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AMERICAN LITERATURE SURVEY

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COLONIAL AND FEDERAL TO 1800
General Introduction and Preface by the Editors

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THE AMERICAN ROMANTICS 1800-1860
Prefatory Essay by Van Wyck Brooks

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NATION AND REGION 1860-1900
Prefatory Essay by Howard Mumford Jones

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THE TWENTIETH CENTURY
Prefatory Essay by Malcolm Cowley

THE AMERICAN ROMANTICS
1800-1860

REVISED AND EXPANDED

∗ ∗

WITH A PREFATORY ESSAY BY
Van Wyck Brooks

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In the spirit of his own time, Emerson insisted that every age must have its original relation to the universe. He reflected an older American belief that no age can hold a mortgage on any future time and that the world is for the living. Our Republic and our national literature share a democratic sense of time in which every age, besides shaping the world that exists, also remakes the past. Given the fact that history is never finally dead, all literary productions of the past can become meaningful in the human mind of the present. What, then, in our living moment, can we see of our identity in the total span of our literature?

One thing stands out clearly: American literature is a rebellious and iconoclastic body of art. The Puritan rebelled against the Anglican, the deist against the Puritan, the romantic against aspects of deism, the naturalist against aspects of romanticism, the symbolist against aspects of naturalism. In each case the rebellion was greeted with cries of outrage and prophecies of doom. It is true that almost any nation’s literary history tells the same story: but besides this there is a deeper nay-saying that characterizes American literature and remains constant beneath the shifting faces of rebellion. On the surface it may seem strange that a nation in some ways tending toward a mass identity should produce a literature of which the underlying theme is revolutionary. But when one considers that the artist, with his keener sensibility and articulation, is most aware of tendencies in his society, including those he feels duty-bound to combat, and that the richest heritage of the Republic is its foundation in defense of freedom of the mind, then his rebelliousness becomes natural and inevitable. The American writer’s “nay” is but a prelude to his resounding “yea!” uttered in behalf of new experience rather than hoarded conventions.
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