

The Rise and 'Fall' of the Great American Novel

LAWRENCE BUELL

THIS ESSAY is about the history of a resonant, grandiose slogan: sometimes invoked passionately, sometimes satirically, but always with a certain mixture of swagger and self-doubt that says, if we listen carefully, a good deal about American authorship, about the publishing and reviewing industries, indeed about the whole history of American culture.

The Great American Novel seems to have been imagined for the first time shortly after the Civil War by a novelist who hoped to write it, John W. DeForest: chiefly remembered today, to the extent that he is remembered at all, for his *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty*, which had been published not long before—one of the first and best Civil War fictions, which unfortunately seems to keep getting rediscovered and then falling out of print.¹ The idea itself has a prehistory that I shall address later on,

1. DeForest, 'The Great American Novel,' *Nation* 6 (Jan. 9, 1868): 27–29. DeForest

This paper was given as the twelfth annual James Russell Wiggins Lecture in the History of the Book in American Culture, held at the American Antiquarian Society on November 4, 1994. With funding from a grant to the American Antiquarian Society from the Lila Wallace–Reader's Digest Fund, the lecture was repeated at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin on February 16, 1995. For their assistance on this project, I should like particularly to thank the librarians of the American Antiquarian Society and the Stowe-Day Foundation, the American literature faculty and graduate students of Georgia State University, Daniel Aaron, Michael Anesko, Nina Baym, Sacvan Bercovitch, Elizabeth Falsey, Philip Fisher, William Pannapacker, Doris Sommer, Roger Stoddard, and Michael Winship. Mss. correspondence by Ross Lockridge, Jr., quoted by permission of Professor Larry Lockridge and the Houghton Library, Harvard University.

LAWRENCE BUELL is professor of English at Harvard University.

Copyright © 1995 by American Antiquarian Society

but the particular phrase, 'The Great American Novel,' apparently was coined in DeForest's 1868 essay of that title.² One of the striking features of its history is how quickly it became a staple of literary journalism. Only three years after DeForest's essay, another critic speculated that it must date back to the early national period when 'the absence of a fully developed literature' was first 'felt.' By the end of the decade, it was affirmed that 'several generations . . . [had] died' waiting for the great national novel to appear; and Henry James had begun writing acronymically to friend and fellow novelist William Dean Howells about the 'G.A.N.,' which James earnestly hoped might soon be consummated (mayhap by either Howells or himself).³ In short, it didn't take long, as another late-nineteenth-century witness put it, for the term to pass 'into well-nigh national acceptance along with other great American things, such as "the great American sewing-machine, the great American public school, the great American sleeping-car," and in general the great American civilization.'⁴

As this writer's snide tone implies, it also didn't take long for a

may have been influenced by an anonymous article in the previous week's issue, 'Literature Truly American' (Jan. 2, 1868): 7-8. This and several other significant early prophetic and prescriptive pronouncements about the Great American Novel are collected in Louis J. Rubin, Jr., and John Reed Moore, ed., *The Idea of an American Novel* (New York: Crowell, 1961). The most significant previous critical studies of Great American Novel discourse are Herbert B. Brown, 'The Great American Novel,' *American Literature* 7 (1935): 1-14; Charles A. Campbell, Jr., "'The Great American Novel': A Study in Literary Nationalism, 1870-1900," Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1951; Benjamin Spencer, *The Quest for Nationality: An American Literary Campaign* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1957), 328-31; Jay Martin, *Harvests of Change: American Literature, 1865-1915* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 25-80; Sergio Perosa, *American Theories of the Novel: 1793-1903* (New York: New York University Press, 1983), 78-83; and Jeffrey Peter Berry, 'Dickens in America: Women Novelists,' State University of New York at Stony Brook, Ph.D. diss., 1986, esp. chaps. 1 and 6. For bibliography, Brown and Campbell are particularly valuable.

2. Edmund Wilson comments aptly on the essay's significance as a pioneer realist manifesto, in *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 692ff. For further discussion of DeForest's aspiration to write a great American novel, see James A. Hijiya, *J. W. DeForest and the Rise of American Gentility* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1988).

3. Thomas Sargent Perry, 'American Novels,' *North American Review* 115 (Oct. 1872): 368; 'Democracy,' *The Literary News*, 1.v (1880): 97; Henry James to William Dean Howells, Dec. 5, 1880, *Henry James Letters*, ed. Leon Edel (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 2: 321.

4. James L. Allen, "'The Great American Novel,'" *Independent* (July 24, 1891): 1403.

fastidious disdain to start seeping into GAN discussions, as if even those who busied themselves with the subject knew they were describing a chimera—a mythical beast that not only didn't yet exist but probably never would—an impossible ideal that might not be altogether desirable anyway, smacking as it did of jingoistic self-puffery.

Yet given how quickly the GAN reached the cliché stage, the greater wonder is how it has persisted. Though its heyday was the half century between the late 1860s and the late 1920s,⁵ 'American reviewers,' as a British scholar dryly remarked in the late 1970s, still seem to 'have a stop marked "Great American Novel" which is pulled out at least once every twelve months.'⁶ This with reference to the promotion of E. L. Doctorow's novel *Ragtime*. And not just reviewers, either: even the writers themselves. In the spring of 1994, the documentary film *The Odyssey of John Dos Passos* ended with a shot of Norman Mailer affirming: 'If we have any *one* great American novel, and perhaps we don't, but if we do, it *would* be *U.S.A.*,' Dos Passos's fictional trilogy covering the first three decades of the century. Earlier in the same film, Mailer had reminisced that it was *U.S.A.* which first formed his vision of what 'a great American novel' might be.⁷

Today's avant-garde intellectual sometimes likes to think of Norman Mailer as passé; but that's not the point. The point is the longevity of GAN-ism far beyond the point it had been 'discredited'—the persistence, in *some* quarters if not in all, of the sense that this is a phrase one can still conjure with—or alterna-

5. Virtually all previous commentators identify GAN-ism as a late-nineteenth-century phenomenon (see for example Brown, Campbell, and Rubin and Moore, note 1 above), but lively discussion continued long thereafter. I set my own watershed at a point between the last major critical essay that treats the GAN as a culturally potent idea still alive in the present (Edith Wharton, 'The Great American Novel' [1927: see note 15 below]) and the first extensive treatment of it by the emerging discipline of American literary studies (Brown's 'The Great American Novel' [1935]), which (prematurely, as my essay argues) treats the vision of the GAN as long defunct.

6. J. A. Sutherland, *Fiction and the Fiction Industry* (University of London: The Athlone Press, 1978), 64.

7. *The Odyssey of John Dos Passos*, prod. by Stephen Talbot (Annandale, Va.: Educational Film Center, 1994).

tively, a pretension that still needs to be put down—as with the British disparager of the fuss about *Ragtime*, or an anti-Toni Morrison piece of the early '90s entitled 'Great American Novel?'—which criticizes what the author takes to be critical overexuberance over Toni Morrison's *Beloved*—as if it were being advanced as the GAN.⁸ Given the GAN's longevity, whether as a term of praise or a term of scorn, even someone skeptical about how much substance is behind the typical invocation of it cannot help getting interested in the sheer fact of its durability, and what this might signify.

Unfortunately for clarity, although fortunately for opportunity, it is not easy to specify what the mythical GAN is or should be. The GAN is rather like the allegorical figure in Hawthorne's tale 'The Celestial Railroad' of Giant Transcendentalist, whose chief trait was that nobody could distinguish his features. It might seem logical to start with a list of GAN nominees. This, however, does not get us very far. At the turn of the twentieth century, for example, when attempts to define and identify the GAN were perhaps at their peak, the following candidates (and doubtless some I've overlooked) were nominated either as having achieved the crown or as approaches thereto: *The Octopus*, by Frank Norris; *A Ward of the Golden Gate*, by Bret Harte; *Guenn*, by Blanche Howard; *Hugh Wynne*, by S. Weir Mitchell; *The Chosen Valley*, by Mary Hallock Foote; and *Unleavened Bread*, by Robert Grant. In short, from a list of reviewerly nominations alone it's impossible to say much more than that a GAN candidate is a novel somebody liked a very great deal.

Failing consensus on nominees, we might try self-selection instead. What about focusing only on novels seemingly written with the intent of making a bid for GAN status? That yields us America's first Nobel laureate, Sinclair Lewis, on the evidence of a letter to his publisher in which Lewis declared: "I want [*Babbitt*] to be the G. A. N. in so far as it crystallizes and makes real the

8. Marjorie Perloff, 'Great American Novel?' *American Notes and Queries* 5 (1992): 229–31.

Average Capable American.”⁹ The same approach also points us toward DeForest, Frank Norris, and Edith Wharton, all of whom wrote manifestoes about the GAN fairly close to the time they published their most ambitious works: DeForest’s *Miss Ravenel*, the first two-thirds of Norris’s unfinished trilogy of the wheat, and Wharton’s *Age of Innocence*. But it doesn’t quite capture Dos Passos, who does not seem to have used the talismanic phrase, even though no twentieth-century American work has been more cited as a possible GAN contender than his *USA* trilogy.¹⁰

A better approach for fathoming GAN-ism, I think, is to extrapolate from the various recipes that have been offered up, especially during the period when the GAN was most intensively discussed: between the end of the Civil War and the start of the Great Depression.

To begin by process of elimination: a GAN should not be tiny. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* is perhaps the shortest ever proposed.¹¹ It should not be about one person’s experience only, although it may be protagonist-oriented. The main characters must be construable as social types; they should not mainly be symbolic figures like Pearl and Chillingworth in *The Scarlet Letter*, nor can they be too idiosyncratic. The Quentin Compson of Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* is less eligible than the Quentin of *Absalom, Absalom!*, where he plays the interpreter of southern history rather than the jealous adolescent with an incest-fixation. The tone of the novel should not be mainly comic, unless as in *Huck Finn* there’s a serious undertone. Finally, it must contribute at least implicitly some significant reflection on the meaning of American culture or a major institution thereof—democracy, indi-

9. Quoted in Mark Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 302.

10. Dos Passos did, however, refer to his early, much-rewritten, and ultimately unsuccessful *Seven Times Round the Walls of Jericho* ironically as the ‘G.N.’ [Great Novel] (*The Fourteenth Chronicle* [Boston: Gambit, 1973], 302, 324, 322).

11. See especially Kenneth B. Eble, ‘*The Great Gatsby* and the Great American Novel,’ *New Essays on the Great Gatsby*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 79–100.

vidualism, capitalism, expansionism, etc. — and not limit itself to a mere rehearsal of particular lives and events.

So much for what the GAN is *not*. This still leaves much room. Beyond that, it may be helpful to think of the GAN as defined by a series of contested questions, among which would certainly be these four. (1) May a novel confine itself to a specific region or place and still qualify? (2) Does it have to be set in the United States? (3) Does it have to be narrated in the realist manner? and (4) May the author be expected to come from any particular background; or is gender, ethnicity, even nationality irrelevant?

On the question of whether regional fiction may qualify, many argued yes, particularly during the era of so-called local colorism in the late nineteenth century: argued that since the U.S. 'is a Union, but not a unit,' a GAN must be sectional. In other words, 'the great American novel will be in the plural; thousands perhaps.' More often than not, though, commentators took the position that 'the great American novel can never be a novel of mere State life, can never be a novel wholly of provincial life, or of sectional life. It must be, a novel of national life . . . based entirely or partly upon national ideas.'¹² It was widely agreed that we might look for a plurality of GANs, not just one; and also that the GAN *could* have a particularistic focus; but the consensus was that it needed more than that. It was on this ground that one late-1870s reviewer acclaimed Harriet Beecher Stowe's now-forgotten *My Wife and I* as the closest thing yet to the GAN: because it described 'typical families' in both 'a typical New England village' and 'the typical American city.'¹³

As to point (2) — Must the novel be set in the USA? — cosmopolitan critics were quick to insist that consciousness and artistic excellence counted far more than locale, that other acknowledged national epics had taken place on foreign soil. The *Iliad*, as Julian Hawthorne tellingly remarked, 'embodies, whether symbolically

12. Frank Norris, 'The Great American Novelist,' *Blix; Moran of the Lady Letty; Essays on Authorship* (New York: Collier, 1899), 291; James Huneker, 'The Great American Novel,' *Unicorns* (New York: Scribner's, 1917), 83; Allen, "The Great American Novel," 1403.

13. A. V., 'American Novels Abroad,' *Literary World* 8 (Nov. 1877): 97.

or literally matters not, the triumph of Greek ideas and civilization.¹⁴ But those who argued against parochial restrictions on setting did so in the awareness that they were resisting a consensus that, as Edith Wharton later put it, 'the American novelist must submit to much narrower social and geographical limitations before he can pretend to have produced *the* (or *the greatest*, or even simply *an*) American novel': i.e., 'the novelist's scene must be laid in the United States, and his story deal exclusively with citizens of those States. . . . The great American novel must always be about Main Street, geographically, socially, and intellectually.'¹⁵ This amounted to a confession that she might have won the battle but was losing the critical war. A few years before, Wharton's *Age of Innocence* had won the Pulitzer Prize in competition with Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*; but it was his vision rather than hers in terms of which the prototype for American fiction seemed now to be defined. One recalls Fitzgerald's overheated letter to Lewis, affirming that *Main Street* had 'displaced' Harold Frederic's *The Damnation of Theron Ware* 'in my favor as the best American novel'¹⁶ — *Theron Ware* being another novel about the constraints of small-town life in the hinterlands.

Wharton's statement also gets to the heart of the question of the stylistic level at which the GAN should be written. DeForest's 1868 manifesto was quite clear on this point: he defined the GAN as 'the picture of the ordinary emotions and manners of American existence.' In other words, it was to be a realist-style narrative about typical, not exceptional, cases. This bothered some fellow critics, disrupting as it did such consensus judgments as that Hawthorne was America's most talented classic writer of prose fiction. 'What . . . is there against considering the "Scarlet Letter" as a great American novel?' some replied.¹⁷ But the commoner ap-

14. Julian Hawthorne, 'The American Element in Fiction,' *North American Review* 139 (Aug. 1884): 168.

15. Edith Wharton, 'The Great American Novel,' *Yale Review* n.s. 16 (1927): 647. This essay was reprinted in the *YR* in 75: 229–38 (Feb. 1986).

16. Quoted in Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis*, 275.

17. DeForest, 'The Great American Novel,' 27; S. G. W. Benjamin, 'The American Novel,' *Independent* (Nov. 21, 1889): 527.

proach was to disqualify it, notwithstanding its reputation as perhaps the best work of fiction America had ever produced, on the ground that it did not represent American life fully or directly enough. Hawthorne's characters seemingly belong 'to the wide realm of art rather than to our nationality'; therefore 'the breath of the supernatural that pervades every line of Hawthorne's work lifts it somewhat out of our sphere.'¹⁸ Even Henry James, who admired Hawthorne more than any other American precursor (and indeed wrote the first book-length critical study ever written on him or any other American writer) thought of the hypothetical great American novelist rather as a Balzac or a Thackeray. With the advent of aesthetic modernism, the critical climate became more flexible, but the impression persisted that the GAN needed a documentary or chronicle aspect. Although it was permissible for Dos Passos to experiment with stream-of-consciousness subjective impressionism in the 'Camera Eye' sections of *USA*, it was imperative for this to be counterbalanced by the realist style with which the lives of the twelve invented characters are told throughout the book. Significantly, Dos Passos's original model for his 'chronicle novel' approach, as he called it, was not one of the great modernists but Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*.¹⁹

Finally, from what sort of background might the great American novelist be expected to come? Not necessarily American, some argued, because after all 'the two greatest works on American institutions' had been written by foreigners, De Tocqueville and Lord Bryce.²⁰ But most presumed that the author would in fact be American. What about gender and race? 'Why should not the coming novelist be a woman,' or an African American? asked one late-nineteenth-century commentator. To my knowledge, this is

18. DeForest, 'The Great American Novel,' 28; M. G. Van Rensselaer, 'American Fiction,' *Lippincott's Magazine* 23 (June 1879): 758.

19. James expresses himself to Howells in a letter of Jan. 31, 1880, *Henry James Letters* 2: 267; for Dos Passos, see Townsend Luddington, *John Dos Passos: A Twentieth Century Odyssey* (New York: Dutton, 1980), 64; and Dos Passos, 'Contemporary Chronicles,' *Carleton Miscellany* 2 (Spring 1961): 26.

20. Allen, "The Great American Novel," 1403.

the one statement—and partially tongue-in-cheek at that—which entertains the possibility of a nonwhite-authored GAN until after Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* appeared in the 1950s.²¹ But so far as women candidates are concerned, GAN commentary is more receptive than one might suppose—doubtless because by the time it began women writers had become major players in the fictional marketplace. DeForest himself held up Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as the nearest approximation—as in fact it continued to be throughout the nineteenth century.²² No statement I've come across—though I may have missed something—stipulates that women are too frail to write the GAN, that it's a job only fit for a man. On the other hand, it's also true that the great American novelist is almost always referred to as a 'he,' that the European models are overwhelmingly male (Thackeray, Dickens, Balzac, Zola, Tolstoy), that the majority of the works treated as GAN contenders are male, and that the call for the GAN was chiefly (although by no means universally) instigated by male critics.

Altogether, then, the GAN was traditionally expected to be authored by a Euroamerican (more likely male than not); to be likely to rely predominantly on realist narrative techniques; and to depict socially representative characters interacting in a primarily American setting, conceivably focusing on one or more regional/cultural enclaves but relating these to the national macro-

21. 'Our Monthly Gossip,' *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* 37 (1886): 440–43. The essay is clearly serious insofar as it wishes to be contrarian ('One thing is certain,—our great novel will not be written by the typical American' [440]), but its elaboration of the thesis that 'The African is . . . a natural story-teller' is so driven by condescending racial essentialism that the ensuing portrait sounds much more like, say, Charles Chesnut's Uncle Julius than Charles Chesnut himself.

22. Late-century affirmations of *Uncle Tom* as the GAN, or the closest approximation yet, include Eleanor P. Allen, 'Harriet Beecher Stowe,' *Lippincott's Magazine* 46 (Aug. 1890): 271; *Literary News* 12 (Dec. 1891): 371; and 'As Howells Sees Fiction' (interview with William Dean Howells), *New York Sun* (Feb. 6, 1898), 3. It should be added that although Howells was unstinting in his praise of *Uncle Tom's* greatness, he also stated in another context that 'we shall probably never have a great American novel as fancied by the fondness of critics, and for our own part we care no more to have it than to have a "literary centre"' ('Editor's Study,' *Harper's* 72 [Jan. 1886]: 324). Latter-day studies that effectively sustain versions of the case for *Uncle Tom* without directly using GAN rhetoric include Leslie Fiedler, *The Inadvertent Epic: From Uncle Tom's Cabin to Roots* (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting System, 1979), and Thomas F. Gossett, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1985).

cosm, and to provide in the process some sort of reflection on the nature and meaning of America.

These prescriptions are of course still quite abstract. In order to bring them into better focus, let us turn to one of the five texts I know of that call themselves 'Great American Novel': William Carlos Williams's *The Great American Novel* (1923), Clyde Brion Davis's '*The Great American Novel—*' (1938), James Fritzhand's *Son of the Great American Novel* (1971), Philip Roth's *The Great American Novel* (1973), and Richard Clinton's *The Great American Novel* (1981). Davis's is the one I want. It consists of the diary of a hapless imaginary journalist from Buffalo named Homer Zigler, who aspires to write the GAN but never gets it off the drawing board. But he does at least outline his *magnum opus*. He calls his first sketch 'Restless Dynasty.' The plot goes like this. A young farmer named Jeremiah Williams migrates with his bride after the War of 1812 from the rocky slopes of the Adirondacks to Ohio. His oldest son moves further westward to Missouri, producing one lococentric lad who becomes a small manufacturer and another who joins the California gold rush. *Their* progeny fight on opposite sides of the Civil War, and *their* progeny, in turn, become adversaries in industrial warfare between capitalist titans in the late nineteenth century. The two sub-clan leaders, by now so dispersed they've never set eyes on each other, get dramatically reconciled when the President of the United States arranges a special summit meeting between them in order to save the national economy from being devastated by their feud, and fortunately they fall in love at first sight and get married instead of destroying the country. (Yes, one of the cousins conveniently happens to be female.)

Later on, Homer revises this scenario and retitles it 'Brutal Dynasty,' but I'll omit the details.

The whole project is obviously nothing more than a dustbin of clichés. But that is precisely what makes it intriguing—that so many stock ingredients get thrown together: the great social upheavals of the American nineteenth century (westward expansion,

Civil War, and industrial revolution [all told, of course, from the standpoint of Northern European settler culture rather than that of Native Americanism, or slaves]); local particularism, geographical mobility, and sectional culture clash combined; and the image of the family as national microcosm. Virtually all of these appear, for example, in the most-cited early GAN contender, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Stowe also builds on the history of the Yankee diaspora west and south; she too creates a family (the St. Clare family) as a microcosm of American attitudes toward slavery; she too combines mobility with particularism; she too organizes her plot around a great American social upheaval, involving economic, ideological, and cultural conflict.

At the risk of seeming as much the imperial generalizer as the writers of the GAN manifestoes themselves, I should suggest that if there is a single device more central than any other to the type of work just described it's the device of imaging relations between the key fictional characters as epitomes of typical divisions within American society. An early example, which Stowe adapted from earlier antebellum Yankee women writers, who got it from Walter Scott, is 'Northern boy courts southern girl'—or vice-versa. Sinclair Lewis uses a local variant on this in *Main Street* (bride from genteel imitation New England city comes to the *real* middle American town of Gopher Prairie); James and Wharton used another version in their internationalizations of the GAN (American male or female falls in love with European or Europeanized counterpart). But the mainspring need not be love and marriage; any family linkage across region, race, and class lines will do almost as well, such as the brother and sister team of Janie and Joe Williams in *USA* embodying upward and downward mobility from the petty bourgeoisie; or the easternized Presley and his western rancher friends in Norris's *The Octopus*; or, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the symbolic link between Augustine St. Clare—the novel's most articulate reasoner—and Tom himself, whom Stowe slyly describes as looking 'respectable enough to be a Bishop of Carthage,

as men of his color were, in other ages' — referring of course to the original St. Augustine himself.²³

Next to the fictive relationship as epitome of national division (and/or the hope of bridging it somehow), perhaps the other most basic formal device in GAN contenders would be the character who exemplifies (or satirizes) an American institution or ideal: such as Lewis's Babbitt, Dos Passos's advertising tycoon J. Ward Morehouse, Fitzgerald's Gatsby, Dreiser's Clyde Griffiths in *An American Tragedy*, or (at a more rarefied class stratum) Henry James's Christopher Newman in *The American* and Edith Wharton's Newland Archer in *Age of Innocence*.

But rather than continue in this recipe vein, I want to move to the pivotal question of the significance of these somewhat vague and shifting prototypes. What justifies the study of so volatile and amorphous a notion as the GAN?

First, its advent helps us mark fiction's coming of age in America as the literary genre of choice. Nina Baym, who has studied antebellum literary criticism most closely, sees this as having happened by the 1850s;²⁴ and I agree that this was the marketplace reality. But it took longer for the earlier mystique of the epic *poem* as the ultimate genre of national achievement, which haunted the minds of American writers from Joel Barlow in the eighteenth century through Walt Whitman in the 1850s and 1860s, to get fully displaced by the idea of the novel as the summit of national creative accomplishment.

The early promotion of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* illuminates this point. In his advertisements, Stowe's publisher, Jewett, recirculated such encomia as 'the Greatest Book of the Age,' or 'the greatest book of its kind ever issued from the American Press,' or 'the most singular and absorbing specimen of American Literature which ever came to our shores.' The word 'novel,' so far as I've yet found, Jewett never used in his promotional efforts; the closest he came

23. Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, ed. Elizabeth Ammons (New York: Norton, 1994), 155.

24. Nina Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984),

was a clip from the *Barre Patriot* praising *Uncle Tom* as 'this greatest of all American tales.'²⁵ This in spite of the fact that reviewers on both sides of the Atlantic immediately classified *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a novel in the Dickensian vein. The doubts that some of these notices expressed about the book's artfulness, as opposed to its power, may have been one reason for avoiding 'novel' in favor of the more ancient and folksy term 'tale.' But more important factors, probably, were the closer association of 'tale' with 'morality,' and the desire publisher and author shared to stress both the didactic and documentary sides of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It probably wasn't so much because the 'novel' rubric might fail to capture Stowe's strong suit as artist that her publisher (and she herself in *ex cathedra* comments) refrained from using it; it was the risk that such an aestheticizing label would seem to trivialize the book's achievement. Yet a mere fifteen years later, DeForest, in his essay, was praising *Uncle Tom* as novel on precisely the ground that Stowe denied that it was fiction in her follow-up work, *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853): namely, as a descriptive chronicle of American life.

By the same token, however, the rise of novel-*ism* also ensured that there would be an enduring rift within U.S. thinking about the 'mainstream' of American fiction that persists to this day. As we have seen, the GAN is loosely though not inevitably tied to realist assumptions, so that Hawthorne (for example) doesn't quite seem to qualify. But when American literary studies became an academic specialization in the second quarter of this century, the first theory of American fictional difference it generated that won widespread acceptance (although lately fallen from favor) was the romance hypothesis, according to which Hawthorne and Melville looked central and Lewis, Dreiser, and Dos Passos peripheral.²⁶

25. Here and below my analysis rests on examination of advertising matter in early editions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as well as miscellaneous promotional circulars and newspaper clippings in the Stowe collections of the American Antiquarian Society and the Stowe-Day Foundation, and the Houghton and Schlesinger libraries at Harvard-Radcliffe.

26. John McWilliams, 'The Rationale for "The American Romance,"' *boundary 2*, 17.i (Spring 1990): 71-82, provides a concise, penetrating survey of the history of the romance hypothesis from the disbeliever's standpoint that the majority of American literary scholars

Obviously now is not the time to develop all the ramifications of this war for the soul of American fictional tradition, only to take note of the fact that the emergence of the idea of the GAN helped ensure that the dispute would take place.

Third, the call for the GAN reflects what has been called in contemporary postcolonial studies 'national longing for form.'²⁷ It is surely no accident that the single liveliest theme in GAN criticism is the part-vs.-whole debate (the typical form of which is regionalism vs. nationalism); or that talk about the GAN began in the wake of the Civil War; or that GAN discussions thereafter tend to see-saw between enthusiasm for the idea and awareness that the sprawling diversity and rapid evolution of American life makes any one canonical formulation impossible. At ground level, the critics are looking to fiction to help solidify a national scene about which they feel excited but also edgy because of its still inchoate-seeming nature.²⁸ More abstractly, we can picture GAN discussions, *ex post facto*, as an institution of discourse designed, consciously or unconsciously, to regulate the American imagination by keeping it within certain flexible bounds: shuttling back and forth between part and whole, never straying from the assumption that the nature of America should be the central fictional subject. As with Whitmanian rhetoric about the great American poet, GAN-ism was often politicized by the theme of national manifest destiny, as skeptics especially pointed out.²⁹ From a late-

now seem to favor. The classic formulation of the hypothesis is Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1957).

27. See for example Timothy Brennan, 'The National Longing for Form,' in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990), 44-70. This and most of the other essays in the same collection were inspired in part by Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso and New Left Books, 1983), whose vision of nation as an imaginary post-Renaissance construct lays the groundwork for theorizing it more fully in relation to the history of print culture in general and narrative in particular.

28. As Amy Kaplan remarks of the post-bellum period when the GAN was generated, 'DeForest and his contemporaries . . . found the shared present of their imagined community radically challenged by the immediate past that had nearly destroyed the nation, and that set the agenda for novelists of reimagining a community and rebuilding a nation' ('Nation, Region, and Empire,' *The Columbia History of the American Novel*, ed. Emory Elliott [New York: Columbia University Press, 1991], 241).

29. 'There appears to be a sort of prospective analogy,' as Edgar Fawcett remarked of the GAN idea, 'drawn between our general national grandeur and that splendid literary

twentieth-century standpoint, the politicization seems all the more conspicuous given that the sectional interests that the great majority of GAN nominees hold to be in need of reconciliation or synthesis are almost always Euroamerican-dominated, as in Homer Zigler's sketch of 'Restless Dynasty.'

This impulse to make fiction serve the purpose of articulating national cultural identity and aspiration is by no means unique to the United States. We find it also, for example, in what Doris Sommer calls the 'foundational fictions' of Latin America, which exploit some of the same motifs we've seen associated with the GAN, such as the family as national microcosm and personal relationships generally (like love affairs) as epitomes of major social fissures.³⁰ Indeed, if there is any merit to Benedict Anderson's influential definition of a nation as an imagined community—a social fiction—we can expect to find the dream of crystallizing emerging nationhood through narrative extremely widespread, if not pandemic, within post-independent societies worldwide, and that at a certain epoch of techno-social development—namely, the age of print culture intervening between oral culture and electronic culture—or, more pertinently for Euroamerican cultural history, perhaps, between the dispensation of epic and the dispensation of cinema/video (from Joel Barlow's *Columbiad* to Ken Burns's *The Civil War* and *Baseball*)—the novel will be the preferred vehicle for this.³¹

Clearly much more comparatist work needs to be done on this subject. At least one aspect of the American case seems to stand out as distinctive, although doubtless not unique: namely, the hypothetical nature of the GAN. In many Latin American coun-

individuality which is now thought an undeveloped power of such massive promise' ('Americanism in Literature,' *Californian* 1 [April 1880]: 332). See also Allen, "'The Great American Novel,'" note 4 above.

30. Doris Sommer, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1991).

31. Contemporary Indo-Anglian literary history presents some especially suggestive cases of this: e.g., the recycling of traditional mythic narratives, from the *Ramayana* and elsewhere, in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1980) and Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), both semi-parodistic engagements with the vision of a 'great national novel.'

tries if not all, according to Sommer, there is consensus as to what *the* national novel or romance is—in Colombia it is Jorge Isaacs's *María* (1867); in Chile it is Alberto Blest Gana's *Martín Rivas* (1862)—whereas in the United States not only is this not clear but the presumption from the start has been that not only has the GAN never been written, it never will be: it's perpetually future tense. This difference doubtless arises from a range of causes, not just one: such as our relative lack of such central regulatory mechanisms as uniform school syllabi; our anti-historicist streak, the notion that the USA is the country of the future rather than of the past; and the importance of individualism as a plank in American civil religion—according to which every man/woman might think of becoming his/her own great American novelist.

Fourth, and likely of greatest interest to students of the history of the book, the GAN illustrates the symbiosis between authorship, publishing industry, and marketplace in American literary history. From DeForest's 1868 essay, which put the slogan in circulation whether or not he was actually the first to coin it, it's clear that one of the main motives if not *the* main motive for developing the thesis that the GAN is a worthy aspiration never yet fulfilled despite the wealth of American talent is to promote the cause of international copyright law: protection of American authors from cheap imports. As the GAN gathered momentum, it becomes on the one hand a marketing device and on the other hand—to the extent that it attached itself to a set of conventions and motifs—a means of energizing and channeling the author's craft.

All this we can better grasp by looking at one of the best-documented cases on record of a GAN aspirant: Ross Lockridge, Jr.'s, *Raintree County* (1948).³²

32. Originally published by Houghton Mifflin in 1948, *Raintree* was reissued by Penguin (1994) in a paperback edition heralding it as 'the great American novel of Love, Tragedy, and Heroic Vision' (front cover), and featuring on the back cover this 1992 pronouncement from Larry Swindell ('syndicated book editor'): 'No myth is more imposing than the Great American Novel; but if it is truly unattainable, I believe that Ross Lockridge made a closer approach than any other writer has, before or since.' For biographical background on Lockridge, by far the best source is the recent biography by his son, himself a literature scholar: Larry Lockridge, *Shade of the Raintree: The Life and Death of Ross Lockridge, Jr.*

Raintree uses a day in the life of a nineteenth-century Indiana schoolteacher, which happens also to be the town's semicentennial, to encompass not only his own life-history but ultimately all of American social history during pretty much the same epoch that Clyde Brion Davis's imaginary Homer Zigler planned to cover in 'Brutal Dynasty': both pre- and post-Civil War. Among other developments, the hero embarks on the eve of the Civil War on a disastrous marriage to a southern woman who destroys herself with guilt because she suspects herself to be part black, whereupon he enlists as an infantryman in the Union Army. A number of reviewers immediately recognized *Raintree* as a bid for the GAN,³³ in which they were prompted not just by the book but by the publishers—Houghton Mifflin—one of whose promotional blurbs affirmed:

This is the novel in which Americans will find themselves. Here in this mythical Indiana county is the counterpart of any American county over which the frontier has passed, but in which traces of the frontier still linger. . . . Here are the grandfathers who remembered the settling of the new land, the young men who turned from the farms to the newly industrial cities, the women who saw their families split in civil war, the ebullient individuals which America has bred so freely. . . . Here Americans can see what they have been and what they are.

. . . One man becomes all men, his fragment of American life becomes the sum of all American life and his quest for the Paradise which man lost so long ago is the quest of all men. . . . the publishers feel that RAINTREE COUNTY will take its place among the great books of America.³⁴

Strong words—and not merely ad hoc. When the manuscript was first submitted, at least one of the press readers identified it as an

(New York: Viking, 1994). Printed and mss. materials related to *Raintree County* are included among the Houghton Mifflin papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

33. See for instance Howard Mumford Jones, 'Indiana Reflection of U.S. 1844-92,' *Saturday Review of Literature* 31 (Jan. 3, 1948): 9; *Time* 51 (Jan. 12, 1948): 85; and Orville Prescott, 'New Books in Review,' *Yale Review* 37 (March 1948): 574.

34. Houghton Mifflin flyer, 'Six Reasons Why *Raintree County* by Ross Lockridge, Jr. will be the most important book of the new year,' Houghton Mifflin archives, Houghton Library, Harvard University (AMS 10 Box 22, Folder 8).

attempt at the GAN.³⁵ The editor assigned to Lockridge hailed it 'the novel Walt Whitman might have written of his America',³⁶ the editor-in-chief still recalled forty years later the 'feeling of excitement [that] ran through the office' about this 'work of immense talent and of unlimited ambition.'³⁷ The firm helped get it taken as a Book of the Month Club main selection and win a six-figure award from MGM, which led to the movie version starring Montgomery Clift as hero John Shawnessy. In short, the publishers really believed in *Raintree*—although they, Book of the Month Club, and MGM all also believed the manuscript needed a great deal of pruning, which Lockridge grudgingly did, although it felt like selling his soul to the devil and may have contributed to the severe depression that unfortunately ended in his suicide shortly after the novel came out.

What got trimmed the most, significantly, was the 'modernist' side of the novel, the stream-of-consciousness interior monologue—resulting in a more 'realistic' product.

Lockridge's reluctance to cut stemmed from an equal confidence on his side in the greatness of his achievement that his two years of dealings with Houghton Mifflin seem only to have increased. Right after the manuscript was accepted, he wrote a reporter for *Life* magazine who'd contacted him about doing a profile that although 'no one in his right mind deliberately sets out to write the Great American Novel, this book involves so much that is American and is conceived on a scale so vast that it will undoubtedly be a candidate for that elusive (and probably meaningless) title.'³⁸ But the autobiographical statement he prepared for advertising purposes a year or so later sang a quite different tune: 'it was

35. Paul Brooks, TLS (encapsulating readers' reports), AMS 10, Box 22, Houghton Mifflin archive, Houghton Library, Harvard University. The original reports appear to be missing, unfortunately.

36. Sentence taken from 1947 anon. publisher's blurb, restating a pronouncement previously made by Lockridge's editor Dorothy Hillyer, as is clear from Larry Lockridge, *Shade of the Raintree*, 265, 339.

37. Paul Brooks, *Two Park Street: A Publishing Memoir* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), 76.

38. Ross Lockridge, Jr., to Jeff Wylie, June 29, 1946, TLC, Houghton Mifflin archive, AM 10, Box 87, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

on a particular day in the spring of 1934,' during his junior year abroad in Paris, Lockridge recalled, that he first 'awakened to the fact that certain Nineteenth Century backgrounds in the life of his own family could be transmuted into the content of a novel, which, if it fully realized the possibilities of its content, might really merit the title of "The Great American Novel."'39 In this version, the GAN was not a belated realization, but a grand twelve-year plan.

The truth lay in between. In fact, during the 1930s Lockridge contemplated and in some cases even pursued a number of different grand plans: "a great comprehensive epic poem of the Middle Ages to equal the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*"; 'a tragedy taking its cue from *David Copperfield*'; an epic poem on the "spiritual history of twentieth-century American and European consciousness from 1914 to the present."40 On the other hand, as one follows Lockridge's career in his son's recent reconstruction of it, one quickly senses from the start that this *is* the level of intellectual ambition that might very well fix itself on a GAN project, as in fact he did in the early '40s while a graduate student at Harvard. Rather than do the dissertation he'd nominally planned with Perry Miller on 'Whitman and the Idea of Democracy in American Literature,' Lockridge instead transposed into *creative* prose the central Whitmanian device of the paradigmatic American individual (his hero), combined this with James Joyce's Bloomsday device, and developed *Raintree's* plot with the aid of a number of other models, including such other GAN candidates as Dos Passos's *U.S.A.*, which Lockridge taught in his freshman classes at Simmons College despite protests from parents (and students) to the dean about its improprieties.41 His other models included cinema, particularly the films of D. W. Griffith. Indeed, even before the point at which Lockridge learned of the possibility of the MGM award, *Raintree* may have been an early example of a novel written with the prospect of movie rights in mind.

39. Houghton Mifflin papers, AM 10, Box 87.

40. Larry Lockridge, *Shade of the Raintree*, 135, 160, 183.

41. *Ibid.*, 210, 219.

As just indicated, Lockridge's literary range was by no means exclusively American. In that autobiographical deposition for Houghton Mifflin from which I quoted, it wasn't just posturing that drove Lockridge to claim that he'd sought to 'do for the American Culture what' Plato's *Republic* did for . . . Greek Culture, *The Magic Mountain* for disintegrating and warring European cultures, [and] *Ulysses* for the modern obsession with supranational and subliminal areas of human behavior and culture.'⁴² Ironically, Houghton Mifflin ignored this part; the ads touted *Raintree's* Americanness exclusively. ('a novel about the core of America'); and the reviewers compared him exclusively to other American writers.

In retrospect, we can see Lockridge being both inspired and constrained by the vision of *Raintree* as a great American novel; of a great American novel project. It seems to have energized him throughout the compositional process, but his work was also aggressively reprocessed by the publishing as well as the book club and film industry during both the revision and the promotion stages so that the book would look less idiosyncratic, more like a recognizable GAN than Lockridge himself intended it to be.

This complex pattern of self-processing and reprocessing still continues, despite the fact that American literary studies, since its professionalization in the 1920s, has never taken the idea of the GAN seriously except as a way of pointing to a transient phase in the history of American criticism associated with the realist movement and its desire to map American social diversity in fictional form. Yet 'simply because we no longer use the phrase,' as William Van O'Connor wrote a third of a century ago, 'we should not assume that the notion itself no longer engages us.'⁴³ Little did he realize how pertinent that observation was, writing as he did a decade before the debate about American canonicity began to heat up. On these debates, so far as I know, the pre-professional tradi-

42. Quoted *ibid.*, 340.

43. William Van O'Connor, 'The Idea of an American Novel: An Introduction,' in Rubin and Moore, ed., *The Idea of an American Novel*, vii.

tion of GAN commentary has had no direct influence whatsoever. But several of the issues most central to GAN-ism have also been central to contemporary canonicity debates in ways that make the old GAN manifestoes, amateurish as they often are, newly interesting: in particular, the question of whether 'major' American literary achievements can be identified as such, the question whether literary worth is to be judged partially in terms of the adequacy of its representation of national experience, and the debate over the relative merits of 'realistic' and 'romantic' modes of representation.

A final instance may help to illustrate this. Toni Morrison's pilgrimage from her first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) to her fifth, *Beloved* (1987), the book that put her in line for the Nobel Prize, shows a preoccupation from the first with the family as a central but deeply problematic unit and more specifically how the injury parents inflict on children gets internalized by both. But that pilgrimage shows also a repackaging of those issues so as to translate them into a more explicitly and ambitiously *American* story, not just a local family drama: a story, furthermore, that positions itself in terms of the same epoch of intra-American anguish that forms the axis of the first GAN contender I've discussed, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and to a lesser extent *Raintree* also — making use of a variant on the family as social microcosm device also central to those earlier novels.⁴⁴ Indeed, Morrison drew on documentary material similar to that which inspired Stowe, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* may even have been one of her pre-texts.⁴⁵

44. For a further, more nuanced discussion of *Beloved's* critique/redefinition of the family as American social microcosm, in the context of an extended comparison with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that argues the case for *Beloved* as 'a great American novel' written from the margins, see Nancy Armstrong, 'Why Daughters Die: The Racial Logic of American Sentimentalism,' *Yale Journal of Criticism* 7 (1994): 16–21. See also Richard Todd, 'Toni Morrison and Canonicity: Acceptance or Appropriation,' in *Rewriting the Dream: Reflections on the Changing American Literary Canon*, ed. W. M. Verhoeven (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1992), 44–45 and passim. That *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* show an ongoing desire on Morrison's part, in the first instance autobiographically based, to retrieve the 'dead girl,' is very strongly suggested at least to my eye during the course of Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison, 'A Conversation,' *Southern Review* 21 (1985): 567–93.

45. On links between the two novels' documentary sources, as well as the notion of *Beloved* as (in part) a rewriting of *Uncle Tom*, see for example Cynthia Griffin Wolff,

What's most obviously distinctive about *Beloved*, relative to the other GANs I've discussed, is of course that American slavery, Civil War, and aftermath are retold by a novelist who, herself the descendant of slaves, recreates history wholly through the eyes of the escaped slave Sethe and her family. The margin has become the center far more completely than in (say) *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Given that GAN-ism as a self-conscious theme in American criticism began well after *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, that it subsided considerably before *Beloved*, and that in the interval it was used for the most part to sponsor much more Eurocentric works than either of these two, one cannot link them together *via* the GAN-theme without a distinct sense of irony. At the same time, it is also notable that GAN discussions from the start, beginning with DeForest's (qualified) endorsement of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, anticipate the possibility of a work like *Beloved* even if they cannot bring it into focus: anticipate not only by accepting from the start that a book with such a lowly hero as a black slave might qualify for serious consideration as a great American novel, but also (more profoundly) by recognizing that the single greatest controversy was defining the issue of regional emphasis vs. national emphasis, which is similar in form (though of course by no means identical) to ethnic culture vs. dominant culture. If one outcome of GAN-ism is to tempt unwary authors (and publishers and reviewers) into repetition and cultural self-parody—the grandiose cliché-gestures of Homer Zigler's hypothetical *Restless Dynasty*—another possible outcome is to provide an incentive for authors (and publishers and reviewers) to engage in venturesome acts of cultural exploration and retrieval that none of us would want to do without.

That *Beloved* follows romance—or, more precisely, magical realist—conventions much more closely than those of the classical realism associated with the idea of the GAN suggests another way

“‘Margaret Garner’: A Cincinnati Story,” *Massachusetts Review* 32 (1991): 417–40; Eileen T. Bender, ‘Repossessing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*,’ *Cultural Power/Cultural Literacy*, ed. Bonnie Braendlin (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1991), 129–42; and Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, ‘Daughters Signifyin(g) History: The Example of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*,’ *American Literature* 64 (1994): 566–97.

in which taking it seriously as a GAN contender both necessitates a recalibration of the GAN as traditionally understood and beckons us to look more closely than this essay permits at the significance of the anti-realist elements within a number of previous GAN candidates: not only *Raintree* and *U.S.A.* but also such predecessors as *Gatsby*, *The Octopus*, and indeed *Uncle Tom's Cabin* itself. From this standpoint, indeed, the terms 'realism' and 'romance' as traditionally understood in Americanist criticism will inevitably start to wobble (since Morrison—and for that matter also Stowe before her—makes quite clear that what many readers will see as 'romance' their narrators and their cultural traditions see as 'real': Beloved's existence and Eva's apotheosis, for instance); and as a result, perhaps, a new and more complicated theory of the history of the novel in the United States will open up to supersede any that has been ventured so far.

All this is by no means to say that *Beloved* is at long last *the* long-awaited Great American Novel. On the contrary, my point is the reverse of that—namely that *Beloved's* distinctiveness relative to its predecessors suggests the capacity of the GAN idea to self-renew precisely by virtue of its instability: because the GAN's chief property, as Emerson long ago said of the imagination in general, is 'to flow, and not to freeze.'⁴⁶ In short, the history of the Great American Novel idea isn't so much one of rise and fall, period (although we can trace a trajectory of this kind between roughly the late 1860s and the 1920s): not so much this as a process of ongoing formulation and reformulation through reciprocal interactions among author, publisher, media, and public that is likely to continue in some form or other as long as the question of what America itself means continues to be debated.

46. Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'The Poet,' *Essays, Second Series*, ed. Joseph Slater, Alfred R. Ferguson, and Jean Ferguson Carr (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 20.

Copyright of Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society is the property of American Antiquarian Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.