herman Melville, in 1848, and three years later, apparently with matchmaking in mind, brought together Taylor’s intimate friend R. H. Stoddard and Elizabeth Barstow, a distant relative of Hawthorne. In 1853 Hawthorne received at Wayside young Mr. Stoddard, by then husband of Elizabeth Barstow, and pulled wires to get him a job in the New York Custom House, Hawthorne having the year before written the campaign biography for his old friend, the candidate for president, Franklin Pierce. (When Melville finally got his own appointment to the Custom House in 1866, Stoddard was on desk duty to welcome him; Stoddard kept Melville from being fired once, but Melville outraged him many years in that nest of corruption.) On a visit to Washington after the Civil War had broken out, the still reclusive, and ailing, Hawthorne seriously considered making the hazardous trip to Wheeling to meet the extraordinary new contributor to the Atlantic Monthly, Rebecca Harding; later he welcomed her at Wayside. At Litchfield, Connecticut, the young Georgian Longstreet greatly admired one of the minister Lyman Beecher’s daughters (not Harriet, then a small child).

Many of the writers of this period came together casually for dining and drinking, the hospitality at the editor Evert A. Duyckinck’s house in New York being famous, open to southerners like Simms as well as New Yorkers like Melville and Bostonians like the elder Richard Henry Dana. In the late 1850s a Bohemian group of newspaper and theater people and writers drank together at Pfaff’s saloon on Broadway above Bleecker Street; for a time Whitman was a fixture there. Of the clubs formed by writers, artists, and other notables (usually male), the four most memorable are the Bread and Cheese Club, which Cooper organized in 1824 in the back room of his publisher’s Manhattan bookstore, the Transcendental Club, started in Boston in 1836 and lasting four years; the Saturday Club, a more convivial Boston group formed in 1856; and the Authors Club, founded in New York in 1882. Members of the Bread and Cheese Club included the poet William Cullen Bryant, Samuel F. B. Morse (the painter who later invented the telegraph), the poet Fitz-Greene Halleck, and Thomas Cole (the English-born painter of the American landscape). Emerson was the leading spirit of the Transcendental Club, but other members included Bronson Alcott, later Margaret Fuller, and George Ripley (the organizer of the Transcendental commune at Brook Farm, near Roxbury). Among the members of the Saturday Club were Emerson, James Russell Lowell, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and the historians John Lothrop Motley and William H. Prescott; Nathaniel Hawthorne attended some meetings. Brander Matthews co-founded the Authors Club, from the first a beloved resource for the literary establishment, which included dominant magazine editors of the time such as Richard Watson Gilder and editors and poets such as R. H. Stoddard and Edmund Clarence Stedman (an intimate of Samuel L. Clemens and William Dean Howells who also befriended Melville in his last years and whose son Arthur became Melville’s literary executor); Matthews recalled that once or twice “the shy and elusive Herman Melville dropped in for an hour or two.”

THE SMALL COUNTRY

Such intimacy was inevitable in a country that had only a few literary and publishing centers, all of them along the Atlantic seaboard. Despite the acquisition of the Louisiana Territory from France in 1803 and the vast Southwest from Mexico in 1848, most of the writers we still read lived all their lives in the original thirteen states, except for trips abroad, and their practical existence was of a compact country; in 1840 the “northern” states were those covered by the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 (Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan; Wisconsin was still a territory), while the “southern” humor writers such as George Washington Harris, Thomas Bangs Thorpe, and Johnson Jones Hooper wrote in the region bounded by Georgia, Louisiana, and Tennessee.

Improvements in transportation were shrinking the country even while territorial gains were enlarging it. When Irving went from Manhattan to Albany in 1800, steamboats had not yet been invented, although William Longstreet, the father of the writer, had been planning one for a decade; the Hudson voyage was slow and dangerous, and in 1803 the wagons of Irving’s Canada-bound party barely made it through the bog near Utica. The Erie Canal, completed in 1825, changed things: in the 1830s and 1840s Hawthorne, Melville, and Fuller took the canal boats in safety, suffering only from crowded and stuffy sleeping conditions. When Irving went buffalo hunting in Indian territory (now Oklahoma) in 1832 he left the steamboat at St. Louis and went on horseback, camping out at night except when his party reached one of the line of missions built to accommodate whites who were Christianizing the Plains Indians. By the 1840s railroads had replaced stagecoaches between many eastern towns, although to get to New Orleans in 1848 Whitman had to change from railroad to stagecoach to steamboat. Despite frequent train wrecks, steamboat explosions, and Atlantic shipwrecks, by the 1850s travel had ceased to be the hazardous adventure it had been. But the few American writers who saw much of the country were still provincials in their practical attitude toward their literary careers, for their publishers and purchasers were concentrated mainly in or near New York, Philadelphia, and Boston.

And the New York, Philadelphia, and Boston of this period were themselves tiny in comparison to their modern size. The site of Brook Farm, now long since a victim of urban sprawl, was chosen because it was nine miles remote from Boston and two miles away from the nearest farm. The population of New York City at the start of the 1840s was only a third of a million and was concentrated in lower Manhattan: Union Square was the edge of town. Horace Greeley, the editor of the New York Tribune, escaped the bustle of the city by living on a ten-acre farm up the East River on Turtle Bay, where the East Fifties are now; there he and his wife provided a bucolic retreat for Margaret Fuller when she was his literary critic and metropolitan reporter. In 1853 the Crystal Palace, an exposition of arts, crafts, and sciences, created in imitation of the great Crystal Palace at the London World’s Fair of 1851, failed—largely because it was too far out of town, up west of the new
Croton Water Reservoir that had recently brought running water to the city. The reservoir was on the spot where the New York Public Library now stands, at Forty-second Street and Fifth Avenue, and the Crystal Palace was on the site of the modern Bryant Park, named for the nature poet.

THE ECONOMICS OF AMERICAN LETTERS

Geography and modes of transportation bore directly on publishing procedures in the United States of this period. For a long time writers who wanted to publish a book carried the manuscript to a local printer and paid job rates to have it printed and bound. Longfellow worked in this fashion with a firm in Brunswick, Maine, when he printed his translation of Elements of French Grammar and other textbooks during his first years as a teacher. Fiction was also sometimes sent to a local printer, as when Longstreet had his own firm in Augusta print Georgia Scenes or when Johnson Jones Hooper paid a firm in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, to print A Ride with Old Kit Kuchter before having it brought out the next year by a regular Philadelphia publisher. However, the true publishing centers were major seaports that could receive the latest British books by the fastest ships and, hastily reprinting them, distribute them inland by river traffic as well as on coastal cities. After 1820 the leading publishing towns were New York and Philadelphia, with the Erie Canal soon giving New York an advantage in the Ohio trade. Boston remained only a provincial publishing center until after 1835, when publishers realized the value of the new railroad connections to the West. Despite the aggressive merchandising techniques of a few firms, the creation of a national book-buying market for literature, especially American literature, was long delayed.

The problem was that the economic interests of American publisher-bookellers were antithetical to the interests of American writers. A national copyright law became effective in the United States in 1790, but it was 1891 before American writers had international protection and foreign writers received protection in the United States. Until the end of the century, American printers routinely pirated English writers, paying nothing to Sir Walter Scott or Charles Dickens for their novels, which were rushed into print and sold very cheaply in New York, Philadelphia, and other cities. American readers benefited from the situation, for they could buy the best British—and Continental—writings cheaply, while American writers suffered, because if they were to receive royalties, their books had to be priced above the prices charged for works of the most famous British writers. American publishers were willing to carry a few native novelists and poets as prestige items for a while, but they were businesspeople, not philanthropists.

To compound the problem, Irving’s apparent conquest of the British publishing system, by which he received large sums for The Sketch Book and succeeding volumes, proved delusory. Cooper and others followed in Irving’s track and were paid by magnanimous British publishers under a system whereby works first printed in Great Britain were presumed to hold a British copyright. But this practice was ruled illegal by a British judge in 1849, and the British market dried up for American writers.

Throughout this period, making a serious American contribution to the literature of the world was no guarantee at all of monetary rewards. Except possibly for a few authors of sentimental best-sellers, including what Hawthorne jealously called “that damned mob of scribbling women,” the United States was not a country in which one could make a living by writing. It was not even a place where the best authors could always publish what they wrote. The only writers who could consistently find a publisher were Irving and Cooper, who kept their appeal on the basis of early success (though more copies had to be sold to make the same profit) and the magazine or newspaper editors who could fill some of their own columns when they wanted. These editors included (for various periods of time) Poe, Longstreet, Harris, Thorpe, Hooper, Lowell, and four other notable examples: Fuller, who for several years reported for the New York Tribune at home and from Europe; Whitman, who for much of the 1840s and 1850s was free to editorialize in one Brooklyn or Manhattan newspaper or another, Whitman, who for more than two decades before the Civil War was corresponding editor of the Washington National Era; and most conspicuous, Bryant, long-time owner of the New York Evening Post. Whitman was his own publisher for most editions of Leaves of Grass and filled mail orders himself, as Thoreau also did when an occasional request came for one of the seven hundred copies of his first book, which the publisher had turned back to him. At crucial moments in his career Melville was balked from writing what he wanted to write, as when he sacrificed his literary aspirations after the failure of Mardi and wrote Redburn and White-Jacket, which he regarded as mere drudgery; and at other times he was “prevented from publishing” works he had written, including at least one that was subsequently destroyed. Ironically, the writer freest to pursue literary greatness in this period was probably Emily Dickinson, whose “letter to the world” remained unmailed during her lifetime.

THE QUEST FOR AN AMERICAN LITERARY DESTINY

In the first half of the nineteenth century, lobbying for the existence of an American literature in magazines seemed to take up more space than the literature itself.

 Especially after the War of 1812 confirmed American independence, theorists called for a great literature that would match the emerging political greatness of the nation. Huckstering critics soon developed specific notions as to the subjects that would-be writers should choose: preferably the distant colonial past (the nearest we could hope to come to the medieval settings that were serving Sir Walter Scott so well), or possibly American Indian legends, or still less desirable (because too near the mundane present), subjects from the recent Revolutionary past. Such exhortations were the stock-in-trade of commencement speakers and literary critics in the 1820s and 1830s. But in The Poet (1842) Emerson boldly called for a poet who would write of the United States as it was, not as it might have been:

We have yet had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye, which knew the value of our incomparable materials, and saw, in the barbarism and materialism of the times, another carnival of the same gods whose picture he so much admires in Homer; then in the middle age; then in Calvinism. Banks and tariffs, the newspaper and caucus, methodism and utilitarianism, are flat and dull to dull people, but rest on the same foundations of wonder as the town of Troy, and the temple of Delphos, and are as swiftly passing away. Our logrolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negros, and Indians, our beaux and their repudiations, the wrath of rogues, and the pusillanimity of honest men, the northern trade, the southern planting, the western clearing, Oregon, and Texas, are yet unsung. Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres.

Later Whitman was to say that he had remained simmering, simmering, until Emerson brought him to a boil.

During the 1840s Evert A. Duyckinck and other New York literary men and women (primarily through the columns of the Democratic Review and the Literary World) mustered a squad of promoters of the great literature that was to come. The propagandists perfected the rhetorical strategy of linking literary destiny to geography and political destiny: the “great nation of futurity” must have a literature to match Niagara Falls and the Rocky Mountains. Herman Melville for several years was associated with Duyckinck’s magazines, and he half-champions and half-spoofs the chauvinistic rhetoric in the essay on Hawthorne that he wrote for the Literary World in 1850. An American, he proclaimed, was “bound to carry repub-
lican progressiveness into Literature, as well as into Life," even to the point of believing that sooner or later American writers would rival Shakespeare, whom a generation of Bardolators regarded as unapproachable. This was literary manifest destiny with a vengeance, warranted only because as he wrote the essay Melville had already written his way well into what he later titled Moby-Dick.

None of the American writers of the period was chauvinistic enough to think that a great American literature could be written without reference to past English and European literature. As Cooper protested in Notions of the Americans (1828), writers in the United States possessed the same literary heritage that writers in Great Britain did. Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton, Bunyan, Addison, Pope, Fielding, Johnson, and Burns, along with many others (especially some now neglected writers of the eighteenth century) were the possession of all educated Americans born in the late eighteenth century or early in the nineteenth. Americans were not long behind the British in responding to the Romantics Wordsworth and Coleridge, then to Byron, Moore, and Scott. By the 1830s Carlyle was a force in the lives of several American writers through his translations of recent German philosophical works and his own jeremiads against contemporary British values. Americans had access to the latest British and continental discussions of art, religion, politics, and science. For British magazines, especially the quarterly reviews, were imported promptly and widely reprinted. Nineteenth-century American writing reveals its full meanings only in the light of European influences and parallel developments.

THE NEW AMERICANNESS OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

Despite the cultural cross-connections with Europe, the best literature that emerged in the United States was distinctively new, and a few perceptive critics very early began trying to define its special quality. This analysis from the review of The Whale (the English title of Moby-Dick) in the London Leader had currency in America as well, for the popular Harper's New Monthly Magazine quoted it approvingly:

Want [lack] of originality has long been the just and standing reproach to American literature; the best of its writers were but second-hand Englishmen. Of late some have given evidence of originality, not absolute originality, but such genuine outcomings of the America's intellect as can be safely called national. Edgar Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville are assuredly no British offshoots; nor is Emerson—the German American that he is! The observer of this commencement of an American literature, properly so called, will notice as significant that these writers have a wild and mystical love of the supernatural, peculiarly their own. To move a horror skillfully, with some thing of the earnest faith in the Unseen, and with weird imagery to shape these Phantasms so vividly that the most incredulous mind is hushed, absorbed—to do this no European pen has apparently any longer the power—to do this American literature is without a rival. What romance writer can be named with Hawthorne? Who knows the terrors of the seas like Herman Melville?

Plainly, this was meant as praise, but to employ “weird imagery” to “move a horror skillfully” was hardly the ambition of any American writer of the period besides Poe; for their part Hawthorne and Melville were not concerned with the supernatural except as stage devices for heightening their psychological analyses.

But literary historians have not improved much on the reviewer in the Leader in deciding what was American about American literature. American writers were not achieving originality in form: Irving’s sentences were accepted as models of English prose style precisely because they were themselves modeled on the sentences of Addison and Goldsmith, long the prime exemplars of decorous English prose. Melville’s sentences often looked like those of whatever powerful master of the English language he had most recently been reading—Shakespeare, Milton, Burns, Taylor, Sterne, De Quincy, or Carlyle. Nor was the content of the best American writing of this period original in anything like an “absolute” sense. Modern scholars have shown that in his most “American” stories, Rip Van Winkle and The Legend of Sleepy Hollow, Irving drew on, and even closely translated, texts of German tales. In Moby-Dick Melville’s metaphysics are recognizably of the generation of Goethe, Johnson, and Carlyle. Thoreau’s recurrent ideas came mainly from Emerson (at least Emerson himself insisted they did), but Emerson had picked them up from dozens of anec and modern philosophers.

Yet, as everyone in the country sensed by the 1850s, there was some elusive quality about its new literature that was American. Irving’s German-influenced stories were profoundly moving to Americans, who knew more than most Britons what it was to feel the trauma of rapid change, especially to experience repeated physical uprootings, and Americans found in the ne'er-do-well Rip a model for making a success of failure. In Cooper’s novels was a sense of the immensity of physical nature and the power of human beings to destroy nature that most European writers could experience only vicariously. In Melville’s Moby-Dick was a sense (long suppressed in European consciousness) of the grandeur of the physical universe and of the place of human beings in that universe. In Leaves of Grass Whitman undertook another elemental task—to become the national poet of a new continent. What proved most enduringly “American” about Emerson was his wide streak of Yankee individualism best displayed in Self-Reliance, which became an inspiration to thousands of Americans who were determined to hitch their wagons, as Emerson said, to a star. Even Thoreau’s Walden, which many contemporaries took merely as an American counterpart of the English naturalist Gilbert White’s Natural History and Antiquities of Selbourne, was in fact consciously an American counterinscenario, a Franklinsque reto to Poor Richard, a how-to book on getting a living by working at what you love. At a time when grandiloquence in political rhetoric was often taken for eloquence, Dickinson’s poems in their minute intensity were as ambitious as Whitman’s, magnificent attempts to define her experience at whatever cost in wrenching syntax and rhyme. At best, beyond question, American writers were accomplishing things yet unattempted in the English language.

THE AESTHETICS OF A NATIONAL LITERATURE

The great writers of the period for the most part defined their aesthetic problems by themselves, though Emerson’s The Poet aided some of the others. The primary difficulty of how to keep from being secondhand English writers had not been squarely faced by the Americanists of nationality in literature, who most often seemed to think that adoption of an American setting or, more vaguely, the infusion of an American “spirit” guaranteed Americanness. Insofar as the issues had been addressed by Americans before the 1840s, it was primarily by painters and sculptors, the most prominent of whom had received their training abroad but then had found it impossible to recollate their European notions of noble subject and style with Americanness. The Hudson River school of painters, led by Thomas Cole, found a pantheistic majesty in American landscapes not anticipated by the history-filled landscapes of European painting. Some of Cole’s own work was marred by a tendency to allegorize as ineratly as Hawthorne’s own, but others of the Hudson River school, including Frederic Edwin Church, faced in North—and South—America a New World, a landscape with primeval power both to awe and to destroy. Artistic tributes could be clichéd as Whitman’s catalogs (everyone from Church to T. B. Thorpe painted inevitable Niagaras), but Church’s rediscovered
Iceburns (1861) is only a decade away from Moby-Dick, a work by a spirit that was in truth kindred. Other Americans, notably Martin Johnson Heade, born the same year as Melville, found compelling mystery not only in the exotica of South America but also in the salt hay marshes and low coasts of New England. The genre painters who formed so conspicuous a part of the artistic establishment—Melville’s and Whitman’s acquaintance William Sidney Mount, for instance—were pleasant but unchallengingly continuing the familiar Dutch tradition—familiar from paintings brought across the Atlantic by Dutch settlers as well as those more recently brought over. Of the major writers of the period Whitman, from his friendships with the members of the Brooklyn Art Union in the early 1850s, was exposed to controversies in art in time to have them affect his poetry—his own aesthetic statements reflect Horatio Greenough’s championship of the nude and his disparagement of mere embellishment. Most of the writers, despite the theorizing about painting and sculpting and the actual painting and sculpting available for them to see, were pretty much on their own when they were solving their crucial aesthetic problems—such as Hawthorne’s attempts to strike a balance between the allegorical and the realistic, Emerson’s difficulty in achieving unity from the mutually repellent particles of his thought, Thoreau’s attempts to unite the Transcendentalist and the naturalist in himself, Whitman’s struggle to domesticate the epic catalog without falling into self-pity, Melville’s attempt to create a tragedy in a democracy, and Dickinson’s attempt to walk the hairline between mere coyness and psychological precision.

THE WRITERS AND THEIR AMERICA

When the great American writers of the mid-nineteenth century took stock of their country, they sometimes caught the contagion of an ebullient, expansionist mood that struck many observers as the dominant one of the time, and even Thoreau, the most relentless critic of the values of his society, insisted that to some extent he counted himself among “those who find their encouragement and inspiration in precisely the present condition of things, and cherish it with the fondness and enthusiasm of lovers.” But often they felt a profound alienation. Emerson was a preacher who had renounced his pulpit, and the other great writers—also preachers without pulpits—devoted much of their artistic effort to analyzing conditions of life in America and to exhorting their fellow citizens to live more wisely.

CONFORMITY, MATERIALISM, AND THE ECONOMY

The eccentricity of Americans, especially in rural areas and smaller towns, was notorious among visitors from abroad and was recorded in some of its aspects by writers as diverse as J. H. Trollope, Harris, Melville, and Stowe. In Stowe’s novels of the late 1850s and early 1860s there is a gallery of portraits of such mentally angular or gnarled characters. In Amherst, Emily Dickinson out-Thoreaued Thoreau in her resolute privacy, idiosyncracies, and individuality. But she could be understood in relation to real and fictional characters. The night her correspondent Thomas Wentworth Higginson met her in 1870 he strove to convey her character in a letter to his wife without staying up too late: “if you had read Mrs. Stoddard’s novels you could understand a house where each member runs his or her own selves.” Despite such powerful individualists, it seemed to some of the writers that Americans, even while deluding themselves that they were the most self-reliant populace in the world, were systematically selling out their individuality. Emerson sounded the alarm: “Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company in which the members agree for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the same. The virtue in most request is conformity.” In The Celestial Railroad Hawthorne satirically described the condition at the Vanity Fair of modern America, where there was a “species of machine for the wholesale manufacture of individual morality.” He went on: “This excellent result is effected by societies for all manner of virtuous purposes; with which a man has merely to connect himself, throwing, as it were, his quota of virtue into the common stock; and the president and directors will take care that the aggregate amount be well applied.” Thoreau repeatedly satirized America as a nation of joiners that tried to force every newcomer “to belong to their desperate odd-fellow society”: to Thoreau, members of the Odd Fellows and other social organizations were simply not odd enough, not individual enough.

But many of the writers found anything comical in the wholesale loss of Yankee individualism as both men and women deserted worn-out farms for factories, where many began to feel what Emerson called “the disproportion between their faculties and the work offered them.” Far too often, the search for a better life had degenerated into a desire to possess factory-made objects. “Things are in the saddle,” Emerson said sweepingly, “and ride mankind.” In elaboration of that accusation, Thoreau wrote Walden as a treatise on expanding the spiritual life by simplifying material wants. Informing Thoreau’s outrage at the materialism of his time was the bitter knowledge that even the most impoverished were being led to waste their money (and, therefore, their lives) on trumpery. In a vocabulary echoing Benjamin Franklin, he condemned the emerging consumer economy that was devoted, even in the infancy of advertising, to the creation of “artificial wants” for things that were unnecessary or outright pernicious. And to counter the loss of an archetypal Yankee virtue, he made himself into a jack-of-all-trades and strong master of one, the art of writing. In strangely different ways the four to speak out most profoundly about the emerging American economic system were Melville, Stowe, Whitman, and Harding.

SEX AND SEXUAL ROLES

At a time when sex was banished from the magazines and from almost all books except medical treatises, Whitman alone called for a healthy sense of the relation between body and soul and created a forum for discussing sexual joy and anguish. The other male writers made no challenge to conventional sexual roles; when Emerson, for instance, said that society “is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members,” he meant “manhood,” not “manhood and womanhood.” Only Whitman among the male authors regularly employed what we would call nonsexist language, and only Whitman rejected the opinion that woman’s proper sphere was a limited, subservient, supportive one. While the attitudes of most male—and female—writers of the time reflected and embodied the prevailing sexism, Whitman rejected the “empty dish, gallantry” as a degraded attitude: “This tepid wash, this diluted deferential love, as in songs, fictious, and so forth, is enough to make a man vomit.” Instead, he insisted on equality: “Women in These States approach the day of that organic equality with me, without which, I see, men cannot have organic equality among themselves.” Of the other writers only Margaret Fuller thought so deeply about sexual roles. Ironically, as the mother of a tardily acknowledged child (and perhaps not the wife of its Italian father), Fuller was an incalculable threat to the little Boston literary society in the months before her death by shipwreck prevented her arrival home. Of the women writers of the time, Dickinson, who never married, was the most bitterly ironic observer of the sacrifices marriage often required of a woman, as in her depiction of the bride who “rose to His Requirement—dropt / The Playthings of Her Life / To take the honorable Work / Of Woman, and of Wife.” And Elizabeth Stoddard, overshadowed by her husband, wrote controlled, ironic analyses of the restricted roles women were allowed to assume. But women had no monopoly on sexual anguish. Melville, who as a young man had known the pagan Eden of the South Seas, found that the claims of his intellect and imagination, his pursuit of a literary career, could not be met while also meeting the claims of his wife and
children. And Whitman, the only writer of the period to advance a "Programme" for honest depiction of sex in literature, privately recorded the torments he endured from his homoerotic longings.

NATURE

In "a new country," Thoreau said, "fuel is an encumbrance," and his generation acted as if trees existed to be burned (and mountains to be graded and wild animals to be slaughtered). But while Thoreau faced the possibility that like villains we might grub our forests all up, "poaching on our own national domains," he had no deep anxiety that primeval nature like the Maine woods would be destroyed. Melville was likewise sure that the whale would not perish: "A huntsman from the savannas and glades of the middle seas, the whale-bone whales can at last resort to their Polar colds, and diving under the ultimate barrier walls and walls there, come up among icy fields and Rees; and in a charmed circle of everlasting December, bid defiance to all pursuit from man." Of the major writers of the period, Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman felt an intensity of communion with nature that warrants their being called nature-mystics, and Dickinson, bounded by town lots and fields near her house in Amherst, found a profoundly un-Christian, "Dru- idic difference" that enhanced nature for her with a sense of harmony between it and human beings. The writers diverged in their wider views of the universe, Melville describing in Moby-Dick the maddening of a cabin boy abandoned in the immensity of ocean, and Thoreau, by contrast, insisting that he was not lonely at Walden. "Why should I feel lonely? is not our planet in the Milky Way?" But whatever their sense of the place of human beings in the cosmos, they all found nature a force in their lives in ways out of leaping with the times, when the Romantic sense of nature as restorer and healer of humankind seemed to persist, as Thoreau pointed out, in the absurd form of uneasy rest-day strollers anxious to pass their allotted time in the woods and return to town.

ORTHODOX RELIGION AND TRANSCENDENTALISM

All the major writers found themselves at odds with the dominant religion of their time, a nominal Protestant Christianity that exerted practical control over what could be printed in books and magazines. This church, Emerson said, acted "as if God were dead." Whitman was more bitter still: "The churches are one vast lie, the people do not believe them, and they do not believe themselves." The writers all came of Protestant backgrounds in which Calvinism was more or less watered down (less in the cases of Melville and Dickinson), but they tended to apply absolute standards toward what passed for Christianity. In The Celestial Railroad Hawthorne memorably satirized the American urge to be progressive and liberal in theology as well as in politics, and Melville extended the satire throughout an entire book, The Confidence-Man.

Awareness of the fact of religious ecstasy was not at issue. Emerson, for instance, showed in The Over-Soul a clinical sense of the varieties of religious experience, the "varying forms of that shudder of awe and delight with which the individual soul always mingle with the universal soul." Similary, Thoreau acknowledged the validity of the "second birth and peculiar religious experience" available to the "solitary hired man on a farm in the outskirts of Concord" but felt that any religious denomination in America would invert that mystical experience into something available only under its auspices and something to be brought into line with its particular doctrines. Like Thoreau, Whitman saw all religious ecstasy as equally valid and came forth in Song of Myself outbidding "the old cautious hucksters" like Jehovah, Kronos, Zeus, and Hercules, gods who held too low an estimate of the value of men and women. Among these writers Melville was alone in his anguish at the realization that Christianity was impracticable. Melville also felt the brutal power of the Calvinistic Jehovah with special keenness: human beings were "god-bullied" even as the hull of the Pequod was in Moby-Dick, and the best way people had of demonstrating their own divinity lay in defying the omnipotent tyrant. To Dickinson also God was a bully—a "Mastiff," whom subservience might, or might not, appease. In a series of novels Harriet Beecher Stowe best described the way rigid Calvinism could cripple young minds.

Transcendentalism in the late 1830s and early 1840s was practiced in newspapers and magazines as something between a national laughingstock and a clear menace to organized religion. The running journalistic joke, which Hawthorne echoed in The Celestial Railroad, was that no one could define the term, other than that it was high-flutin, foreign, and obscenely dangerous. The conservative Christian view was well represented by a passage that appeared in Stowe's newspaper serialization of Uncle Tom's Cabin (1851) but was omitted from the book version, a sarcastic indictment of the leader who might find it hard to believe that Tom could be stirred by a passage in the Bible: "I mention this, of course, philosophic friend, as a psychological phenomenon. Very likely it would do no such a thing for you, because you are an enlightened man, and have out-grown the old myths of past centuries. But then you have Emerson's Essays and Carlyle's Miscellaneous, and other productions of the latter day, suited to your advanced development." Such early observers understood well enough that Transcendentalism was more pantheistic than Christian. The "defant Pantheism" infusing Thoreau's shorter pieces helped keep them out of the magazines, and James Russell Lowell for the Atlantic Monthly publication of a section of The Maine Woods censored a sentence in which Thoreau declared that a pine tree was as immortal as he was and perchance would "go to a high heaven." Melville also was at least once kept from publication by the religious scruples of the magazines, and often he was harshly condemned for what he had managed to publish. For years he bore the wrath of reviewers such as the one who denounced him for writing Moby-Dick and the Harpers for publishing it: "The Judgment day will hold him liable for not turning his talents to better account, when, too, both authors and publishers of injurious books will be cojointly answerable for the influence of those books upon the wide circle of immortal minds on which they have written their mark. The book-maker and the book-publisher had better do their work with a view to the trial it must undergo at the bar of God." The ultimate result was that Melville was silenced. This was extreme, but Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman all suffered in comparable ways for transgressing the code of the Doctors of Divinity (Thoreau said he wished it were not the D.D.'s but the chickadee-dees who acted as censors). Lowell himself indiscriminately censored Thoreau, Whitman, and Stoddard.

IMMIGRATION AND XENOPHOBIA

However threatened conservative Protestants felt by Transcendentalism and by religious speculations like Melville's, they felt far more threatened by Catholicism when refugees from the Napoleonic Wars were followed by refugees from oppressed and famine-struck Ireland. In Boston, Lyman Beecher, father of Harriet Beecher Stowe, thundered out antipapist sermons, then professed dismay when in 1834 a mob in Charlestown, across the Charles River from Boston, burned the Ursuline Catholic School where daughters of many wealthy families were educated. Throughout the 1850s and 1860s and long afterward the country was saturated with lurid books and pamphlets purporting to reveal the truth about sexual practices in nunneries and monasteries (accounts of how priests and nuns disposed of their babies were specially prized) and about the pope's schemes to take over the Mississippi Valley (Samuel F. B. Morse and others warned that Jesuits were prowling the Ohio Valley, in disguise). An extreme of xenophobia was reached in the summer of 1844, when rioters in Philadelphia (the city, everyone pointed out, of brotherly love) burned Catholic churches and a seminary. Melville was replying to the cur-
rent hostility when he followed a description of the pestilent conditions of steerage passengers in emigrant ships with this plea: "Let us waive that agitated national topic, as to whether such multitudes of foreign poor should be landed on our American shores; let us waive it, with the one only thought, that if they can get here, they have God's right to come; though they: bring all Ireland and her miseries with them. For the whole world is the patrimony of the whole world; there is no telling who does not own a stone in the Great Wall of China."

For all his humanitarian eloquence, Melville, like the other writers, realized that the new immigrants were changing the country from the sweaty, homogeneous land it had been, or had seemed to be. By the end of the Civil War many native Americans shared Stowe's profound nostalgia for the days before the railroads, before the influx of Catholics, before the even more alien influx of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, few of whom spoke English and many of whom were not Christian at all. The view of many in the literary establishment was reflected by Thomas Bailey Aldrich in The Stillwater Tragedy (1880): what you do with the widow and the children of the unionizing Italian (once he has conveniently and agonizingly died) is ship them back to Italy.

POLITICS AND WARS

The major writers of the period lived with the anguish of paradox that the most idealistic nation in the world was implicated in continuing national sins: the near-genocide of the American Indians (whole tribes in colonial times had already become, in Melville's phrase for the Massachusetts Pequots, as extinct as the ancient Medes), the enslavement of blacks, and (partly by a product of slavery) the staged "Executive's War" against Mexico, started by President Polk before being declared by Congress. Emerson was an exception, but most writers were silent about the successive removal of eastern Indian tribes to less desirable lands west of the Mississippi River, as legislated by the Indian Removal Act of 1830. American destiny plainly required a little practical callousness, most whites felt, in a secular version of the colonial notion that God had willed the extirpation of the American Indian. The imperialistic Mexican War was so gaudily exotic—and so distant—that only a small minority of American writers voiced more than perfunctory opposition; an exception was Thoreau, who spent a night in the Concord jail in symbolic protest against being taxed to support the war.

It was black slavery, what Melville called "man's foulest crime," which most stirred the conscience of the white writers, and in describing his own enslavement, the fugitive Frederick Douglass developed a notable capacity to stir readers as well as audiences in the lecture halls. When the Fugitive Slave Law was enforced in Boston in 1851 (by Melville's father-in-law, Chief Justice Shaw), Thoreau worked his outrage into his journals; then after another famous case in 1854 he combined the experiences into his most scathing piece, Slavery in Massachusetts, for delivery at a Fourth of July celebration in which a copy of the Constitution was burned because slavery was written into it. In that speech Thoreau summed up the disillusionment that many of his generation shared. He had felt a vast but indefinite loss after the 1854 case, he said: "I did not know at first what ailed me. At last it occurred to me that what I had lost was a country." (Successive generations of American writers would experience the same trauma: Howells, Twain, and others when the United States turned from savior to conqueror in the Philippines after the Spanish-American War; Robert Lowell and many others after it became clear that the involvement of the United States in Vietnam was not purely a gesture of suavitas toward a grateful, beleaguered nation. More obliquely than Thoreau, Melville explored black slavery in Benito Cereno as an index to the emerging national character. At his bitterest, he felt in the mid-1850s that "free America" was "intrepid, unprincipled, reckless, predatory, with boundless ambition, civilized in externals but a savage at heart."
federal office in occupied New Orleans. A younger Connecticut writer, John William DeForest, recruited a company of volunteers at New Haven and served through the war as their captain. His *The First Time under Fire*, published in the September 1864 *Harper's*, deserves to be better known and may find a place in some future edition of this anthology; surely in the opening of the nineteenth-century canon his *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty* will be taught in survey courses as a supplemental text. Samuel L. Clemens after a brief fling at patrolling in Missouri (an episode he later wistfully if speciously recorded in *The Private History of a Campaign that Failed*) saw the war out safely in the west; William Dean Howells sat it out in Venice; and Henry James, seeing both younger brothers off to the war, the opening of which coincided with his suffering what he called an "obscure" injury, spent the war years in Newport and Cambridge. No writer really escaped it, and for most of them, as for most citizens, it was a chastening personal and national history. In *Clarel* (1876) Melville called the winter of 1860–61 a "sad arch between contrasted eras"; his modern critics have forgivably misapplied the words to the years 1861–65.

DeForest's masterpiece aside, the war did not soon evoke great fiction, but Melville's unevent *Battle-Frogs* (1866) included some remarkable meditative poems as well as the technically interesting *Down East*, in which he conveyed vividly the anxiety of civilians awaiting news during a protracted and dubious battle and eagerly reading aloud the latest bulletin posted outside the telegraph office. His contemporaries such as Richard Henry Stoddard liked best the brisk derivative poems such as *Sheridan's Ride*. *Whiteman's Drum-Taps* (1865) also is uneven but contains several great poems. After a few copies had been dispersed, Whitman held back the edition for a "Sequel" mainly consisting of newly written poems on Lincoln, among them *When Lilies Last in the Doorway Bloomed*, the greatest literary work to come out of the war and one of the world's great elegies. Both volumes summed up the national experience. Both writers looked ahead as well as backward, Whitman calling "reconciliation" the "word over all," and Melville urging in a preface "Supplement" that the victorious North "be Christians toward our fellow-whites, as well as philanthropists toward the blacks, our fellow-men." Later in *Specimen Days* Whitman made a memorable attempt to do the impossible—to put the real war realistically into a book.

Both Whitman and Melville, especially in their later years, saw American politics cease to be concerned with great national struggles over momentous issues; rather, politics meant corruption, on a petty or a grand scale. Melville lived out the Gilded Age as an employee at the notoriously corrupt Custom House in New York City. In *Clarel*, foreseeing a descent from the present "civil barbarism" to "the Dark Age of Democracy," he portrayed his American pilgrims to the Holy Land as recognizing sadly that the time might come to honor the God of Limitations in what had been the Land of Opportunity, a time when Americans might cry: "To Terminus blind fate! / Columbus ended earth's romance: / No New World to mankind remains!"

**THE HEROES OF AMERICAN WRITERS**

Against a society that often lost sight of principles, whether aesthetic, social, or political, Emerson offered the challenge that the other great writers took up: "Let us confront the smooth mediocrity and squalid contentment of the times, and hurl in the face of custom, and trade, and office, the fact which is the upshot of all history, that there is a great responsible Thinker and Actor moving wherever moves a man; that true man belongs to no other time or place, but is the centre of things." In the same spirit Melville looked bravely at the risks that lay beyond the imitation of Irving:

But the graceful writer, who perhaps of all Americans has received the most plaudits from his own country for his productions, that very popular and amiable writer, however good, and self-reliant in many things, perhaps owes his chief reputation to the self-acknowledged imitation of a foreign model, and to the studied avoidance of all topics but smooth ones. But it is better to fail in originality, than to succeed in imitation. He who has never failed somewhere, that man can not be great. Failure is the true test of greatness.

In the same spirit Whitman commanded his readers: "Re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body." As Emerson had warned them they must, the great writers of this time relinquished "display and immediate fame" to wrestle, in Melville's phrase, "with the angel—Art," making their writings "a fusion of classes from which later generations, and sometimes even their own, would date eras in their lives. As the selections in this volume demonstrate, all of Emerson's great fellow writers fervently shared his conviction that "nothing is of any value in books, excepting the transcendental and extraordinary."

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**WASHINGTON IRVING**

1783–1859

Washington Irving, the first American to achieve an international literary reputation, was born in New York City on April 3, 1783, the last of eleven children of a Scottish-born father and English-born mother. Well into his thirties his brothers routinely tried to make plans for him, and his own devotion to his family was a dominant emotion throughout his life. He read widely in English literature at home, modeling his early prose on the graceful Spectator papers by Joseph Addison, but delighted by many other writers, including Shakespeare, Oliver Goldsmith, and Laurence Sterne. His brothers enjoyed writing poems and essays as pleasant, companionable recreation, and at nineteen Irving wrote a series of satirical essays on the theater and New York society for his brother Peter's newspaper, the Morning Courier.

When Irving showed signs of tuberculosis in 1804, his brothers sent him abroad for a two-year tour of Europe, where in his notebooks he steadily became an acute observer and felicitous recorder of what he witnessed. On his return, he began studying law with Judge Josiah Hoffman, but more important for his career, he and his brother William (along with William's brother-in-law, James Kirke Paulding) started an anonymous satirical magazine, Salmagundi (the name of a spicy hash), which ran through 1807 with sketches and poems on politics and drama as well as familiar essays on a great range of topics. Then in 1808 Irving began work on a History of New York; at first conceiving it as a parody of Samuel Latham Mitchell's pompously titled: *The Picture of New-York; or The Traveler's Guide through the Commercial Metropolis of the United States*, then taking on a variety of satiric targets, including President Jefferson, whom he portrayed as an early Dutch governor of New Amsterdam, William the Testy. Exuberant, broadly comic, the History spoofed historians' pedantries but was itself the result of many months of antiquarian reading in local libraries, where his researches gave Irving refuge from grief over the sudden death of Judge Hoffman's daughter Matilda, to whom he had become engaged. Then the History was launched by a charming publicity campaign. First a newspaper noted the disappearance of a "small elderly gentleman, dressed in an old black coat and cocked hat, by the name of KNICKERBOCKER," adding that there were "some reasons for believing he is not