Simms’s “Southern” Romance
and the Tradition of “American” Romance

That the romance, in its old form at least, will play again a serious part in the history of literature is open to grave doubt. . . . But because no Englishman will ever again write a great epic is no reason why “Paradise Lost” should cease to delight us. And so, because we shall see no more Scotts or Coopers is no reason why we should prophesy a day of oblivion for their works. If their works fill any one of the world’s various needs, they will be preserved in the world’s memory and regard.

William P. Trent, William Gilmore Simms

The romance can flourish without providing much intricacy of relation. The characters, probably rather two-dimensional types, will not be complexly related to each other or to society or to the past. Human beings will on the whole be shown in ideal relation—that is, they will share emotions only after these have become abstract or symbolic. . . . In American romances it will not matter much what class people come from, and where the novelist would arouse our interest in a character by exploring his origin, the romancer will probably do so by enveloping it in mystery.

Richard Chase, The American Novel and Its Tradition

If the old modernist intellectual, fundamentally a deraciné, saw literature as a “strategy of permanent exile” and fundamental displacement . . . the new intellectual rather likes to pose as a topologist: S/he speaks from one specific place of cultural production, and about a localized “geography of the imagination” within whose borders a given literary utterance may remain significant, relevant, and even intelligible.

Roberto M. Dainotto, Place in Literature

“Ever since literary publishing established itself in the late eighteenth century,” as Wimsatt observes, there has been a tendency in the United States to “view northern traditions as the dominant American traditions and to assign to the South before the twentieth century an inferior role in literary history” (Major Fiction 262). The first two passages quoted above exemplify the generally accepted definition of
“American” romance in nineteenth- and twentieth-century America. Trent, a postbellum native of Richmond, gave the first full analysis of Simms’s life and literary achievements at the end of the nineteenth century, but ironically it served to question the full significance of “a close scrutiny into [Simms’s] motives and his life-work” (*Simms* 332). Despite the same literary domain that Simms and Hawthorne shared in mid-nineteenth-century America, Trent stresses that Simms’s romance, in “its old form,” will never “play again a serious part in the history of literature,” while he highly evaluates Hawthorne’s romance which “ennoble[s] all who read [it] in the right spirit” (329). This one continued synthesis of “serious” or “new” romance extends into the twentieth century to produce the canon of “American” romance by Richard Chase. According to Chase, Simms’s romance is more characterized by his preoccupation with panoramic settings and heroic deeds than the psychological modernity that is essential to “American” romance. New Americanists such as Nina Baym and John P. McWilliams, Jr., refute the romance theory propounded by Chase, and totally exclude Simms from the new canon. An exception to the general critical tendency to rule his romance out is New Traditionalism, as G. R. Thompson and Eric Carl Link call it, which finds Simms’s definitions of romance “not unusual but standard in reviews and essays in the literary magazines of the day” (103).

The last passage quoted above suggests “current critical practice, practice in which positionality figures strongly as a strategy of resistance . . . either to the assimilation or to the exclusion of a given positional entity” (Kerkering, “American Renaissance Poetry” 226). Speaking “from one specific place of cultural production” leads to “the questioning of traditional aesthetic values once mistaken as universal”; regionalism set against “the superimposition of the unified map of the nation on all kinds of internal differences” (Dainotto 3–4). Over the past two decades considerable scholarly attention has focused on redefining and rewriting the American Renaissance, but we too frequently compare the fictional and poetic descriptions of places with the actual places the author is writing about, just to “enhance the stature of such work by likening it to stories by Hawthorne or James or other major writers, supposedly elevating the southern writer by demonstrating that the two were attempting to do the same thing” (Rubin, “Southern Literature” 20). Of course, it is important to understand and appraise the literature of the South in “its many and complicated relations with the literature of the rest of the nation” (Hubbell x), but in the light of the region as “‘the place in which arguments and demonstrations’ about the existence of a cultural identity free from political impositions and from the unjust demands of history ‘are stored, and from which they can be retrieved’” (Dainotto 19), Simms’s Southernness should be more properly redefined and reevaluated in its own right.

To outline and interrogate the “well-entrenched consensus of criticism” (Wimsatt, *Major Fiction* 262), I have chosen Trent, Chase, and McWilliams in this chapter for my discussion of the romance in the American literary criticism, because they differentiate between the works of Simms and Hawthorne in aesthetic (and
political) terms, while others, including F. O. Matthiessen, Baym, and Dekker, evade a critical analysis of Simms, saying, “It may be held that my choice of authors is arbitrary” but “the masterworks of these authors have been largely taken for granted” (Matthiessen x–xi), or that “I would not argue with a reader who wished I . . . had included a book by William Gilmore Simms . . . but I would maintain that most of the books I do write about are among the best of their kind” (Dekker 4).

By examining their discourses on the Americanness or modernity of the romance first and then devoting a full discussion to Simms’s reviews of Hawthorne’s fiction, in this chapter I explore Simms’s view of romance and demonstrate that as a Southern conservative he deliberately chose the Scott style of rendering to represent the real and the ideal in “their inextricable involvement” (Weaver, Essays 57).

“American” Romance, Trent’s Biography, and Simms’s Romance

When Trent wrote a biography of Simms, the structure and values of the American community had changed so drastically with the extraordinary progress in the development of communications and transportation that realism “grew out of the bewilderment, and thrived on the simple grimness, of a generation suddenly brought face to face with the pervasive materialism of industrial capitalism” (Kazin 15). It was “born in protest, born in rebellion, born out of the sense of loss and indirection which was imposed upon the new generations out of the realization that the old formal culture—the ‘New England Idea’—could no longer serve” (Kazin 31). The literary battle lines between the novel and the romance appeared in a new form as the realism/idealism controversy. Hjalmar Hjorth Boyesen, a Norwegian realist and professor of German at Columbia, for instance, observed in the May 1889 North American Review that “the great and radical change which the so-called realistic school of fiction has inaugurated” was “no longer an irresponsible play of fancy” but “acquires an historical importance in relation to the age to which it belongs” (598), since it broke with the romantic tendency to create “a series of extremely entertaining tales, which are incidentally descriptive of manners, but caricatured, extravagant, and fantastic” (599).

At the same time it was suggested by others that art should avoid the extremes of realism and idealism. In the March 1890 Forum W. H. Mallock offered their intersection to seek for not only “manner and circumstances” represented “precisely as they are perceived by our own ears and eyes” but also “what lies below the surface” (qtd. in Thompson and Link 146). A few years earlier, George Parsons Lathrop, Hawthorne’s son-in-law, had referred to the import of realism in the September 1874 Atlantic Monthly; it supplies, he observes, “the visual distinctness which is one great charm of the stage,” but the novelist must “investigate the functions of all those complicated impulses, emotions, and impressions which we experience from hour to hour, from day to day, and by which our actions and characters are continually controlled, modified, or explained” (321). In “investigation of psychological phenomena, or insight into the mysteries of spiritual being,” he argues, Hawthorne’s
“realism” is “careful, detailed, perfectly true, and perfectly finished” (321). James T. Fields contributed toward “assuring Hawthorne’s continuing presence in the cultural foreground” in the post–Civil War era, by producing eleven posthumous editions of Hawthorne’s work between 1864 and 1883 (Tompkins, Designs 29). Hawthorne’s “friends and associates” kept his fiction “up-to-date” by writing about it, and “then their friends took over” (Designs 30).

As Richard H. Brodhead observes, Hawthorne was “recanonized on new grounds” and “elevated to the highest reaches of the literary pantheon” during the period of major shifts in literary preference and practice after the Civil War. The modernists of the 1870s coupled him with Turgenev as a model for “the new novel shorn of moral commentary” and those of the early 1880s linked him with George Eliot as “a patron of the new novel of psychological analysis and moral irresolution” (Brodhead, “Hawthorne” 25). To put it in perspective, the realism/idealism controversy in the age of realism was a bridge between the romance/novel distinction in the early nineteenth century and Chase’s theory of romance in the mid–twentieth century.

Charles Dudley Warner, general editor of the American Men of Letters Series, who invited Trent in 1889 to write a biography of Simms as the leading man of letters in the Old South, wrote The Gilded Age, a satirical criticism of sentimentalism in collaboration with Mark Twain, giving a name to the 1870s and 1880s. In the essay “Modern Fiction” published in 1883, however, he observes that “one of the worst characteristics of modern fiction is its so-called truth to nature” and contends that “art requires an idealization of nature” (33). Art is “selection and idealization, with a view to impressing the mind with human, or even higher than human, sentiments and ideas” (34). Realism gives a wholly unidealized view of human society: it takes “a delight in representing the worst phases of social life; an extreme analysis of persons and motives; the sacrifice of action to psychological study; the substitution of studies of character for anything like a story; a notion that it is not artistic, and that it is untrue to nature to bring any novel to a definite consummation, and especially to end it happily; and a despondent tone about society, politics, and the whole drift of modern life” (36). This kind of fiction holds that “we are in an irredeemably bad way. There is little beauty, joy, or light-heartedness in living; the spontaneity and charm of life are analyzed out of existence” (36–37). The main object of the novel should be, as Warner argues, “to entertain”; “the best entertainment,” he says, is “that which lifts the imagination and quickens the spirit; to lighten the burdens of life by taking us for a time out of our humdrum and perhaps sordid conditions, so that we can see familiar life somewhat idealized, and probably see it all the more truly from an artistic point of view” (39).

Trent, a Virginia native, lived three decades after the Civil War in the age of realism when the canon of classic American literature was thus being questioned and reconstructed. He pronounces clearly in the last chapter of the biography that Simms’s romances cannot “make any firm stand against the attacks of the realists”
Visions of Order in William Gilmore Simms

(Simms 328) because they do not “ennoble” readers “in the right spirit” (329). Mentioning The Kinsmen, he says that “the bad company he had kept while writing ‘Richard Hurdis’ and ‘Border Beagles’ had not been without its effects,” adding that his talking with thieves and outlaws and brothers eager to kill one another made him dwell “almost exclusively on the darker side of Carolina’s revolutionary history” (121). The scenes in Simms’s Border Romances are “as rough in their construction as the people described were in their manners and customs” (88): “But he might have avoided, at least, introducing brutal murders not necessary to the action of the story, and he might have remembered that a good artist is not called upon to exercise his powers upon subjects not proper to his art, simply because such subjects belong to the realm of the real and the natural. He might have remembered that nobility is that quality of a romance which is essential to its permanence; and that the fact that he was describing accurately the life of a people whom he thoroughly understood would not alone preserve his work for the general reader” (89).

To his own question—“Will the revolutionary and colonial romances be read, say fifty years hence?”—Trent gives a prompt answer: “That the romance, in its old form at least, will play again a serious part in the history of literature is open to grave doubt” (328). In A History of American Literature, 1607–1865 he comments about Hawthorne, “a man of noble nature and of subtle imagination” (359), that his style “may seem a trifle old-fashioned, it may not be sufficiently varied and flexible, or individual, but to deny its remarkable charm and adequacy would be hypercritical” (360), and that “under any definition Hawthorne’s genius must be pronounced authentic and individual” (362).

Warner and Trent had another more important but similar basic understanding of American history. Before he selected Trent, Warner had deeply impressed Trent in his lecture on “Certain Diversities of American Life” at the University of the South at Sewanee, Tennessee; “New England,” he declared, was “hospitable in its intellectual freedom, both of trial and debate, to new ideas” and “in touch with the universal movement of humanity and of human thought and speculation,” but “isolation from the great historic stream of thought and agitation” produced “stagnation” in the Old South (qtd. in McCardell, “Trent’s Simms” 186–87). Warner was also impressed with Trent, a twenty-seven-year-old native of Richmond whose philosophy was a doctrine of progress. Trent felt the necessity for historical studies in the South, but believed that “in the South there was only one thing that knit the several States together, and that was slavery”; “progress and slavery are natural enemies,” he observes, and “the South had no great desire to progress except in her own way, which was really retrogression” (Simms 169). He wrote in “Notes on the Outlook for Historical Studies in the South” that “I know more than one scholar, born without the Southern pale, into whose hands I would trust our history without a fear; and I cannot help smiling, to think how thoroughly the tables would be turned, if it were a Northern historian who should first give to the world a true and complete history of the Southern people” (qtd. in Stephenson 156). Trent’s William Gilmore
Simms’s “Southern” Romance

Simms, then, is a co-product of a native New Englander and a Southerner who agreed, with “Professor Shaler, of Harvard,” that “if there be one fact that stands out before the student of ante-bellum Southern history, it is that the Southern people, down to 1861, were living a primitive life, a life full of survivals” (Simms 31).

Trent saw the antebellum Southerners as feudal minded and the Old South as a primitive society that was “conservative, slow to change, contented with the social distinctions already existing” (Simms 36): “Southerners lived a life which, though simple and picturesque, was nevertheless calculated to repress many of the best faculties and powers of our nature. It was a life affording few opportunities to talents that did not lie in certain beaten grooves. It was a life gaining its intellectual nourishment, just as it did its material comforts, largely from abroad,—a life that choked all thought and investigation that did not tend to conserve existing institutions and opinions, a life that rendered originality scarcely possible except under the guise of eccentricity” (37).

Slavery and feudalism combined, Trent argues, to produce a feudal element in the Southern character: Southerners’ incapacity to reason clearly and their “arrogance, contempt for inferiors, inertia of mind and body” (41). The “higher planes of existence, individual as well as national” are reached “by toil, by slow degrees, by pain,” but “it was the forces of destiny that made the North the instrument by which the whole country, North and South, was finally saved for what we all believe will be a glorious future” (287).

Trent opines that Simms’s romances should not have been written since “they have nothing ennobling in them” (Simms 328). The works of Scott and Cooper, he notes, will be “preserved in the world’s memory and regard,” since they fill “the world’s various needs” and “ennoble all who read them in the right spirit” (329). While Simms’s best romances deal with “an eventful period, when a young people was struggling for its rights,” “animated by a common patriotism,” they are “in many places commonplace and dull,” so that “they will never be very popular, at least with older readers, but boys will continue to delight in the daring deeds of scout and partisan, and cultivated and curious persons will turn to them as faithful pictures of interesting epochs in their country’s history” (330–31). Simms, he concludes, was “more English than he thought himself”: he made constant use of “the stock materials of former and contemporary romancers” (331). Thus he was not “original,” and “any comparison with Hawthorne is of course out of the question” (329). Despite “a fair measure of success” he achieved through his own energy, many of his romances as well as “his numerous essays, biographies, dramas, or even his short stories” are not “worthy of special attention” (History 387–88).

Chase’s “American” Romance, New Americanists, and Simms’s Romance: An Overview of “American” Romance

In The American Novel and Its Tradition (1957) Richard Chase, a New Engander, distinguished the American prose romance from the European novel. He saw the
contradiction of the old world and the new one in America as being essential to his formulation of the romance theory, just as Simms and Hawthorne had a century earlier. American romances, he says, are “adaptations of traditional novelistic procedures to new cultural conditions and new aesthetic aspirations” (14).

Chase frames the concepts of the novel and the romance around the notion of how they view reality. The novel, he argues, presents “its great practical sanity, its powerful, engrossing composition of wide ranges of experience into a moral centrality and equability of judgment” (2). This realistic or naturalistic art moves “through contradictions to forms of harmony, reconciliation, catharsis, and transfiguration” (2). The novel renders reality in “comprehensive detail” and delineates people in “their real complexity of temperament and motive” (12). Character is more important than action and plot, and the primary purpose of the narrative is to enhance “our knowledge of and feeling for an important character, a group of characters, or a way of life” (12).

In contrast, the romance renders reality without providing “much intricacy of relation.” The characters, “two-dimensional types,” are shown in “ideal relation”: “abstract or symbolic” (13). Instead of exploring the origin of the character, the romancer envelops him in “mystery” (13). The romance tends to veer toward “mythic, allegorical, and symbolistic forms” by being “less committed to the immediate rendition of reality than the novel” (13). The “profound poetry of disorder” (2) in romance reflects the anomalies and dilemmas of “unexampled territories of life in the New World”; the American romance is “more profound and clairvoyant” than the English novel (5). This is how Chase finds “the definitive adaptation of romance to America” in Hawthorne’s preface to The House of the Seven Gables. Hawthorne adapted, he argues, “the neutral territory between civilization and the wilderness” and “the borderland of the human mind where the actual and the imaginary intermingle” to “the particular demands of an American imagination” and brought “into play his considerable talent for psychology” (19).

According to Chase, pioneers of American romance like Brockden Brown, Cooper, and Simms produced two streams of romance in American literary history. A group encompassing Hawthorne, Melville, James, Mark Twain, Frank Norris, Faulkner, and Hemingway is the mainstream of American fiction with “certain qualities of thought and imagination which the American fiction writer needs but which are outside the province of the novel proper” (20). The other one is a group of historical romance writers such as John Esten Cooke, Lew Wallace, Charles Major, Margaret Mitchell, and Kenneth Roberts. “Although these works may have their points, according to the taste of the reader,” Chase states, “they are, historically considered, the tag-end of a European tradition that begins in the Middle Ages and has come down into our own literature without responding to the forms of imagination which the actualities of American life have inspired” (20). It is only thinly hidden that Simms should be included among the latter group.
In the first chapter, “The Broken Circuit,” Chase refers to Simms’s “Advertisement” to *The Yemassee* for his analysis of the situation of the romancer in the New World. After citing the 1835 version of Simms’s definition of romance in its entirety, he passes a select judgment on it: “Loosely written as it is, this statement, with its echoes of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, remains something of a classic in the history of American criticism, its general purport being one which so many of our prose fictionists have accepted. American fiction has been notable for its poetic quality, which is not the poetry of verse nor yet the domestic or naturalistic poetry of the novel but the poetry of romance. In alllying romance to epic Simms was reflecting his own preoccupation with panoramic settings, battles, and heroic deeds; doubtless he had also in mind, vociferous nationalist that he was, the power of epic to mirror the soul of a people” (17). As the mainstream of American romance is represented by “writers who each in his own way have followed Hawthorne” (20) in thought and imagination, Chase excludes Simms’s works from great American epics by saying that “on the whole, American fiction has approximated the poetry of idyl and of melodrama more often than of epic” (17).

Chase is not unwilling to admit that Simms’s *Confession; or the Blind Heart*, *Beuchampe*, and *Charlemon* are “dark studies in psychology that reflect Godwin and the Gothic tradition at the same time” and “forecast later Southern writers, such as Faulkner and Robert Penn Warren” (17). However, echoing Trent, he takes a high-handed attitude toward these works without any careful attention to them: Simms’s tales of passion are described as “fataly marred by the carelessness and crudity with which they are thrown together” (17). He hastens to argue that it was “in the work of Hawthorne,” who was “no less convinced than Cooper and Simms that romance, rather than the novel, was the predestined form of American narrative,” that “for the first time the psychological possibilities of romance were realized” (18). Simms’s originality was “circumscribed by his apparent belief” that “American romance would differ from earlier forms only because it had different material rather than a ‘particular mode’ of rendering this material” (19). In the tradition of Allen Tate’s “complexity of feeling,” Marius Bewley’s “tension,” and “the Manichaean quality of New England Puritanism” as “the national consciousness” (5–11), Chase sees the mainstream of romance in the works that delineate “the borderland of the human mind where the actual and the imaginary intermingle” rather than “the field of action” in “the neutral territory between civilization and the wilderness” (19). As Robert Spiller observes, Chase defends his hypothesis here by selecting “what he believes to be the few best works” and analyzing them by “application of the thesis to them” (qtd. in McWilliams, “Rationale” 75).

New Americanists question the major premise of Chase’s hypothesis: removing political and social contexts to argue for psychological modernity in American romance. Chase’s formulation has encouraged, as the New Americanist McWilliams notes, the notion of romance writers as “prototypes of alienated modern artists
concerned with the deeper psychology,” and critics of the Chase school have sublimated into the ahistorical and the mythic their “fascination for all those dark, inner, asocial drives of the self” (“Rationale” 72). New Americanists, by contrast, aim to disclose “the conservative, Eurocentric hegemony of mainstream American culture and its patriarchal control of the canon of classic literary texts” (Thompson and Link 5). Their work reflects “an irresistible trend in the academy toward the spurning of unified schemes and hierarchies of every kind” (Crews 68).

This “questioning of absolutes” (Crews 68) by New Americanists has brought to light Chase’s attempt to establish “a monolithic cultural mythos that implicitly reified the idea of a privileged class of ivory-tower intellectuals and narrow literary specialists” (Thompson and Link 6). Removal of political and social contexts in Chase’s formulation is closely linked by Crews to its indifference to and disregard for Native Americans, black Americans, women, and minorities, and by Baym to a chauvinistic political consensus (Thompson and Link 5; 3). They rewrite the established definition of the intrinsic value of literary works in the male-and-white-dominated scholarly tradition. Baym holds that “‘purely’ literary criteria” have had “a bias in favor of things male” (Woman’s Fiction 14). Tompkins opened up the canon to popular works and texts that are “not usually thought to conform to a definition of imaginative literature” (Designs xv), showing that the stereotyped characters in popular writings with their sensational plots and trite expressions are “the instantly recognizable representatives of overlapping racial, sexual, national, ethnic, economic, social, political, and religious categories” (xvi).

The rise of New Americanism has led to an unfavorable revision of Simms’s role in the novel/romance controversy in the nineteenth century. Baym, who propounds that woman’s fiction was “by far the most popular literature of its time, and on the strength of that popularity, authorship in America was established as a woman’s profession, and reading as a woman’s avocation” (Woman’s Fiction 11), plays down Chase’s exemplification of the novel/romance controversy as it related to male writers. The terms “novel” and “romance,” she argues, were interchangeable among reviewers, and without checking Simms’s 1835 version of The Yemassee she insists that his definition of romance was not original but only influenced by Hawthorne’s 1851 preface in The House of the Seven Gables. Tompkins, who questions “a certain set of defects that excludes [sentimental fiction] from the ranks of the great masterpieces,” encourages us to see these neglected texts “insofar as possible, as they were seen in the moment of their emergence, not as degraded attempts to pander to the prejudices of the multitude, but as providing men and women with a means of ordering the world they inhabited” (Designs xii–xiii), but as her attention is focused on “sentimental” women writers, Simms’s writings are never mentioned there. Simms’s name appears under the category of neglected writers only twice in her criticism of Fred Pattee’s Century Readings for a Course in American Literature, though she points out the selection’s “geographical and chronological bias” (Designs 197).
McWilliams admits Chase’s formulation of “the social novel and the other-worldly romance” (“Rationale” 71) has promoted many important strands of American critical thought, and yet contends that it allowed entrance only to the less worldly fictions of certain white male novelists; it is “tacitly exclusive” (74). By insisting upon psychological modernity, that is, employing the term “romance” to remove political and social contexts, he argues, Chase ignored “highly regarded, widely read novelists” such as Stowe, Wharton, Dreiser, Cather, and Wright, just because “novels of direct moral persuasion and/or social determinism were somehow unliterary, almost illiberal” (74). Although the term “romance” was “both a diachronic term applicable to all fiction and a synchronic term referring to historical fiction,” it was “a catch-all word for fiction of any kind that seemed adventurous or thrilling” (75). “Because of its links to the epic and history,” he observes, “the Romance must be seen as a vital influence on the frontier novels of Cooper and Simms and the heroic histories of Parkman and Prescott” (82). One conclusion that “seems wholly tenable,” he contends, is to “now and finally” abandon “Chase’s notion of the timeless Romance as a generic term” (82).

Supporting Baym’s “claim for a mid-century definitional chaos” (“Rationale” 77), McWilliams concedes that we cannot “predict” whether the word “romance” can be “successfully adapted to new critical concerns” (82). “Whether or not the term ‘romance’ can be plausibly applied to genres of American literature other than that of historical prose,” he observes, “remains more problematic” (82). Nevertheless, Hawthorne’s “centrality” in the tradition of American romance is “impossible to deny”; it has “reasons beyond his indispensability to the theory of the American Romance,” because “scholars and readers care for psychological subtlety, for New England historical literature, for New and Old World literary relations, and for artistic control” (78). He firmly argues that Hawthorne himself “steadily shifted his idea of how the Romancer’s imagination functioned” (79): “The settings of the four Romances suggest,” he notes, “Hawthorne’s increasing removal from the historical actualities of American life, together with his growing belief that a Romance was only an artifice of the fancy anyway” (80). The distinction between the novel and the romance continued to be “of importance only to Hawthorne, for whom it came to be crucial” (78).

In contrast to his high appraisal of Hawthorne’s romance, McWilliams sees Simms’s distinction between the novel and the romance in the “Advertisement” to The Yemassee as “subordinate” to his contention that “the modern Romance is the substitute which the people of the present day offer for the ancient epic” (“Rationale” 79). The “generic transformation” of the verse epic into the historical prose romance is “at least as crucial to Cooper, Simms, Melville, Prescott, Parkman, and Norris as the distinction between the novel and the romance” (79), but in The American Epic he argues that Simms’s Yemassee fails to qualify as a great epic. In American epic literature that leads back to Virgil and Homer, “epic and mock-epic, heroism and mock heroism, finally became one” (7), transforming patriotic
self-assertion into new forms satirizing sacred cultural values. In his discussion he refers to satirization of the American epic by Hawthorne, whereas he harshly criticizes Simms’s *The Yemassee* as an American epic for “devolv[ing] into mere adventure, and thereby [sacrificing] not only the narrative thrust central to epic, but ‘unities of plan’ and ‘harmony of parts’ as well”; Simms’s work, he argues, “in no way further[s] the confrontation of the two cultures” (151). He observes in *Hawthorne, Melville, and the American Character: A Looking-glass Business* that among the mid-nineteenth-century American writers only Hawthorne and Melville approached fundamental cultural questions arising from democracy in America “without losing sight of either the shadows of the self or the openness of the future” (20). Hawthorne saw, he argues, “transmuted forms of past flaws living on within the present,” and searched for a usable New England past to demonstrate that “any American who would presume freely to project his self into all others, and all others into himself, was only ignoring distinctions created by region, time, family, and money” (21).

McWilliams goes further: Hawthorne approached the writing of New England historical fiction as “a means of uncovering, in Sacvan Bercovitch’s phrase, the Puritan origins of the American self,” without “exposing himself to the illogic of William Gilmore Simms’s statement “To be national in literature, one must needs be sectional” (*Hawthorne* 21). McWilliams concludes that Hawthorne “simply assumed that New England’s priority in historical influence lent it primacy in determinations of national identity” (21). However, this argument of McWilliams only thinly masks his firm conviction in the precedence of Puritanism in the formation of an American national character. McWilliams’s view of epic and cultural confrontation will be discussed in greater detail in the second section of chapter 6.

Thompson and Link are right in arguing that criticism by New Americanists is “an attempt to invent yet another academic mythos, one which, like so many of its predecessors, shows little real regard for the ‘historical’” (5). “The basic propositions regarding romance that Simms made in 1835,” they observe, “reflect the consensus propositions in the magazine culture at large” (104): “The modern romance was generally considered the substitute for the ancient epic; the novel rendered everyday experience of the ordinary and the probable; the romance allowed for things extraordinary and improbable; and new romance was specifically outlined as a blended hybrid narrative that intermingled the actual and the imaginary. These ideas had developed in England in the eighteenth century, and each was implemented in American criticism during the first third of the nineteenth century” (104).

While it is clear that British and American reviewers shared “a common critical tradition,” it is also clear, as Thompson and Link admit, that there were “New World transformations of Old World conventions” (104). Simms’s and Hawthorne’s definitions of romance were “not unusual but standard in the reviews and essays in the literary magazines of the day” (103), but their varieties of romance have pursued a