Luisa Turczynski

(Re-)Imagining Nature, Gender, and Sexuality in American Romanticism and Beyond

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1. Introduction

"How much of beauty – of color, as well as form – on which our eyes daily rest goes unperceived by us!"
Henry David Thoreau, Journal*, 1 August 1860*

"So much detail goes unnoticed in the world."
Barbara Kingsolver, Prodigal Summer*, 2000*

The intellectual and cultural movement of Romanticism has engendered increased attentiveness to the natural world and pronounced unprecedented concern for its relation to the individual. Romantic and transcendentalist writers not only endowed the thorough observation and description of natural phenomena with an introspective quality, probing the correspondence between physical matter and human mind. Moreover, they encountered nature as their era's 'new cathedral', a religious realm that provides the inquiring observer with spiritual revelation and insight into their own potential divinity. Reevaluating wild, untouched nature as a source of self-awareness, spiritual truth, aesthetic pleasure, and creative stimulation, Romantic thinkers have established persistent cultural practices of relating the human subject to the natural sphere. In response to the destructive commodification of nature that was caused by the progressing industrialization, British and subsequent American Romantics further pioneered the promotion of wilderness preservation. Hence, this thesis posits that transatlantic Romantic currents have left a lasting imprint on the collective Euro-American environmental imagination.

In the literary-historical section of my study, I trace how the Romantic veneration of wild nature gradually spread from Europe to America during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The European Romantic nature philosophy and aesthetics of the sublime undoubtedly established the framework for a new, favorable portrayal of wilderness. During the Anglo-Americans' exploration and conquest of the 'new' continent, this vogue for the wild intertwined with their project of nationalist self-assertion. Exploring the impact of Romantic paradigms for the American national consciousness and literary canon, my study highlights the transatlantic conjunctions between (late) eighteenth- and nineteenth-century nature writers of the anglophone world.[1]

Positioning *American Romanticism* as Part of a Transatlantic Cultural Movement

Predominant periodization approaches to American literary history identify the mid-nineteenth century as an *American Renaissance* – the first peak of a specifically national literary tradition that has given rise to a rich array of masterpieces. Francis Otto Matthiessen established this designation in his eponymous literary-historical study to

1 Put differently, I conceive of authors like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Emerson, and Thoreau as a "transatlantic community of Green Writers who flourished in England and America during the Long Romantic Period", following James C. McKusick's comprehensive analysis of *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology* (2000: 19).

describe the unprecedented maturity American writers achieved in an "extraordinarily concentrated moment of literary expression" (1941: vii). Accordingly, works by Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Whitman, and Melville stand out due to their thematic density, stylistic innovation, and their promotion of democracy. While the phrase *American Renaissance* connotes these texts' continuity and equivalence with the greatest achievements of European literary culture, it likewise signifies their claim to intellectual independence and national distinctiveness. Matthiessen's widely received approach to the major American writers of the mid-nineteenth century draws on their self-perception as visionary prophets ushering in a new era of spiritual, cultural, and societal liberation from given traditions – as proclaimed insistently in Emerson's essay "The American Scholar" (1837) (Fulton 2007; Reynolds 2016; Zapf 2010: 85-104).

Upon its formation after the Second World War, American Studies centered on this conception of the *American Renaissance* as a field of national self-definition, providing close readings of the literary canon as defined by Matthiessen. Formalist and subsequent poststructuralist critics primarily viewed the five esteemed authors as "alienated rebels in an arid cultural environment" (Reynolds 2016: 2). Pursuant to these early appreciative approaches, the canonized American Renaissance writers positioned themselves in fundamental opposition to their surrounding dominant culture, effectively surpassing its rare literary materials in philosophical depth and stylistic excellence.[2] With the rise of New Historicism and cultural studies in the 1980s, literary scholarship has increasingly questioned these insular and exclusionary leanings in conceptualizing the period – firstly through relating American Renaissance works to the complex historical-political situation from which they emerged and to which they responded. Besides this emphasis on contextualization, especially feminist and ethnographic critics have prompted an expansion of the restrictive canon that only comprised white, male Anglo-Saxons, accentuating the era's outstanding pieces of African American writing and women's fiction (Reynolds 2016; Zapf 2010: 86-87).

Moreover, critical revisions of the *American Renaissance* have addressed the mythic notions of American self-reliance and exceptionalism, which fueled both the nineteenth-century writers' self-stylization and – to a considerable extent – their canonization in early academic approaches. In their determination to forge a distinctively American literature that could compete with Europe's cultural magnificence and simultaneously outgrow its influence, seminal authors like Emerson and Thoreau frequently denied their evident ties to European literary traditions. Despite their intensive reception and adaptation of the British Romantics' philosophy and poetry, the Ameri-

2 In his textbook's introduction to "Romantik und 'American Renaissance'" (2010), Hubert Zapf discusses this positioning of the major mid-nineteenth-century writers as dissenters who opposed the dominant culture and national ideology. He aptly comments on the apparent paradox that these authors have gained representative status as epitomes of this very national culture: "Gerade am Dissens nämlich, am antinomischen Denken dieser Autoren wurde ihr spezifisch amerikanischer Charakter festgemacht, womit die Prinzipien von Individualismus und liberaler Demokratie als Grundlage auch der künstlerischen Höchstleistungen des Landes ansetzbar waren" (86).

can transcendentalists typically voiced their aversion to these thinkers. Significantly, such American endeavors to claim intellectual independence from the Old World utilized the comparatively 'new', wide, and untamed American landscape as a national asset deemed capable of inspiring an admirable national culture (Manning 2008; McKusick 2000).

The assumption of a uniquely American wilderness experience has further served to promote an idealized image of the agrarian and democratic society that developed in continuous confrontation with the wild, allegedly unoccupied, free land at the western American frontier. In line with Frederick Turner's influential Frontier Thesis (1920), early historiography has conceived of America's westward movement and the concomitant exploration and conquering of new territory, which endured throughout the nineteenth century, as the crucible of the American collective identity. From the late 1980s onwards, so-called 'New Western' historians have refuted Turner's socio-historical thesis, claiming that it overstates the significance of the settlers' encounters with the New World while ignoring the transit of previously existing principles from Europe. Also, they problematized its inherent ethnocentrism and disregard for the area's prior habitation by the indigenous peoples that were subjected to violent conquests and forced relocations (Herget/Ortseifen 1986; Jones/Wills 2009).

In response to these early tendencies of the field, recent cultural-historical scholarship has emphasized the persistence of European ideas within the formation and development of the American national consciousness and literary tradition. The academic engagement with the *American Renaissance* as a vital period of national self-definition and literary expression increasingly illuminates its manifold transatlantic conjunctions. In his introduction to the era, David S. Reynolds aptly remarks that "[t]ransatlanticism challenges longstanding views of American exceptionalism by demonstrating continuities between antebellum authors and writers elsewhere in the world, both contemporaneously and throughout history" (2016: 4). The mythologized notion of a distinctively American, self-reliant, and exceptional national culture largely emerged from the intellectual movement of American transcendentalism, which flowered in mid-nineteenth-century New England. At the same time, the very foundations of the transcendentalist philosophy evolved from several transatlantic sources, especially German Idealism and its interpretation by the British Romantics. For these reasons, transcendentalist writing has lent itself to a reconsideration of Euro-American continuities.

Whereas earlier prominent American authors like James Fenimore Cooper had already adopted Romantic elements, it was only during the transcendentalist movement that these impulses solidified into a dominant paradigm of philosophical contemplation and poetic expression. Cultural historians have repeatedly considered transcendentalism as a manifestation or 'outbreak' of Romanticism in America – firstly in that it championed subjective, intuitive, and imaginative modes of experiencing spirituality and praised nature as the ultimate realm for exploring these. Furthermore, the transcendentalists drew heavily on the profound Romantic shift towards a dynamic and organic conception of the universe, which opposed the static and mechanistic worldview that was promoted throughout the era of Enlightenment and the Scientific Revo-

lution.[3] They refined this proto-ecological understanding of the earth, brought special urgency to the environmental challenges of their time, and incorporated various other Romantic innovations into their progressive vision of individual and social transformation (Adams 1952; Chai 1990; Gravil 2000; Miller 1978; Reynolds 2016; Zapf 2010: 98-109).

Against this backdrop, a growing body of scholarship has uncovered the cultural legacies of European Romantic currents within the major literary works that Matthiessen and his followers canonized as American Renaissance writing. This research interest in transatlantic continuities not only counters the above-discussed cultural bias within the predominant periodization of American literature. Likewise, it contradicts literary-historical studies that define Romanticism as an essentially European phenomenon (cf. Day 1996: xi; Roe 2008: 1). In her contribution "Americas" to *Romanticism: An Oxford Guide* (2008), Susan Manning calls for a reconsideration of Romanticism as a broad, transatlantic, and dynamic cultural movement. Examining interrelations between (late) eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writing in Britain, Canada, North and South America, the literary scholar shifts the focus from determining *a* Romantic period to conceptualizing "a sprawling century of Romanticisms" (148). Manning emphasizes that the national tradition of 'American Literature' has strongly depended on the aesthetics of Romanticism, prompting the use of plural forms to signify the respective relations: "[S]peaking instead of 'Americas' and 'Romanticisms', we can begin to think more fluidly, not of essential features and peculiar characteristics, but of transformations and processes, of shared preoccupations given local inflection" (ibid.).

Following this fluid notion of a broad, transatlantic Romantic movement, my study traces such shared preoccupations and transformative processes within anglophone philosophical, literary, and political discourses of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. More precisely, this book's literary-historical section (chapter 2) explores the vital impulses the European Romantic nature philosophy and aesthetics have given to the formation of the American national consciousness and literary canon. I thus conceive of *American Romanticism* as a cultural current that has spawned the persistent American self-stylization as *Nature's Nation* – simply put, a nation whose distinctive character, cultural expression, and political promise equal its magnificent landscape. My examination of this myth strives to illuminate both its indebtedness to European Romantic traditions and its nationalist functioning within America's intellectual independence efforts and expansionist rise to empire.

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3 In one of the earliest articles on "Romanticism and the American Renaissance" (1952), R.P. Adams considers this metaphysical shift from static mechanism to dynamic organicism as the crucial transatlantic connection between the two cultural movements. Adams highlights that the national literature that arose in mid-nineteenth-century America "was not so much the result of American writers' rejection of European models and devotion to native themes"; it rather emerged from their somewhat belated adoption of a dynamic and organic worldview – "in which they were greatly aided and encouraged by the example of such Europeans as Goethe, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Carlyle" (432).