

# ANNIHILATED SPACE

American values, core structures framing everyday life and shaping the toughest-minded literature, pulse here under the eye and hand of a superb anatomist of contemporary American hopes, fears, and dreams deep-rooted in national bedrock.

I have read [*Annihilated Space*] with care, immense pleasure, and great profit. . . . It is magisterial.

It demonstrates the deep, enduring worth of American Studies and confirms from the start an understanding of literature as the portal to so much else.

—John R. Stilgoe, Harvard University

In what must prove to be the capstone of a long career of investigating the social and cultural history of America as presented by our literature, Stuart Levine delves deeply into many of our classic works and many of our classic writers. He notes revealing parallels between such apparently different works as *Moby Dick* and *Rabbit, Run*, or *The Blithedale Romance* and *The Damnation of Theron Ware*. And unearths the commonalities that mark them all as peculiarly American.

Using the elements of “modernization” as the basis of his analysis—as he has done throughout his career as editor, writer, and teacher—he brings new insights and new life to time-honored literary works. At the end of the analysis and discussion of any of these well-known works, the reader feels he must read them once more—in a stronger light and from a sharper angle. In short, as Levine notes, he is using American literature to call out our social and cultural history—investigating “circles” and “webs” of relationships in our complex and variegated communities—and then he is reversing that approach by using social and cultural history to enhance and encourage fresh investigations of our literary heritage.

—Richard Boudreau, Professor Emeritus, University of Wisconsin/LaCrosse

An ingenious and profound rereading of American literary classics, at once realistic but also hopeful, informed by Levine’s varied careers and travels and everywhere evincing humor, insight, and humility.

—Alan Gribben, Editor, *Mark Twain Journal*

[A] formidable analysis of American culture.

Stuart Levine has spent a lifetime involved in writing about and teaching American Studies. His work has helped to define the academic subject and *Annihilated Space* is a model of scholarship in the field.

—Charles L. P. Silet, Emeritus Professor of English, Iowa State University

Annihilated Space

American Literature and American Society

Stuart Levine

Samuel Sewall ROGER WILLIAMS John Winthrop Michael  
Wigglesworth Edward Taylor William Byrd Cotton Mather Jonathan  
Edwards ROYALL TYLER Thomas Jefferson Michel-Guillaume



Crèvecoeur Henry David  
Thoreau Benjamin  
Franklin Charles  
Brockden  
Brown James  
Fenimore

Cooper EDGAR POE Ralph Waldo Emerson Herman Melville Nathaniel  
Hawthorne Harriet Beecher Stowe Walt Whitman George  
Washington Harris MARK TWAIN Emily Dickinson William Dean  
Howells Kate Chopin Harold Frederic Henry James Frank Norris

# ANNIHILATED

STEPHEN CRANE Edward  
Bellamy Theodore Dreiser Thorstein  
Veblen Henry Adams Willa

Cather Claude McKay T.S. ELIOT Henry Roth Robert Frost Robert  
Penn Warren e.e.  
cummings Ralph

## American Literature and American Society

Stuart Levine Ellison Toni  
Morrison ELMER

RICE Wallace Stevens J.D. Salinger Thomas

Pynchon John Barth Vladimir

Nabokov Donald Barthelme JOHN

O'HARA William Faulkner John

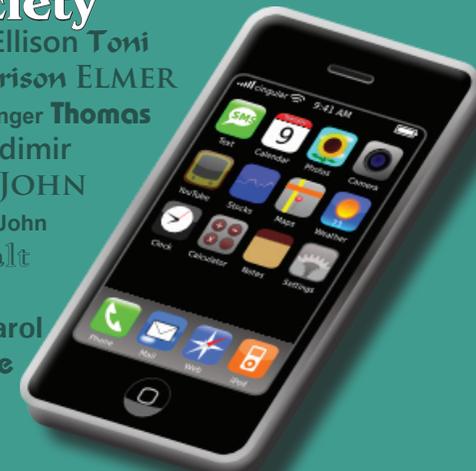
Updike Ernest Hemingway Walt

Kelley Arthur Miller Allen

Ginsberg W.D. SNODGRASS Carol

Hebald Flannery O'Connor Katherine

Anne Porter



**Annihilated Space** uses American literature to understand our social history. Flexible and inclusive, it shows multiple ways in which national fiction, drama, journals and poetry reveal us. The study builds upon a lifetime of scholarship and experience in areas as diverse as contemporary conditions among Native American peoples, the social structure of the audience for “classical” music, the history of American art, street life in Mexico City and, of course, American literature and the American experience.

It suggests approaches that “work” even on pieces set outside the United States, in one case revealing American social history in a novel with no American characters. Some works treated in this lively discussion are acknowledged masterpieces. A few are things critics generally dislike—but they can be entertaining to discuss, and very useful to an open-minded student of society.

Much of this unusual book grows out of studies by Professor Levine published in **Comparative Literature**, **Harvard Studies in English**, **American Studies**, **American Quarterly**, **The Canadian Review of American Studies**, **New England Quarterly** and other peer-reviewed scholarly outlets, and out of concepts developed in the National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar for College Professors he taught on the subject.



# **ANNIHILATED SPACE**

**American Literature and  
American Society**

Stuart Levine

Main and Fulton

## Other books by Stuart Levine

*Are You Superman?* (Main and Fulton; Amazon/Kindle, 2014).

*The Craftsmans' Memory/Billy Budd in the Context of the Earlier Novels* (Main and Fulton; Amazon/Kindle, 2014).

*Killing in Okaraygua/An Inspector Irronogaray Mystery* (Main and Fulton; Amazon/Kindle, 2012).

**Main and Fulton books are available @ [kubookstore.com](http://kubookstore.com)**

Stuart Levine and Susan F. Levine, eds., *Edgar Allan Poe, Critical Theory/The Major Documents* (University of Illinois Press, 2009). (On-line edition: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

Stuart Levine and Susan F. Levine, eds., *Edgar Allan Poe, Eureka* (University of Illinois Press, 2004).

Stuart and Susan Levine, *Edgar Allan Poe/Thirty-Two Stories* (Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2002).

*The Monday-Wednesday-Friday Girl and Other Stories* (Woodley Press, 1995). **Winner of the Robert Gross Award for Fiction.**

Stuart and Susan Levine, *The Short Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe/An Annotated Edition* (the first fully-annotated edition of the complete short stories) (Bobbs-Merrill, 1976) (Fourth printing, 1979) (University of Illinois Press, 1990).

*Edgar Poe, Seer and Craftsman* (Everett/Edwards, 1972).

(With Nancy O. Lurie) *The American Indian Today* (Everett/Edwards, 1968). **Winner of the Anisfield-Wolfe Award in Race Relations** (Revised version, Penguin Books, 1970).

(Edited), Charles Caffin, *The Story of American Painting* (with a study of Caffin by SGL) (Johnson, 1970).

*Materials for Technical Writing* (Allyn and Bacon, 1963).

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## Introduction

Another analogy we shall now trace, that every action admits of being outdone. Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn. . . .

Emerson, "Circles"

My method in this study is essentially simple. I propose to examine a series of literary works for evidence about the characteristics of American society and culture, and then to relate the evidence to a group of hypotheses about American social history. To begin, I would like to explain briefly my rationale for proceeding this way and my own feelings about the shape and direction of American social history, not in order to argue with the reader who may believe in a different interpretation, but rather to let him know where I stand. This might make the book more useful for the reader who, disagreeing with my conclusions, can still make use of the texture of my argument or the procedures I have followed.

Because I would like the book to be as useful as possible to people in different fields, I will try to avoid on the one hand, lengthy expositions of historical, social or sociological theory, and on the other, matters of purely literary-critical interest. In general I would like my discussion of American society to grow from the texture of the literary works themselves.

Let me say at the outset that I recognize a kind of ambiguity in what I propose: if it is not entirely clear whether this book is intended to use literature to expound social history, or social history to enrich our appreciation of literature, well and good. I like that ambiguity. I have both intentions in mind, and do not feel they are in any way incompatible.

My scheme will be only roughly chronological, because it seems important to retain the freedom to tie together thematically related works from various periods. I had thought at one time of making the organization entirely thematic, but this involved chopping the discussions of some literary works into so many pieces that a reader

who wanted to refer just to a portion of the book, to find out how, for example, one might connect social history to an author so apparently cut off from the texture of everyday society as Edgar Allan Poe, would have to search through index and text for a hundred scattered allusions to Poe.

In structure this book is somewhat like a sonata-allegro movement in music: the first chapters, mainly on the colonial era, serve as an exposition, setting forth concerns, hypotheses and attitudes which are to be developed in the middle chapters on the nineteenth century. And the twentieth century portions serve as recapitulation and coda, bringing ideas presented early on to a contemporary conclusion. It won't do to press the analogy too far; books are not symphonies (more's the pity). But I have tried to get the expository material in and over with quickly so that much of the study can play with and develop it, and I do think of the last portion as saying, in effect, "You see? Here is what became of these same tendencies in the modern world." To keep the history material relatively brief, and to get as quickly as possible into discussions of the literary texts, there will inevitably be places in which it is necessary to "get a little ahead of the story"—as, for instance, when I discuss some characteristics of modernization in connection with the colonial period, long before the fuller explanation of modernization theory in the chapter on Emerson as a social historian.

I should say also that I intend this to be in many ways a very personal kind of book. The lines between scholarly objectivity, an honest and appropriate use of one's relevant personal experience, and an inappropriate confessional tone are not always easy to draw. Thucydides, I think, was right to tell his readers that he had been importantly involved in the war of which he was the historian, and Dr. David Ramsay was wrong when he wrote his account of the battle of Savannah entirely from British military records, though he had been on the scene himself and was a close friend and colleague of most of the important patriot leaders involved in the battle. Henry Thoreau said that he had traveled much in Concord, and that he would write about some topic other than himself and his own experiences were there one which he knew as well. Precedent is available, then; so is the worthy Emersonian argument that the good American scholar should

always test his work against the texture of his own experience. The real subject of this book is the peculiar nature of American society and culture. I am myself the product of that society and culture, and it seems to me that I would be throwing away an important source were I to ignore my own background or experience, to forget, for example, that my ancestors came here to escape savage pogroms in Russia, or that I share a range of values culturally peculiar to Americans. Detachment, however, is also desirable, and I therefore intend to make a certain amount of use of what is sometimes called a “comparative culture approach.” This means whenever possible viewing American custom and experience from the point of view of another culture. I have lived abroad a number of times, and each trip made me see my homeland in new ways. Experience in Latin America and especially Mexico should help highlight those dramatically exotic characteristics of our national life which seem so normal to us.

This is a book about what literature can tell about society. It is, however, also largely about what literature can’t help but tell about society. We will, of course, discuss those elements present in many works which obviously reflect social reporting or a writer’s theories about our society: textural details of everyday life, for example; social or historical analysis; or treatment of the social impact of new ideas, new technology, fads. But not all novels, poems, plays or short stories contain such material; moreover, not all writers feel they must or even should tell the truth. “Fiction” can mean “lie,” as can “fable,” “myth,” “fancy,” and other terms crucial to creativity, such as “imagination,” even “creativity” itself.

In order to deal with books that lie or fantasize, or which contain no apparent social information at all, one needs approaches so basic that they will show American social realities even if they are applied to works such as *Billy Budd*, a novel without American characters, set outside the United States (set, for that matter, out of sight of any land), in a time a century before its composition.

This introductory chapter is here to explain a little about these approaches and to explain why, instead of concentrating on books rich in reportorial density, I have gone out of my way to deal with hard cases, works which reflect America only because their authors were American and “it shows.” The basic approaches are first, a model

for changing boundaries in American society; for want of a better name, call it “expanding circles”; second, a model for that web of individualistic, voluntaristic associations which modern Americans seem to weave about themselves; third, an inventory of those values which, so far as I can make out, Americans seem to hold sacred; fourth, a list of certain traits which we are told are characteristic of “modernized” nations; finally, what seems to me a realistic manner of visualizing the way that changes of any sort come upon a people as complex and heterogeneous as are Americans. When I try to realize it graphically, it comes out looking like a staircase moving through space, so call it “moving stairs.”

Much of what is most characteristic, I feel, of American social history may be understood by visualizing a series of “expanding circles” which divide our people, in one way or another, into insiders and outsiders. Those included within the circles in any period or context are likely to feel superior to those outside; those outside generally want to enlarge the circles to include themselves. Curiously, in their effort they generally have some support from within, for the ideals and values of the insiders include beliefs which condone the outsiders’ ambitions. I do not feel that this model is fully developed in the earliest colonial periods, though there are hints of it in surprising places and eras, but I believe that the process begins to operate quite early in our history, and that as one moves closer to the present, it becomes increasingly institutionalized and rationalized.

For example, the thoughtful characters who surround the Corey dinner table in William Dean Howells’ *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) seem to perceive class and poverty in about the manner I have suggested. They feel themselves within a circle of privilege, yet their values tie them to outsiders. The passage is worth quoting at length. Bromfield Corey has remarked the injustice of comfortable wealthy homes sitting vacant during the hot Boston summers, their owners away at resorts, while poor families swelter in crowded quarters in the North End. He says that were he a poor man with a sick child, he would break in and “camp out on the grand piano.” His stuffy wife worries about the damage such folks would do to an elegant home; the others have more serious responses:

“And if you were a poor man with a sick child, I doubt if you’d have so much heart for burglary as you have now,” said James Bellingham.

“It’s wonderful how patient they are,” said the minister. “The spectacle of the hopeless comfort the hard-working poor man sees must be hard to bear.”

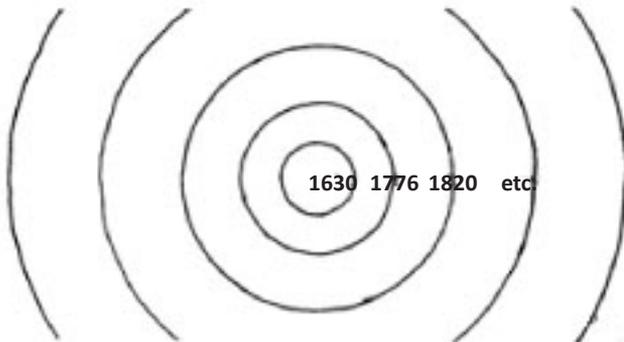
Lapham wanted to speak up and say that he had been there himself, and knew how such a man felt. He wanted to tell them that generally a poor man was satisfied if he could make both ends meet; that he didn’t envy any one his good luck, if he had earned it, so long as he wasn’t running under himself. But before he could get the courage to address the whole table, Sewell added, “I suppose he don’t always think of it.”

“But some day he *will* think about it,” said Corey. “In fact, we rather invite him to think about it, in this country.”<sup>1</sup>

Corey’s comment is critical. It implies that those “within the circle” not only share egalitarian values with the deprived people outside it, but actually include among their number those who helped to promulgate and popularize such ideas among the outsiders.

Now, I believe that the implications of this process are, by and large, hopeful, and do not think that my belief in it is the result of naive optimism or a jingoist’s faith in national destiny, though, after all, being American, I share many of the values used to condone it. Strong facts seem to indicate that the process is real: measure it any way you will, the circles expand. More Americans and a higher percentage of Americans are included “inside” than were in 1970, 1940, 1900, 1820, 1776 or 1636. This is true whether one has in mind subjective ways of measuring “insiders”—for instance, “people whom other Americans regard as ‘real Americans’”—or quantifiable ways, such as “people to whom the franchise is extended.” Suppose that the circle represents the franchise. It is simply true that a higher percentage of Americans today have the right to vote than was true in earliest colonial times. The circles have been pushed outwards, albeit spasmodically, over the decades and centuries to include more

and more people in categories which had been previously excluded. The argument that the franchise is less meaningful now may be valid in itself: because of the strange structure of our political system, because the choice of nominees often takes place under conditions (nicely described in *The House of the Seven Gables*) of less than ideal democracy, or because of low voter participation, one might wish that we did our voting differently, more efficiently, more intelligently. But the expansion of voting rights has been paralleled by so many other “expansions” that the model would seem valid even if nobody actually voted. That the election process seems rusty and cumbersome at present would be troubling to a believer in expanding circles were there not so many other ways of demonstrating that expanded circles are characteristic of our national experience. If one feels, that is, that it is not really meaningful that one unenfranchised group after another was brought within the circle of enfranchisement—twice, in the case of black voters, before it was made to stick—one can then look to another dimensions, to other indications of inclusion, for other definitions of what the circles represent. Doing so produces pretty much the same result: people to whom various social services should be proffered; people who deserve the full benefits of universal free education; people we could live near; ultimately, people whom we had best include when we think of what it is to be American, and people who themselves write poems and novels about the place of their group in our society. The circles expand; “American” refers to a richer mixture of people today than yesterday.



Expanding Circles

A week living with a young social worker whose flat is on what a newspaper called “the black/Irish frontier” in the Boston area in 1980 did not disabuse me of my faith in American social processes and expanding circles: there was real tension, and I was told not to walk on certain streets at night. But would you feel safer there or in a frontier neighborhood in Northern Ireland? And in which area do you think the tensions will dissipate more rapidly? My father grew up along a Jewish/Irish “frontier” in New York; he walked his little brother blocks out of the way to public school to avoid an Irish area where Jewish kids could not safely pass. The line they were afraid to cross would be hard to find today. Give the old national social processes a few years or decades to operate and look for the lines around our Puerto Rican, Chicano, Vietnamese or Cuban newcomers.

In this and other matters native American experience offers a kind of control. Neither African nor European, Asian only in remotest ancestry; neither immigrants nor ex-slaves, culturally diverse themselves, but always alien to ecumenical national traditions, our indigenous tribal peoples provide us with a wide assortment of “domestic” but “foreign” cultures against which we may measure ourselves. Doing so makes our common characteristics stand out in higher relief. Our indigenous tribal peoples by and large are unique in not wanting those circles to include them. Their desire to remain separate has not always been respected, but it marks them off from almost every other large group. The more usual pattern involves exclusion and the desire for inclusion.

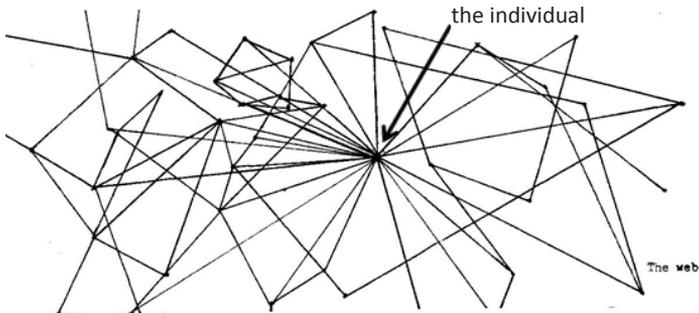
One can apply the model of the expanding circles on an individual level as well, by saying that increasingly, as one moves toward the present, it becomes characteristic of American social life that many individuals have to expand their own definitions of “people who really count” or “people who have to be thought of as being like me” in the course of their careers. This is because, on the one hand, the media of transport and communication and our complex commercial and industrial systems have brought Americans into countless interdependent relationships, and on the other because of those gradual society-wide redefinitions of which groups of people must be considered full-fledged Americans. The author of a recent study of political power in the half-century after 1790 concluded that

narrow, oligarchical leadership held on only in static and culturally homogenous places. Where there was growth, diversity and change, our political life became “democratic, egalitarian, and pluralistic.”<sup>22</sup> The circles, in other words, expanded. This book argues that much of our literature records that process.

Thus a frequent plot pattern in our fiction shows a character from a relatively parochial background—Carrie Meeber, Silas Lapham, Theron Ware—trying to operate in a broadened arena. Many Americans can provide more dramatic personal observations of extraordinary “expansions of circles,” especially in race relations since the 1950’s. Illness in the family in 1963 obliged me to eat a number of meals in a small restaurant near a hospital in Kansas City. A black nurse’s-aide always stood to await her food-to-take-out, and the waitress, a small young woman whose accent suggested “border-Southern” and “country” in that environment, each day said nasty racial things about her after she left. In 1969, forced by a friend’s illness into a series of visits to the same place, I found the two sitting cozily together in a booth each morning enjoying a mutual coffee-break. Prejudices and hatreds of course remain in America, but I believe that my piece of evidence is “hard,” good and irrefutable. The thousand changes of the sort I see about me and have experienced myself make me optimistic, perhaps. To other observers, it seems that national social problems are getting out of control, that there is no cause for social optimism. Neither their attitude nor mine is new in our history. I cannot see that conditions were ever better in the past, however, and I know that they are better now for specific groups.

The model of “expanding circles,” then, can be used either in a societal or a personal way. It will not, however, handle efficiently the complicated and special way that individual Americans branch out, form ties, friendships, associations and other relationships. For that curious national phenomenon a more effective model is a “web” or “net,” and so I have borrowed that idea from the social scientists. As I see it, the nearer we come to the present, the more dynamic, complex and unpredictable become our personal affiliations. We need some such model if we would like to consider those characteristics which are of interest to anthropologists. Their scheme for studying cultural institutions, values, rites and so on was developed through dealing

with cultures far more homogenous than ours. Probably the same cultural functions must be provided in each society; ours is trickier to study because we do not all go about our cultural way through uniform, shared institutions. Thus each of us modern Americans may be visualized at the center of a web. The patterns we spin out from ourselves are quite individual. The strands which lead out, say, to the institutions which we utilize, follow voluntaristic lines. Such a model can comfortably describe those diversities—of taste, religion, style-of-life, interests, activities, or organizational affiliations, and so forth—which are so puzzling to foreigners who are not accustomed, for instance, to a suburban block on which no two families share the same church, occupations, birthplace, circle of friends, club or fraternal order, sports interest, arts interest, and so on; even within a family unit we find varieties of choice which are startling to aliens but more or less normal to us. More and more Americans know families in which different members practice (or ignore) different religions. Alexis de Tocqueville said that such things might come to pass, but I doubt that even he had an American friend, as I do, whose immediate family includes an Episcopalian, a Jew, an atheist and a Catholic monk. The family's record seems unusual, but only in degree. The model of the web also serves to connect American social behavior with the realm of values, for these complex webs are in part the product of the premium we place on free choice—the emphasis on, or at least the illusion of, choice even in those areas, such as courtship or religion, in which in other societies choice generally is severely



The Web

limited. A young girl in a tribal society we read of belongs to clan A; she knows she will marry one of the three eligible boys in clan B. She and her husband will never make a choice of religion because “religion” is simply the way the world is and works. Your friend’s twelve-year-old daughter faces far more choices.

The flexibility of the web is helpful also in understanding social class. Income levels alone are patently inadequate to define social class in our society, any more than “Protestant-Catholic-Jew” defines our religious behavior. A good social history of the United States requires a more complex and flexible model, capable of handling the wide variety of voluntaristic choices available on most economic levels. Such a pattern seems to me evident in the contents of literary works which we will discuss; it can also be seen, whenever enough information is available, in the way literary works are used in our country, in their reception in various periods. If two readers share a literary taste, let us say, and form a friendship based upon it, they become points on each other’s web. Thus we will, from time to time, allude not only to the works themselves, but to their impact.

Without in any sense undervaluing the importance of economic factors in American social history, I think that we can agree that the old model of American social structure which used to appear both in sociology texts and in popularized quasi-sociological books and articles—the one that resembles a thermometer, and which divides American society into upper, middle, and lower classes (generally with subdivisions such as “lower-middle”)—is simply not adequate. This is not to say, of course, that there are not Americans on each of those economic levels. The problem, rather, is that those levels are not adequate as indicators and predictors of attitudes, behavior, taste, style of life, and so forth, as used to be thought. I recall reading explanations of how when one visited homes of people on the different economic levels, furnishings changed predictably: on one level one could expect to find not rugs or hardwood floors but rather linoleum, certain kinds of objects on kitchen shelves, and certain kinds of pictures hanging on the wall. Sociologist friends tell me that they still have colleagues who teach that sort of nonsense, people who fail even to qualify such statements by saying that such things hold true only under certain carefully specified conditions. I am pleased, at any rate, to see that

social historians now take a more flexible stance. Rowland Berthoff, for instance, says that “. . . because of . . . economic mobility and the popular attachment to it, social classes have been about the least substantial component of the modern American social structure. . . . a social *history* organized around . . . *economic* classes is bound to suffer . . .” because our economic classes never coalesced “into well-defined, stable social-status groups. . . .”<sup>3</sup>

My own work in the structures of the audiences for the different arts would lead me to make Berthoff’s statement even stronger; I would say that it is not merely “economic mobility and the popular attachment to it” that make social classes ambiguous—it is also the immense number of voluntaristic choices available within any economic level. These make income a surprisingly unreliable indicator of how families live, think, feel, pray, eat, and express themselves.

As I see it, one’s income affects to some extent the nature and scope of these voluntaristic choices, but not as strongly as it should were purely economic factors as sovereign as Marxist analysts wish. Thus my wife and I choose not to fly the family to Paris or Vienna a few times a year to enjoy a week or two of concerts or opera because doing so would involve a greater sacrifice of other things than we are willing to make. We can, however, afford almost any comparable events that come our way, and a great many do. We share those events with thousands of other citizens far richer and far poorer than we, people who have the choice of spending their evenings at concerts, sports events, movies, the neighborhood bar, at home glued to the tube, reading, or in any of thousands of other ways open to Americans in an extremely wide economic range.

I choose my illustration from the arts because they are the field with which I am most familiar, but as I visualize the web or net pattern which runs outward from individual Americans, the voluntarism affects many different areas of human activity. As Peter Goheen noted,<sup>4</sup> industrial organization broke old patterns of communal relationship, and the history of the American city is to some extent the history of a search for community. The voluntaristic answer is a mad pattern of associations which is not, as a general rule, reflected in any obvious way in the geographic layout of our towns and cities. For some Americans, a “neighborhood” may still be a place in which the bulk

of one's activities and friendships are centered, but for millions of others, activities and friendships are scattered in a complex network around the urban or suburban area. Home is here, but work is there, and close friends are in six other places. Club, church, or shopping occur at points scattered widely away from anything one could call "the neighborhood." And this network to a large extent describes more than the special realities of our lives and activities; it has social implications as well, implications which are surprisingly independent of the old-fashioned income "thermometer."

I believe that at least up to the present writing our social history moves steadily in the direction of the elaboration of such networks. They are more evident in late nineteenth than early nineteenth century novels, and more evident yet in more recent novels. It may be that the automobile has made possible the extreme flexibility of the present network, and that the fuel crisis to which Americans are beginning to adjust will force revision of our behavior, but my guess is that the attitudes upon which that web is based are more fundamental to our nature as a people than even the beloved car.<sup>5</sup> Certainly sensitive observers remarked it long before Ford. Alexis de Tocqueville's concerns about democratic pressures for conformity were balanced by his observations about the American proneness for voluntaristic association. Any citizen with a group of miscellaneous affiliations of any sort seems to be enacting what Tocqueville saw; he has constructed a web of ties and contacts about himself. The tendency to form voluntary ties, moreover, appears to be well-grounded in our value system; it is condoned by such values as free choice, naturalness, diversity. Thus the web, values, and class perceptions in America can be seen as closely interrelated.

It should be obvious that any of the broad changes described in our discussion did not strike our entire population at once. "Periods" were invented for the convenience of historians. When we discuss changes in the structure of the family, changes related to modernization, changes in sex role patterns or the impact of some other alteration, the reader must understand that only some people in our population were affected in any given period. By and large I think that it is true that as we move closer to the present, as more and more Americans are intimately connected to a nationwide network

of communication, the impact of changes occurs more rapidly. But even in the present, it usually does not make sense to draw a line and say that before this, such and such was true of our society, while after this, something else is true. Not all Americans are affected at the same time; indeed, not all Americans are affected. We might visualize broad change as happening in something like the following manner:

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1620      1700      1800      1860      1900      etc.  
“Moving stairs”

You will notice that the steps are drawn in grey, not sharp black, and that they reach neither the top nor the bottom of the diagram. This is to suggest that these transformations do not strike everyone at the same time or with equal force, and that they are likely to miss many people altogether. I find the model useful in visualizing the manner in which some major alteration came to our society: let us say the change from the family as unit of production to the family as unit of consumption out of which a breadwinner moves every day to acquire cash. Call the model “moving steps” or “moving stairs” for convenience, with the understanding that what we are describing is not an escalator. The movement takes place laterally through time.

The model provides an answer to the thoughtless question one is often asked when describing direction of change—“How can you say that that is true? Only last week I met some people who are different from what your statement implies.” “Well,” one replies, “change doesn’t always occur all at once to everyone. It comes about more like this”—and one points to the moving stairs.

I am aware, of course, that some of the models which I am proposing are not highly compatible with others which have been suggested for the course of American social history. It would be hard

to square what I have said, for instance, about “expanding circles” with those readings which see our social experience as the working out of a continuous conspiracy on the part of the “ins” to exploit the “outs.” I know as well as the next writer that there are and have been “ins,” that there continue to be “outs,” and that there have even been conspiracies. But I believe that the fact that we are so much aware of that and feel it to be iniquitous is too important to be ignored. I would rather argue that American history has been a continuing series of discoveries of areas of unfairness, followed by efforts to eliminate them. Wrongs, injustices, exploitation, and repression have existed in all human societies throughout any history that I have ever heard of. What is most interesting in the American experiment, it seems to me, is the faith, which increases as one moves nearer to the present, that it is within the realm of human possibility to do something about them, and to make it stick. We are, I am afraid, incurable meliorists, and that meliorism seems to me the most basic radical value in our sacred value system. Even the author of a recent article on how conservative Americans seem when one examines Gallup Poll results since 1935 admits that

opinions about civil rights have been surprisingly liberal. During the 1930’s, while Congress repeatedly refused to make lynching a federal crime, 70% of Americans (65% in the South) supported such a measure. Two-thirds of the public in 1949 desired abolition of the poll tax; 54% approved the Supreme Court’s school desegregation decision; and, in 1956, 67% favored a ruling by the Interstate Commerce Commission forbidding racial segregation in trains, buses, and waiting rooms. The 1964 Civil Rights Act requiring desegregation of hotels, restaurants, and similar establishments also won solid public endorsement, as did the Voting Rights bill of 1965.<sup>6</sup>

Each of these civil rights issues involves the clash between custom, tradition, ethnocentrism or bigotry and meliorist values such as fair play. Those values were visible early in our national history,

and seem to have been sincerely believed in even by people notably unable to live up to them themselves. The bruised, tired, tough and often corrupt survivors who made up Washington's Continental Army, a recent study shows, did whatever was necessary to stay alive. But surprisingly, their values belied their soldiers' cynicism: they believed in their mission, believed a better nation was being created, believed in meliorism, in short. "The revolutionaries had held onto their millennial vision of the future, but had done whatever seemed necessary to get through the war."<sup>7</sup> The meliorism of the ragged Continentals is present today as well; it is at the root even of much current pessimism, for many Americans who profess to be fed up with their own society feel so because they imagine that societies could be better.

Another hypothesis of this book, then, is that Americans today share a surprisingly well-defined system of what may be called "sacred" values, and that one can see it entrenching itself in the record of our earlier literature. The values to which I refer are shared with other western cultures, but they appear in contemporary American society with a pattern of emphasis which is distinctive, and immediately seems so to foreigners, who are likely to react with some surprise to the discovery of just how strong is consensual commitment to this or that value in our country. I am assuming that as one moves forward in our history, this range of values becomes not only increasingly clear, but increasingly ordered and emphasized in a way which would feel very comfortable to a contemporary American.

Some definitions and explanations to prevent misunderstanding: First, by "sacred values," I mean those values which recur on the most condoned levels throughout the institutions of a society, those which seem basically true and good. If one did a conscientious inventory of values associated with a wide range of institutions in our society, then eliminated first those which were peculiar to given institutions, and second those which one believes are universal to all human cultures—those related to hunger and sex drive, for instance—the residue, the values which recurred in each case, but which were not simply a part of the human condition, could be called our sacred values. Such values form one basis of thought, evaluation and action.<sup>8</sup>

Second, a value system, even a sacred value system, is not a logically consistent philosophical construct. It is real; if you go looking

for it systematically, you will find it. But it was not constructed by a professional philosopher; a logician could easily point to ambiguities and contradictions in the ways in which it is commonly used. People arguing on opposing sides of a given dispute will generally appeal to the same sacred values: “Political refugees (or Black Americans, or handicapped workers, etc.) have so much going against them that we have to give them extra help to ensure that they get a fair break.” “No. Any special treatment you give to any special group is unfair to other Americans who have worked hard to get where they are.” Both arguments rest on the sacred value “fair play.” The values themselves are so much “givens” that they themselves can hardly be attacked, but we can use them to attack problems, opponents or other—“sacred”—values.

Third, there are a great many values floating around in any society. Most of them are not what I have called sacred, because they are not enshrined, so to speak, on the most condoned levels.<sup>9</sup> Some are “local,” or peculiar to only certain institutions. Football and basketball coaches value “quickness” and “speed,” for example, but those values are obviously local; they do not recur in all American institutions. Business institutions value profit, but that, curiously, is not a sacred value in our country either; it does not appear in the inventories of values of certain institutions, and it can certainly be attacked. Sacred values are “givens.” If one repeatedly hears complaints about the over-emphasis on a value, or about its perniciousness, it is not a sacred value. The values used as a basis for protest or action against it are far more likely to belong to the family of sacred values. One encounters, for example, protests against racism in America. Racism is not a sacred value. This is not to say that racism has not existed and been a severe problem throughout American history. It is not a sacred value because it can be attacked— indeed, it has been attacked, as we shall see, from surprisingly early times in our national experience. What the student of values learns from such an issue is that there must be some value or values which has come to outrank racism. “Fair Play” is the name given to one such value in a study of sacred values in which I participated some years ago.

The study was designed to identify those values most highly condoned by those institutions which are themselves felt to be worthy of

the unselfish support of the society: arts, research and education, for example. Statements of goals, ideals, values were easy to come by: university catalogues, for instance, contain such formulations. From a broad range of such sources we made a large inventory of values, and then, following the procedures just suggested, eliminated as best we could those which seemed “local” or “universal.” The residue, values which seemed always to be considered good, fine and worthy, we labelled “sacred.” Without taking space to explain fully what is meant by each, I am going to reproduce here the arrangement of sacred values which resulted from this study. They are explained more fully in an appendix.

1. Orderly Universe

or

Process

- |                           |                          |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| 2. “Truth”                | 9. Fair Play             |
| 3. Objectivity            | 10. Individual Potential |
| 4. Broadest view possible | 11. Talent or Genius     |
| 5. Knowledge              | 12. Self-Expression      |
| 6. Education              | 13. Creativity           |
| 7. Meliorism              | 14. Innovation           |
| 8. Specialization         | 15. Diversity            |
|                           | 16. Indigenoussness      |
|                           | 17. Naturalness          |
|                           | 18. Humanitarianism      |

19. Sanctity of Human Life

You will notice that specific religious values—“sacred” in a more conventional sense—do not appear on the chart. Clearly, had our study been of sacred values, let us say, at the seminary in Oberlin, Ohio at the period in the nineteenth century in which Oberlin Perfectionism was being developed, we would have had to add to our list a value such as “salvation.”<sup>10</sup> But, from surprisingly early times in our history, such purely religious values have been weighed against those on the list and found susceptible to challenge. “Sacred” describes basic precepts on which one ought to act. They are not challenged because they are felt to be simply true. Discuss the attempts by the Church to suppress the findings of Copernicus and Galileo, for example, and even most religious Catholics will feel that in such cases the Church was wrong.

“Truth” is more sacred even than specific religious beliefs. We will see this kind of challenge in figures as different as Roger Williams, Cotton Mather, and Benjamin Franklin. Note that this is not to imply that as one moves forward in time once ceases to encounter people for whom such hypothetical choices between religious authority and rationalized truth would be difficult, or who would not choose authority. I do feel, however, that one reaches a point at which, on the most condoned levels, one does not expect the choice even to appear.

It may for the moment seem that all I am saying is that secularization and rationalization become increasingly strong as a society modernizes. I believe that that is true, but also that the truth is somewhat more complex, for not all societies modernize in exactly the same way, and not all societies give the same degree of devotion to the various items on that chart of sacred values.

My hypothesis that one can see the steady emergence and definition of a sacred value system in which fair play and meliorism come to rank extremely high helps to account for differences between my point of view and that of some other writers, such as the good social historian Rowland Berthoff, whose work I like and have made use of. Berthoff writes, “. . . if men subvert or abandon the values embodied in the well-ordered institutional structure, and so dismantle the social foundations for cultural achievement and spiritual serenity, they proceed at their own grave peril.”<sup>11</sup> John Winthrop certainly would have agreed, though he put it in terms of a holy contract in warning his followers of the terms of their Covenant with God: if we get safely to New England, he wrote on the *Arabella* in 1630, we will know that

. . . then hath hee ratified this covenant and sealed our Commission, and will expect a strict performance of the articles contained in it; but if wee shall neglect the observation of these articles . . . and, dissembling with our God, shall fall to embrace this present world and prosecute our carnall intentions, seeking greate things for ourselves and our posterity, the Lord will surely breake out in wrathe against us; be revenged of such a [sinful] people and make us knowe the price of the breache of such a covenant.<sup>12</sup>

Winthrop's warning is sincere and religious, but its secular implication, spelled out more fully in a famous speech on liberty to the General Court, July 3, 1645, is that order must be upheld and legal leaders obeyed.<sup>13</sup> What Berthoff says is in many ways true, and is fruitful in that one can apply it to processes which one sees operating in the United States. One could, for example, apply it to the Harold Frederic novel which we will discuss later, *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, and say the Theron's difficulties result if not from the dismantling of the order to which he was accustomed, then at least in his moving outside of it. Either way, it is certainly true that the peril is "grave."

But Americans by and large seem to have felt willing to take the risk. What happens, finally, to your respect for a "well-ordered institutional structure" if you carry values which make you perceive that it is unjust? Winthrop, after all, delivered his speech because authority was already being challenged. I would agree that the process of dismantling an established institutional structure, or at least the ideals upon which it was based, is desperately perilous, but I feel that the American experiment throughout its history freely dares to face the peril. Americans, like citizens of all nations in the Western tradition, are meliorists, but it is the general consensus among observers of such phenomena that our meliorism is more extreme than that of other nations.<sup>14</sup>

Now I do not want to claim that the first European settlers early in the seventeenth century in what is now the eastern United States constituted a body of conscious meliorists. Yet it is likely that among them were leaders who were unusually melioristic for their day. I think this is probably true of the Puritans, for example, even though their eyes were set on the past as well, and the godly commonwealth they had in mind was a religiously perfected version of a hierarchical order which did not differ very much from what any Englishman would have thought was the way things should have been. They were meliorists, then, in believing in the ability of mankind through a combination of prayer, consultation, expertise, and rational planning to establish a commonwealth that would be more pleasing in the eyes of God, but they imagined that its characteristics would be those of an ideally orderly English society. Still, it was to be a more perfect social order; that fact makes them meliorists. Their meliorism, of

course, was only unintentionally radical; I do not want to argue that because they had more faith in and commitment to the idea of their ability—with God’s aid—to remake their own society, that American meliorism is “founded” on what they did.

I would think it more accurate to say that they, like all of the founders of American colonies, had in mind a kind of hierarchical, almost medieval order, and that social forces unleashed throughout the Western world but especially strong in the New World caused those circles I have spoken of to expand, to press against the boundaries which were supposed to divide social ranks. Nothing that can really be called a democratic political philosophy emerges in the seventeenth century, but I think that it is fair to say that the social pressures which would later be rationalized as a democratic political philosophy were already clearly at work.

No one questions the importance of such philosophy in the eighteenth century; the historians’ debate on that topic is about the sincerity of people’s commitment to it at the time of the Revolution. And while I agree in certain precisely defined ways with a writer like Bernard Bailyn that one must see even the American Revolution as in part an attempt to restore, and not to transform,<sup>15</sup> I feel that the Revolution was also motivated by an increased confidence that an alteration in government could produce controlled changes in society. So, as we have already seen, did the troops who fought the war. Even if we conceded that all Revolutionary goals were conservative—which is certainly not true!—it would be hard to hide the radicalism of the means used to achieve them. And those means are related to the confidence of earlier colonists that a fresh and modern start gave fair promise of achieving their varied social, economic or religious goals.

I said that these various approaches and models—”expanding circles,” the network, sacred values—were interrelated, overlapping, part of what seems to me a unified and reasonably coherent way of understanding America. This is perhaps just a way of saying that economics, social class, values, taste, style-of-life and any other parameters we can name *ought* to seem part of a whole if one is studying a people who constitute a culture. In a thoughtful article, Robert Heilbroner wrote,

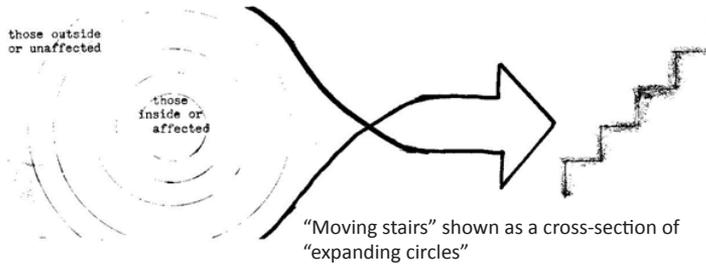
. . . unlike previous economic systems, capitalism has always been exposed to an egalitarian countercurrent that has undermined the simpler endorsement of inequality characteristic of pre-capitalist societies<sup>16</sup>

There is a link between economics and values. But I would argue that the values are more sacred than the economic system. Thus Heilbroner goes on to suggest that what is needed in the present economic crisis is a turn to a *planned* capitalism, a position generated from that range of values on the left side of our “arrangement” on page 20. And he continues by saying that his guess is that even such a solution would be temporary because “capitalism” as we know it will probably eventually have to be scrapped for some future arrangement more amenable to developing world conditions. He sees the solutions, in short, in terms of specialized expertise, analysis, and ultimately, meliorism. I do not want to get involved in the question of whether our economy now is or ever really has been genuinely “capitalist,” or the question of whether, as he seems to imply, capitalism created the values (I think it did not). What is clear is that in his mind, the values outweigh the system; they are the ones he applies even though he earlier implied that their source was a system he feels is doomed.

It is for reasons of this sort that I believe in the close interaction of values, behavior and social structure in the United States. Even our analysts—your faithful servant the present author among them—operate within a definable range of connected beliefs, assumptions and ideals. Those may be seen reflected in our behavior, as when we organize our life in a pattern so voluntaristic that it takes a model like a web to express it, or in our history, which is in large part a constant expansion of the circle of those to whom the rights of voluntarism are extended, an expansion motivated and accelerated by the stubborn application of certain national values.

The approaches which I have outlined overlap because they describe the same phenomena, the same society, the same developing culture, the same extraordinary amalgamation of people. In my mind, indeed, they are not really “approaches.” They are all the same approach. So the web seems to me to be the physical embodiment of voluntarism. And voluntarism seems based on our sacred values. The

more the circles expand, the wider is the scope for voluntarism, the richer the variety of points available on an individual's web. Those moving stairs record the broader currency of any phase of this within the population. When we use the moving stairs to show the spread of common social acceptance, moving stairs become just a cross-section of expanding circles which, if I can muster the graphic skill required to handle another illustration, I visualize thus:



Similarly, any of the characteristics of modernization express the same values. Rationalization, faith in expertise and specialization all tend to break down traditional social barriers. Our sacred values, particularly meliorism and fair-play, exert pressure which tends to expand the circles. The total effect of these processes is very powerful. Eventually it affects even our way of conceptualizing, so that, when we come to deal with works produced after the first third of the nineteenth century—for I believe that this began happening very early, with Emerson, Poe and others—our models for social structure, the impact of technology and even the nature of human perception and consciousness begin to converge.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is Volume 12 (1971) of the CEEA edition of Howells' works (Bloomington, Indiana, 1968—). The quotation is on 194.

<sup>2</sup> Whitman H. Ridgway, *Community Leadership in Maryland: A Comparative Analysis of Power in Society* (Chapel Hill, 1979). 193. John Braeman put me on to this study; my comments on it follow his review in the Spring, 1981 *American Studies*.

<sup>3</sup> Rowland Berthoff, *An Unsettled People: Social Order and Disorder in American History* (New York, 1971), xi-xii.

<sup>4</sup> In "Industrialization and the Growth of Cities in Nineteenth-Century America," *American Studies* XIV, 1 (Spring, 1973), 49 ff.

<sup>5</sup> As overwhelming as the importance of the automobile has been, it is probably not accurate to say that it is the reason for the development of this sort of complex web. We think, for example, of Los Angeles as the automobile city par excellence, the city which not only does not have old-fashioned "neighborhoods," but, most famously, does not have a "downtown." But as several writers have noted, Los Angeles assumed its strange shape before the introduction of the automobile. (This matter is reviewed in Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* [Middlesex, England and Baltimore, Maryland, 1971, 1973].) For that matter, Silas Lapham's Boston in the 1890's seems to have the web structure.

<sup>6</sup> Wesley T. Wooley, "Profiles of a Conservative America: The Gallup Poll, 1935-1975," *Midwest Quarterly*, XXI, 3 (Spring, 1980), 306-316. 311.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character 1775-1783* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1979), 364.

<sup>8</sup> Stuart Levine, "Arts, Values, Institutions and Culture: An Essay in American Studies Methodology and Relevance," *American Quarterly*, XIV (May, 1972), 131-165.

<sup>9</sup> This matter of condonation is critical to the definition, but a little tricky to explain in brief. For a fuller explanation, see "Arts, Values. . . ."

<sup>10</sup> The illustration is Theodore Hovet's. Examining our findings during a visit to Kansas during the course of the values study and at a time when he was working on Harriet Beecher Stowe's Oberlin associations, he was asked how our list would do for the nineteenth century people on whom he was working. He said that a list compiled at Oberlin would have been identical to ours except for that one addition.

<sup>11</sup> *An Unsettled People*, xiv.

<sup>12</sup> George Folson, ed., "Modell of Christian Charity," *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 3rd Series, Volume VII (Boston, 1838), 33-48. 46.

<sup>13</sup> "Speech of Winthrop defining the Just Bounds of Liberty," *Winthrop's Journal: History of New England: 1630-1649*, edited by James Kendall Hosmer (New York, 1908; 1966). Two volumes. II, 237-239.

<sup>14</sup> I recall reading, for instance, that European observers were shocked that the United States was serious about air pollution controls, that our government enacted emission controls and the like, and seemed, by and large, to be making them stick, even in the face of a radically altered fuel situation which made them initially uneconomic.

<sup>15</sup> *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967).

<sup>16</sup> "Reflections / Boom and Crash," *The New Yorker* (August 28, 1978), 52-73, 66.



## Chapter 1

### You Can Drink the Water

[A]ll our prisons are pestered and filled with able men to serve their country, which for small robberies are daily hanged up in great numbers. . . . [W]e would hasten . . . the deducting of some colonies of our superfluous people into those temperate and fertile parts of America. . . .

—Richard Hakluyt, *Divers Voyages Touching the Discovery of America and the Islands Adjacent* (1582)

William Bradford reviews the fears which made his Pilgrim colleagues hesitate to leave Holland for the unknown coasts of New England, and writes, “The change of air, diet and drinking of water would affect their bodies with sore sicknesses and grievous diseases.” As Samuel Eliot Morison points out,<sup>1</sup> drinking water was considered a dangerous practice, often with good reason, in that period. There is a little more to the matter, though. Benjamin Franklin, stranded in England a century later, as he tells us in his *Autobiography*, saved money, and kept himself from the general fuddlement of his peers in the print shop where he worked, by drinking water instead of the usual beer; he picked up the nickname, the “Water-American.” Americans travelling abroad are surprised to find that in most places they visit, water is not drunk at meals. Morison notes that beer or cider were the usual poor man’s drink. “¿Que va a tomar?” asks the waiter in every restaurant, from the poorest to the swankiest, in Mexico—“What are you going to drink (take)?” The expected answer is beer or a soft drink; water, unless it is bottled mineral water, is an odd (and dangerous) response. And cider-like beverages are always available as a soft drink; Sidral Mundet and other brands rub shoulders with Pepsi, Orange Crush, and Pascual. In Mexico, where so many older customs hold on—where the head carpenter, plumber, plasterer, or electrician is called “Master,”<sup>2</sup> as the head cooper, carpenter or blacksmith would have been in colonial America—one realizes that an alertness

to small cross-cultural clues even about “obvious” material matters can work in several directions. The famous foreign complaint about Coca-colonization has always seemed odd to most Americans, who generally use soft drinks only as a “break” or to wash down a snack. In countries where it is customary to “take” something with each meal, the replacement of cider, beer or wine with a new beverage is likely to seem a more profound intrusion than a midwestern slosher-of-coffee or other Water-American would imagine.

My trivial example illustrates a less trivial point: our colonial literature speaks from a related, but quite distant, cultural setting. It is illuminated by our cross-cultural experiences, and in turn can illuminate them, as William Bradford, of all people, made me understand certain aspects of Mexico, of all places. We must not leave Bradford thirsty in Holland in Chapter IV of his history, by the way: we should look again, to Chapter X, where a Pilgrim search party, lost on Cape Cod and “most distressed for want of drink. . . . at length . . . found water and refreshed themselves, being the first New England water they drunk of, and was now in great thirst as pleasant unto them as wine or beer had been in foretimes.” (65) The discovery that, usually, “You can drink the water” is a small but not insignificant sign of the thousands of cultural peculiarities, small and large, which would someday distinguish our civilization from others.

The custom of drinking water is an aspect of what is called “material culture,” an important dimension in recent social history. In this first chapter, by way of “tooling up” for what we shall do later in the book, I would like to explore other sorts of mutually illuminating connections between literature and social history. We shall look mainly at the colonial era, but I propose less a survey of its social history or literature than a series of brief illustrative—and, I hope, suggestive—excursions into areas as different as social classes, social attitudes, personality, and values; and authors as different as William Bradford, John Winthrop, William Byrd, Samuel Sewall, or Benjamin Franklin, Jonathan Edwards, Crèvecoeur, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, to suggest both a way of reading colonial history, and a number of ways of “doing” literature as social history.

-1-

John Smith

By that register I perceived that I was the youngest son of the youngest son for five generations back.

—Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography*

Most settlers in most colonies were, according to everything we have learned in recent years about colonial history, “a middling sort of Englishmen,” people who were “. . . less discontented with the structure of English society than with what it held for them. . . .”<sup>23</sup> One can reach several different kinds of conclusions from that evidence. To the social historian Rowland Berthoff it indicates that most colonial English immigrants, “like immigrants to America at any later time, emigrated mainly for economic ends.” They were not “discontented with the basic social structure of the old country as much as with their place in it or with some other temporary condition. They had no plans to alter it fundamentally in the New World.”<sup>24</sup> Now, Berthoff argues that the colonies enjoyed the security and stability of traditional European social class relationships; he sees American social history as a movement away from that kind of stability, and says that one thing which maintained it during the colonial period was the difficulty of amassing really large fortunes, a difficulty which evaporated in the nineteenth century with the removal of governmental restraints upon commercial enterprises and the loss of the remnants of the sense of orderly social class relationships inherited from medieval times.

Though it is probably true that one does not find real theoretical challenges to the idea of traditional orderly relationships between economic classes at least until very late in the colonial period, I am not quite comfortable with Mr. Berthoff’s conclusions. It is correct to say that immigrants “had no plans to alter” fundamentally the social structure they knew from England. But their dissatisfaction with their own place in that structure and their brave decision to emigrate seem to differentiate them from those who remained. As I read through the literary documents which they left to us, I think I see evidence of kinds of social pressure which are not logically compatible with the

ideals of stable and stratified social structure which they undoubtedly also held. There is, I think, a continuity in that sort of social pressure in our history. The migrants wanted a fair break. Values connected with the ideas of fairness and opportunity are present very early, and many aspirations were based upon them. I would think that it would be more accurate to say that the individual migrant wanted the social system in the New World to be the same as that in the Old, only “more so.” It would work, that is, as Old World society ought to have worked; it would be stratified, but the immigrant would now claim his or her rightful stratum. Certainly, though, not many imagined that the new social location would be less elevated than their rank in the Old World. Inducements offered to immigrants did imply clearly that colonists could better their lot; even more ambitious aspirations could develop once immigrants saw that those circles of which we spoke in the Introduction could be widened. The kind of social movement which a single family, perhaps, had been able to make because of special economic conditions in the New World might begin to look to members of that family like a “right,” and not just a stroke of luck.

There are, indeed, some indications that certain Englishmen saw the New World this way even before real settlement had begun. Richard Hakluyt argued in the late sixteenth century that economic conditions in England were so bad that every day good citizens were being hanged for petty crimes into which poverty forced them; ship them to the New World, he reasoned, and they will better themselves and help England prosper. Emigration was from the outset associated with individual opportunity and social betterment. To fair play add meliorism: both values seem almost inherent in the earliest days of British colonial planning and settlement.

John Smith’s list of reasons for staking one’s life in America is also revealing. He says, in *A Description of New England* (1616), “Who can desire more content, that hath small meanes; or but only his merit to aduance his fortune, than to tread, and plant that ground hee hath purchased by the hazard of his life?”<sup>5</sup> “Small means” and “only merit” are true enough of Smith, who came of humble stock; he is socially appropriate as an early propagandizer of the American dream. Though one can agree with Berthoff that colonists did not challenge the existing social order, there is a challenge implicit here.

Smith's hypothetical adventurer achieves a good life not because of inherited status, but through his own ability and courage.

Smith then lists the reasons for settlement; his list is reminiscent of the propaganda for colonialism assembled by Hakluyt, and it, too, is more than covertly meliorist. First, he says, is the matter of converting "those poor savages to know Christ and humanity." He has in mind also gaining for "our native mother country a kingdom to attend her." But his argument also shows clearly that meliorist impulse, which, I believe, has been a strong characteristic of American experience since earliest times: "erecting Townes," says Smith, "peopling Countries, informing the ignorant, reforming things uniuist, teaching virtue." (208) "Reforming things unjust" in a place where a man deprived of a fair chance at home can take a crack at an open country: the national passion for making things work the way they should seems there in more than embryo. We should acknowledge the radicalism of the idea.

Captain Smith's enumeration of the kinds of settlers he has in mind makes his social vision more clear. His list of who should go predicts exactly both the people to whom the New World would appeal and the social implications of their migration: he says he does not want to break up families or take servants away from masters, but move "only such as with free consent may be spared . . . fatherlesse children of thirteene or fourteen years of age, or young mar[r]ied people, that haue small wealth to liue on. . . ." We will need "sufficient masters (as, Carpenters, Masons, Fishers, Fowlers, Gardiners, Husbandmen, Sawyers, Smiths, Spinsters, Taylors, Weauers, and such like) to take ten, twelue, or twentie . . . for Apprentises. The Masters by this may quicklie growe rich; these [the apprentices] may learne their trades themselues, to doe the like; to a generall and incredible benefit, for King, and Countrey, Master, and Seruant." (214)

Smith's projection is at least as important in New World history as is the Puritan vision, for Smith's more nearly endures. We need not in any way glorify John Smith; he is not a consciously prophetic figure or perhaps even a particularly profound or admirable man. One cannot really call him ordinary—he is unusual and colorful—but I think his view of the New World is one ready to hand in his day: a place where certain values, available in his society but not practically

realizable, can be realized, a place where people of humble origins will prevail, where unjust aspects of the British social structure can be reformed.

Leaders of colonial expeditions left good records which show clearly enough the orderly and stratified communities they intended to found. Their documents also show, however, that to attract colonists they had to appeal to groups such as those Smith names, and to make the New World attractive to them by promising social conditions different from those at home. These colonists left less copious records for a few generations; until the age of Franklin their writings are not in general a part of our literary canon, though modern close studies of colonial communities now record the pressures which their presence produced upon the schemes of the original leaders, and the documents of the leaders show clearly enough their increasing need to respond to the pressure.

-2-

Rigid or Flexible?  
Haughty or Friendly?

Exult each patriot heart! this night is shown  
A piece, which we may fairly call our own;  
Where the proud titles of "My Lord! Your Grace!"  
To humble Mr. and plain Sir give place.

—Prologue, "The Contrast" (1787),  
by Royall Tyler

The planners and founders of colonies had in mind ordered and rationally stratified societies based on contemporary European or even older social patterns; some even went so far as to invent titles and ranks for the new nobility they expected to create. Except in New York, where a couple of the immense estates left over from the Dutch plan for a patroon system hung on into the nineteenth century (the death throes of the system are recorded in a trilogy of novels by James Fenimore Cooper), none of these plans really "took." Thus wild land speculation and highly dispersed, cash-crop agriculture quickly negated all such schemes in the South below the tidewater

and in many other places. And certainly no one really had planned the society created by Scotch Irish and other ethnic groups that moved out of the Middle Atlantic states into the southern back country.

Because of the very strict and highly rationalized manner in which Puritan colonies were established, there has, I think, been a tendency to think that New England came closest to creating a society of truly traditional stability. Through much of the seventeenth century, Puritans did not simply take off for the frontier; rather, a new town was supposed to be chartered and authorized in a carefully controlled way before it could be established, and it was then founded, so to speak “all at once,” with the General Court in Boston seeing to it that it had adequate funding and an appropriate supply of settlers in all the trades, specialties and professions necessary to make a coherent and complete community which could thrive in the new location. Since the theocratic government intended to control everything from faith to prices and appropriate dress, and since it identified the hierarchical system which it attempted to create in Boston and in these satellite towns with the godly order of the covenant theology, one might suppose that as long as the system persisted, a social structure at least as conservative as that of Great Britain must have prevailed—and probably more conservative, since we are aware of various unsettling forces which were at work in the mother country.

But this is not, I think, what really happened. All of the colonies were very short of labor, but in Puritan New England a special situation prevailed because the Puritans were predominantly a middle- and upper-middle class sect, long on educated men, and short on people skilled in the various “mechanic arts” which one needed to make a seventeenth or eighteenth century society go—those coopers, carpenters and blacksmiths we have already mentioned, the people for whom Smith thought the New World offered great promise. And so from the earliest times the colony had had to use non-Puritan Englishmen, whom it attracted to Massachusetts Bay with the promise of far better wages and conditions than they could expect—even assuming that they were able to set themselves up as masters of an establishment—at home. The leaders’ hope and expectation was, of course, that, impressed by the pious and prosperous example of the Puritans around them, they would come to share the Puritans’ religious

concerns and point of view. This, after all, did not seem so unreasonable. One assumed that workmen were at least nominally members of the Anglican church, and, as the Puritans were always careful to point out, they were not themselves separatists, but believed rather in a reform within the church which they hoped their good example in America would bring on. Social pressure, official state propaganda, shared traditions, and prosperity suggestive of God's approval of their way might reasonably have been expected to convince their leather-aproned neighbors to join the holy experiment.

There were at least two things wrong with this scheme. The first was that as far as anyone has been able to make out, English working-class people have as a rule been no more devout than our comic strip friend Andy Capp. There are, indeed, those who argue that one can go far back in English history for the reasons; I have read explanations which say that when the country was Christianized, intense missionary activity was largely confined, in many regions, to certain towns, while many valleys were left virtually untouched, and their people came to be only nominally converted. Others make the point that the Church of England has, by and large, suffered from too great an association with the upper classes. There is even some evidence that the "witchcraft" against which New and old England so vigilantly defended themselves was to some extent a Christian pejorative label for surviving pagan beliefs and customs. It does seem to have been associated with lower class and with resistance to resented authority.<sup>6</sup> Be that as it may, strong doses of "right reason" seem to have failed to bring in many converts among non-Puritan Englishmen in the midst of the Puritan colony. As we shall see, there seem to be oblique reflections of this and other social facts in the fiction of Nathaniel Hawthorne, who, despite his protestations about being just a romancer, knew his colonial social history.

The second flaw in the Puritan plan has to do with the economic motives which brought non-Puritan craftsmen to the New World. Their skills and their scarcity gave them a certain power, a power which not even the carefully planned corporate and communal characteristics of Puritan towns could thwart. Having attracted a cobbler, let us say, to come to Boston, where he thrived as master of an establishment more prosperous than he could likely have hoped for in England, one

could not be sure he would stay put. It was possible to induce him to move again by again upping the ante—better rates for his work, a more commodious house, perhaps, or the right to graze more animals on common land. Participation in the governance of the new town was, of course, limited: “Those persons whom congregationalism excluded from church membership were excluded not only from the sacraments and from a voice in the selection of their minister but also from the privileges of freemanship, the right to vote and hold office.”<sup>77</sup> But, after all, an honest man’s prosperity might be taken as a sign that he had found his calling, and the gates were always hospitably open to fuller participation in the church; it might well be that God had designated him as one of those destined to become full members of the community of His saints. This was the process by which Puritan leaders hoped to draw newcomers into their church and their thinking. But such things seldom happened—indeed, as we know, within a few decades the Puritan community itself was having difficulty producing a decent showing of full church members from within its own ranks. It was far more likely that our hypothetical cobbler, or perhaps his son, distant cousin, or even a former apprentice in his shop would achieve political clout because eventually he had come to think of himself as a substantial citizen of the community, and wanted a say in the town meeting; were it not granted, he had in hand an offer to move to another place which offered him not only a more substantial house, the right to graze even more animals on the common, and so forth, but just the political voice which he had come to feel he deserved. And later on, of course, as genuinely Puritan governmental control broke down, and along with it the careful regulation of settlement, he could simply pick up and move on.

Now one can use such things—and I take my hypothetical example to be no more than symptomatic—to illustrate the gradual secularizing of society; certainly it is true that the Puritan theocracy lost its power, and that government in New England was secularized. (Indeed, Edmund Morgan argued that we should not go on calling the Puritan state a theocracy since “of all the governments in the Western world at the time, that of early Massachusetts gave the clergy least authority.” [96] Its leaders were to be devout Puritans, conscious that they governed under the eye of God, but laymen. Most colonialists,

however, now use the term. Certainly by our lights, early Massachusetts seems theocratic.) One can see secularization also as the first step in the direction of a harsher kind of society, the kind which Berthoff says we develop in the nineteenth century. But it is also possible to see the process as an early example of an admirable national social principle which one used to hear expressed resentfully by southern whites in these words: "You give 'em an inch and they take a mile."

I think that this is the real social significance of that series of complaints in Puritan writers, which our own age finds so amusing, about how this or that person is wearing clothing inappropriate to his or her station, or failing to show proper respect for betters in some specific situation. Samuel Sewall's *Diary* provides plentiful illustrations, but the complaint—and legislation to correct it—are common enough to indicate what seems to me a healthy social turbulence. Hawthorne shows us the potential for uppity behavior among New England craftsmen in an interpolated short story in *The House of the Seven Gables*. The story, significantly, is supposed to be written by a nineteenth century descendant of the plebian Maule family, the first of whom was cheated out of the land on which the House was built, and whose son was the carpenter who built the House. The story concerns the grandson, another carpenter Maule, who is summoned to the House by an aristocratic Pyncheon. We are told pointedly that this Maule is not a "church-communicant";<sup>8</sup> when he comes to the House, he ignores the servants' back door, and pounds instead on the iron knocker of the principal entrance. In an ambiguous—but clearly not accidental—sense, he also has designs on Pyncheon's proud daughter, Alice, whose serene snobbery, probably perfectly proper to her class, is offensive to the independent craftsman.

The tale, "Alice Pyncheon," is a very characteristic and an awfully good Hawthorne short story: we are told at the end that Alice's pride before the carpenter was sinful—she comes to repent it—but that the carpenter's vengeful assault on her dignity has not merely humbled her, it has killed her, and left her murderer "the darkest and wofullest man that ever walked behind a corpse." (210) The moral implications are clear to any sensitive reader who knows his Hawthorne. Any pride that cuts one off from human contact and sympathy is spiritually dangerous. Alice's pride does that; so does Maule's, for

his tampering with her spirit shows his capacity to ignore fellow-feeling and sympathy.

These are the terms and issues of many other good Hawthorne tales; it is in such terms that his work is usually discussed. But if we think through "Alice Pyncheon" in terms of colonial social history we realize that it is also a parable of class conflict. In the name of order and religion, the Pyncheons of New England had cheated the Maules; in times of crisis and hysteria their religion could make them blindly unjust, as in the execution of the first Maule for witchcraft. But the Maules, who had immigrated because of the promise of social and economic betterment, could hold New England to its promises, and would eventually usher in a new day as a time came when a man's abilities would count more than his ancestry, when, therefore, marriage between Maule and Pyncheon was not unthinkable. Thus even the thought "But would you want your daughter to marry one?" lurks beneath the surface of this rich story, and the historical implication is that the answer, given a century or two, will be "Yes." *The House of the Seven Gables* in fact ends with a Maule marrying a Pyncheon maid.

Our history runs in that direction; the circles of which we spoke in the Introduction expand; those outside come, with time, to be included. I have a strong hunch that Hawthorne had an inkling of the future course of the process, for he had his "author" pointedly introduce a black slave into the story. Scipio, ironically, is offended at Maule's social presumption: after Maule dares to send his "humble respects" to Alice Pyncheon, Scipio says, "He talk of Mistress Alice! . . . The low carpenter-man! He no business so much as to look at her a great way off!" (188) That heavy irony is no accident. Hawthorne is just too careful, it seems to me, for Scipio to be a casual detail. The topic is outsiders; the Maules were and are no longer. In response to Scipio's question, "And what for do you look so black at me?" the "low carpenter-man" even replies, "No matter, darcy. Do you think nobody is to look black but yourself?" (188) He thus makes it impossible for the reader to ignore the issue of race: these are outsiders today, the passage says, but there is always tomorrow. What short story will Scipio's descendants write?

The social implications of "Alice Pyncheon" are congruent with

Hawthorne's politics, with its tough combination of democratic openhandedness and open-eyed skepticism about human nature. Neither the sturdy craftsman Maule nor, as we shall see in a later chapter, his descendant the short-story writer Holgrave, is a completely admirable hero. The social process they embody is desirable, but, Hawthorne says, these are just men, as flawed as those against whose order they exert their quiet but firm pressure. We are to expect change, but not miracles. I find his opinions congenial. In confessing a bias against what the Jacksonians would later call "privilege" I am freely admitting that I share a common attitude of descendants of immigrants and other outsiders, who would of course want equality of social opportunity. I mean to suggest similarities in the social attitudes of Jacksonians, recent immigrants, and those early "outsiders," the non-Puritan New Englanders of early colonial times.

The process at which I have been hinting must have operated irregularly, because conditions varied from place to place. But different aspects of it are easy enough to document. Take, for example, the matter of the right to a voice in governance in New England, which is certainly symptomatic. Originally limited only to full members of the church, it seems to have been extended in various ways, legislated and informal. The process was complex and is hard to summarize without distortion. Sometimes religious governance which affected church membership also affected the franchise; sometimes there were political decisions, such as plans to give nonfreemen voice in town elections. (203) There was legislation in 1647 which enfranchised most free-holding heads of families; the new charter of 1692 established a property, and not a religious, base for voting. The Saybrook Platform of 1708, designed to let more become church members would, in its way, similarly have expanded the number of voices being heard from. The electoral reforms which we associate with the period of and immediately following the Revolution, and which would continue until universal adult suffrage was achieved in the twentieth century, thus had forerunners quite early in the colonial era, and, I think, for related social reasons.

It is thus fair to conclude that the labor-short conditions described by economic, agricultural and other historians of colonial society helped to create the expectations of social change. It was, one might

say, hard to keep a good man (socially) down. Berthoff, summarizing this line of argument and applying it to the South, says that this is what created slavery: slaves were good people the master could keep down. I think that what he says is true, but I feel that the same force that produced the repressive situation in the southern colonies also made radical social expectations possible for other immigrants, those who, to return to the image I have been using, wanted the circles drawn wider.

Even in the slave South the process seems to have been in operation: one would perhaps expect that, in a society which developed a pseudo-aristocracy, and which included so high a percentage of people whose ancestors had been extremely poor when they came—transported felons and indentured servants among them—a very rigid structure would have developed and maintained itself. But as southern historians have noted for decades, not even the combination of one-crop farming, corruption in land acquisition and land speculation, the concentration of enormous quantities of land in the hands of a few very influential families, and the large plantation system itself were ever able to destroy the small, generally freehold, farm.<sup>9</sup>

Concluding a discussion of economic regulation, Berthoff makes the point that colonists, even when they felt that a given rule or decision was unwise, never challenged the idea that governments should regulate, and writes, “The hemming in of economic progress kept the old European social values remarkably safe from radical upheaval. That would come later.” (79) No doubt if what we mean by “old European social values” is a just and orderly social system, that statement is true. But to the extent that individual colonists had been dissatisfied with the working of the system at home and had come to the New World in the expectation that, from their point of view, things would run a little better here, they carried as well some radical social values. Carrying such values is not the same as desiring “radical upheaval”; the difference between my sense of the period and Berthoff’s is merely a matter of definition and emphasis, but I feel that the difference is important. When, late in the colonial experience, one finds the colonies such extraordinarily ripe soil for the ideas of the Enlightenment, and when colonists insist vehemently on applying fair play and other meliorist values to areas heretofore left to tradition,

one senses the difference which the social potential of immigration produced. Ideals plainly enunciated and widely accepted during the Stamp Act crisis and later controversies<sup>10</sup> suggest not only colonial similarities to English society, but contrasts, as well.

I would also like to suggest that in discussing social tendencies in a society one is not always likely to come up with consistent answers. Citing Bridenbaugh and other authorities, Berthoff concludes that there are many signs that social lines hardened during the eighteenth century. Thus he notes that in most colonies, high government power tended to fall into the hands of a small group of powerful families; noting that the colonies were still relatively free from extremes of wealth and poverty, he cites signs of stronger class distinctions than had previously been in evidence, and “even of arrogance.” (90) On the other hand, as a sometime teacher of art history, I have been impressed again and again with certain sharp distinctions between eighteenth-century American portraiture and that practiced in the mother country, distinctions which suggest apparently contradictory tendencies. I have before me as I write a set of slides which I often teach, portraits by John Singleton Copley from the 1760’s and early 70’s of prosperous and successful Americans, mostly New Englanders. With them for comparison are some contemporary works, by Reynolds, Raeburn, and other superb British portraitists. Perhaps my sample is bad—perhaps there exist in provincial places in England eighteenth-century portraits which show some of the same social characteristics as the Copleys—but I do not know of any.<sup>11</sup> The British paintings are haughty; their subjects seem aloof, sometimes even snotty. In the Copleys the prominent and wealthy subjects smile, chuckle inwardly, and generally seem to want to make us like them. If they are at home, they are shown often in informal apparel—the men sometimes have their wigs off, and wear caps against the chill, their shaven heads showing bald beneath. If, in contrast, they are all gussied up in the latest fashions or in fashionable poses, they sometimes seem tickled at their own pretention, the women especially signaling the viewer, if I read these faces correctly, “Don’t worry, honey, it’s only me.”

As a group, Copley’s colonial-period people show facial expressions suggesting friendliness and informality, traits totally different

from what I see in British work of the same era. I certainly don't detect arrogance very often. A colleague who teaches history of painting but who does not know American art calls European portraits of this era "mask-portraits"; he says that "the sitter wears a social mask, and does not invite you to penetrate it." Clearly something different is going on in the British colonies in North America. Until Copley leaves the colonies and begins to work in London, there is no haughtiness in the faces he paints. On the contrary, his work not only suggests informality and friendliness, but occasionally makes an overt democratic social statement, as does the notable (but flawed) portrait of Paul Revere, who wanted to be shown in his shirtsleeves, at his workbench, with the tools of his craft and some objects of his craftsmanship in view. That the same painter, transposed to London as the war broke out,<sup>12</sup> soon began to paint *hauteur*, seems conclusive evidence: it provides us, so to speak, with a control.

Those friendly faces in Copley paintings seems strong evidence, but they are not isolated; much in the tenor of late colonial diaries, literature, and correspondence suggests the same tendencies. Now, I am somewhat skeptical of the concept of "national personality"—clearly there is something in the idea, but any civilization is host to such a wide range of personalities that formulations of "national personality" fail to match the realities which even a tourist observes. A safer approach is available through "desired personality traits"; it is safer because it allows for any amount of temperamental variation, and merely claims that different cultures value different traits differently. Thus a Potawatomi friend explains one difference between his people and their "Anglo" neighbors with an anecdote: a Potawatomi boy is a fine runner, and is entered in a high school track meet. Before the race, his mother tells him that if he is winning, as both expect, he is to look back and slow up if need be so as not to win by too much, not to make the other boys look "small." She and her son stress "relationship" and "community" somewhat more than their neighbors, and "achievement" and "individual potential" somewhat less.<sup>13</sup> Such different stresses on different values imply different personality traits, and I feel that cross-cultural discussions of personality are on fairly safe ground if that is all that is being claimed.

Standing in a line of people waiting patiently to buy tickets in Montevideo, Uruguay, my wife and I noticed one aggressive, portly, unsmiling mustachioed gent behaving very differently, elbowing his way to the head of the queue. “Look,” joked one of our neighbors in the line, “It must be an Argentine.” Everyone giggled. Argentines—or at least Porteños of certain classes—value kinds of social aggressiveness which seem comically insecure and rude even to their cultural neighbors across the Rio de la Plata. (The people in line, incidentally, were right; Sr. Elbows was Argentine.) Stereotypes undoubtedly distort, but they may have some basis in the facts of desired traits.

In terms of desired personality traits, then, I think that what emerges from Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* is consistent with what one sees in the faces of Copley’s sitters—moderation, good humor, diligence, modesty, yet a certain undefeated pride in accomplishment, as Franklin admits when he says of his pride that “. . . even if I could conceive that I had compleatly overcome it, I should probably be proud of my humility.” It will be well to bear these desired traits in mind as we think through later American literature. When a novelist, say, really wants us to like a character, how does he portray him or her? I think of Hemingway’s Colonel Cantrell, shown scolding himself for being tough, gruff and impatient as part of the author’s (perhaps too obvious) campaign to suggest Cantrell’s wit, culture, amiability, curiosity and spontaneity. The traits we are supposed to discern in the Colonel seem congruent with those Franklin thinks admirable, or those which Copley’s sitters seem trying to project. David Riesman speculates very intelligently about the dynamics of such things in our culture; he thinks not only that our institutions seem to require “the lubrication of human friendliness,” but that “More than most people, we want to like people and to be liked.”<sup>14</sup>

All such considerations are matters of degree, of course. I am not claiming that late-colonial Americans were all sunny of disposition, or that John Copley’s sitters were really as nice as they seem. Perhaps desired personality traits operate in a manner analogous to sacred values—one does not live up to them, necessarily, but one does not challenge their “rightness,” either, and one can say that in some places they have more apparent import than in others. Our literature of the era does suggest an unusual emphasis on just such

traits, sometimes in unexpected places. Thus for some readers who have difficulty in responding to the spiritual and intellectual drama in Jonathan Edwards, it is just this sunny quality—especially evident in his *Personal Narrative*—which makes, “the last great Puritan” endearing. Such readers feel far greater tension between that sunshine and the darkness, say, of “Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God” than between the old theology and the new psychology which, as Perry Miller explained, Edwards tried to reconcile.

There is a danger in suggesting such things, the danger of sliding into the sappy optimism of a Vernon Parrington, who seems to have believed that anything not friendly, sunny and optimistic was un-American. Hawthorne, whom Parrington disliked, pointed out in *The House of the Seven Gables* that the overpowering sunshine of a smiling democratic politician like Judge Pyncheon might be hot enough to tan his constituents, but that its glare was likely intended to conceal corrosive ambition. I am with Hawthorne in founding my democratic faith on an open-eyed recognition of human failings as well as human potential. But the conclusion opposite to Parrington’s—that our national faith is a fraud, and that, perhaps, our range of attractive desired personality traits nothing more than a bourgeoisie con-game or advertising campaign—is equally foolish. For one thing, such a view lacks humor: who ever said that men behave consistently, live up to their best values or most desired traits? We Jews tell ourselves that we are trained to see not only the tragedy, but also the comic pathos in human failure, without losing love for the ideals we fail to attain. Hawthorne’s vision was never as black as Parrington thought because he, too, had a strong sense of the comical,<sup>15</sup> and I find Hawthorne’s social, political and cultural vision consistently preferable to that of latter-day purveyors of national guilt and doom.

Sweet reasonableness certainly is manifest in St. Jean de Crevecoeur, who tries to convince us that his beaming merely reflects the radiance of the British colonies in America. His work will serve to bind together some of the points I have been trying to make, for he suggests the connections between the social processes we have seen operating since early colonial times and the institutional and personal results, the new America and the new American. Certainly something of this sort is implicit in that famous third letter from Crevecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*, “What is an American.”<sup>16</sup>

It is true that Crèvecoeur stresses to some extent the English character of America, telling his English audience that it should be proud of this place; one can, indeed, see his America as a kind of ideal England—England as it should be—“. . . fair cities, substantial villages, extensive fields, an immense country filled with decent houses, good roads, orchards, meadows, and bridges. . . .” (149) It is also true that, to some extent, in stressing the differences between the Old World and the New, he emphasizes just that lack of immense economic distance between the classes which Berthoff acknowledges—“The rich and the poor,” Crèvecoeur writes, “are not so far removed from each other as they are in Europe.” (149) But we must not downplay the implicit radicalism which Crèvecoeur absorbed during the last years of the colonial period, the decade in which he is believed to have written his famous essays; clearly to him and to the people who influenced him, America is not merely “another England in which I have another chance.” No, argues Crèvecoeur, the “wretch[es]” so afflicted in Europe have become new men here because this is a new place: “Every thing has tended to regenerate them; new laws, a new mode of living, a new social system; here they are become men: in Europe they were as so many useless plants. . . .” (52) Crèvecoeur seems unambiguous and sure of himself: “*He* is an American, who leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds.” (54) The American, then, is new in personality and in social standing; he is a “new man” with “new rank.”

It is tempting to dismiss Crèvecoeur’s statements as pie in the sky and as a romantic idealization of American reality. Immigration historians tell us that by and large it was not starving “wretches” who came to the New World but rather a “middling” sort of settler. I think, however, that Crèvecoeur has caught on to a social process basic to American history, one reflected both in the recent valuable studies of individual colonial communities and in our literature as well.

I conclude that if those social lines were hardening and arrogance becoming visible, that was not all that was going on. For every line that hardened, another blurred, and arrogance seems at least matched by democratic informality. I do not think that we have to make a choice in social history between A or B. Both A and B are possible. This

is not the last contradiction we are going to have to deal with—for example, in discussing nineteenth-century female sex roles, we are going to examine a period in which women's roles were demonstrably circumscribed, narrowed, limited, while at the same time it became possible for large numbers of women to operate in professional areas hitherto practically inaccessible to them. It is perfectly possible that, as one moves later into the colonial period, one finds greater fortunes, and a larger gap between poor and rich people on the one hand, and, on the other, more democratic social attitudes, more frequent and more accepted social mobility and, if you will, more grinning in public places.

Having said a frank word about how I perceive certain colonial social forces, it is time to look more closely into some literary documents to see whether these tensions and tendencies are visible there. In a sense, of course, this is begging the question—if the literary documents had not shown what I think they show, I would not have formed the opinions I have just expressed.

-3-

### Radical Values in Conservative Societies

“All right, then, I’ll go to hell”

—Huckleberry Finn

Though we are told it is wrong to hold up Roger Williams as the first champion of democracy in America, as is still done in some textbooks, the fact remains that he voiced several points of view compatible with what came to be accepted “truth” in our country. American historians made him a national hero though William Bradford pityingly prayed for his soul, and his Puritan ex-brethren, initially so excited by his decision to cast his lot with them, and so hopeful of the contribution he would make to their colony and its reputation, finally came to regard him as a pig-headed, dangerous heretic and—almost—as a spoiled brat.

Perhaps he was a foolish purist among practical Puritans. But his career in Massachusetts tells us, first, that the ideas which he voiced were logical outgrowths of the intellectual milieu of his day—that is

obvious, but important; second, that they were reasonable-sounding enough so that John Cotton and other Puritan leaders felt they must take them very seriously; and third, that the New World had seemed to him the place to go to put them into operation. He was recognized as more radical than other Protestants of his sympathies, such as his friend John Milton,<sup>17</sup> and he came here, while Milton did not. His career in Rhode Island tells us that despite his personal impracticality, he bore ideas whose time, at least in the New World, was coming. Rhode Island might have been viewed as a haven for crazies and a backwater; in some ways it remained intellectually and religiously isolated until the Great Awakening of the next century, but it grew and survived in an era in which most colonies died.

Thus it is safe to conclude that the star graduate of Cambridge thought of New England as the best place to take his ideas, that his ideas seemed dangerous to the rulers of the Bay Colony, and that he did, in fact, attract followers. The values he carried should not be secularized and separated from their religious context, for he was a deeply devout man, but one is almost forced to secularize them in order to contrast him with his disappointed Puritan colleagues—one cancels out the devoutness, so to speak, since both he and they were devout, and compares what is left. The result does make him seem modern: he argues for freedom of religious conscience, for a sort of separation of church and state, for the sacredness of “Truth” and the free pursuit of truth even at the cost of salvation—“. . . having brought Truth deare, we must not sell it cheape, not the least graine of it for the whole World, no not for the saving of Soules, though our owne most precious. . . .”<sup>18</sup> That is in any context a tearing, radical statement. However true it may be that in general one should not see colonials as social radicals, that is a challenge to all authority, it comes from America in 1644, and contemporaries did not ignore it as the raving of a madman.

How important the issue was to Puritans is suggested by stanzas 92-106 of Michael Wigglesworth’s *The Day of Doom* (1662)<sup>19</sup> which describe the judgment of “a Company/ of Civil honest Men” who lived honestly, decently, and justly, working diligently, loving virtue and fighting vice, men whom Williams, one would suppose, would say were living admirably, since they harm no others. But

not in Wigglesworth's view: they lack "true faith." The Last Judge concludes,

You thought to scale Heav'ns lofty Wall  
by Ladders of your own.

"No salvation through good works alone" is an orthodox response which makes Williams' declaration seem even more subversive: even the withdrawal of the hope of salvation itself, "though our owne most precious," does not daunt him. Are we to feel as proud of Williams when he writes that as we are of Huck Finn when he says, "All right, then, I'll *go* to hell"? Williams will have truth even at the cost of damnation.

This is not to castigate the Puritans for their "intolerance." Indeed, perhaps one reason that the simple argument which sees Williams as hero and Puritans as villains is unconvincing is that, by seventeenth century standards, American Puritans are restrained in their treatment of dissent, heresy, nonconformity, and even witchcraft. That is especially striking when one remembers the strength of their belief in the Covenant. They were sure, of course, that God would punish them severely if they tolerated error—that was in the contract, so to speak. Yet they generally tried to reason with people whose beliefs were out of line in order to show them the error of their ways, and were more likely to banish the unconvinced offenders from the colony than to execute them in the manner of other Christian nations. Thus to argue that Williams was in effect a lone modern liberal crying out against the forces of reaction weakens him and makes him implausible. It is, however, equally incorrect to say that, given the Puritan context in which he speaks, he is not saying what we *think* he says. That is wrong; those are his words, and the Puritans fear him in part because they are themselves moving in the direction of those values—truth, fair play, freedom of conscience and inquiry—which he enunciates. Their movement is more rapid than that of English society as a whole, partially because of their educational standards and their commitment to "right reason," and partly—largely, rather—because of social forces within their commonwealth.

Here are his words:

I acknowledge that to molest any person, *Jew or Gentile*, for either professing *doctrine*, or practicing *worship* merely religious or spiritual, is to persecute him, and such a person (what ever his *doctrine* or *practice* be true or *false*) suffereth persecution for *conscience*. (63)

By “merely religious or spiritual” Williams means, worship which in no way harms other people.

. . . *Gods people* were and ought to be *Nonconformists*, not daring either to be *restrained* from the *true*, or *constrained* to *false* Worship, and yet without *breach* of the Civill or Citie-peace, properly so called. (72)

Much of the potency of his words comes from the fact that, far from being an alien, a nineteenth or twentieth century American dropped into New England in 1631, he is a Puritan and speaks the language. The practicality of what he says about “Citie-peace” is seductively congruent with pragmatic Puritan political judgment; Winthrop and other first-generation administrators were as practical as they were holy in day-to-day governance. And Williams thought in the quasi-commercial terms of the Covenant, too, as in this passage in which he develops his idea of “Citie-peace”:

The *Church* or *company* of *worshippers* (whether true or false) is like unto a *Body* or *Colledge* of *Physitians* in a *Citie*; like unto a *Corporation*, *Society*, or *Company* of *East-Indie* or *Turkie-Merchants*, or any other *Societie* or *Company* in *London*: which *Companies* may hold their *Courts*, keep their *Records*, hold *disputations*; and in matters concerning their *Societie* may dissent, divide, breake into *Schismes* and *Factions*, sue and impleade each other at the *Law*, yea wholly breake up and dissolve into pieces and nothing, and yet the *peace* of the *Citie* not be in the least measure impaired or disturbed; because the *essence* or being of the *Citie*, and so the well-being and *peace* thereof is essentially distinct from

those particular *Societies*; the *Citie-Courts*, *Citie-Lawes*,  
*Citie-punishments* distinct from theirs. (73)

What Williams enunciated in a pamphlet in 1644 Puritan rulers were already having to face in their society. John Smith was right that “Masters,” apprentices, and servants could come and prosper. Few found the meetinghouse attractive, but many began to insist on their civic prerogatives. A society of voluntary immigrants is by bias voluntaristic, and that voluntarism was beginning to make itself felt socially. Williams provided religious and intellectual formulation of a credo being worked out in practice in New England towns.

Thus, no matter how strongly we want to agree with Berthoff’s point about the love of tradition, stability and order in colonial societies, there is that within Puritanism which makes for downright radicalism. Before one dismisses Roger Williams as a “sport,” one should consider that the ideas for which he stands are just Puritan ideas carried a step or two nearer their logical conclusions than most more practical Puritans were willing to carry them. The radical strain appears just as convincingly in the writings of a man always taken to be an arch conservative, Samuel Sewall. This is the same Sam Sewall who worries throughout his career about such seemingly trivial matters as perriwigs (“I expected not to hear a vindication of Perriwigs in Boston Pulpit by Mr. Mather.”) and is unwilling to use one himself even to please Mrs. Winthrop: “As to a Perriwig, My best and greatest Friend, I could not possibly have a greater, began to find me with Hair before I was born, and had continued to do so ever since; and I could not find in my heart to go to another.”<sup>20</sup> This same Sam Sewall, jealous of minutest changes in theological practice, fashion, or the shape of society, wants to rename the days of the week, and uses, in 1696, the same arguments against the traditional names which would be used a century later by French revolutionaries who also wanted to rationalize the calendar.<sup>21</sup> Sam would call the days, first day, second day, and so on, even, he tells us, at the risk of being compared to the Quakers. Moreover, as subsequent entries in his diary show, he gives the new system a try.

The same point might be illustrated in Cotton Mather’s famous advocacy in 1721 and 1722 of smallpox inoculation. We think of

Mather as the voice of reaction; certainly his contemporaries in that New England society over which the Puritans had really long since lost control thought of him that way. Yet it is he who, with faith in right reason and science, and membership in the great scientific body of the day, the Royal Society, urged that the research and communications of doctors in obscure parts of the world and the corroborating testimony of the slave in his own household far outweighed either traditional fears of anything new or Dr. Boylston's argument that if God were sending the smallpox to punish New England, it would be ungodly to try to resist. Mather was on firm theological ground when he held that God gave man the ability to reason well, and that to fail to use one's reason to protect oneself in the face of an oncoming smallpox epidemic would be far more ungodly. It seems odd to compare Mather's reasoning in this dispute with the case which Roger Williams built, decades before, when he argued, in effect, that truth is more sacred even than salvation, for the tone of Mather's prose is so different and the crabbed contradictions and inconsistencies of his neurotic rhetoric so alien to the muscular slashing vigor of William's Elizabethan language that such comparison seems ridiculous. But the logical connection is there; the same impulse in Puritanism is being felt.

One is almost tempted to argue that this rational streak causes Puritans to modernize in many ways more rapidly than the people of some of the other colonies. It is not that the Puritans are not traditional; it is rather that they are likely to see the illogic or the unfairness in practices handed down traditionally and perhaps never before critically examined. Not long ago, I had occasion to read Sewall's diary in one connection, and the *Secret Diary* of William Byrd in another. The juxtaposition was accidental, but I found it revealing. Byrd is generally portrayed as eighteenth-century Virginia aristocrat whose rich life, love of ideas, learning, culture and so forth look forward to the Enlightenment, while Sewall seems to look backwards to an earlier era. But there are a number of ways in which Byrd's society seems much "older" than that of his Puritan contemporary (their dates are Sewall, 1652-1730; Byrd, 1674-1744). Thus, for example, while the Puritans strongly believe in a society stratified in an orderly way, they do not allow people in the more exalted ranks the kind of piggish

behavior we associate with the worst abuses of the British squireocracy. When Byrd tells us that he has been kissing and feeling a pretty servant at an inn or toying with young Indian girls, he sometimes seems to have a guilty conscience; his diary sometimes shows that on such days his usual litany at bedtime (“I said my prayers and had good health, good thoughts, and good humor, thank God Almighty”) is broken in one way or another. But the next time sexual dalliance of this unpleasantly unequal sort offers itself, Byrd always seems ready to grab.<sup>22</sup>

This does not mean either that Puritan sexual behavior is confined to activities between properly married adults or that all Virginians are as grabby as is William Byrd. On the contrary, there is quite a bit of recent evidence to suggest that Puritans practiced and perhaps condoned some form of trial marriage or at least sexual activity before vows were taken.<sup>23</sup> And, as we will shortly see, Sewall and Puritans in general strike modern readers as being exceptionally blunt and frank about things sexual. What I am suggesting rather is that Puritan society was more highly rationalized; if it was not “fair” in our sense of the word, at least there was less leeway for the kinds of social abuses of power which seem offensive in Byrd, a greater tendency to blow the whistle even if one had to blow it against a prominent leader or an established practice or custom.<sup>24</sup> And such rationalization, we are told, will be a characteristic of a modernized state.

I believe that Samuel Sewall’s *The Selling of Joseph*, his justly famous attack on the institution of slavery, is a sign of just this sort of blowing of the whistle. The pamphlet’s fame rests on the fact that it is the first such attack on slavery. Although Sewall cannot, of course, conceive of a successful community in which blacks and whites are integrated into the same society, the most extraordinary passage in this document is that in which Sewall, for the first time, so far as I know in our literature, succeeds imaginatively in putting himself into the shoes of genuinely alien people. He does it by applying those two values I have alluded to before, fair play and “truth,” and the implication of the result is that that circle defined as “real people,” can, in fact, someday be expanded.

After a careful refutation of the arguments used to condone or justify slavery, Sewall turns personal and addresses his readers. Here is the passage:

I am sure, if some Gentlemen should go down to the *Brewsters* to take the Air, and Fish: And a stronger party from *Hull* should Surprise them, and Sell them for Slaves to a Ship outward bound: they would think themselves unjustly dealt with; both by Sellers and Buyers. And yet 'tis to be feared, we have no other kind of Title to our *Nigers*. Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the Law and the Prophets. Matt. 7.12.<sup>25</sup>

“Fair play” is certainly not merely a modern value. Sewall goes to a Scriptural restatement of the “golden rule,” and could have cited even older sources. What feels modern here is the deliberate attempt to press principles to their logical conclusions, to look at areas heretofore conveniently unexplored. We saw such behavior in Roger Williams; finding it in a conservative like Sewall suggests how deep the impulse runs.

A parenthetical note: in the course of a not unrelated quarrel between Sewall and Increase Mather in 1701, some name-calling revolves around the issue of whether or not Sewall has treated Mather “as a Negro.” The language, of course, is the result of the fact that Mather knows that Sewall has written *The Selling of Joseph*. Sewall uses the language himself in his Diary: “I sent Mr. Increase Mather a Hanch of very good Venison; I hope in that I did not treat him as a Negro.”<sup>26</sup> Since Sewall is repeating someone else’s use of “Negro” in that condescending sense, and doing so in a private diary in which he himself would know whether the tone of voice was ironic, we have no way of being sure precisely what his own attitude toward the *language* really is. I mention this small matter because of similar ambiguous passages we will examine in literary works two hundred years after the date of Sewall’s entries, places in which writers mounting attacks against prejudice, intolerance or ethnocentrism nevertheless continue using language that implies the superiority of “our kind” of people.

Sewall’s diary and Byrd’s have characteristics in common, some of them surprising. There is in both men, not just Sewall, a strong belief in an active day-to-day God, in signs and portents, and in history as God’s continuing revelation to man. This perhaps goes

without saying in Sewall; this latter belief is, we are told, the reason that Puritans are such very good historians, the reason that Sewall's diary is so careful and honest. A couple of examples seem to me in order, not because they are needed to prove the point, but because, in part, the point has been so clearly made by Perry Miller and other excellent colonialists that no one argues it, and I have found that many colleagues and advanced students, taking such specialists at their word, have never read the original and seen how history-as-revelation works in practice.

It is this concept which enables us to understand the connection between Sewall's entries for the first two days of 1696/7, in which he talks of the deaths of his children, and that famous entry of two weeks later in which he records the "Bill" in which he publicly confessed his guilt for the insanity at Salem:

Samuel Sewall, sensible of the reiterated strokes of God upon himself and family; and being sensible, that as to the Guilt contracted, upon the opening of the late Commission of Oyer and Terminer at Salem . . . he is, upon many accounts, more concerned than any that he knows of, Desires to take the Blame and Shame of it, Asking pardon of Men, And especially desiring prayers that God, who has an Unlimited Authority, would pardon that Sin and all other his Sins; personal and Relative: And according to his infinite Benignity, and Sovereignty, Not Visit the Sin of him, or of any other, upon himself or any of his, nor upon the Land. . . (I, 367. See also 366.)

Sewall's famous confession is a remarkable document. On the one hand it shows that Puritan tendency, which I have connected with rationalization, to blow the whistle even if one blows it on those in high places; on the other, it shows that it would be overstating the case if we labeled this tendency in New England "Secularization," for, after all, Sewall sees history as the continuous revelation of divine intention. Other instances are easy to find in Sewall. If some disaster occurs, Puritans look to the immediate past to see what it is that they have done which displeased God. I take it that Sewall's bewildered

reaction after he and his family are nearly killed by fire in their home is entirely genuine: he is not sure what he has done to bring on God's displeasure. The date is July 13, 1709; after a detailed description of the events of the fire, he speculates about the agency and meaning of the conflagration:

We imagine a Mouse might take our lighted Candle out of the Candle-stick on the hearth and drag it under my closet-door behind the Box of Wafers. The good Lord sanctify this Threatening; and his Parental Pity in improving our selves for the Discovery of the fire, and Quenching it. The Lord teach me what I know not; and wherein I have done amiss help me to doe so no more!  
(II, 621-622;622)

That such belief exists also in Byrd will not be surprising to those who know his writings well, but it may be to those who think of Sewall as a seventeenth, and Byrd as an eighteenth century man, Sewall as a voice of the past and Byrd as a forerunner of the Enlightenment in America. A fine example appears in Byrd's diary on the last day of the year 1710:

Some night this month I dreamed that I saw a flaming sword in the sky and called some company to see it but before they could come it was disappeared, and about a week after my wife and I were walking and we discovered in the clouds a shining cloud exactly in the shape of a dart and seemed to be over my plantation but it soon disappeared likewise. Both these appearances seemed to foretell some misfortune to me which afterwards came to pass in the death of several of my negroes after a very unusual manner. My wife about two months since dreamed she saw an angel in the shape of a big woman who told her the time was altered, and the seasons were changed and that several calamities would follow that confusion. God avert his judgment from this poor country. (279-280)

It is well to remember that the Enlightenment did not come in on one fine morning, nor the sense of a God who revealed his desires on a day-to-day basis evaporate in the sunshine of an eighteenth century Virginia day. And certainly not in that winter of 1710 and '11. It will not even do to say that all vestiges of theocracy vanished in the English New World once the Puritans lost control of their charter and their government, for on January 30, 1711 William Byrd carefully records the effects on his household of the colony-wide fast day which Governor Spotswood has proclaimed: these Virginians felt that, because of their sins, there had been a serious wave of sickness. Their government set out to remedy it with prayer and fasting. We recall that belief in signs and portents was not yet an indicator of gullibility or superstition; many educated people, scientists and statesmen, still assumed that they were "facts."

Certain other congruencies in the diaries are socially meaningful, too, for they reflect very important social facts in the pre-industrial western world. As we note elsewhere, there was a close connection between family size and prosperity; all other things being equal, the family with a large number of children fared better than one with few. Large families and the state of medical practice meant that early eighteenth century colonists had to deal far more frequently than we do with the deaths of close relatives. Such experiences were simply more visible and frequent than they are today. Moreover, since, with our modern penchant for specialization, we have professionalized the handling of death, we try hard not to see it even when it does occur. Puritan "preoccupation" with death is not really a sign of excessive morbidity, for death is as prominent in the diary of Byrd.

By the same token, Sewall is as enthusiastic in relishing good food and good company as is Byrd. That might surprise those who believe in stereotypes about the Puritans, but not a good colonial historian, who could also tell about the pleasure Puritans took in bright colors, loud and lively singing in church, festival days and the pageantry of processions.

Byrd's fondness for sensuous pleasure is not alien to Sewall, either. Hawthorne's observation in *The Scarlet Letter* that Puritan society was more robust than his own, its women coarser and more blunt, correlates well with the evidence in contemporary literature.

Sewall's frankness in speaking of his own emotions is famous and endearing, as when he tells us that he knows social and economic reasons argue that he should marry the widow A, but that his bowels yearn for widow B. I think one could also show that even theological argument, especially earlier in the seventeenth century, gives evidence of truly Elizabethan rhetorical and sexual energy. Non-Jewish colleagues are sometimes shocked to learn that Jewish tradition does not hold sexual feelings incompatible with devoutness—that, for example, the eve of a major holiday is traditionally an especially propitious time for a couple to enjoy sex. I have a notion that Puritans also felt less strongly the “incompatibility” of sex and religion than do modern Christians. (Our literature is always rich in examples of such matters: recall how, in John Updike's *Rabbit Run* [1960], the church seen through the window of the prostitute Ruth's apartment discourages some of her patrons.) Sexual imagery or example, often blunt, thus shows up in what might seem unexpected places—a Taylor poem, or a passage such as this from Roger Williams:

A chaste *wife* will not onely abhorre to be restrained  
from her *husbands bed*, as adulterous and polluted, but  
also abhor (if not much more) to bee constrained to the  
*bed* of a *stranger*. And what is abominable in *corporall*,  
is much more loathsome in *spirituall whoredome*. . . .  
(64-65)

The passage is not from a sermon on fidelity, but from William's long pamphlet-war with John Cotton. Sewall's frank treatment of his sexual feelings, at any rate, is not exceptional. Colonial society was generally “coarse.”

Given their temperamental, political, intellectual, and religious differences, the reader might be surprised to find that Sewall and Byrd share a concern for prayer, a concern which, in that old friend of Wycherly and Congreve, the squeezer of servant girls, slaveholder, and political manipulator, may strike us as hypocritical. Perhaps in a way it is, or perhaps he lived in a society in which the interconnections between prayer, sincerity, behavior and logic were pressed less rigorously than they were in Sam Sewall's Massachusetts. If this is

so—and with our poor sample of one diarist from each community we cannot make any large claims—it would suggest again that there is that in conservative Puritanism which pushed the Bay Colony, paradoxically, into a greater modernity than one could find in the Old World and in most of the other colonies. Perry Miller put it in terms of the Puritans' emphasis on "the will of man." They believed, he wrote, that "no force but the will of man can bring order out of the chaos of human depravity."<sup>27</sup> That is a nicely balanced statement which reminds us at once of the complexity of their analysis of human nature, their theological location, and their surprising stress on human volition.

Writing in Mexico after a morning of arm-wrestling with local bureaucrats, I am struck again with the immense contrast between the way Mexican and American institutions work, and with the corresponding differences between the personalities of Mexicans, even Mexican intellectuals, and their American counterparts. Living here is living in different time, time closer to Sewall's or Byrd's. There is in this country a much higher tolerance for inconsistency, contradiction, and what appear to our eyes hypocrisy and corruption. It is often hypocrisy and corruption of just the sort which was present by design in the British colonial administrative system, the sort which expected public officials appointed by way of reward by the crown to use their appointments for personal gain. Modernized societies may not really be less corrupt, but they probably at least create a more impressive show of being consistent. Modernization may not be the whole story, either: there are always important cultural and environmental differences, too. (And I certainly don't mean to be condescending to Mexico, which I love—or I would not twice have come to live here. Mexicans agree with what I have just said.) New England logic and conscience nevertheless seem to me harbingers of the modern.

If we are to understand the colonial period well, it seems to me important to remember that the histories of those English colonies which eventually rebelled are very different from one another, and have to be studied individually. There is, of course, a famous tendency to place more stress upon the New England Puritans than upon oth-

ers, as well as a lot of loose talk about the Puritan heritage. I tend to minimize “Puritan heritage.” Not very many Americans, after all, are really descendents of the Puritans, or really affected directly by their ideas. Similar effects may be found in too many other places in our culture. “Puritan” is a wonderful catchall; my Latin American students are fond of calling anything they do not like in the United States “Puritan,” and many *estadounidenses* use the word just as inaccurately. When, for example, we use it to mean “prudish,” we do the Puritans a disservice. They are not, as I hope Sewall and Hawthorne have convinced us. Usually what we mean when we say “Puritan” and mean “prudish” is “Victorian,” which is, after all, a very different thing. It is amusing to hear people referring to contemporary Boston as “Puritan,” when most of the characteristics they refer to are the result of the power of its Irish Catholic residents.

I believe that we study the Puritans more because they wrote and preserved more, and so left us more to study, and because, moreover, their region produced the scholarship. But it is also important to study them, I think, because their history gives clearest early indication of the workings of a range of social pressures and modern values which seem to me a key to our history, pressures and values which would make our nation culturally distinctive. They are not America’s only national ancestors, but their history in many ways predicts ours. The road they trod unintentionally is one we have deliberately tried to follow.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> From Chapter IV of the First Book of *Of Plymouth Plantation*. The standard edition is Morison’s (New York, 1953); Bradford (1590-1656) apparently wrote it between 1630 and 1650. Morison’s explanation and the quotation appear on 26. Subsequent references will be handled by parentheses in the text.

<sup>2</sup> “Master plumber” in the U.S. is usually taken to mean “skilled.” In Mexico it signifies “Master of the establishment,” and is used as a title: the assistants refer to the boss as “el maestro,” and if you phone, you ask to speak to “el maestro.”

<sup>3</sup> I would like to acknowledge my indebtedness to my former student Eldon Turner, now of the University of Florida, who for a number of years has refereed articles on the colonial period submitted to the journal which I edit, and who has used these opportunities and our annual conferences in

Gainesville to brief me on the current state of colonial research. The quotation above is from Berthoff, *An Unsettled People*, 20. Michael Kammen has done good work on the desire of colonists to make their institutions “legitimate” in terms of Old World traditions and perceptions; he contrasts this need for legitimacy with the pressures which pushed colonists toward pluralism and individualism, and sees colonial history in terms of the resulting tension. I recommend his work; see *People of Paradox: An Inquiry Concerning the Origins of American Civilization* (New York, 1972).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Arber, ed., *Travels and Works of Captain John Smith, President of Virginia and Admiral of New England* (Birmingham, England, 1884), 2 vols.; or new edition: A. G. Bradley, ed., (same title), (Edinburgh, Scotland, 1910), 208. The two editions are identical in texts and pagination. Subsequent references are handled in parentheses in the text.

<sup>6</sup> See my “Some Notes for Witch-Watchers,” *American Quarterly*, XXI, 2 (Summer, 1969), 267-268. David Konig argues that witchcraft is sometimes a dodge resorted to by people frustrated in legal disputes; it has, so to speak, a class dimension, as one might expect. He says that it could be “used against any form of generally accepted authority in the community.” *Law and Society in Puritan Massachusetts: Essex County, 1629-1692* (Chapel Hill, 1979), 147.

<sup>7</sup> Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop* (Boston, 1958), 198. Subsequent references in parentheses.

<sup>8</sup> *The House of the Seven Gables* is Volume II (1965) of William Charvat et. al., eds., *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (1963—). The interpolated “short story” is Chapter XIII, 187-210. We learn that the grandson is not a communicant on 190.

<sup>9</sup> “As late as 1750, when the average holding in Virginia ran to some 750 acres and some of the greatest estates took in more than 100,000 acres, only 10 to 15 percent of the Virginians were tenants.” Berthoff, 53. Subsequent references are handled in parentheses in the text.

<sup>10</sup> “See Edmund Sears Morgan and Helen M. Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1953). Although I feel that this book somewhat overstates its case, I find its arguments persuasive.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Wright’s Robert Gwilym (1766) in the St. Louis Museum of Art is the friendliest British work I know; even it seems less “winning” than comparable Copley. Wright’s ties to the industry and science which were to revolutionize Britain are very suggestive in the light of our speculation about Copley.

<sup>12</sup> Copley left because Boston became too hot for him. He was not, as one still sometimes reads, “a Tory painter.” He was a peaceable and shy man whose brave efforts to help two increasingly belligerent factions communicate during the hours in which Boston moved from protest to rebellion made him unpopular. Had he succeeded, we would hail him as the man who prevented bloodshed and enabled the colonies to redress their just grievances without

war, a savior of the Empire and one of the spiritual founders of the British Commonwealth.

<sup>13</sup> The anecdote was told me by Archie Eteeyan of Topeka.

<sup>14</sup> "Psychological Types and National Character: An Informal Commentary," in Hennig Cohen, ed., *The American Experience: Approaches to the Study of the United States* (Boston, 1968), 1-19; 9.

<sup>15</sup> My old mentor and friend Hyatt Waggoner used to try to pass off Hawthorne as a sort of hidden Anglo-Catholic; perhaps I should try to paint him as a *marano* Jew! (See Waggoner's fine *Hawthorne: A Critical Study* [Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1955, 1963].) Vernon Parrington's unfinished *Main Currents in American Thought* appeared from 1927-1930.

<sup>16</sup> By "J. Hector St. John" (Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crevecoeur), London, 1782. The standard edition is that of New York, 1904 (reprinted New York, 1925). Preface by W. P. Trent, Introduction by Ludwig Lewisohn. Citations are handled in parentheses in the text.

<sup>17</sup> Christopher Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution* (New York, 1977) discusses of the connection.

<sup>18</sup> *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience* (1644). The standard edition is *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams* (Providence, R.I. 1866-74; New York, 1963) 6 volumes, with an extra volume edited by Perry Miller, III, 13. Subsequent citations are to this volume; pages will be indicated in parentheses.

<sup>19</sup> In Kenneth B. Murdock's edition (New York, 1929, 1966), 32-35.

<sup>20</sup> *The Diary of Samuel Sewall: 1674-1729* ed. M. Halsey Thomas (New York, 1973). In 2 vols. March 19, 1690: 1 (Vol. I, p. 276). See also such entries as that for June 10, 1701 (Vol. I, pp. 448-49); Nov. 30, 1701 (Vol. I, p. 458); June 11, 1702 (Vol. I, pp. 468-470). Of related interest is the entry for October 24, 1720 (Vol. II, pp. 964-5). Where possible, subsequent citations are in parentheses in the text.

<sup>21</sup> See his entry for June 11, 1696: "I strove with my might that in stead of Tuesday, Thursday, and Satterday in every Week, it might be said, Third, fifth and seventh day in every week: but could not prevail. . . ." *Ibid*, I, 351.

<sup>22</sup> See for example his entries for October 6, 1709, October 19, 20, and 21, 1711. In Louis B. Wright and Marion Tinning, eds., *The Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover, 1709-12* (Richmond, Virginia, 1941), 90, 423-425. Subsequent citations are in parentheses in the text.

<sup>23</sup> Scholars see apparently routine—but notable—disparities between wedding dates and church-recorded births. It is of course very difficult to get an accurate sense of what private behavior was like in the past; even "primary sources" require impressionistic interpretation. Your faithful author was President of the Pierian Sodality of 1808 at Harvard in 1953-1954, and was required to familiarize himself with the early minutes of the Sodality in the university *Archives*. In the minutes is some slight evidence from New England a century after Sewall of the possible tone of sexual interaction across apparent class lines. These early nineteenth century New England

blades recorded a certain amount of servant-girl-fondling, I recall, but I do not remember quite the offensive tone of condescension which one finds in Byrd in their accounts of Pierian musical field-trips. Brother X, we are likely to be told, disappeared from the table at an inn where the musicians had stopped to refresh themselves. The pretty girl waiting table was also missing for a few minutes. And so on: the tone seems very different from what Byrd records in his *Diary*. König, in *Law and Society* . . . discusses servant girls' accusations that their Puritan masters harassed them sexually, but thinks that may have been a tactic to "get back at" a master—the accusation was itself a way in which people of low social status could "punish" their "superiors." See Chapter 6 of König, 136ff.

<sup>24</sup> I am not trying to suggest that the Puritan legal system was "fair" in our sense of the word. For a recent discussion of its operation, see Eldon Turner, "A Functional Look at Law: Political Crises, Values and Case Volume in Puritan Law, 1670-1680," *American Studies* XVIII, 1 (Spring, 1977), 71-86. Turner's essay is discussed in some detail in the next chapter. The broad background of law in the Bay colony is discussed in Mark DeWolfe Howe, "The Sources and Nature of Law in Colonial Massachusetts," in *Law and Authority in Colonial America*, ed. George A. Billias (Barre, 1965). See also König, *Law and Society*. . . .

<sup>25</sup> *The Selling of Joseph. A Memorial*, was published June 24, 1700. It is reprinted in Thomas' edition of the *Diary*, II, 1117-1121. My quotation is from 1120.

<sup>26</sup> *Diary*, Vol. II, October 9, 1701.

<sup>27</sup> *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (1939; reprinted, Boston, 1961), 449. An extended discussion by several authors of Miller's impact on an understanding of New England appears in *American Quarterly*, 34 (Spring, 1982), 3-48.



## Chapter 2

### Common Sense and Literary Evidence

“Where Order prevails, Beauty shines forth.”  
William Hubbard, Election Sermon

The demands of their religious party-line prevented New England Puritans from producing much belletristic literature; they feared any art likely to contribute more to the glory of the artist than to the glory of God. But little came from the other colonies, either, which makes one wonder about easy conclusions regarding Puritan society, repression and the arts. A comparison with Latin America might be in order again: colonial Latin American literature is distinguished for its historical chronicles, but, though these are sometimes embellished with imaginative passages (the process begins with Columbus, who insisted that he had seen mermaids), fiction and poetry are about as scarce there as they are in the English-speaking north. The exceptions prove the rule; I suppose that Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz comes closer to being a major poet than does Edward Taylor, but in neither culture are there many other names that one can turn to. The moral of the comparative story is to distrust simple generalizations about literature and culture. Puritan attitudes do not seem to be the important variable; colonies not the least Puritan or even British produced none either.

Better not turn to sweeping conclusions about the inartistic nature of colonial societies in general, either, for the situation is curiously different in painting. Our art historians, like our literary historians, must study what is there—sermons, diaries, and other expository works for the literary people; portraits, portraits, portraits for the art historians. There is little else to look at: There once was a little funerary or processional art, which has not survived, in New England; now and then a landscape in southern or middle colonies. But several Latin American countries produced rich and sophisticated painting in quite early colonial times. Excepting to an extent in those areas in the Spanish Southwest which are now part of the United States, we

have nothing to compare with the profusion of original and energetic religious art found in countless colonial-era churches, and will never have a museum like the Pinocoteca Virreinal in Mexico City. No clear pattern emerges from these comparisons. One art flourishes there and not here; one could look to other ages and show another flourishing here and not there. A salutary first lesson in dealing with arts and society has to do with respect for the mysteries of artistic creation. I have learned to suspect broad statements about how for art to thrive there must be any particular social or cultural situation: aristocratic patronage, social solidarity, shared values, suffering, what-have-you. It is too easy to think of notable exceptions.

A glance at one or two Edward Taylor poems offers an opportunity to make what I hope seem common-sensical observations about literary evidence and social history; Taylor also provides an appropriate transition to the imaginative nineteenth century material with which we will be dealing in the next chapters. I deliberately pick Taylor (c. 1642-1729) rather than a late eighteenth century poet such as Freneau because he seems to me a hard case. Precisely because we can do relatively little with Taylor, his example provides an exercise in the language of this sort of criticism. We should say clearly at the outset that his poems are not really on social-historical topics. Still, there should be some fairly obvious connections between even metaphysical and religious poems and the society in which they were written. One can use them as an aid in understanding the Puritan mind and Puritan theology, topics certainly not unrelated to Puritan society and culture, or to the society and culture of New England after the era of Puritan domination. It is also true that although Taylor's subject matter is generally religious, the stuff of any given poem is likely to consist of a surprising mixture of erudition—pedantry, one wants to say—and homeliness. Homely and colloquial images mix with a formal vocabulary that sends even experts on the colonial era scurrying for help to the *OED* and more specialized aids. I would think that the language would be of interest to scholars who specialize in transit of culture and to sociolinguists; his obscure colloquialisms strike me, a non-specialist, as especially intriguing. One could also do a little with Puritan material culture on the basis of those homely images which crop up every so often in his poems. "The Preface"

talks about a furnace, a cornerstone, a quilt ball, a bowling alley, and so forth; “An Address to the Soul Occasioned by a Rain” tells us what happens when one shakes a bottle of ale too vigorously, and of course, “Huswifery” says something about the component parts of the spinning wheel. If these matters seem obvious, good. Some social evidence in literature is obvious. If there are a theology and a spinning wheel in Taylor’s world, the evidence in the works of later authors will tell us that there will come a time when this theology no longer affects most people and when homes no longer contain spinning wheels.

A richer exercise, perhaps, is provided by Taylor’s “If Any Man Sin, We Have an Advocate,” the 39th of the *Preparatory Meditations, First Series*. We might want to argue that this poem nicely displays the furniture of a devout Puritan mind; it is the furniture of a law-office or a court of law:

Joy, joy, Gods Son’s the Sinners Advocate  
Doth Plead the Sinner Guiltless, and a Saint.  
But yet Atturnies pleas spring from the State  
The Case is in: if bad its bad in plaint.  
My Papers do contain no pleas that do  
Secure mee from, but knock me down to, woe.

Or,

Make me thy Friend, Lord, be my Surety: I Will be thy  
Client, be my Advocate . . . .<sup>1</sup>

Any number of colonialists have remarked the special strength of Puritan attachment to legal procedure. I think it connects with faith in “right reason,” and in part explains why these seemingly “superstitious” people are, paradoxically, harbingers of important modern attitudes. That they are by seventeenth century standards an unusually well-educated sect seems related, as does Eldon Turner’s hypothesis that Puritans run to law not only to redress grievances or for adjudication of disputes but also to be reassured that, in times of crises, the social, religious, and political system is still intact. A study of a largely rural area in seventeenth century Massachusetts noted

“an average of more than 200 cases a year” for a population which never reached 2,000 adult males.<sup>2</sup>

Poets of the metaphysical school in whose shadow Taylor writes did, of course, pluck conceits from all manner of places, and poets of no special Puritan cast used the law as a source of governing metaphor in given poems. Thus it would be valid to argue that, by itself, a Taylor poem in which God is a lawyer and the poet a client, proves nothing, were it not that the Taylor poem is not isolated, that the texture of Puritan rhetoric is shot through with legalisms, so that both defenders of dogma and critics like Williams in the passage elsewhere quoted about corporations, courts, records, and civic sense, turn to it so naturally that they seem sometimes unaware they are turning at all.

It may be, too, that were there only more Puritan poets, we could trace in their works a decline in this sort of thinking which would parallel the transformation in legal “feeling” which Turner suggests: by late in the century he senses “that a special property consciousness and a modern concept of rights emerges” from a “demonstrable” change in legal activity.<sup>23</sup>

It also emerges, we can be sure, from those changes we have noted in Puritan society, the transformations brought on by shortages of labor, the growing social pressures exerted by non-Puritan settlers, the decline in church membership, the difficulties with the home government, the sad shock of the failure of the Cromwellian revolution, the rising importance of commercial activity and the size of the New World environment itself. But if all we are claiming is that the Taylor poem suggests that Puritans had law-on-the-brain, we are on quite safe ground. That fact, indeed, relates to important social characteristics of Puritan society which we have already discussed: notably, their middle and upper-class flavor, which meant that a disproportionately high percentage of Puritans had legal experience. It was always easier to find a Puritan barrister than a Puritan cobbler. Moreover, as every student of their religious thought has observed, a new legal invention, the chartered joint-stock corporation, provided not only the economic machinery that made colonial ventures possible, but also the analogue and imagery which underlay the “Covenant” (or “legal contract”) theology.<sup>4</sup> In John Cotton, John Winthrop, and other New England writers down through John Wise, law, religion, and society

interpenetrate so thoroughly that it is sometimes not accurate to say that one represents another, or even that one governs another. They are part of the same unified vision.

I hope that this suggests that there is nothing magical in the process of moving from social history to literature. I would say merely that being sensitive to issues in social history makes one respond to aspects of the literature one would not have noticed otherwise, and that, moreover, quite often when one is puzzled by problems in social history, there are likely to be cues in literature which suggest ways of checking out the sometimes meager historical record.

It is also true, of course, that there are many things in non-didactic literature which one must discount. I have been cheerfully using evidence from Hawthorne novels almost interchangeably with primary source material from the colonial era, and one would be justified in asking just how authoritative the Hawthorne stories are. A good response would be that while Hawthorne knew his Puritan history intimately, an honest critic should add that he sometimes distorted it to help make a point. Thus in *The House of the Seven Gables* and *The Scarlet Letter* he often made Puritans far uglier than they appear if they are compared to other seventeenth century people. It seems unfair, for example, for him to use the Puritans as whipping boys in preachments about bigotry. Puritans were certainly bigoted by Hawthorne's nineteenth century standards, or by ours. They seem, however, at least as open-minded as other seventeenth century Christians. Hawthorne extracts grim humor from the games which he imagines Puritan children play, and frightens us with the horror of the witchcraft trials. I think of Dutch schoolkids in New Amsterdam playing soccer with the severed heads of Indian people, or of the fact that executions for witchcraft ended in the 1690s in New England, but went on in Europe into the twentieth century.

Be that as it may, what justification is there for accepting some material from fiction or poetry, and discounting other? How do I know, that is, that Hawthorne is to be trusted here, and not there? The answer, I think, is that one expresses honestly the limitations of one's sources, brings to bear the best corroborative evidence and scholarship one knows, and uses a certain amount of common sense. In the case of the Taylor "Meditation," after discounting poetic conventions I

still feel a relationship between important peculiarities of the Puritan social imagination and the imagery of the poem. In the case of one Hawthorne novel which we will discuss in considerable detail in a later chapter, we are dealing with an author who consciously tries to recreate the feel of an historical era. Since both his learning and his biases are known, we can make intelligent estimates of the reliability of the material. Since he lived himself in a critically important era of transition, his impressions of temporal contrast seem especially valuable. But one can even find useful insights when dealing with a writer who has done his homework less thoroughly. Let us use, as our case in point and as our transition into a later era, James Fenimore Cooper's *The Prairie*.

*The Prairie* seems to be set somewhere in what is now western Nebraska; Cooper had never been anywhere near there. Indeed, Cooper is known to have based his book in large part on Major Steven H. Long's narrative of his expedition to the area; this had been published in 1823, and, according to Henry Nash Smith,<sup>5</sup> the novelist apparently often had the Long material open on his desk while he wrote. Long's account, moreover, is in many ways less reliable than other travel narratives covering the same turf. A recent student of the matter, indeed, feels that it is one of the major sources of the notion that the midlands of North America constituted a "Great American Desert," the long-enduring misconception which so badly distorted people's ideas of the high plains.<sup>6</sup> In addition, as we all know, the Cooper novel is exceedingly heavy in those conventions of the adventure novel that Cooper shared with other writers, especially Scott. Much of what happens, that is, happens because it is supposed to happen in such books; it would happen were the novel set in New England, Scotland or medieval France. Otis W. Coan and Richard Lillard—pointedly, I think—left *The Prairie* out of their useful guide to novels which interpret American life, though they included some other Cooper novels more firmly based on observation of solid information.<sup>7</sup> Given that list of disqualifications, what could possibly remain of value to the student of social history?

Any number of things. The novel gives us evidence of Cooper's attitudes towards values, tradition, sex roles, social class, family, rites of passage—and where his attitudes seem unclear, where the

plot of the book leaves ambiguity, we can guess that we are dealing with issues that trouble him, on which his mind is not fully made up. Such issues are liable to represent fault-lines, areas in which rapid and upsetting alterations are taking place in his society. I am not going to discuss these aspects of *The Prairie* here because they are covered through other works in later chapters. The point I want to make is that even a most "unreliable" book can tell readers about its author's ideas and concerns. That is as near as we are likely to get to an opportunity to "interview" a citizen of a past century, and it is, I think, a very valuable opportunity.

But there is even something to be learned from Cooper's handling of those aspects of his story about which, as we just noted, he knew little first-hand, such as conditions on what was then the nation's extreme western frontier. In the eighty years or so in which scholars have tested various corollaries of Frederick Jackson Turner's famous essay about the passing of the American frontier, almost every aspect of Turner's ideas has been modified, but in the process an immense amount has been established about the American past. Indeed, several fields of American history owe their origin to attempts to confirm or refute Turnerian ideas. Specialists in the westward migration attempted to check out what Turner had written or implied about the nature of frontier penetration and settlement; they studied the actual process of migration by front-running migrants. Careful scholarly digging seems to have established a strange class of frontiersmen moving west for generation after generation, just behind the first wave of hunters and trappers, but well in advance of settler society and law. In many cases the same families move again and again in a thin stream of migration which begins in colonial times and, in its northern manifestation, moves out of the New England states, across the Burnt-Over District of upstate New York, skips or bypasses Pennsylvania, and then, characteristically, with some families moving many times in a generation or a decade, passes across Ohio, Indiana and the upper Midwest. Similar types of people have been noted along the main routes of southern migration, as well. Even though it is clear from the names which Cooper gives to his frontier family that he intends them to be symbolic figures who are larger than life, the characteristics which he attributes to them accurately match those of

this frontier type. Thus, the Ishmael Bush family is uneasy with the law, moves steadily west to remain ahead of settlements, and seems at first likely to split into several nuclear (but west-moving) units as its independent-minded offspring strike out on their own. I suppose Cooper might have known such people from the days when the area around his Cooperstown, New York home had frontier characteristics, or from reading travellers' accounts of trips to frontier regions. But whatever his sources, the result is a picture of frontier reality consonant with the findings of recent historical investigation. Or, perhaps more accurately, Cooper in 1826 was presenting an image of this kind of frontiersman at which historians were to arrive more than a century later.

And Cooper clearly has an ethnographic impulse. At the beginning of Chapter Ten, he gives a careful catalogue of people one is likely to find in the "unguarded territory" ahead of permanent settlement: "semi-barbarous hunters from the Canadas, the same description of population, a little more enlightened, from the States, and the metiffs, or half-breeds, who claimed to be ranked in the class of white men. . . ." (119) If ethnocentric, his list matches both descriptions by later travellers and explorers, and the conclusions of recent scholarship.

It certainly could not be called a cross-section of the national population. Mexican experience again provides a revealing contrast. C. Alan Hutchinson's study of Mexican frontier settlements in California concludes with a chapter which deliberately compares Mexican efforts in California with Turner's criteria, as well as with Adam Smith's formula for the successful colony (colonists need "plenty of good luck" and "liberty to manage their own affairs their own way"). "California under Mexico does not appear to have been a frontier in the same sense that Turner used the word," Hutchinson concludes; Mexican California "in certain respects [was] . . . a microcosm of Mexico proper. . . ." Very different place, apparently, from the imagined frontier of *The Prairie* or the reconstructed frontier of our historians. To a contemporary Mexican thinker, the cause of the contrast seemed national character. He wrote, ". . . the Mexican character is not fitted for colonization."<sup>8</sup> But Mexican frontiersmen and settlers were typical Mexicans; they were a "cross-section" of

their nation. Their gringo neighbors seem to have populated their new lands with more specialized, more exotic types of people. Cooper knew that; Frederick Jackson Turner apparently did not.<sup>9</sup>

Cooper is also a splendid source in intellectual historical terms. In Chapter IV, we will discuss in some detail two important ways in which man's concept of time changed in this era. One of them, a new awareness of the immensity of past historical time, appears with great clarity in *The Prairie*. That Cooper put such ideas into the mouth of his ancient trapper does not demonstrate that they had filtered down either to the average citizen or to an exceptionally sensitive if unlettered frontiersman. It does demonstrate, and incontrovertibly, that the ideas were available. The passage I have in mind comes in an argument between the trapper and Obed Bat, Cooper's straw-man of science. There is a comedy of misunderstandings, but both the trapper and the scientist understand the immensity of past human history. The trapper speaks first:

“Look about you man; where are the multitudes that once peopled these prairies; the kings and the palaces; the riches and the mightiness of this desert?”

“Where are the monuments that would prove the truth of so vague a theory?”

“I know not what you call a monument.”

“The works of man! The glories of Thebes, and Balbec—columns, catacombs, and pyramids! standing amid the sands of the East, like wrecks on a rocky shore, to testify to the storms of ages!” (278)

The trapper, still misunderstanding Obed's question about what ancient civilizations might have lived on the high plains, but clearly aware that ancient high civilizations have recently been discovered, continues, “They are gone. Time has lasted too long for them.” (278-9)

One could show similarly that other ideas whose time had come are evident in the novel. Numerous writers, for instance, have made the point that evolutionary ideas were widely understood and generally accepted among educated people before Darwin. That is

exceedingly clear in *The Prairie*.<sup>10</sup> The passage in question once again involves Obed Bat, who has mistaken his own unoffending ass for a new and terrible species of animal which Obed hopes he had discovered: "From that moment the world has heard no more of the *Vespertilio Horribilis Americanus*, and the natural sciences have irremediably lost an important link in that great animated chain which is said to interconnect earth and heaven, and in which man is thought to be so familiarly complicated with the monkey." (78)

Two points need to be made about what we have seen in three very disparate works of literature, Taylor's 39th Meditation, Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, and Cooper's *The Prairie*. The first has to do with the matter of what is and what is not social history, the second with the reliability of literature as evidence.

Though academic disciplines are handy for a number of reasons, the lines that divide them are very often arbitrary. The lines between subspecialties in given disciplines—between social history and intellectual history, for instance—should always be ignored when they get in the way of a fruitful investigation. This preaching is not original with me; the same warning, as we shall see in a few pages, appears in Emerson, who saw that his society was becoming specialized. Specialists, concentrating on smaller portions of a field, can go faster and deeper, but in narrower tracks. There is a danger that they will themselves become narrow. All this is by way of saying that I am not very tolerant of the complaint that in dealing with such issues as the Puritan feel for law, or with evidence of a change in the perception of time in Cooper's day, I am dealing with intellectual, and not social history. Intellectual history is in part a product of social history, and social history is in part a product of the history of ideas. Although there is a lively debate about the precise nature of their effect on social behavior, no one argues that Puritan concepts of law, contract, corporation, and covenant did not have social impact in seventeenth century Massachusetts. And the changes in the concept of time we noted in Cooper were by no means a plaything of a handful of literary intellectuals. I know of no more basic dimension of the transformation through which society went in the early nineteenth century than just this matter of time. This is not to say that disciplines or subdisciplines

have no place in scholarly enterprise: of course they do. But they must always be seen as means to an end, and not as the end itself. When adherence to one method, one discipline or one subdiscipline comes to serve as an ideological chastity belt designed to protect the purity of a discipline against even fruitful insights of an adjacent field, it is time that the disciplinary border went the way of the chastity belt.

This leaves the matter of reliability and certainty—how sure we can be of the validity of literary evidence? Once again, common sense provides surprisingly satisfactory answers. Imagine, if you will, a kind of scale running, let us say, from the left-hand side of this page to the right. We may label the left end “soft evidence,” “things we are not very sure of” or “educated guesses”; the extreme right we can label “hard evidence” or “things we are sure of.” In Cooper’s *The Prairie*, I would say that if we did not have available the results of good twentieth century scholarship on the nature of the frontier settlement process, to hypothesize that what one sees in the Ishmael Bush family is to any considerable extent representative of what really happened would be to argue on the basis of fairly soft evidence; I would put it somewhere to the left-hand side of the scale. I would also note that literature in this case seems an excellent source of “testable” and fruitful hypotheses. Given the fact that we do have excellent corroborative evidence that Cooper’s estimate of frontier life was about right, I would move it considerably to the right. But not too far, for we know enough about the nature of historical scholarship to know that sometimes very basic ideas change in time with the development of new concepts or, occasionally, with the uncovering of new lodes of historical fact.

On the other hand, I would not hesitate to locate at the extreme right-hand side of the scale my contention that the basic ideas of evolution were available at the time that Cooper wrote the lines I have quoted. That is absolutely hard evidence. We may be sure of it, or as sure as one ever is of anything. The idea is there; we know the date on which Cooper wrote of it.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Donald E. Stanford, ed., *The Poems of Edward Taylor* (New Haven, 1960), 63, 64.

<sup>2</sup> “A Functional Look at Law: Political Crises, Values and Case Volume in Puritan Law, 1670-1680, *American Studies*, XXIII, 1 (Spring, 1977), 71-86. Turner now feels that “religion, law and the state have a special confluence in seventeenth-century Massachusetts,” but that late in the century “this confluence failed,” and “expectations of justice separated from religious values.” (Quotations from Turner’s draft proposal for a further study of Puritan jurisprudence, tentatively entitled, “Civil Law and Religious Values in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts: Divergence of Law from Theology.”) The rural community is Essex County, analyzed in David Konig, *Law and Society in Puritan Massachusetts/Essex County, 1629-1692* (Chapel Hill, 1979). See xi-xii. Like Turner, Konig sees an unusual willingness to run to law, though he notes (see esp. 136ff.) that the law was also likely to be viewed as anti-religious (because it strove to be dispassionate) or as a tool of the “powers that be” by the less-privileged members of the community, who sometimes resorted to extra-legal means of dispute.

<sup>3</sup> Turner, Draft proposal, “Civil Law and Religious Values. . . .”

<sup>4</sup> All subsequent scholars are indebted on this matter to Perry Miller—see especially *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1939) and *The New England Mind/From Colony to Province* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1953). But in recent years there have been several studies designed to sharpen the definition of what “covenant” really meant. Thus Norman Pettit argues that it did not imply “a bargaining basis for man’s relationship with God.” *The Heart Prepared: Grace and Conversion in Puritan Spiritual Life* (New Haven, 1966), 220. Michael Zuckerman, in *Peaceable Kingdoms/New England Towns in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1970) argues that in that period at least, colonists were alarmed at excessive use of courts and at the cost of going to law; there was a strong feeling that religious people ought not to go to court against one another. See esp. 89ff.

<sup>5</sup> Introduction the *The Prairie* (New York, 1950), vi. Subsequent citations will be to this edition and will be handled parenthetically in the text.

<sup>6</sup> I am indebted here to a seminar paper by Wayne Viitanen delivered to a NEH Summer Seminar for College Teachers which I conducted in the summer of 1978.

<sup>7</sup> *America in Fiction/An Annotated List of Novels That Interpret Aspects of Life in the United States, Canada, and Mexico* (Stanford, California, 1941, 1945, 1949, 1956, Palo Alto, California, 1967). This is the fifth edition.

<sup>8</sup> *Frontier Settlement in Mexican California/The Hijer-Padres Colony, and Its Origins, 1769-1835* (New Haven and London, 1969). Hutchinson quotes Smith’s *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* on 397; the conclusions about Turner and California as social microcosm are on 399 and 401. He cites, on 393, Manuel Payno, “Alta California,” from the *Revista científica y literaria de Mexico*, I (1845), 84.

<sup>9</sup> A tricky issue, it would appear. Students of Turner say that Turner in the classroom had a far more subtle and sophisticated vision of history than

Turner in print. I am not a specialist on the matter, but have several times heard from his disciples that the master “knew” more than he published.

<sup>10</sup> I am aware, of course, that these early evolutionary constructs generally lacked the idea of competition and survival so important in Darwin. But that, however, is not what caused the popular shock. It was the idea of evolution itself, as opposed to special creation.



### Chapter 3

## In Which Ralph Waldo Emerson Invents the Interlinked World

I was never molested by any persons  
but those who represented the state.

Thoreau, *Walden*

“The term ‘modernization,’” says a capable historian in a 1975 article, . . . does not appear in the writings of nineteenth-century Americans.<sup>1</sup> He goes on to say that while Americans did not use the term, they embodied it, that, indeed, modernization reached a “climax” in the United States in the last century. So far as I know, he is right in saying that the term in its present social-scientific acceptance had not yet been coined; certainly he is right in seeing the Victorians as paragons of faith in the values and procedures that characterize modernized societies. I would argue, however, in the interest at least of a salutary humility among social scientists, that the concept of “modernization” was fully understood, as were its implications for the future of society, quite early in the nineteenth century, and well before the “climax.” It is more important, for our purposes, to argue that many of the most signal characteristics of the Romantic movement can be understood as direct reactions, often conscious, to those social forces now often explained through “modernization theory.”

Three tasks, then: first, a brief explanation of the relevant characteristics of modernization theory; second, evidence that American poets, essayists, and writers of fiction recognized those trends and spoke directly to them; third, discussion of aspects of modernization in a wide range of our letters.

Modernization theory was designed primarily to see whether there was sense and order to the transformations through which nations pass as they industrialize. The idea involved analysis of what happened, say, to Great Britain, the United States and Germany; common characteristics extracted from the analysis, it was hoped, could then be applied to developed or developing nations. If clear “stages”

emerged, planners would perhaps be able to predict problems, areas of tension and so forth, and perhaps make the process less traumatic and more humane. Most of the debate about the validity of this approach is peripheral to our concern;<sup>2</sup> probably, since our topic is American social history in its literature, we should not worry here about whether the “stages” of modernization occur in a fixed order, about which formulation of the stages is the most accurate, or even about whether modernization should be regarded as good or inevitable, something we should encourage in traditional—which is to say, non-modernized—societies.<sup>3</sup> What is very useful, however, is a list of characteristics of modernized societies on which there seems to be general agreement among even those modernization theorists who disagree on other matters. As societies industrialize, they say, they move in the direction of increased rationalization, demythologization, specialization, compartmentalization, urbanization, and professionalization. The government of a modernized country, moreover, touches the lives of its citizens more frequently—providing services, exacting duties, involving them in the governing process or repressively controlling their lives: authoritarian states, in other words, can modernize, too.

These changes are both deep and widespread. They alter the organization of society and the texture of each citizen’s life. The list of changes seems immensely useful, because once one is attuned to the items on it, one sees many of our authors differently, in social contexts one had not considered. Yet they themselves were acutely aware of what was transpiring; Emerson in particular pointed to precisely that range of characteristics which modernization theorists would list more than a century later. Here is a passage from *Nature* (1836, revised in 1849):

The useful arts are reproductions or new combinations by the wit of man, of . . . natural benefactors. He no longer waits for favoring gales, but by means of steam, he realizes the fable of Æolus’s bag, and carries the two and thirty winds in the boiler of his boat. To diminish friction, he paves the road with iron bars, and, mounting a coach with a shipload of men, animals, and merchandise behind him, he darts through the country, from town to

town, like an eagle or a swallow through the air. By the aggregate of these aids, how is the face of the world changed, from the era of Noah to that of Napoleon! The private poor man hath cities, ships, canals, bridges, built for him. He goes to the post-office, and the human race run on his errands; to the book-shop, and the human race read and write of all that happens, for him; to the court-house, and nations repair his wrongs. He sets his house upon the road, and the human race go forth every morning and shovel out the snow, and cut a path for him.<sup>4</sup>

Emerson connects human reason, technological changes and alterations in the “feel” of life; he also observes very specifically that the state touches the citizens in new ways.

Along with the promise, he felt, however, come dangers; a rationalized world is a world which stresses analysis, and analysis means breaking down whatever one wants to understand. Its societal equivalent and corollary is specialization. Specialization enables one to move more rapidly in acquiring and applying knowledge, but the specialist it produces may lack breadth of vision. He may not, indeed, be a whole man. Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* can be understood in large part as an attack upon just such specialized division of labor.<sup>5</sup>

Emerson says that a person who thinks in such a way “works on the world with his understanding alone,” and goes on to show that such work leads to highly efficient but soulless and fragmented specialization:

His relation to nature, his power over it, is through the understanding; as by manure; the economic use of fire, wind, water, and the mariner’s needle; steam, coal, chemical agriculture; the repairs of the human body by the dentist and the surgeon. This is such a resumption of power, as if a banished king should buy his territories inch by inch, instead of vaulting at once into his throne.<sup>6</sup>

Emerson’s linking science, technology, rationalization, and specialization to a spiritual danger, a threat, if you will, to an inte-

grated personality, might seem at first glance merely clever. Was he not, after all, preaching the importance of the intuition, and are not the connections merely bright guesses which serve to illustrate how poetic intuition can leap from topic to topic? The answer is complex, first, because the question implies a condescension toward that poetic intuition which Emerson and other Romantics insisted on taking very seriously; second, because, although Emerson *did* of course want the connections to embody intuitive leaps, he had, as a matter of fact, thought through these connections very thoroughly, and was sharply aware of the increasing prestige of science.

Contemporary science fascinated and worried Emerson. He discusses it frequently, and often has it in mind even when he is not discussing it directly. It shows up in his imagery and in his comparisons; often it provides his illustrations of cosmic unity. Consider this excerpt from Section III, "Beauty," in *Nature*: "The dawn is my Assyria; the sun-set and moon-rise my Paphos, and unimaginable realms of faerie; broad noon shall be my England of the senses and the understanding; the night shall be my Germany of mystic philosophy and dreams." (13) That sentence performs a number of functions. It is a poetic illustration of the sentence which precedes it ("Give me health and a day, and I will make the pomp of emperors ridiculous"). It serves the function of a footnote, too, letting us know the author's intellectual roots.<sup>7</sup> But it also tells readers that his indebtedness is not merely to classical Greek, or to modern English and German philosophy; it is also to the new sciences which had made the educated world acutely aware of preclassic civilizations.

Emerson's sharp consciousness of science is constantly evidenced. In *Nature*, which I am using as my chief text, he repeatedly alludes to physics and principles of physics; in the section "Discipline" he tells us, "Open any recent journal of science, and weigh the problems suggested concerning Light, Heat, Electricity, Magnetism, Physiology, Geology, and judge whether the interest of natural science is likely to be soon exhausted." (25) The first paragraph of "The American Scholar" contains a reference to "our cotemporaries in the British and European capitals" who meet "for the advancement of science."<sup>8</sup> Any number of sensitive scholars have pointed out that from the late eighteenth century on, people who kept up with natural

history figured out, pretty much on their own, a kind of evolutionary pattern roughly parallel to the one which Darwin was to popularize in the 1850's, though of course generally without Darwin's exposition of the idea of competition and survival. It appears, to pick a handful of odd places in which I have myself noticed it, in Bartram, in James Fenimore Cooper, and in Herman Melville. Encountering it in Emerson, then, is in no sense surprising, but it does help make the point that he had had his nose in scientific speculation.<sup>9</sup> The example to hand at present is again from *Nature*, a passage in Chapter V, "Discipline," in which he actually uses evidence of evolution as an example of an "obvious" relationship, speaking of "resemblances . . . in things whose analogy is obvious, as when we detect the type of the human hand in the flipper of the fossil saurus. . . ." (27)

Emerson was aware, then, of the connections between new modes of thought, brought in by the spread of scientific attitudes, and the transformation of society. The ideas and attitudes were not brand new, of course; they are plentifully evident among intellectuals from the Renaissance on. In some American colonies, as we have seen, they apparently had what would have seemed by European standards unusual strength. Their accelerated dissemination suggested to Emerson both promise and menace. The public prints spread them, the Revolution associated them with patriotism, and the national experiment—an appropriate word—made them part of a national faith to be propagated in the increasingly ubiquitous free schools. The author of a study of the period in the nineteenth century in which schoolteaching became a feminine task remarks, incidentally but significantly, that the badly exploited schoolmarm seemed, despite conditions which could have embittered them, enthusiastic about the mission they were accomplishing,<sup>10</sup> which, put in its broadest terms, meant indoctrinating young American kids into the articles of faith Emerson describes as characteristic of his century.

I want to insist very strongly on this point: much of what we usually think of as most impractical and high-flown in Romanticism was a specific response to social history; it appeared in artists of very different sorts, and even among writers who did not especially admire one another. Thus we are not surprised to find similar reactions, perhaps, in the work of Henry David Thoreau. We are in Edgar Allan

Poe. The tie between Thoreau and industrialization is covered in an essay by Max Lerner and so can be treated very briefly here. Lerner says that *Walden* is an

attack upon every dominant aspect of American life in its first flush of industrial advance—the factory system, the corporations, business enterprise, acquisitiveness, the vandalism of natural resources, the vested commercial and intellectual interests, the cry for expansion, the classishness and theocratic smugness of New England society, the herd-mindedness of the people, the unthinking civic allegiance they paid to an opportunistic and imperialist government.<sup>11</sup>

Taken by itself, of course, that statement is too one-sided, for Thoreau is also a reflector and a supporter of many aspects of modernization. His challenge to custom and precedent, for instance, rests on a modern respect for fresh rational inquiry. A student of mine put it this way: “In discussing the necessity of discarding traditions and answers others have found, Thoreau is in fact urging an increasingly rationalized life: a life in which one acts because one has decided that action has meaning and purpose for him.” His “sacred values,” in other words, are recognizably modern, ours. One could also cite his healthy interest in science and his surprisingly numerous positive reactions to industrialization.

The picture, then, is somewhat complex. On the one hand, the modernity of certain values and the excited response to certain aspects of modernization; on the other, Thoreau’s transcendental desire for experience beyond rationality—the cake-and-eat-it-too dilemma one notes for other Romantics of this period.<sup>12</sup>

Discussing similarities of response in Thoreau and Emerson is not calculated to surprise many students of the period; bringing in Poe might. Poe is not often linked with Emerson; we know too well his insecure scorn for “the frog pond” and its inhabitants, and his somewhat spiteful characterization of Emerson in the “Autography.”<sup>13</sup> But the two respond very similarly to the issue we are discussing. In a famous and early (1829) poem, Poe points an accusing finger at science:

Science! true daughter of Old Time thou art!  
Who alterest all things with thy peering eyes.  
Why preyest thou thus upon the poet's heart,  
Vulture, whose wings are dull realities?<sup>14</sup>

One might conclude that Poe was genuinely hostile to science were it not that his work, perhaps even more than Emerson's, shows a career-long fascination and even involvement with it. He wrote stories about scientific and technological marvels and curiosities ("The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scherazade" is an especially good example), science fiction intended to be credible ("The Balloon-Hoax") and whimsical ("Some Words with a Mummy"); he even got himself involved in the production of a scientific textbook,<sup>15</sup> and, of course, late in his brief life, produced *Eureka*, the obscure treatise designed to reconcile modern science with the mystical world view we think of as more characteristic of Romantics. That mysticism itself, we shall soon see, is very directly connected with modernization. For now all that we are demonstrating is an acute awareness of science and a perception of its relationship to changes in the everyday world, changes threatening to the wholeness of life unless science and the new range of popular values were put in a more universal perspective.

The history of that science itself suggests the nature of the transformations which these writers saw occurring around them: science was responding to specialization, becoming professionalized.<sup>16</sup> Write a biography of a major figure of the Revolutionary era and one had best be familiar with a number of fields. Franklin was certainly the colonies' premier "scientist," but he did not call himself one—indeed, we are told that the word in its present usage had not been coined. He was also printer, author, inventor, statesman. And, like most other savants with whom he corresponded, Franklin did not limit himself to any one field of science. Nor to "pure" or "applied" science: those distinctions had not been invented. Franklin made great theoretical contributions to physics, and imagined an electrical picnic. His bifocals and better stoves made more liveable the same rooms in which he thought out polarity, meteorology, oceanography.

Franklin was exceptional, but not isolated: Joseph Priestly ended his days in Pennsylvania because his theological opinions made

England untenable; his superb laboratory technique and his brilliant use of a dying theory keep him in the textbooks as one of the two principal founders of modern chemistry. Charles Willson Peale, friend and military aide to Washington, we remember not only as a likeable and honest painter, but for other aspects of a varied and energetic life—skilled craftsman, founder—some say “inventor”—of an important natural history museum, useful scientist. At one stage of his most famous scientific and museological project, exhuming the remains of an enormous mastodon, Peale turned for help to his colleague Jefferson, then President; Jefferson himself, of course, embodies the tradition we have been describing: governor, President, author, educator, musician, the most influential architect in our history, father of democratizing legislation, and “scientist” as well.

Jefferson did more, probably, to speed the onset of modernization than any other single American; the Declaration of Independence sets forth as self-evident the rationalist values of fair play—the legislation of which he was proudest struck down, in Virginia, the customary British inheritance practices which perpetuated an aristocracy of birth, rather than talents. Such changes are prime examples of what modernization theorists call “rationalization”: one replaces traditional ways with “rational” ways. His educational ideals, similarly, called for a system designed not only to produce a literate and rational electorate, but to hunt out talent and leadership in all sectors of the population. The network of schools and colleges he envisioned was never fully articulated; its ideals, however, remain the sacred values of our educational system. But his career was that of a great eighteenth century man, not that of a great man in a modernizing society: like Peale, Franklin, Priestly, he was assuredly not a specialist.

Visualize if you will—the legend persists that it happened—an encounter on the steps of the Rotunda, the library of Jefferson’s University of Virginia, on a day late in Jefferson’s life when the great old man, during a visit to the academic community he had envisioned, invented and housed, is supposed to have passed a freshman named Edgar Poe. The meeting would not seem much more remote if I were to claim that Confucius, say, or Rabbi Hillel, out for a stroll one day in Fulton, Missouri, nodded “Hello” to Winston Churchill, in town to give a speech. The encounter between Jefferson and Poe, however, could really have happened. They were at the university at the same

time. Its seeming implausibility suggests how radically and rapidly society was being transformed, and helps me make my point about the specificity of Romantic response to modernization. It did not occur to people in 1750 or 1792, apparently, to say that because they were artistic and creative, Peale, Franklin, or Jefferson were unfit to be scientists, or too unworldly to be effective leaders. But creative people of Poe's generation were held to be impractical, skilled only in the production of pretties. Breadth of the Jeffersonian sort in a man of the 1830's would already have seemed unsound, as it does in our own age, when Robert Frost used the instinctual specialization of ants as an emblem for the spiritual perils of being bureaucratic:

It couldn't be called ungentle.  
But how thoroughly departmental.<sup>17</sup>

But his sour lines came a century after the Emerson passage about the soulless specialist. Our artists had long since pinpointed the danger; I superimpose the reactions of Emerson and Poe because the two men are so different from one another that their common response suggests that a strong stimulus affected both, and also because each is popularly supposed somehow to have been out of touch with the flow of workaday affairs, Emerson because of a sort of lofty, ideal unworldliness, Poe because of the creepy impression left by his supposedly eerie biography (the worst details of which, we have known since 1941, were largely invented by a biographer who disliked him.)<sup>18</sup> Of Emerson's indelible Brahmanism they tell the story of his entering a noisy bar to rub elbows with working people and to hear their honest and vulgar vigorous language, the speech of everyday, living experience from which he wanted a poetry to grow. The place, if the story is true, fell dead silent, till the barkeep nervously and politely asked, "A glass of water, Mr. Emerson?"<sup>19</sup> Of Poe, even some of our best critics and scholars, as we shall see in our next chapter, have concluded that it is impossible to tie him to the civilization in which he lived—or, indeed, in the words of one of them, to "the spirit of any age."<sup>20</sup>

Yet both *were* men of their age; in Poe's case especially it seems profitable to point out that a suitably broad approach to literature as social history is fruitful even in the case of an author long regarded as

isolated from his society. We shall see in another context how untrue is the allegation that Poe fails to reflect his society; he is, in fact a very representative American. But our focus now is on the idea that the Romantic artist is impractical, isolated from the give-and-take of the everyday world. We think of Poe as almost the prototypical artist-in-the-garret. That image of the artist is old enough, but it acquired special urgency in the western world in the early Romantic period precisely because of the forces of modernization. I have a strong hunch that one saw it first in England and only a little later in the U.S. only because modernization reached the “take-off” stage—to use W. W. Rostow’s term—sooner in England.

Perhaps it is no accident that one of the first American Romantics to have strong British ties—he was a friend of Coleridge, and knew European artists and literati in general—was also one of the first to sound the complaint that the artist was being made helpless, stereotyped, boxed-in. I hear in it an early warning of the dangers of specialization, compartmentalization and professionalization. Washington Allston’s friendships with the circle of writers and painters associated with the Caffè Greco in Rome begin in 1805. British modernization antedates American by several decades. In a satirical, almost cartoon-like painting of 1811, young Allston represented the pathetic man of art in the world of business; it is called “The Poor Author and the Rich Bookseller.” The businessman, portly and confident, sits comfortably while the skinny writer, standing, is obliged to hop out of the way of the kid who is sweeping the room. Considering the generosity and patience of Allston’s New England patrons and sponsors after his return in 1818, Allston’s painting perhaps seems unfair, but its sentiment is familiar to us; we have all heard about the sensitive and hungry fellow in the shabby studio. That image appears in American art at just the moment of the artist’s contact with the great industrial take-off. W.W. Rostow offers these tentative “take-off” dates:

Great Britain	1783-1802
France	1830-1860
Belgium	1833-1860
United States	1843-1860
Germany	1850-1873 <sup>21</sup>

His dates are developed from growth figures of various sorts, but to work correlations between poets and G.N.P., or novelists and pig-iron production strikes me as funny, and I will not do it beyond saying with a vagueness which my cliometrician colleagues would doubtless find intolerable, that those dates are “suggestive.” Emerson tours Europe in 1832 and 1833; Poe’s “The Purloined Letter” dates from 1844.

I point to that Poe story especially because it is so explicit a response to modernized specialization and the badly misunderstood “scientific” method. It is the response of the artist to specialization, to the notion that one goes to the specialist for access to expertise in some special area, and that all the artist is for is to produce pretties, the products of his specialty. If that happened, he would lose all those other roles he had held in the pre-modern world, the world in which artist was also seer and prophet, perceiver of truths and truth. It was against this danger that Shelley had warned in his “Defense of Poetry” in 1822,<sup>22</sup> when he insisted that “Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present . . . Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” Poe’s complaints against the same menace in the “Sonnet to Science” date from 1829. In his detective story Poe shows the inefficacy of narrow and specialized investigation in matters of human importance: The Prefect of Police plods, pries, searches, gets nowhere. The thief, the minister who stole the letter, is known, yet the Prefect cannot locate the letter. Significantly, he misjudges his adversary—the minister is known to be a poet, the Prefect says; he must therefore be “only one remove from a fool.”<sup>23</sup>

Dupin, Poe’s detective hero, confesses slyly that he has been guilty of a little doggerel himself. This is Poe’s way of telling us that this work, too, is a “Defense of Poetry.” For Dupin’s methods work, and the Prefect’s do not. Poets are not narrow specialists who produce pretty things: the Minister is politician, poet and mathematician; Dupin also has broad interests which, like those of Franklin, Jefferson, Priestley, or Peale, reinforce rather than impede one another. He is a whole man, while the Prefect, as Emerson put it, “works on the world with his understanding alone.” Dupin has an artist’s sensitivity and an intuitive, empathetic feel for the thief’s complex personality; he finds a truth that eludes the Prefect.

The idea of the whole man is critical. We are accustomed to being told that Romanticism was the rebellion of the nineteenth-century heart against the eighteenth-century mind, the rebellion of passion against the control and moderation of the Age of Reason. Even were that all there was to Romanticism, we would be justified in tying it to modernization because, as we have noted, rationalization is one of the prime characteristics of industrialized societies. The further societies move from traditional modes of understanding and decision-making, the nearer they approach such “rational” attitudes as skepticism, open-mindedness, willingness to experiment, the more modern they seem. “The age of arithmetic and criticism has set in,” Emerson wrote of the era which “made itself remarked, say in 1820 and the twenty years following.”<sup>24</sup> Much of Emerson can be understood in terms of reaction to these tendencies: negative in that he feared a shallow modern man might result; positive in that, as we have seen, he was as fascinated by science, rationalism and the changes about him as the next guy, even if the next guy were Edgar Poe. We have to remind ourselves that Romantics are not merely rebels against the age which preceded them; they are also its heirs, often skeptics, rationalists, satirists, and ironists. Poe is an especially good example, as we shall see in the next chapter. Much of his *œuvre* is satirical, and many of his tales, even those popularly categorized as tales of terror, of ratiocination, or other genres, are at the same time whimsical, satirical, or ironic—sometimes all three.<sup>25</sup>

These Romantics were unwilling to give up their rationalist heritage—one remembers that our most explosive Romantic, Melville, loved the grace and wit of great eighteenth century essayists—but some of them were surer than was Melville that there was an order to creation to which the inspired whole man, the visionary artist, had the key. Thus many of these skeptical, rational aficionados of the new sciences were mystics—indeed, I feel general agreement with recent scholars who go further, and call them occultists.<sup>26</sup> They had a unitary view of man and the universe, sometimes expressed in terms of a world spirit or Oversoul which permeated all things; they felt that the inspired seer could attain a transcendent communion with it like the states of consciousness condoned in certain tribal religions or in some oriental religions. Such communion involved merging with

the world spirit, and as such was a source of inspiration and truth. Their transcendentalism should not, however, be regarded merely as a flight from the unpleasant realities of the world around them. I want to argue that it, too, was a very specific answer and even a challenge to aspects of modernization.

It is often difficult to get students—or even one's colleagues—to take such ideas seriously; one has to point out that similar world-views have been the majority opinion, so to speak, of most of the human inhabitants of the globe for most of human history, and that it is not merely small tribal societies, which perhaps strike us as “primitive,” which see the world in this unified way, but also several high civilizations. Poe and Emerson knew their Greek philosophers,<sup>27</sup> and knew which expressed the views they felt were true. They also had access to the findings of the new sciences of anthropology and archeology, to the great burst of Egyptological information that reached the fascinated West in the wake of the Napoleonic expeditions in Egypt and the discovery of the Rosetta stone in 1799, and they saw a communality in cosmological vision between their classical writers, other ancient writers, the contemporary orient, and tribesmen in lands far and near. We tend to think of science as the enemy of such “magical” world-views, but the nascent social sciences, in showing this recurrent pattern of occult belief from culture to culture across space and ages, strongly suggested that “Truth” lay in that direction.<sup>28</sup> Modern science paradoxically provided not only part of the threat to the artist, but access to what seemed a model of artistic survival, worth and power.

A shaman in a tribal society is a convenient and strong illustration of the sort of unity of role the Romantics had in mind. A shaman is notably not a specialist, as an isolated traditional tribal society is notably not modernized. Say that we locate in it a person who chants songs in certain ceremonies, trains the young in sacred observances, gives counsel when large decisions must be made, and performs rituals to heal the sick. His singing makes him an artist; if his songs tell of the tribal past, he is historian. His counsel makes him statesman, his healing, a doctor. Each of these roles in a modern society is performed by at least one different specialist. The example of a tribal shaman is not chosen merely because it provides spectacular contrast

with the way that roles are defined in a modernized society. The idea of seeking an anthropological parallel, of doing “culture studies” of American society utilizing methods borrowed from the anthropologists, is not something invented in the American Civilization program at the University of Pennsylvania in 1950’s. Emerson himself thought in such terms. Anthropology is one of a group of sciences which, at about the turn of the nineteenth century, began to produce startling new information; in the case of this particular social science, the result was the potential for a kind of self-conscious detachment from one’s own culture which made possible the cultural attitudes we have been discussing.

Thus it is precisely the contrast between the holistic manner in which the shaman operates and the increasingly specialized manner in which roles are defined in the society which Emerson saw developing around him which produced statements such as the following, early in “The American Scholar”:

Man is not a farmer, or a professor, or an engineer, but he is all. Man is priest, and scholar, and statesman, and producer, and soldier. In the *divided* or social state, these functions are parcelled out to individuals, each of whom aims to do his stint of the joint work, whilst each other performs his. (53)

We know that Emerson’s approach is specifically anthropological from any number of passages in his essays. Early on in his first book, *Nature*, he argues (although “argues” is always an odd word to apply to Emerson) the basic mystical doctrine that the “analogies” we see between nature and our own consciousness are in no way “capricious,” but are based, instead, on the nature of things. Reasoning from analogy is not a logical fallacy for someone who feels the world as one, alive, a unity, and himself. An argument from linguistics helps him make his point; in the chapter “Language,” he uses a linguistics founded in assumptions we would have to call anthropological: “Because of this radical correspondence between visible things and human thoughts, savages, who have only what is necessary, converse in figures. As we go back in history, language becomes more picturesque, until its

infancy, when it is all poetry; or, all spiritual facts are represented by natural symbols.” (19) Carl Strauch writes,

. . . in a series of journal entries from 1843 to 1845, in the dialectic confrontation of opposites—science and religion, skepticism and faith, evolution and emanation—. . . [Emerson] accepted skeptical science together with the religious impulse, but lifted both to a new level of occult insight and symbolically clairvoyant fable.<sup>29</sup>

What I guess I feel is Emerson’s best and most sustained serious poem, “Blight,” is thus not only a statement of the need for wholeness and a unitary vision, but also a demonstration of his familiarity with the most advanced comparative-cultural and religious scholarship and information. Indeed, it is surprising that such sophisticated information was already available in 1843, when he first published this poem: he understands, for example, that astrology and alchemy were not ancient quack sciences, but rather occult systems designed to get the initiate “through” to a sense of transcendent experience and power. For our purposes, I suppose, the key passage is contained in lines 18 through 32:

But these young scholars, who invade our hills,  
Bold as the engineer who fells the wood,  
And travelling often in the cut he makes,  
Love not the flower they pluck, and know it not,  
And all their botany is Latin names.  
The old men studied magic in the flowers,  
And human fortunes in astronomy,  
And an omnipotence in chemistry,  
Preferring things to names, for these were men,  
Were unitarians of the united world,  
And, wheresoever their clear eye-beams fell,  
They caught the footsteps of the SAME. Our eyes  
Are armed, but we are strangers to the stars,  
And strangers to the mystic beast and bird,  
And strangers to the plant and to the mine.<sup>30</sup>

The “Latin names” are the heritage of the eighteenth century cataloguers and category-makers, the scientific compilers who in fact paved the way for the great theorists of Emerson’s age. But in Emerson’s context the “young scholars” trained as specialists are narrow; Emerson’s young scholar is Poe’s Prefect and vulture, or Whitman’s learn’d astronomer:

When I heard the learn’d astronomer,  
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns  
before me,  
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add,  
divide, and measure them,  
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured  
with much applause in the lecture-room,  
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,  
Till rising and gliding out I wander’d off by myself,  
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,  
Look’d up in perfect silence at the stars.<sup>31</sup>

Such men fail to catch “The footsteps of the SAME,” that system of linked analogies which the enlightened prophets-poets-perceivers, the “old men,” knew bound themselves with the universe. To the tribesman or to the member of most traditional societies, that universe is one, a whole, alive, and identical to the man who perceives it.

I was taught in college that Emerson was too civilized really to take such views to heart, however often he alluded to them. A decade later, an anthropologist friend told me that Emerson could not have had the knowledge and cultural detachment needed to achieve a genuinely modern comparative-cultural attitude. But I had not yet looked closely at “Blight,” and I now think both teacher and colleague were wrong. Emerson knows fully with what he is dealing; he understands this world-view perfectly, and embraces it explicitly, as when he says in the “Nature” section of *Nature*, “The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable,” a relation which the old men, the “unitarians of the united world” studied in the flowers or in anything else, precisely because the world was united, one, a whole, all parts

of which were meaningful, alive and identical with the Oversoul and with the man who studied them.

My decision to show that Transcendentalism is a response to one aspect of modernization—specialization—is arbitrary. Other characteristics on which modernization theorists agree would serve as well to illustrate that these Romantic artists were consciously responding to the great forces of social change which were transforming their world. Instead of specialization, I could have selected from Rostow or Brown urbanization, and made the same point: even when Emerson is at his most elevated, seemingly his most “impractical,” he is responding most directly to large social forces around him. At a passage in the chapter of *Nature* called “Discipline” in which he is using linguistic evidence to make his recurrent point, asserting that as language grows from things to abstraction, so matter is literally tied to mind by analogy, he then springs to what we would today call a holistic view of the world. “What is a farm,” he asks, “but a mute gospel?” (26) Merely pastoralism, perhaps, echoing his thought of a few pages earlier about the advantages which “the country-life possesses for a powerful mind, over the artificial and curtailed life of cities.” (“Language,” 21) Well, anti-urbanism is a response to modernization: we have already noted that urbanization is one of those central facets of modernization noticed by all theorists. Thus to say that the pastoralism of Romantic writers indicates their remoteness from contemporary social forces is to miss a basic fact about pastoralism. It is a response to those forces.

But there is more involved than that. For having said that a farm is a mute gospel, he goes on: “But the sailor, the shepherd, the miner, the merchant, in their several resorts, have each an experience precisely parallel, and leading to the same conclusion. . . .” (26) Thus there can be a passage of the transcendent beams in locales other than rural. Indeed, all of the categories and specialties of modernizing society will yield the same truth. Categories and specialties don’t matter. They and all human experience are one, a whole, the universe.

“Xenophanes,” he continues, “complained in his old age, that, look where he would, all things hastened back to Unity. He was weary of seeing the same entity in the tedious variety of forms. The fable of Proteus has a cordial truth. A leaf, a drop, a crystal, a moment of time

is related to the whole, and partakes of the perfection of the whole. Each particle is a microcosm, and faithfully renders the likeness of the world.” (27)

If this chapter has performed its office, however, you should be convinced not only that in transcendental Romantics we find direct responses to those alterations in the world listed by recent students of modernization, but that their writings demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of what was happening. Far from being remote, aloof from social forces, Emerson especially seems in some ways their cultural product. Yet, while its product, he impressively achieved sufficient detachment from his own culture to be capable of very sophisticated analysis of new forces and their implications. Because he could list the forces and anticipate their effects, because he could stand outside his culture and compare it knowledgeably with others, he perhaps deserves mention as an important predecessor of modern economics, sociology and anthropology, fields which in their modern forms might have discouraged him for their specialization and, too often, narrowness. Saying that he was a predecessor of new specialties would certainly tend to diminish a writer whose vision was of underlying “Unity.” Say rather that he was a harbinger of that bolder, broader scholar we all want to be, who, transcending the specialties, sees the “footsteps of the SAME.”

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Richard D. Brown, “Modernization: A Victorian Climax,” *American Quarterly*, XXVII, 5 (December, 1975), 532-548.

<sup>2</sup> Richard D. Brown’s *Modernization: The Transformation of American Life 1600-1865* (New York, 1967) summarizes aspects of that debate—see esp. 322. The best-known formulation of the “stages” of modernization is Walt Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge, England, 1960, Second Edition 1971).

<sup>3</sup> Significantly, Rostow calls his analysis a “Manifesto,” and links it to editorial statements about paths which democratic societies ought to follow in dealing with countries of what is now called the Third World. It is worth noting that some political scientists and historians see modernization theory as warmed-over nineteenth-century whig history, probably because they recognize some shared liberal values.

<sup>4</sup> *Nature* (1836), in Robert E. Spiller and Alfred R. Ferguson, eds., *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. I, *Nature, Addresses*,

and *Lectures* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971). The quotation is from Chapter II, "Commodity," 11-12. Subsequent references to this edition will be handled, when possible, in parentheses in the text.

<sup>5</sup> A point noticed by F. O. Matthiessen in *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York, 1941). See especially ix, 49 (footnote), 78, 97, and 173. I am also indebted, in my remarks on Thoreau, to my student Patricia A. Hunt.

<sup>6</sup> "Prospects," in *Nature, Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>7</sup> The imagery which Emerson uses for England and Germany forcibly reminds us of that which Poe uses for the English Rowena and the darkly learned and German-influenced Ligeia in his short story, a contrast explicated by Clark Griffith in "'Ligeia' and the English Romantics," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, XXIV (October 1954), 8-25. For an excellent essay on Emerson's complex web of artistic and intellectual ties to his contemporaries, I recommend Joel Porte, *Representative Man: Ralph Waldo Emerson in His Time* (New York, 1979).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52. For discussion of the popularity of science journals in the Federal period, see Donald de B. Beaver, "Altruism, Patriotism and Science: Scientific Journals in the Early Republic," *American Studies*, XII, 1 (Spring, 1971), 5 ff.

<sup>9</sup> Excellent discussions of Emerson's reaction to science in general, and of his pre-Darwinian evolutionary speculation, appear in essays by Carl F. Strauch. In "Emerson's Sacred Science" [*PMLA*, LXXII, 1 (June, 1958), 237-250], Strauch explains why evolution was philosophically critical to Emerson. One of Emerson's main sources for such thought was Robert Chambers, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*; Emerson owned an 1845 New York reprint of the Third London Edition. See also Strauch's "The Importance of Emerson's Skeptical Mood," *Harvard Library Bulletin*, IX (Winter, 1957), 117-139.

<sup>10</sup> Keith Melder, "Woman's High Calling: The Teaching Profession in America, 1830-1860," *American Studies (MASJ)*, XII, 2 (Fall, 1972), pp. ff.

<sup>11</sup> "Thoreau: No Hermit," in Sherman Paul, ed., *Thoreau: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, 1962), 20.

<sup>12</sup> A nice discussion of these two aspects of Thoreau's response appears in Alexander Kern's "Church, Scripture, Nature and Ethics in Henry Thoreau's Religious Thought," in Robert Falk, ed., *Literature and Ideas in America* (Athens, Ohio, 1975), esp. p. 86. Transcendentalism, Kern explains, grew out of American religious experience, which included Enlightenment rationalism.

<sup>13</sup> I have discussed this matter in *Edgar Poe: Seer and Craftsman* (DeLand, Florida, 1972), pp. 152-168. For the philosophical proximity of Poe and Emerson, see the chapter "Concord and Fordham."

<sup>14</sup> "Sonnet—To Science." The standard text for Poe's poetry is Floyd Stovall, ed., *The Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (Charlottesville, 1965), 24.

<sup>15</sup> Arthur Hobson Quinn's *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography* (New York, 1941) contains (pp. 275 ff.) a discussion of how Poe came to be listed as author of *The Conchologist's First Book* (1839). Poe was not the principal author, but was conversant with the subject.

<sup>16</sup> Two useful articles on how this occurred in America are Hamilton Cravens, "American Science Comes of Age: An Institutional Perspective," *American Studies*, XVII, 2 (Fall, 1976), 49-70; and Berney Williams, Paul Cerruzi and Norris Hetherington, "Science in the American Democracy, 1776-1976," *Humbolt Journal of Social Relations*, V, 1 (Fall/Winter, 1976), 48-53.

<sup>17</sup> "Departmental," in Robert Frost, *The Poems of Robert Frost* (New York, 1946), 330-331; 331.

<sup>18</sup> The Reverend Rufus Griswold's slanders and forgeries were fully explained in Arthur Hobson Quinn's *EAP*. Griswold was supposedly Poe's literary executor. Poe's aunt and mother-in-law Maria ("Muddy") Clemm dutifully delivered Poe's literary remains to Griswold who, in arranging a "Life" and "Works," distorted and falsified material.

<sup>19</sup> I am sorry to confess that I do not know the source of this anecdote which I think I first heard from Perry Miller; I hope I have the bartender's words right. The point of the story is not teetotaling, incidentally—it is Emerson's inability to shed what I suppose we should call his Brahmanism.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Wood Krutch, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Study in Genius* (New York, 1926).

<sup>21</sup> Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth*, 38.

<sup>22</sup> Shelley's essay was published in 1839, and dated 1840. The poet had died in 1822, and worked on it that year, but never saw any of it in print. He wrote it as a refutation of another essay for a magazine which became, in Cummings' phrase, "radically defunct."

<sup>23</sup> "The Purloined Letter," in Stuart and Susan Levine, *The Short Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe: An Annotated Edition* (Indianapolis, 1976), 228.

<sup>24</sup> The quotations are from an essay Emerson is said to have written around 1867, "Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England." In the 1883 "Concord Edition" (*The Complete Works of RWE*), it appears in volume X, 323-370; the quotations are on pages 326 and 325 respectively.

<sup>25</sup> G. R. Thompson has done fine work on Poe and romantic irony; see his *Poe's Fiction: Romantic Irony in the Gothic Tales* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1973). My wife and I reached similar conclusions via a somewhat different path—see S. and S. Levine, eds., *The Short Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe*, especially xix and 471 ff.

<sup>26</sup> John Senior, *The Way Down and Out: The Occult in Symbolist Literature* (Ithaca, New York, 1959) is the best explanation I know of what the occult is and what it meant for nineteenth-century writers. I discuss the implications of this book for American authors in "The Mystical Moist Night-Air," *American Quarterly*, XIV, 2 (Summer, 1962), 198-206.

<sup>27</sup> Colleagues in classics and philosophy tell me they feel Emerson in certain ways misinterpreted his classical sources. They feel, however, that he believed he found there what I say, reinforcement for transcendental views.

<sup>28</sup> The physical sciences, too, provided grist for the mill of the mystics, as we discuss in another context—electricity seemed a means of reconciling rational cause and effect with occult interconnectedness.

<sup>29</sup> “Emerson’s Sacred Science,” 237.

<sup>30</sup> “Blight,” in Edward W. Emerson, ed., *Poems* (Boston and New York, 1904), 140. This is volume IX of the “Riverside” edition.

<sup>31</sup> “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer,” in Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley, eds., *Leaves of Grass* (New York, 1965), 271.



## Chapter 4

### Poe as American Emblem

His works bear no conceivable relation, either external or internal, to the life of any people, and it is impossible to account for them on the basis of any social or intellectual tendencies or as the expression of the spirit of any age.

Joseph Wood Krutch, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Study in Genius*

That legend that Poe and Jefferson met briefly on the steps of the library Jefferson had designed is unexpectedly haunting—Poe had been educated in the tradition of the Universal Philosophers.<sup>1</sup> That Jefferson could be statesman, agriculturalist, musician and scientist while he, if he chose to be poet, would be typed as impractical, is just the sort of thing that galled him and galled other writers of his day. With modernization comes specialization. They put you in a box. One is almost tempted to wonder whether this is one more reason for the popularity of that recurrent favorite theme of magazinists in Poe's period, burial alive! Poe looks back very specifically to a time when artists were not in boxes:

Occasionally the poetic intellect—that intellect which we now feel to have been the most exalted of all—since those truths to us were of the most enduring importance and could only be reached by that *analogy* which speaks in proof-tones to the imagination alone, and to the unaided reason bears no weight—occasionally did this poetic intellect proceed a step farther in the evolving of the vague idea of the philosophic. . . . And these men, the poets . . . ponder piningly, yet not unwisely, upon the ancient days when our wants were not more simple than our enjoyments were keen—days when *mirth* was a word unknown, so solemnly deeptoned was happi-

ness—holy, august and blissful days, when blue rivers  
ran undammed, between hills unhewn, into far forest  
solitudes, primaeval, odorous, and unexplored.<sup>2</sup>

It is for such reasons that Poe's detective, Dupin, treats sarcastically the unimaginative methods of the bumbling prefect of police. In more recent jargon, what Dupin is saying is that the prefect lacks a holistic view. He proceeds by compartmentalization, analysis, breaking things down, which is not the way to truth. Dupin is something of a poet. The poet understands intuition; he understands the frequencies and wave-lengths which tie the world together.

Poe's attack on analytical science and compartmentalization and his defense of unitary philosophy, then, are absolutely characteristic of his era. It is absurd to say that he is an atypical man of his age because he is a romantic, yet that is what, in effect, has too often been said. Poe's philosophical stance ties him to many of the most characteristic spokesmen of his age, and is, like theirs, largely a defensive reaction to large-scale changes in the world brought on by industrialization, which they accurately sensed threatened the artist's power and stature.

But one need not turn to philosophy to connect Poe to American social history; there are more obvious ties, and a review of some of them should be useful to suggest approaches to other "difficult" or "alienated" authors. This is not to imply that Poe is worthy of discussion for methodological reasons only: he is well worth "doing" for his own sake. We have for so long taken Edgar Allan Poe as a prime example of the alienated genius or the sensitive artist suffering in a materialistic environment, or—a favorite French literary fantasy—as a writer who should have lived in France, that I feel the need for a very general statement which points out a number of important ways in which the man and his work are unmistakably, unambiguously of his time and place, which is to say, American, of the 1830's and '40's. Poe is the American author of greatest influence on world literature; his stories are immensely popular, and his poetry, whether or not we feel that it is important (Poe did not—he said that his poems were experiments, and that he had never had the leisure to make himself a better poet), has served several generations of youngsters well as introduction to the possibilities of sound and rhythm. He is, in short, in every way a big figure, and we should learn to be more comfortable

with him by understanding his connections to his American environment.

Lest I be accused of assaulting straw men, incidentally, let me begin by showing that the incredible assertion by Krutch above is not an inexplicable lapse of judgement by a smart critic. Other major students of American literature and culture have said pretty much the same thing. Perry Miller said that he knew of no way to place Poe in a history of American literature, unless it was by “postulating a Dark Tradition, running from Charles Brockden Brown through Poe to Ambrose Bierce and William Faulkner.”<sup>3</sup> Vernon Parrington felt that Poe was not in the main current; F. O. Matthiessen drummed him out of the American Renaissance.<sup>4</sup> Even Alfred Kazin, who complained about Parrington’s blindness to Poe, failed to do much to root Poe on native grounds, and, though Poe knew a lot about and wrote on the relationship between inspiration and the landscape, and published large portions of an uncompleted novel about the American frontier, Henry Nash Smith never thought to mention him in *Virgin Land*.<sup>5</sup>

This is no scandal: probably when writers think of Poe in connection with national issues, various peculiarities of his best-known work, his contentious literary career and his biography make him seem an exception to whatever rule they have in mind. The process rather reminds one of the manner in which historians and social scientists used to shunt aside black Americans: “They’re very important; they’ve been treated abominably; the injustice must be rectified—but we can’t discuss them here; these terms and definitions were developed for white Americans.” “Poe as the nigger of American literature” might serve as an appropriately loaded ironic phrase, given his racist feelings on the one hand and the slights he has received on the other.

But that racism is in itself a clue: who will argue that racism was not an important part of American life in the age of Poe? Poe played at being southern aristocrat; he wrote sympathetic reviews of books defending slavery, and even argued that slavery was morally uplifting for the slaveholder.<sup>6</sup> There is no need, in short, to fabricate a “dark tradition” in order to tie Poe to his nation and his time; one already exists.

Fortunately, there are other and more positive connections as well. For convenience, I will list some categories which might be fruitful,

admitting at the start that the categories overlap and are arbitrary. Poe's work reflects his age in America in the following ways: 1) His work and the work of other romantics is in large part a reaction to modernization. 2) His philosophic stance is not only very characteristic of his period, it is also in part a response to the threat to the artist's role posed by modernization. 3) He is fascinated by contemporary technology. 4) He shares in national self-consciousness by expressing concern with the problem of a national literature. 5) He is what we would today call a "media author," alert to the messages in each medium. 6) He is sensitive to popular culture in ways both obvious and subtle. 7) His works reflect many of the most condoned values of our culture. 8) He reacts vigorously to American government and political theory.

The first three items on our list we covered adequately, I hope, in our last chapter; the similarities in response by writers as different as Emerson and Poe—and many other Romantics one could name—suggest the scope and strength of both stimulus and reaction. We might point out that even the celebrated cold relations between Concord and Fordham do not indicate any real intellectual difference in the response to modernization, to the threat to the artist's role, or to modern science and technology. Poe's impatience with contemporaries who, like Emerson, should have been his philosophical allies, stems not from ideological hostility, but from a combination of other reasons: jealousy, perhaps, and certainly impatience with their manner of presenting a sacred—which is to say, "pre-modern"—world view. His characteristic complaint against the Transcendentalists is, in effect, Why are they bothering to argue? Don't they know that these things are, as Agathos puts it in Poe's tale "The Power of Words" [1845], "simply true?"

That hostility was also, of course, a matter of temperament and biography. Poe was insecure, and Emerson did call him "the jingle-man." Touchiness, contentiousness, and irascibility, however, are not adequate reasons for denying a writer his time and place. Nor should the eerie stereotype of Poe—even had it been true—have blinded critics to his interest in his environment. Were it not for the notorious creepiness of Poe's popular image, his reactions to progress and technology might strike us as far more "typical." They remind me

of Twain's: on the one hand, he is skeptical of national faith in the connection between new gadgets and genuine human progress; on the other, absolutely fascinated with the implications of new technology and new processes. In three tales,<sup>7</sup> Poe skylarks about voyages by air, but the playfulness fails to conceal his fascination with the possibilities. "The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade" (1845) lists strange scientific facts and technological wonders of the age—steam-powered ships, new processes in printing (reminding one again of Twain, who sank a fortune into an automatic typesetter), balloon flight, a train that went 71 m.p.h., a steam incubator for eggs, the Daguerreotype, and so on. Both "Mellonta Tauta" and "Some Words with a Mummy" mock pride in such technological advances, but even these two stories, like Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, betray itchy curiosity about the possibilities of technological applications. Similar contradictions in Twain strike us as "characterically American." Those in Poe should as well.<sup>8</sup>

-1-

Poe as Patriot

"... we are a poetical people"

American self-consciousness about its productiveness in the arts is generally recognized as an important characteristic of the early national period. The charge that Poe is isolated from such concern, not interested in the issue of an American literature, is based on simple ignorance of his work. He is very much concerned. And, narrow as his points of view on many issues frequently are, the stand he takes on the matter of national literature seems sound and defensible. I have in mind especially what he says in the first pages of his long review of books on poetry by Joseph Rodman Drake and Fitz Green Halleck which ran in the *Southern Literary Messenger* for April 1836.<sup>9</sup> Poe writes, "There was a time, it is true, when we cringed to foreign opinion—let us even say we paid a most servile deference to British critical dicta" (p. 276). All that, however, has changed, he goes on; it has been replaced by a cocksure chauvinism, so eager to praise any national production that it ignores more mature continental criticism.

We have good writers, he concludes, but we should not praise anything just because it is American.

Poe, of course, has an axe to grind. His comments give him an opportunity to respond to snide Northern reactions to his critical work for the *Southern Literary Messenger*. But his prefatory remarks also function as an extremely good introduction to his discussion of Drake and Halleck. The opening of that discussion, indeed, makes the connection clear. Poe writes, “Perhaps at this particular moment there are no American poems held in so high estimation by our countrymen, as the poems of Drake, and of Halleck”—which is to say, this illustrates what I just said about the perils of mixing patriotism with critical judgment.

The Drake-Halleck review is, incidentally, among the most careful and sensitive pieces of criticism that Poe produced. While on the one hand one wants to agree with the judgment of those writers who feel that it is a terrible shame that the man had to waste his energies reviewing the second-rate materials that appeared on his desk, it is worth saying that at least some of the poems discussed here seem still to be readable today, and that Poe’s close analysis of them succeeds in illuminating some genuine critical distinctions: also that Poe finds some things to admire in them. Certainly if the reactions of my own children are any gauge, portions of Drake’s “The Culprit Fay” function very well as children’s poetry. Sometimes close examination of the less-than-great enables a critic to define the differences between art and near-art, and thus ultimately to approach definitions of the nature of high art. That is Poe’s real subject in the portions of this careful and thoughtful essay which are devoted to close literary analysis.

The argument that provides his “frame,” however, the one about national pride and literary judgment, is as important to Poe. Sidney Moss reminds us how hard Poe fought throughout his career for higher ethical and critical standards in the discussion of American works.<sup>10</sup> To praise “puerilities,” Poe writes, “as among the loftiest efforts of the human mind” just because they are American, “is to prove ourselves at once a fool, a malingerer, and no patriot” (p. 298). “That we have among us poets of the loftiest order we believe—” he concludes, “but we do not believe that these poets are Drake and Halleck” (p. 318).

Poe is literary patriot enough. In response to the familiar cliché

about how the practical workaday Americans will never produce true poetry, Poe growsl, "Those who have taken most careful note of our literature for the last ten or twelve years, will be most willing to admit that we are a poetical people; and in no respect is that fact more plainly evinced than in the eagerness with which books professing to compile or select from the productions of our native bards [such as the works of the anthologist Rufus Griswold, which Poe is discussing], are received and appreciated by the public."<sup>11</sup> Poe wrote that in 1842; he was even angrier in 1845 at John Wilson ("Christopher North") of *Blackwoods* for insulting James Russell Lowell, and extended the target of his griping to the power of the entire British critical establishment:

There is not a more disgusting spectacle under the sun than our subserviency to British criticism. It is disgusting, first, because it is truckling, servile, pusillanimous—secondly, because of its gross irrationality. We *know* the British to bear us little but ill-will—we know that, in no case, do they utter unbiased opinions of American books—we know that in the few instances in which our writers have been treated with common decency in England, these writers have either openly paid homage to English institutions, or have had lurking at the bottom of their hearts a secret principle at war with Democracy:—we *know* all this, and yet, day after day, submit our necks to the degrading yoke of the crudest opinion that emanates from the fatherland. Now if we *must* have nationality, let it be a nationality that will throw off this yoke.<sup>12</sup>

Readers of Poe familiar with his cool attitude toward popular government will perhaps be surprised at his fervor here in defense of democracy. He *is* inconsistent—patriotic in "Politian" (1835-45), suspicious of aristocracy in several stories, critical of national taste in "The Philosophy of Furniture" (1840) and elsewhere, hostile to popular rule in "Mellonta Tauta"—but an unfair assault on a compatriot apparently brings out the democrat and patriot in him. No need, however, to labor the point: Poe shows all the national self-

consciousness one could reasonably expect of an author.

-2-

### Poe and the Media

“ . . . lastly, I effected a bargain . . . and united all the literature of the country in one magnificent magazine. . . .”

—Thingum Bob, in Poe’s “The Literary Life of Thingum Bob, Esq.”

For several generations Poe specialists have worked to debunk the ghoul-haunted version of Mr. Poe’s biography. They are correct; the ugliest aspects of the older image of Poe were based on hearsay and deliberate slander. We know that a good deal of his literary output may be understood in more-or-less everyday terms. However unsuccessful we Poeians have been in altering the picture of Poe which appears in the popular media, in short, we seem to have convinced one another that Poe must have been sober at least some of the time and that there are reasons to question the reliability of evidence for some of the seamier things we used to think were true about him. Establishing Poe’s close ties to the media of his time should help us establish context for both works and behavior. Yet despite a number of very good books that have appeared in recent years in which are discussed the intimate relationship between Poe and the print publications of his day,<sup>13</sup> I’m not sure that we fully grasp how much of Poe can be understood in terms of the push and pull of the media.

We should be aware of the pressure of the media in at least two senses. First, there are fairly obvious matters, for instance, the frequency with which Poe discusses the printing and publishing industries themselves. On a less obvious, but in some ways more profound, level there is also the pull of the media as the media scholars of the 1960’s explained the idea: it can often be said in Poe, to use Marshall McLuhan’s famous phrase, that “the medium is the message.”<sup>14</sup>

The obvious first. Poe talks a great deal about the business and methods of printing. In a passage published in 1828—and which, incidentally, I am quite certain Poe knew—James Fenimore Co-

per wrote, "in America the printer came into existence before the author."<sup>15</sup> The smell of printers' ink is upon Poe, a practicing editor who knows not merely the drudgery of editorial offices, but also the processes that go on in the print shop. He shares this quality, too, with Mark Twain; we have not had any trouble connecting Mark Twain to the American environment and to American social history. An easy example may be found in Poe's story "X-ing a Paragrab" (1849). To tell the honest truth, I do not know precisely what is Poe's target in this satire,<sup>16</sup> but I understand fully those parts of the story which treat the difficulties encountered by Bob, a twelve year old printer's devil. The tale has to do with squabbling editors. Bob's editor, embroiled in a literary brawl, has composed a paragraph filled with "O's." Poe lets his readers in on the jargon of the composing room: "Meantime the devil to whom copy was entrusted, ran up stairs to his 'case,' in an unutterable hurry, and forthwith made a commencement at 'setting' the MS. 'up'." The rest of the story has to do with the consequences of Bob's discovery that all of his "O's" have been lifted; his decision to substitute X's for the O's sets up the opportunity for some puns in the last few pages; the story concludes with Bob telling us that his editor never *could* be "persvaded fur to drink like other folks, but vas continually a-svigging o' that ere blessed XXX ale, and, as a naiteral consekvence, it just puffed him up savage and made him X (cross) in the Xtreme."

Poe's interest in the processes involved in getting work to the public extended to all aspects of magazine and book publication. He commented on the physical appearance of books, the quality of paper, page size, typography and design. He said that he liked to use cuts, but much preferred the suggestiveness of woodcuts to the more explicit quality of the increasingly popular steel engravings. Plates or illustrations were tremendously important to magazine publishers in Poe's day. Editors believed that good plates could quickly double the circulation of a magazine. We have to remember where we were in the history of the media in the 1830's and 1840's: photography was available and very exciting, but photographs could not yet be printed in books, newspapers or magazines.

The other visual mass media with which we are familiar were not, of course, yet available. The steam and electronic revolutions,

however, were well under way; the world felt smaller, as we have seen in discussing technology. The combination of these forces produced a great hunger for visual materials relating to exotic places. The tug we recognize when examining twentieth-century photo essays on far-off lands—the sort known best in the *National Geographic*—was already strongly felt by Poe’s day. Those *National Geographic* articles richly illustrated with “Kodachromes by the author” have their clear precedents in articles, often written after the cut had been produced, on interesting or exotic places, which ran in many American and British magazines in this period.<sup>17</sup>

Poe responded in several ways. There are tales such as “The Balloon- Hoax” about travel and the new technology, of course, but also works designed to appeal because of their exoticism. His abortive serial novel, *The Journal of Julius Rodman*, exploits interest in the trans-Mississippi west; his novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* pretends to be a factual account of adventure in latitudes further south than any previously explored. Any number of stories are set in exotic or picturesque places: “A Tale of the Ragged Mountains” in the misty Virginia mountains named in the title, “The Assigination,” his romantic fantasy on Byronic gossip, in Venice; “A Descent into the Maelstrom,” at a remote location off the coast of Norway, and so on.

As for the medium as message: consider first Poe’s letter to Mrs. Richmond (“Annie”)<sup>18</sup> in which he asks her to read his story “Hop-Frog” (1849), published in a frankly commercial “sporting magazine,” *The Flag of our Union*. He said that *The Flag of our Union* was “not a very respectable journal, perhaps, in a literary point of view, but one that pays as high prices as most of the magazines.” Poe’s self-consciousness in the letter shows, obviously, that he knew that where your work appeared affected readers’ attitudes toward what you wrote.

Poe knew how to make format speak, too. Most of the magazines for which he wrote carried articles and sketches as well as fiction, and did not distinguish fiction from non-fiction through format. Poe frequently made this fact about medium part of his message by writing stories which masquerade as articles.<sup>19</sup> Thus “The Imp of the Perverse” (1845) pretends to be a philosophical discussion until nine paragraphs from the end, and “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar”

(1845) starts by explaining that it was written to counteract gossip about a remarkable event:

Of course I shall not pretend to consider it any matter for wonder, that the extraordinary case of M. Valdemar has excited discussion. It would have been a miracle had it not—especially under the circumstances. Through the desire of all parties concerned, to keep the affair from the public, at least for the present, or until we had farther opportunities for investigation—through our endeavors to effect this—a garbled or exaggerated account made its way into society, and became the source of many unpleasant misrepresentations, and, very naturally, of a great deal of disbelief. It is now rendered necessary that I give the facts—as far as I comprehend them myself. (134)

The best illustration of this sensitivity, perhaps, is his tale “The Balloon-Hoax.” Poe had numerous ties to newspaper journalism, and a razor-sharp sense of how newspapers worked and what they could do. Harold Scudder<sup>20</sup> tells the story of the connection between Poe’s hoax and an extraordinarily fast run by a packet ship. In February of 1844, a packet ship on the trip between Charleston and New York beat the mail service by three days. Poe used this media fact to make credible the scoop appearing in the “extra” of the *New York Sun*. It explained how the *Sun* could have a story no other paper carried: it would be three days before anyone could check. The “story” in the extra, of course, was Poe’s tale, a work of fiction masquerading as a newspaper story, which worked because of his acute sensitivity to what newspaper readers were like and what they knew. Poe’s tale, moreover, gains plausibility because the people involved in the great balloon adventure, a supposed trip from Great Britain to Charleston, South Carolina, were real persons, balloonists whose names had been before the public somewhat earlier when they were involved in a true and almost equally remarkable balloon trip: they had flown from Great Britain to Germany. Poe’s tale, then, is not only about media, but somehow “through” and “because of” media as well.

One could point also to what I suppose should be called “comparative journalism,” for one needs approximately such a label to explain the structure of Poe’s tale “The Mystery of Marie Roget” (1842). This is the tale in which Poe takes the details of a notorious murder case that occurred in New York and transposes them to Paris. It makes dull reading, to tell the truth, and has always seemed to me the weakest of Poe’s detective stories, but its journalistic assumptions are interesting enough: Poe’s detective, Dupin, sits in his study reading accounts of the murder from the various newspapers, and Poe, who identifies the American newspapers he has in mind, alleges that he knows enough of their strengths and weaknesses to be able to characterize a given fact or interpretation as reliable or unlikely.

Related to this is comparative journalism of another sort, his practice of gathering together various reviews. He once published a special supplement of the *Southern Literary Messenger* in order to present reviews of his work as its editor; the supplement consists of brief comments from Poe, and a lengthy string of reviews, friendly and unfriendly, abusive and intelligent. He did the same thing in fictional form in the story “The Literary Life of Thingum Bob, Esq.” (1844) in which “Thingum Bob’s” literary effusions are variously greeted by a group of ignorant and biased reviewers for different literary magazines. The story is thus not only a satire on a specific writer, Lewis Gaylord Clark, but also an attack on the corrupt system of patronage and favoritism that prevailed in the interlocking worlds of newspaper, magazine and book publishing in Poe’s lifetime.

Finally, one wants to remember Poe’s long-time dream of owning his own first-class literary magazine. I take this as a sure sign of Poe’s confidence that he could play upon the print media of his day as upon an organ.

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### Poe and Popular Culture

We now demand the light artillery  
of the intellect; we need the curt, the  
condensed, the pointed, the readily  
diffused—in place of the verbose,

the detailed, the voluminous, the  
inaccessible.

—Poe, “Marginalia”

I said at the outset that these categories overlap. Much of the material suggested under the heading “the media” could be placed here in a discussion of the relationship between Poe and popular culture. But I chose to make popular culture a separate heading in order to stress the homeliness of some of Poe’s materials. “Some Words With a Mummy” (1845), for instance, has its time and place writ large upon it. This is the story in which foolish scientific amateurs obtain a surplus mummy from a museum and bring it to life. Their attempts to impress the ancient Egyptian with the accomplishments of modern, particularly American, and especially New York, civilization fail; the revived mummy keeps insisting that things were better and more impressive in ancient Egypt. This framework allows Poe to make topical and local jokes.

The story idea itself, first, exploits popular interests. There was a tremendous amount of curiosity about the exciting field of Egyptology, brought into the world spotlight by Napoleon’s Egyptian campaign, and kept in public view through a series of spectacular revelations. Thus when Poe and his snickering collaborators at the *New York Sun* planned their balloon-hoax, they chose to fill out the page of “*The Extra Sun*” on which the story ran with an article on Egyptology. It was, in other words, still front page news.

The texture of the story, second: much of “Some Words With a Mummy” consists of material of a sort which would be familiar to anyone who knows American popular magazines, a string of scientific and technological curiosities. Having shown that he is philosophically more sophisticated than his interrogators, the Egyptian refuses to be impressed by phrenology, animal magnetism, modern astronomy, or optics, topics on which the questioners assume that a comparison of Egypt with “the moderns and more especially with the Yankees, altogether [attests] to the superior solidity of the Egyptian skull.” (519) But the poor Egyptian finally has to admit that his civilization has nothing to match the majesty of the famous riprap fountain at Bowling Green, nor those much-advertised patent medicines, Pannonner’s

losenges or Brandreth's pills. The story, in other words, makes use not only of local New York jokes, but the humor of advertisements as well. The reader will perhaps recall that Melville also responded to patent medicines. There is a passage in *Moby-Dick* in which he explains how one would treat a tummy-ache in the sperm whale: row up to the front end of the beast with a few boatfuls of Brandreth's pills, shovel them in, and flee. Such cheerful tastelessness reminds one very precisely of contemporary children's scatological jokes about such products as Ex-Lax.<sup>21</sup>

Vulgar jokes occur with some frequency in Poe. Elmer R. Pry noted one recently in Poe's story "Three Sundays in a Week."<sup>22</sup> He points out that the discussion of a wedding employs the phrase "come off" in a context which clearly implies sexual connotations; reinforcing the sexual line are references to the bride's "plum." "Plum" had the same sexual connotations in slang as "cherry" does today. We are sure that Pry is right, first, because similar obscene jokes appear elsewhere in Poe, and also because Poe has his characters laugh at them in "Three Sundays in a Week."

Poe's attitudes toward sex, while complex, seem very much characteristic of his age. However overdrawn was her Freudian portrait of Poe, Marie Bonaparte was unquestionably right in pointing out that in prudish ages a substitution gets made of death for sex.<sup>23</sup> I imagine that it is for this reason more than any other that Poe's heroines expire in their wedding chambers, in their wedding beds and under circumstances which, as numerous other critics have pointed out, strongly suggest such "substitution." Thus Poe's famous dictum that the most beautiful subject for a poet is the death of a beautiful woman, a statement which might seem on first glance to isolate Poe from the everyday life of *any* culture, seems on closer inspection instead to reflect some very basic forces within *his*. A Jungian might argue that the forces are from sources deeper, indeed, than "culture" itself.

Many Poe stories reflect the interests and activities of an urban American in the first half of the nineteenth century. Several seem to have been inspired by theatergoing: I think in particular of "King Pest" (1835), "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842) and "The Spectacles" (1844). The first I suspect because of its dance-of-death,

graveyard-grotesque, slapstick-macabre subject and plot: there is a theatrical tradition of such material.<sup>24</sup> The second borrows its setting from the stage; Poe gives literal stage directions, telling us how his tale is to be mounted: a long corridor exists only to hold braziers, the light from which is to shine through the colored windows of the string of chambers through which his doomed revelers move. And the third story actually takes place largely in a New York theater.

It would not be hard to multiply examples of Poe's involvement with popular culture. Both in obvious matters of texture and detail, and on more profound levels of attitude, prejudice and hang-ups, he seems a citizen of his time and place.

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#### Poe and American Values

[T]he origin of the principal social evils of any given land is not to be found (except in a much less degree than we usually suppose) either in republicanism or monarchy or any especial method of government—. . . we must look for the source of our greatest defects in a variety of causes totally distinct from such action—in a love of gain, for example. . . .

—Poe, in a review of Friedrich von Raumer, *England in 1835*

Having stressed, some pages back, Poe's ties to romantic idealism, with its strong undercurrent of mysticism, it may seem paradoxical that I conclude by claiming that Poe believes in those sacred values of modern western civilization discussed in our first chapter. The two seem contradictory: the first, transcendental and holistic; the latter, "linear" and analytic. Well, Whitman and Emerson warned us about worrying overmuch about consistency or contradictions! Both positions are certainly characteristic of Poe's age, and both are evident in Poe's work. Moreover, as I suggested, romantic idealism, mysticism and occultism are in large part a reaction to the processes of industrialization, compartmentalization, specialization and the

other characteristics of modernization which western sacred values justify and in large measure create. If the two are contradictory, they are also symbiotic.

By “sacred values,” again, I mean those values which, on the most highly condoned level, one never finds attacked; these are values to which even opponents in disputes will agree—indeed, both sides may generally be shown to be appealing to the same values. Two quick examples: “profit,” while undoubtedly a value that is very important in our culture, is not, by this definition “sacred.” On the most highly condoned level, one can find it under attack, find statements about its over-emphasis, or the need to keep it in proper perspective. “Fair play,” in contrast, is never—at least in the statements and materials examined in a recent study—questioned.<sup>25</sup> Opponents in a given argument are likely to refer to it to bolster their cases.

One family of sacred values could roughly be called “cartesian.” Such values are consistently affirmed in Poe. Rational explanations of puzzling phenomena can be found. The celebrated and bewildering “automated” chess player of Maelzel, Poe demonstrates, will yield its secret to the analytical observer. Proper analysis will crack any cipher, we learn in “The Gold-Bug” (1843) and in Poe’s editorial columns in which he invites readers to send in passages in code for him to decipher. Indeed, even his version of that apparently contradictory philosophical idealism, the heritage of his reading in Greek idealists and modern philosophers such as Fichte, is ultimately grounded on a belief in a universe that will give up its laws to man. And those laws will be reasonable, even comprehensible in physical terms. It is for this reason that he argues in *Eureka* and his mystical fantasies that spirituality must ultimately have some physical “carrier.” Sometimes he says that he believes there is an “ether” which provides the physical basis for idealism—it pervades the entire universe, and even our thoughts literally set it in motion, so that every human thought changes the universe. At other times, he says that he is an atomist, and that the essential unity of all material creation is the underlying physical explanation for that occult or holistic world view which we have already discussed. The point is the same either case. He wants to find a way to have both his cartesian rationalism and his idealism.

Dostoevski was perhaps the first to notice that even at his most

fantastic Poe is rigorously logical. The weird happenings of his best-known macabre tales can almost always be accounted for “realistically”: often they are perceived by an unstable character, and so might be a reflection of his mental state. And “Even his most unbounded imagination,” Dostoevski says, “betrays the true American.” Even the strangest visions are compelling because of Poe’s “power of details.”<sup>26</sup> I think Dostoevski connects the Americanness with the love of fact and detail; he says that it is what makes Poe different from other writers of fantasy.

Another range of national values strongly expressed on the sacred level has to do with individual potential and creativity. (This group of values includes such things as Individual Potential, Talent or Genius, Self-Expression, Creativity, Innovation, Diversity, Indigenoussness, Naturalness.) I do not think it is necessary to cite chapter and verse in Poe’s critical writings to show that he subscribes to the entire range. Poe stood, for example, for great artistic freedom, for a system in which the creative spirit had far freer access to society’s media and rewards than was the case in his own day. That life-long battle against literary back-scratching and “old school tie” to which we have referred was fought in the name of fair play in the cause of those values which I have just listed.

Indeed, about the only value on the list of sacred values which does not find consistent endorsement in Poe is Meliorism, for Poe is truly suspicious of the possibility of genuine progress. For all that he attacks injustice, he is skeptical of the national faith that human reason can devise better institutions, and that better institutions will produce a better life for mankind. He remains suspicious, as we noted, of “Mob,” though he also makes occasional attacks on aristocratic pretension. In several stories he mocks the national confidence that our democratic institutions will bring on the golden age. This is especially clear in “Mellonta Tauta” (1849). Characters living a millennium from now look back on our day and laugh at such ideas. They themselves, however, are shown to be as prone to error and to cocksure temporal chauvinism as were Poe’s contemporaries. Thus even the one value that Poe attacks links him clearly to his society. And the point he makes—that a few hundred years will put any civilization’s pretensions in perspective—was made by other Americans

in his day. Indeed, science of the period encouraged such statements, for the great discoveries in archeology, especially the work of the Egyptologists, and in geology, made people very much aware of the enormous age of the earth. As E. P. Richardson has pointed out,<sup>27</sup> Thomas Cole's series of paintings "The Course of Empire" (1836) stirred audiences precisely because of the new and acutely frightening sense of "pastness" in the period in which it was produced. Thus Poe's suspicion of the efficacy of governmental and institutional reform is itself a clear reflection not only of his conservative political attitudes, but of strongly-felt popular intellectual currents. Even the apparent contradiction between his hostility to Jacksonian and post-Jacksonian popular politics and his quite frequent attacks on aristocratic pretensions—in tales such as "Hop-Frog" (1849), "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842) and "Mystification" (1837)—are in no way inconsistent with vacillations in national attitudes in his age. On the contrary, they are very typical.

A brief word, while we are on the subject, on Poe and American government: only an understandable ignorance of the nature and details of the day-to-day exposure of Americans to politics in Poe's era can account for the failure of some commentators to see how large an element politics is in Poe's work. Some of his tales are topical political satires: I think especially of "Four Beasts in One/The Homo-Cameleopard" (1836) and "The Man That Was Used Up" (1839). In others, Poe inserts political referents as incidental jokes and allusions: good examples appear in the story we were just discussing, "Mellonta Tauta," where Poe works in references to a New York City official, a senator, the President, and so forth.<sup>28</sup> Sidney Kaplan thinks that *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* contains a racist political allegory;<sup>29</sup> though I am not sure that he is right, I have a strong suspicion that Poe intended an allegorical statement on the South and its "peculiar institution" in "The System of Dr. Tarr and Prof. Fether" (1845).<sup>30</sup> There is no need to belabor the point: one can begin with Burton Pollin's valuable *Dictionary of Names and Titles in Poe's Collected Works* (New York, 1968), select some political figures, see how often Poe mentions them, then look in the Virginia Edition (or the AMS reprint of it) to check out the context. One comes away convinced that Poe was not isolated from national political interests, forces and personalities.

I conclude from this brief run-down of ties to his world that we can connect Poe to all those fields of study we use to understand an age and place: intellectual history because he reflects the interests of his age; sociology, because he carries many period, class and race attitudes; “New History,” because he shows us how men lived on the day-to-day level; popular culture, because he understands and responds to it; psychohistory, because he is a fabulous source of information about the underside of the Victorian mind, and material culture, because he records it in detail. He seems to me as American as violence, idealism, racism (and its adversary, fair play), the Wild West, electronics, occultism and apple pie.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Portions of this chapter appear in my “Poe and American Society,” *Canadian Review of American Studies*, IX, 1 (Spring 1978), 16-33, and are reprinted by permission.

<sup>2</sup> The passage is from “The Colloquy of Monos and Una” (1841), in S. Levine and S. Levine, *The Short Fiction of EAP*, 120. Subsequent references to this edition will be handled in parentheses in the text.

<sup>3</sup> On saying which he picked up his notes and exited quickly, before we in the class could ruin the effect by asking questions, through the famous professors’ quick-escape door directly behind the lectern in the large classroom in Sever Hall, Harvard, in which he taught the American literature survey. The time was Fall semester, 1951. He told me some years later—in June of 1958—that I had changed his mind about what he said in that “silly lecture.”

<sup>4</sup> Vernon Louis Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought: An Interpretation of American Literature from the Beginnings to 1920* (New York, 1927-30); F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York, 1941).

<sup>5</sup> Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature* (New York, 1942, 1956). See especially pp. 131-32 of the 1956 Anchor edition for his reaction to Parrington’s dismissal of Poe. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass., 1950).

<sup>6</sup> In the *Southern Literary Messenger* for April, 1836, Poe reviewed J. K. Paulding’s *Slavery in the United States* and a work called *The South Vindicated from the Treason and Fanaticism of Northern Abolitionists* (no author is given: Poe lists the publisher as “H. Manley”). James A. Harrison, ed, *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York, 1902), VIII, 265-75. Poe used most of his review to expound his own views on slavery.

<sup>7</sup> “The Balloon-Hoax” (1844), “Mellonta Tauta” (1849), and “Hans Pfaal” (1835).

<sup>8</sup> The Twain and technology *maven* is Sherwood Cummings; see his “Mark Twain and the Sirens of Progress, *American Studies (JCMVASA)*, I, 2 (Fall, 1960), 17-24.

<sup>9</sup> Review of *The Culprit Fay, And Other Poems*, by Joseph Rodman Drake; *Alwick Castle, With Other Poems*, by Fitz Green Halleck, *Works*, VIII, 275-318.

<sup>10</sup> *Poe’s Literary Battles: The Critic in the Context of His Literary Milieu* (Durham, North Carolina, 1963). For response to this particular review, see 55ff.

<sup>11</sup> Review of *The Poets and Poetry of America: with an Historical Introduction*, from *The Boston Miscellany* (November, 1842). *Works*, XI, 147-60, 149.

<sup>12</sup> “Editorial Miscellany,” *The Broadway Journal* (October 4, 1845), 199.

<sup>13</sup> See especially Perry Miller, *The Raven and the Whale* (New York, 1956); Michael Allen, *Poe and the British Magazine Tradition* (New York, 1969); Robert D. Jacobs, *Poe: Journalist and Critic* (Baton Rouge, 1969); Sidney Moss, *Poe’s Literary Battles* (Durham, North Carolina, 1963) and my *Edgar Poe* (especially the chapter, “The Magazine Environment”).

<sup>14</sup> McLuhan’s own writings most scholars found intriguing and suggestive but maddeningly impressionistic. His most useful book, I think, is *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York, 1964). I find the writings of Father Walter Ong more immediately useful. See *In the Human Grain: Further Explorations of Contemporary Culture* (New York, 1967) especially.

<sup>15</sup> “Notions of the Americans: Picked up by a Travelling Bachelor” (Philadelphia, Carey, Lea & Carey, 1828), 2 vols. Cooper’s name does not appear in the book—it pretends to be a series of letters from the “bachelor” to European friends of different nationalities.

<sup>16</sup> Nor do other scholars, so far as I know. For our best guess on the precise victim of Poe’s satire, see S. and S. Levine, *Short Fiction*, 436, notes 2, 3, and 7.

<sup>17</sup> To my taste, the production of this sort of material reached its zenith in the 1870’s in *Harper’s* magazine. *Harper’s* in this era carried travel articles far lengthier and more elaborate than those of Poe’s day, illustrated with extraordinarily informative engravings, and, often, texts more interesting and satisfactory in many respects than those in more modern periodicals. But Poe and his colleagues had blazed the trails to Asia, the Poles and the Far West.

<sup>18</sup> The letter is not clearly dated; Arthur Hobson Quinn thinks it was written in February, 1849. See Quinn, *EAP: A Critical Biography* (New York, 1941), 594.

<sup>19</sup> This was especially easy to do in magazines which did not print the author's name under the title of each piece: the reader had no clue at all. See the discussion of false starts in Poe's fiction in Benjamin Franklin Fisher IV, "Blackwood Artists" à la Poe: How to make a False Start Pay," *Revue des Langues Vivantes*, XXXIX (1972), 418-32.

<sup>20</sup> "Poe's 'Balloon-Hoax,'" *American Literature*, XXI (May, 1949), 179-90.

<sup>21</sup> There are other examples of Poe's contact with advertisements, too. Although Poe fought hard against such backscratching, his own *Broadway Journal* ran articles praising firms that advertised in *The Broadway Journal*. And in "The Literary Life of Thingum Bob, Esq." Poe uses the name "Op-podeldoc" [sic]. "Opodeldoc" was another patent medicine name, as Burton Pollin pointed out ("Poe's Use of 'Oppodeldoc' and Other Patent Medicines," *Poe Newsletter*, IV [December, 1971], 30-32). See S. and S. Levine, *Short Fiction*, 423 for yet another popular-culture connotation of the name: it is also a racehorse.

<sup>22</sup> "Bawdy Punning in 'Three Sundays in a Week,'" *Poe Studies* IX, 2 (December, 1976), 54.

<sup>23</sup> Marie Bonaparte, *Edgar Poe: Etude Psychanalytique* (1933), trans. John Rodker as *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psycho-Analytic Interpretation* (London, 1949).

<sup>24</sup> The tradition seems less strong in the legitimate theater today than formerly: I have never encountered it in a modern play, but students of the theater tell me that it was strong in Poe's time. It is still readily visible in other aspects of our popular culture: Walt Disney's early graveyard musical cartoon was of precisely the sort; slapstick gothic still entertains us on the screen ("Young Frankenstein") and the tube ("The Munsters").

<sup>25</sup> The present discussion of values follows the scheme described in my "Art, Values, Institutions and Culture: An Essay in American Studies Methodology and Relevance," *American Quarterly*, XXIV (May, 1972), 131-65. See the more detailed exposition at the opening of the present study, and the explanation of the "sacred" values in the Appendix.

<sup>26</sup> Fyodor M. Dostoevski, "Three Tales of Edgar Poe" (Dostoevski's preface to "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Black Cat" and "The Devil in the Belfry" in his magazine), *Wremia [Time]*, 1 (1861), 230. Quoted in Eric Carlson, *The Recognition of EAP: Selected Criticism Since 1829* (Ann Arbor, 1966), 61, 62.

<sup>27</sup> *Painting in America* (New York, 1956), 167. Richardson writes, "The immensities of time past, the immeasurable perspectives of the earth's history are today an accepted part of our consciousness. It is difficult for us to conceive with what resistance and revulsion, with what shuddering awe and fearful delight, such ideas were received by men of 150 years ago."

<sup>28</sup> A full account of these matters appears in S. and S. Levine, *Short Fiction*, 616-19.

<sup>29</sup> See the Introduction to Kaplan's edition of *Pym* (New York, 1960), vii-xxv. Evelyn J. Hinz disagrees with Kaplan. See her "'Tekeli-li': *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* as Satire," *GENRE*, III (Dec., 1970), 379-99.

<sup>30</sup> Reasons for the suspicion are spelled out in S. and S. Levine, *Short Fiction*, 548-49.

## Chapter 5 Hawthorne and the Industrial Revolution

*“In the Name of the Prophet—figs!!”*

—Street-cry of “the pious hawkers of Constantinople,” reported humorously in James and Horace Smith’s *Rejected Addresses*, and from that source quoted by Poe as a motto for a satiric tale

Despite Hawthorne’s usual complaints about his lack of talent in representing the “beef and ale” of everyday life, and his usual theoretical justification for leaving such things out—this always boils down to his saying, in effect, “I am a romancer, dealing not with the truths of the physical world, with which I can play more or less fast and loose, but rather with the truths of the spirit; this gives me license to be unreal”—despite all this, he has made *The House of the Seven Gables* quite rich in the texture of life in a nineteenth century American town. Thus we learn about gadgets, about the railroad, about the trade of a daguerrotypist, about cabs, omnibuses, the city water cart and its losing battle with dust in the summer street, and even some things about consumer economics, about tradesmen with carts and wagons selling fish, meat, and other products, and of course, about “cent-shops.” I think again of Mexico, where much small trade and service is still handled in such ways. In residential districts in Mexico City, tradesmen and craftsmen come into the neighborhood, and advertise themselves by characteristic sounds—noises, whistles, calls, or tunes: a bell means the garbage cart is coming, a steam whistle that the locomotive-looking wagon of hot yams and baked bananas is going by; a singsong cry heralds fresh fruit, and a doleful “Gaaaz!” shouted into the hallway of an apartment house brings out householders to purchase tanks of liquid gas. The knife and scissors sharpener announces himself with an airy arpeggio on his pan’s-pipe; he still brings his wheel to the shade of a wall or tree as he did to that

of the Pyncheon elm in Hawthorne's Salem, and, while you can get your shoes repaired in a shop or "shoe hospital," you can also take them to the shabby man who carries his shop in his pocket, and fixes shoes right out on the street. Thus the housewives and maids of any *colonia* today would soon learn the sound of the fish-hawker's horn which old Clifford Pyncheon heard, and, if the fish were fresh and not too dear, would visit the cart to buy *lisa*, *sierra*, or *huachinango*.<sup>1</sup> Such trade is less institutionalized and more personal; you dealt in Hawthorne's Salem as you do in the *calles* of Mexico with people rather than stores or supermarkets. We learn that there still is some barter in Salem and that business is not strictly business; it is also social interaction, as when young Phoebe deals with a very old woman who has come to trade homespun yarn for whatever she can bargain the shopkeepers out of.<sup>2</sup>

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#### Clifford and the Water-Cart

The audience was of a generally decent and respectable character . . . all looking rather suburban than rural. In these days, there is absolutely no rusticity, except when the actual labor of the soil leaves its earth-mould on the person.

—Miles Coverdale, in Hawthorne's  
*The Blithedale Romance* (1852)

That old woman is interesting to us because, along with all of the other miscellaneous information Hawthorne drops about nineteenth century Salem, he tells us she is the last woman in town who still spins her own yarn.

That fact tells us important things about the enormous transformations through which the United States had gone in the previous decades. Had we looked at the start of the nineteenth century we would have seen a very different country from the place Hawthorne was showing us in the 1850's. The United States in 1800 was not only a new political experiment, it was a society still primarily rural and

agricultural, technologically not very impressive,<sup>3</sup> linked by certain shared cultural and political assumptions, and primarily western European in those portions of its population which possessed political clout. Its cities were small, though important in their influence, and in cities and in countryside, for the most part, the family (which sometimes meant the family plus apprentices, servants, employees, and/or slaves) was the basic economic unit. The rural woman not only spun her own yarn, like the lady in *The House of the Seven Gables*, she also manufactured soap and had charge of a wide number of household, garden and barnyard activities that were productive in nature and for which she had been trained since childhood. The man who married her did so in large part for sound personal economic reasons: he became immediately richer on acquiring a wife who had these skills. She was likely to feel the same way about it, since her husband had been “socialized” into a wide range of complimentary skills and responsibilities. Both, moreover, wanted children for economic as well as emotional reasons, for each healthy child increased the labor force of the remarkable and durable economic unit which was the family.

Even the things that the rural family did not produce itself were likely to be produced by other families, the members of which viewed their roles in similar economic terms. Production was not centralized in factories or rationalized by production lines; commerce was generally not corporate. Thus the craft establishments that produced barrels, shoes, candles or iron products, the retail establishments of towns and cities, and even quite large mercantile enterprises were likely to be essentially familial in structure, although the definition of “family” might have to be enlarged, in the case of especially large projects, to include servants, apprentices, and more distant relatives, especially youngsters sent in to learn the trade. In such establishments, too, the wife played an important economic role. Depending on the enterprise, she might manage the considerable household logistics—feeding such a crew in itself was akin to running a small restaurant—supervise servants, or direct one or another aspect of the business, such as bookkeeping. It was not considered unladylike for her to understand the business—the idea that ladies had to be helpless, as we shall see, was a corollary effect of the next stage of modernization—and she

was perfectly capable of taking it over in the event of her husband's absence or death. Here, too, children were assets, not economic liabilities.

Hawthorne's novel is set midway in the change that was to transform American life by the end of the nineteenth century. By that time, the country would be immensely large, knit together by roads, rails, canals, and electronic media of communications. It would be ethnically heterogeneous: its ex-slaves, citizens, although badly treated; Native Americans, having been engulfed or transplanted, would be expected to vanish shortly (they did not); and millions of new Americans would have poured into the nation, mostly from southern and eastern Europe and the Far East. Most American families in 1900 were no longer economic units which produced goods. In affluent households, mother and the kids had lost their productive economic role; instead, daddy went out to work, and the rest stayed home to consume. If, perhaps, this made life physically easier for the wife and children, it also seems to have put new strains on them, for, deprived of the sense that they were part of the economic team, they began expecting unreasonable returns from family; "happiness" and "fulfillment," the conscious pursuit of which is guaranteed to produce unhappiness and frustration. In many poorer urban families, everyone worked, but generally not together in the older way: perhaps the father toiled long hours in a plant, while his wife took in piece-work of one sort or another, his daughter cleaned people's homes, and his young son tried to pick up odd jobs on the street.

Even the quality of time had changed. In *Walden* (1854), Henry David Thoreau noticed that having railroads in the country made the country run on time; he liked the attentive alertness which that produced. But, as he knew, there were dangers in the change, too. He feared that the railroad ran on the bodies of the underpaid workers who built it. A child working for a family enterprise in the eighteenth century worked very long hours, but the pace of work was usually humane; he could rest, chat, change tasks, often even take time off to play or learn. Benjamin Franklin grew up in such a shop; his father was "a tallow-chandler and sope-boiler." Young Franklin disliked the trade, yet his description of his work in the *Autobiography* makes clear the variety of work he did: ". . . I was employed in cutting

wick for the candles, filling the dripping mold and the molds for cast candles, attending the shop, going of errands, etc.”<sup>74</sup> The proprietor of an early New England mill employed children; he had them work the same dawn-to-dark hours, but failed to note that the machines in the mill had altered what that time meant: the looms and bobbins demanded a kind of constant, numbing, rhythmic attention unknown before the Industrial Revolution. He was a very nice man, and meant to be kindly to the youngsters in his employ. The sprinkler system he installed above their heads was turned on late each afternoon to keep them attentive and alert: a kind man could have done that only if he had failed to see what machines do to time.

Now not all of these transformations are visible in the Hawthorne novel, in part because of the novel’s limited range, and in part because it is a product of the midcentury, before all of these things had occurred or reached culmination. It is too early, for example, for there to be very much talk about a flood of really alien immigration; the flood is still a trickle, though it is visible now and then, as in the person of the young Italian organ grinder who appears on Pyncheon Street with his music, his animated mechanical figures, and his monkey which so disturbs Clifford. Yet to my mind, it is Hawthorne’s generation that lived through the most profound part of the change, for steam power, the telegraph, photography, the factory and the new sciences altered the world more radically than it had ever before been changed in a lifetime—more “basically,” I think, than anything since, as well, since subsequent changes all seem implicit in these. Chemistry was new; so were machine-powered transportation, instantaneous communication and widespread understanding of the extent of past time. Those alone are more fundamental than any innovations since, even, we must hope, atomic power. So many indications of change are present already that the world of Pyncheon Street, quiet though it is, dazzles and bewilders Clifford, the Rip Van Winkle of the tale, who has been out of circulation long enough to be startled by changes far more radical than those which bewildered Rip. Rip slept through the American Revolution; poor Clifford missed the Industrial Revolution.

Most of these changes can comfortably be handled by the list of characteristics which modernization theorists tell us typify modernizing societies. Industrialization and the increased impact of tech-

nological innovations are plentifully visible in Salem. The change in the system of distribution and the alteration in the structure of the family and in sex roles are closely related to specialization. And specialization and urbanization turn out to be opposite sides of the same coin, since the specialties tend to locate themselves in the towns; then, the towns' influence is felt far out in the countryside, as Hawthorne reminds us in another novel from the 1850's, *The Blithedale Romance*, when he has his narrator go to a show in the lecture hall of a tiny rural hamlet and remark, as he looks around the audience, that nowhere in the United States anymore can one find people who look really rural—they look, he says, suburban. And suburban, of course, usually implies, “We live here, and daddy travels to work in the town.” I doubt that Hawthorne has that in mind in that particular passage: the town is too remote. If the people look suburban, it must be because in manner and especially in dress they have the mark of the city upon them, which brings us back to where we began, to the old lady who came to Hepzibah Pyncheon's cent-shop to haggle with young Phoebe Pyncheon, and who still manufactured her own yarn. They look suburban, I presume, because they are wearing “store-boughten” clothes, and not homespun. Their clothing is made by specialists in manufacturing clothes.

Several other textural details, seemingly thrown out in passing, turn out to be thematically important. The ambivalence towards enterprise and modernization, notable in Thoreau, is present again in Hawthorne. This novel contains both the idea that commerce corrupts (37) and that it brings life and health. It is therapeutic when the broken old lady Hepzibah earns her first honest penny from her cent-shop (52); on the other hand, Hawthorne uses the pejorative “hucksteress” to refer to the career in Hepzibah's future.

The novel, moreover, even gives us some evidence about the commercial media of the day and about the nature of the reading audience. Hepzibah's tenant Holgrave is a fairly well-known magazine author. He has written for *Graham's* and for *Godey's*, two of the best-known periodicals of the period, places in which Hawthorne, Poe and other good magazinists were happy to publish. But Hepzibah's young country cousin Phoebe, a literate, bright, lively, alert and intelligent girl, has not heard of him, suggesting the existence

of a range of choices of interests, activities and reading matter. Not every literate young lady read the *Lady's Book*. We shall describe such voluntarism as characteristic of twentieth century society. Its existence should make us skeptical of easy generalities about taste, class and audience. The evidence of Hawthorne's novel suggests that even in 1850, the "mass media" exist, and that this early the mass of Americans fail to use them with the uniformity which that word "mass" implies. Something more akin to Tocqueville's voluntarism or our "web" seems to apply, even this early in the American version of media development. Americans pick and choose; no two seem to share exactly the same pattern of associations, friendships, affiliations, experiences and tastes. It is a point we should keep in mind, for since the popularization of the ideas of José Ortega y Gasset, there has been a tendency to confuse mass man—which really means "unthinking man"—with "man in the presence of the mass media." The two are not the same.<sup>5</sup>

Hawthorne understands, too, the implications of the railroad for changing society. It ties the world more closely together, as Clifford points out in an extraordinary passage which we'll discuss shortly. Clifford, who has been in prison for many years, and has a poetic and dreamy nature to start with, reacts with great strength to those things which have changed most dramatically since before his incarceration. From an upper window, he looks out on the world; when a political parade goes by one day, he almost falls from the window in his eagerness to make contact with the new life around him. We think of another characteristic of modernization: increased contact between the government and the citizen. We think of it again when we are told about Clifford's remarkable reaction to the municipal water-cart when it goes by to damp down the dust in the street. Clifford is startled and surprised every time he sees it; it is too new for him to get used to. Recall Emerson's comment on how the whole world now runs the errands of the individual citizen. Emerson's snow-clearers are the same municipal employees.

-2-  
Holgrave

How much mere industry proves!  
—Thoreau, *Journal*, November  
18, 1857

Nathaniel Hawthorne's sarcastic comments about what democracy does to leaders should not hide from us the fact that this is an intensely democratic book. We see Judge Pyncheon as a hypocritical public official in a democracy, who smiles his glaring smile and bows in sham cordiality even to the humblest, but Hawthorne does not want us to conclude that things were better in the good old days. Hawthorne, indeed, begins the book by telling us that his romance has a moral, and that the moral is the need to remove the dead hand of the past from our shoulder. The old Puritan ancestor's delusion about a regal family inheritance, and Hepzibah's humiliation because she, a lady and a descendant of one of the first families of the area, must now open a cent-shop to support herself, are closely related. Our sense that family ties shouldn't matter, that each individual ought to make it on his own, on the basis of his own talents and energy, sets us off from traditional societies; what is involved is an aspect of rationalization. It is not unfair to say that that side of modernization is largely what *The House of the Seven Gables* is about. Indeed, if one lists the characteristics which modernization theorists associate with modernization, each appears more or less prominently in the novel: urbanization, compartmentalization, industrialization, rationalization, increased government contact with the citizen, secularization, institutionalization, specialization. Hawthorne tells us that in the seventeenth century dispute between Colonel Pyncheon, who built the house of the seven gables, and the plebian Mathew Maule, laws and institutions that one expects to function more or less impersonally and "rationally" sometimes did not. He calls the dispute, ". . . this controversy between two ill-matched antagonists" and says that it occurred at a period . . . when personal influence had far more weight than now." (7) Maule, moreover, was executed in the witchcraft trials of the 1690's, "one of the martyrs to that terrible delusion. . . ." That

Hawthorne sees witchcraft only as a delusion in itself says much about modernization and rationalization.

We noted in an earlier chapter the suggestive evidence that Puritan use of the court system was different in kind from our own.<sup>6</sup> Case load seems to have gone up not in relation to situations that might have increased the frequency of different kinds of crimes or of disputes between individuals, but rather in relation to broad general threats against the Puritan commonwealth itself. It is almost as though the Puritans were going to court to assure themselves that everything was still all right, despite, for example, periodic attacks in England on the peculiar arrangements that made their colony so nearly an independent nation.

The courts, moreover, do not seem to have operated under certain common-law assumptions which we take to be universal in English-speaking places. The principle of equality before the law was by no means always adhered to in Massachusetts. Courts almost seemed to rule in a manner which, however apparently unfair, reassuringly reinforced the hierarchical structure of the society. We learn through Holgrave's short story<sup>7</sup> what we suspected from the beginning—that for the original Colonel Pyncheon to acquire Maule's land following Maule's execution for witchcraft, there must have been a lawsuit (194), undoubtedly "unfair" from a more modernized point of view. Two trials, then, the Salem witchcraft trial of old Maule and the suit to acquire Maule's land, mark an era when law and court meant different things than they did in the time of the novel, one because the "crime," witchcraft, had could no longer be considered the responsibility of civil government in a rationalized, "demythological" state; the other because what had been standard procedure in premodern times would seem corrupt in a modernizing nation.

The young daguerreotypist Holgrave himself, however, is Hawthorne's most obvious symbol of the new times. Hawthorne's account of Holgrave's career is significant in several senses. If in modernized societies one's job and one's status should increasingly depend upon ability and expertise, and less on family influence and tradition, a citizen might reasonably be expected to have tried out more than one sort of occupation; one might even develop an ideal of pluralism applied to profession, an idea which might eventually produce a cheerful

disregard of the class and status implications of some lines of work. Something of the sort exists for many contemporary Americans, who, though they now, perhaps, hold “professional” jobs, are not at all ashamed to tell of their earlier experiences in construction work, as waitresses, or whatever. Indeed, such radical shifts in status sometimes continue after a “higher” status is achieved: I know, for instance, of people who spend half of each year as substantial property owners and entrepreneurs in Maine, and the other half working—albeit sometimes not too hard—at “low status” jobs (bellhop, for example) in Florida; or retired merchants, executives and military officers with part-time jobs at fixed hourly salaries, held “just to keep busy” or “to keep up circulation” in such places as franchise operations, department stores or discount houses. The lack of serious self-consciousness about such experiences is special; it does not appear in many nations. Though my Mexican students, for instance, considered themselves socially quite radical, not one of them had ever held a “menial” job. All worked, but generally in the family business, at desk-jobs, or as middle-/or low-level bureaucrats. They were incredulous at my having once been a truck-driver; indeed, almost embarrassed that I would have told them such a thing, or perhaps at being in a class taught by an ex-truck driver.<sup>8</sup> Earlier that same academic year I had been guest professor at a university in Los Angeles where many of my students were not middleclass kids who worked at hard jobs part-time or during summers, but rather full-time truckers, prison guards, and checkout clerks who went to school at odd hours to effect sharp changes in social status. That is another idea familiar to *estadounidenses* but exotic abroad. Class lines are far less rigid in Mexico now than they once were, but they are still rigid by our standards, and a modernization theorist might point to his theory in explanation.

When Melville published *Typee* in 1846, his American readers assumed that the narrator was in fact the author; his British readers, unable to swallow the idea that a common sailor could write so well, did not. This was despite the efforts of the English publisher to make the book feel like non-fiction—he even had had the young author add “documentary” chapters so that it would seem less professional. It was also despite the fact that *Typee* was published as part of a series of non-fiction volumes. The difference in reception says much

about class assumptions and social mobility in the two countries. In some aspects of modernization, Great Britain, despite its head start, lagged behind its ex-colonies by 1846, a fact quickly to be reflected in phenomena as diverse as technological innovation, the ease with which social lines could be ignored, and literary responses.

I also sense in this matter of class-crossing a further reason for the friendship that would develop between the class-crossing Melville and the socially perceptive Hawthorne. Such things are generally unprovable, but we can prove the common interest. The first page of Melville's first novel shows it when the narrator of *Typee* contrasts himself as a poor whaler to comfortable "state-room" sailors; in *Redburn*, especially the early portions, we feel the pain and, finally, desperation of a poor youngster from a more genteel background than those of the people with whom he is going to work. Insecure Wellingborough Redburn suffers for his "truck-driving"; Ishmael, a little older, we sense, is almost pugnaciously proud of it. Hawthorne sees such alterations in station as almost a sign of Americanness.

For all his weaknesses, Holgrave is presented as a "type" of the American of the future—"in his culture and want of culture . . . in his faith, and in his infidelity; in what he had, and in what he lacked," Holgrave, Hawthorne says, ". . . might fitly enough stand forth as the representative of many compeers in his native land." (181)

Though now but twenty-two years old (lacking some months, which are years in such a life), he had already been, first, a country schoolmaster; next, a salesman in a country store; and, either at the same time or afterwards, the political editor of a country newspaper. He had subsequently travelled New England and the Middle States, as a pedlar, in the employment of a Connecticut manufactory of cologne-water and other essences. In an episodic way he had studied and practised dentistry, and with very flattering success, especially in many of the factory-towns along our inland streams. As a supernumerary official, of some kind or other, aboard a packet-ship, he had visited Europe, and found means, before his return, to see Italy, and part of France and

Germany. At a later period he had spent some months in a community of Fourierists. Still more recently he had been a public lecturer on Mesmerism, for which science (as he assured Phoebe, and, indeed, satisfactorily proved, by putting Chanticleer, who happened to be scratching near by, to sleep)<sup>9</sup> he had very remarkable endowments.

His present phase, as a daguerreotypist, was of no more importance in his own view, nor likely to be more permanent, than any of the preceding ones. (176-177)

Hawthorne makes clear that Holgrave's assumptions about what it takes to operate effectively in a modern society are accurate. His career would make no sense at all in a traditional society, in which one would expect a child to follow the family occupation, or to be apprenticed out, perhaps, to another occupation which would then become his lifework.

But it is not merely the ease with which one can change professions—it is the professions themselves. They are created out of the spreading effects of industrialization, and interrelated with the spread of rationalization, sometimes half-digested, to fields previously traditional in nature; related, too, to the development of the new sciences and of new pseudo-sciences which grew in the interstices between fact and speculation. *The House of the Seven Gables* dates from 1851; in 1855, when he was 52, Emerson entered the following extraordinary item in his journal:

*The new professions.* The phrenologist; the railroad man; the landscape gardener; the lecturer; the sorcerer, rapper, mesmeriser, medium; the daguerreotypist. Proposed: The Naturalist, and the Social Undertaker.<sup>10</sup>

Holgrave's career runs through Emerson's list except for landscape gardening (though he does smaller-scale gardening in the Pyncheon yard), but Poe provided a hero in that profession; significantly, indeed, he made him his ideal poet, the recreator of ancient and transcendent beauty in an otherwise imperfect world.<sup>11</sup> Hawthorne's hero—though we are never sure that "hero" is the right word for this whimsical,

skeptical, thoughtful, and self-critical fellow whom Hawthorne half mistrusts, and who half mistrusts himself—is the author’s version of the type of the modern. Full both of promise and menace, he symbolizes the changed and changing America which Hawthorne, for all his conspicuous modesty about his inability to portray the everyday world, so accurately mirrored.

-3-

### Hawthorne and the Media

It is a principal aspect of the electric age that it establishes a global network that has much of the character of our central nervous system.

—Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964)

There is simply no way to exaggerate the shock and exaltation produced by the overwhelming changes in thought and technology during the first decades of the nineteenth century, changes which Holgrave represents. I suppose that we are so accustomed to being told such things that while we do not challenge them, we do not feel their force. For my generation, television was an exciting innovation; when my family bought its first set, I wasted hours and days staring at the thing, kiddie shows, wrestling matches, test patterns, anything. But TV, powerful as it was, was really only an extension of the principle of radio,<sup>12</sup> whose simultaneity of transmission was already available via the telephone, and before it, the telegraph. The greatest shock was electrical transmission of information itself, the transformation from a world in which the fastest long-distance medium of transportation and communication was the sailing vessel to one in which wires tied the world together in a manner that changed everyone’s life, and put romantic intellectuals in mind of what they had always wanted to believe anyhow about the interrelations of things.

It is worth our while to try imaginatively to project ourselves back into the shoes of someone who lived through that change, and

then to remember that it was but one among a series of overwhelming alterations in the facts of life. The same generation that learned of the ancientness of the earth and the antiquity of human civilization had its own earth transformed by an engine that could produce rotary motion,<sup>13</sup> by the telegraph and by photography. So Hawthorne's choice of careers for young Holgrave is by no means capricious. And, like the telegraph, whose simultaneity seems to Clifford a "type" of the nature of the universe and of the human mind, the daguerrotype has occult implications: it is a sun-machine, its metal plate is literally a mirror (remember that vapor of mercury, a substance crucial to alchemy, was also crucial to the daguerreotype), and it sees spiritual truth, as Hawthorne's ugly Judge Pyncheon discovers, despite our attempts to produce more attractive images.<sup>14</sup> Thus paradoxically, some of the first and most world-transforming of the products of the new age of progress and rationality—for no other age has ever been so radically affected as was the early nineteenth century—suggested immediately to our artists the relevance of an ancient mystical philosophy.

Holgrave's other skills are no less reflective of this range of associations. There are some who believe, Hawthorne tells us in the usual ambiguous way in which he handled the not-quite-credible, that members of the Maule family have the ability to "influence . . . people's dreams. The Pyncheons, if all stories were true, haughtily as they bore themselves in the noonday streets of their native town, were no better than bond-servants to these plebian Maules, on entering the topsy-turvy commonwealth of sleep." Hawthorne continues, "Modern psychology, it may be, will endeavor to reduce these alleged necromancies within a system, instead of rejecting them as altogether fabulous." (p. 26) That last sentence is more than the usual gothicist's attempt to suggest a more or less convincing rational alternative to an event more easily explained as supernatural. Hawthorne lived in an age in which it truly seemed as though science were about to provide physical proof for various kinds of apparently "spiritual" ties.

Indeed, thinking people already had a pretty good idea of what that physical basis was going to be. There is a wondrous passage in *The House of the Seven Gables* in which Hawthorne's two "old owls," Hepzibah and Clifford, flee from the dead past of the Pyncheon house into the bewildering world outside. They take a train to nowhere, for

to Clifford, the new medium is itself the message. During that famous train ride, Clifford buttonholes a stranger and babbles on about how the world is “growing too ethereal and spiritual” for ancient evils to hold sway for very much longer. Mesmerism and spiritualism are the two examples of the trend which he thinks of first; his auditor calls them humbug. Clifford continues, in a passage about the telegraph which strongly suggests the writings of the media analysts of the nineteen fifties and sixties,

“Then there is electricity,—the demon, the angel, the mightily physical power, the all-pervading intelligence! . . . Is that a humbug too? Is it a fact—or have I dreamt it—that, by means of electricity, the world of matter has become a great nerve, vibrating thousands of miles in a breathless point of time? Rather, the round globe is a vast head, a brain, instinct with intelligence! Or, shall we say, it is itself a thought, nothing but thought, and no longer the substance which we deemed it!” (264)

Although Hawthorne, of course, is far more skeptical than dreamy Clifford that any force will transform his most basic given, the human heart, he does understand, as did Emerson, the capacity of a new medium to remake the feel of the world. Like Poe, he saw the connection between this new knowledge of electricity and philosophical idealism. As Holgrove can yoke mercury and the sun, so he can harness the probably electrical influences between minds, for, Maule that he is, he is an accomplished hypnotist.

I am not claiming, of course, that American writers invented this rationalization of spirituality via the medium of electricity. The idea simply was abroad, and had suggested itself to sensitive observers for decades. The root sources is probably Mesmer himself, who thought he discovered that a magnet moved near their bodies could affect his patients, and then that the magnet itself was not necessary—his hand alone would suffice because of its “animal magnetism.” In 1816, according to Mary Shelley, she, Shelley, Byron, and the odd doctor and author John Polidori passed several strange days together in which frightening dreams, schemes for gothic stories and scientific

speculation blended together; we are not surprised to note that there was talk about electricity as the medium of spiritual contact.<sup>15</sup> Thus when Poe said, of the insights of classical idealists, that their ideas are “simply true,” he, like other romantics, often meant what he said very literally. They had in mind the specific idea of the identity of thought with the universe. Both world and mind were tied by simultaneous spiritual flashes, and the telegraph not only made the analogy palpable, it suggested the scientific explanation for spirituality. The idea that the operations of the brain were electrical was already abroad in the land. I elsewhere have pointed to a fugitive item in an American magazine of the 1830’s, which reports that according to French scientific journals, “M. Magendie continues to obtain the happiest results from the application of electricity in affectations of the senses. . . .”<sup>16</sup>

The vision is fully adumbrated in Clifford’s speech on the train; Clifford tells us how transportation and the “ascending spiral curve” of progress are going to make us a nation of nomads again, more “etherealized,” less in love with things than with movement. One is forcibly reminded of recent statements about the retribalization of twentieth century life; Marhsall McLuhan thought that the electronic media would be responsible for a social transformation. One wonders whether he knew that Hawthorne’s Clifford accurately predicted the Winnebago.

I find it interesting that in Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (*Cien años de soledad*), in which the occultism is very explicit—alchemy, for example, plays a conspicuous role in the plot—the same technological innovations symbolize exactly what they do in Hawthorne: the gypsy Melquíades, alchemical adept, introduces the daguerreotype to Macondo; Aureliano Triste, tied to gypsy wonders by his ancestry and his profession,<sup>17</sup> brings Macondo the railroad. I do not know whether García’s insights came mostly from personal observation in Colombia, from his training or reading, or, for that matter, from modernization theorists; the fact that Latin America, especially remote areas, modernizes later and differently, is of course significant. But I do know that the date of *Cien años de soledad* is 1967, and *The House of the Seven Gables*, 1851, and that impresses me.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I imagine that Hawthorne's fishmonger sold cod; if he could get that to Mexico cheaply, he would clean up. Cod—*bacalao*—is a great holiday delicacy, now prohibitively expensive, and often black-marketed.

<sup>2</sup> *The House of the Seven Gables* is volume II of the "Centenary Edition," *The Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, edited by William Charvat et al (Columbus, Ohio, 1963—). The present passage appears on 290. Subsequent references to the novel will be handled through parenthesis in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Eugene S. Ferguson, "On the Origin and Development of American Mechanical Know-How," *American Studies (MASJ)*, III, 2 (Fall, 1962), 3ff compares the nation technologically in two periods and discusses reasons for an extraordinary transformation. A superb article which modernization theorists should study carefully.

<sup>4</sup> Leonard W. Labaree et al, eds., *Autobiography of B.F.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 54.

<sup>5</sup> I discuss this confusion in some detail in "Some Observations on the Concert Audience," *American Quarterly*, XV (1963), 152-163.

<sup>6</sup> See Chapter One, note 22 and Chapter Two, notes 2 and 4.

<sup>7</sup> Hawthornean ambiguity, as always, masks the "facts." In this case, Hawthorne hides them under layer on layer of "might-have-been's" and "possibly's"—not only are they as usual the result of hearsay, gossip, and doubtful tradition, but the whole foggy business is presented through a work of fiction by a character who mocks his own abilities.

<sup>8</sup> They would probably have been appalled had I told them what kind of truck I drove—a little ice cream truck from which I peddled pops, bars, and quarts—for an ice cream peddler occupies an even lower social level in Mexico. Be that as it may, I had had to get a chauffeur's license to obtain the job, and that made me a truck driver.

<sup>9</sup> Whether Hawthorne was once naively impressed by someone "mesmerizing" a rooster or chicken or whether he means this as a joke, I cannot say. But many farm kids can show you how easy it is to "hypnotize" poultry; I have seen Mexican women do it to birds they are taking to market; it takes but a second. I want to acknowledge indebtedness to C. Loring Silet, who pointed out this odd joke or slip to me.

<sup>10</sup> *The Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson: With Annotations*, edited by Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes (Boston and New York, 1912). The passage is from Journal XLVI, vol. 8, p. 574. I would like to acknowledge the contribution of Richard Boudreau, who pointed me to this passage in Emerson.

<sup>11</sup> This is in Poe's "The Domain of Arnheim"; the ideal poet is Ellison.

<sup>12</sup> I do not mean here to challenge the provocative suggestions of media specialists about the important differences in emotional "feel" and social import between the various media. I agree that print media are different

from electronic media, and that film, television and radio have very different emotional effects.

<sup>13</sup> Steam engines were not new: Newcomen engines of enormous size had worked faithfully in English mines for well over a century before the development of engines that could drive a ship or railroad engine.

<sup>14</sup> I am indebted again here to C. Loring Silet, whose as yet unpublished paper on daguerreotypy in *The House of the Seven Gables* I find very suggestive.

<sup>15</sup> She said that the idea got into her dreams in the form of the scene in which a dead man is revived by electricity. "She awoke, and recognizing that what had terrified her might terrify others, began to write the novel *Frankenstein*, or *The Modern Prometheus*. . . ." E. F. Bleiler, "John Polidori and *The Vampire*." The essay appears in E. F. B.'s edition of Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, William Beckford, *Vathek*, and John Polidori, *The Vampire, Three Gothic Novels, And a Fragment of a Novel by Lord Byron* (New York, 1966).

<sup>16</sup> *Atkinson's Casket* XIV, 5 (May 1838), 235, quoted in Stuart Levine, *Edgar Poe: Seer and Craftsman* (Deland, Florida, 1972), 96.

<sup>17</sup> He manufactures ice; his family's career was transformed by a block of ice brought to Macondo by the gypsies.

## Chapter 6

### The Pequod Meets the Soulsbys

#### *Moby-Dick* as Social History

“Missions I would quicken with the Wall street spirit.”

—the man in grey, in Melville’s *The Confidence-Man*

A literal-minded reader certainly might find good reason to conclude that *Moby-Dick* is of not much use for American social history. In certain obvious ways the book is not “realistic.” It does not take place in the United States; many of its characters are not even Americans. After the opening chapters there are no women characters present (although a few female relatives exert some influence). It contains, moreover, numerous errors, contradictions, and inconsistencies that would seem to make suspect any social evidence it might contain. Yet *Moby-Dick* is, in fact, a document of both our civilization and of certain world-wide historical tendencies. There are interesting things to be learned from it on the subjects of race, religion, the economic structure and related values, modernization—especially specialization, technology, work roles and the organization of means of production—folklore, changes in the manner in which human consciousness is perceived and attitudes towards tradition and innovation.

As an old Melvillian, I hate to limit my discussion of *Moby-Dick* to ways of doing social history with it—for that matter, I hate to limit myself to *Moby-Dick* alone, since there is rich material as well in works from *Typee* in 1846 to the posthumous and incomplete *Billy Budd*. The very dawn of Melville’s fiction, the first page of *Typee*, makes us feel class injustice. In works which are very different from one another—in the semi-autobiographical early South Sea novels, *Typee* and *Omoo*; in *Mardi*, *Redburn*, *Pierre*; in his magazine fiction and in *The Confidence-Man*—Melville addresses social problems specifically. He comments on the effects of industrialization and

modernization upon sex roles, theories of government, business and religion; he is especially concerned with the connection between change and poverty.<sup>1</sup> Melville *is* a social writer; “The Tartarus of Maids,” or Chapter VIII of *The Confidence Man* or “Cock-aDoodle-Do!” with its vision of the railroad as “the chartered murderer” or numerous other places and works show that plainly enough.

But as a matter of fact, there is more to be said about *Moby-Dick* and social history than we have space for, and in this chapter I will try to be more suggestive than exhaustive, to move from one approach to another in an effort merely to show how rich the work is, to encourage, again, imaginative historical examination of literary works other than those whose main self-conscious objective is social. I know of studies which tie *Moby-Dick* to social history in two ways, through discussions of the ship as a nineteenth century factory and of the economics of the voyage. I have some suggestions to make on those topics, but will not limit myself to them. In a perhaps perverse effort to show how comfortably one can relate a high-romantic seafaring romance to other more obviously social literary documents, wherever appropriate I will move outward from *Moby-Dick* to other works, to a novel as different as O’Hara’s *Appointment in Samara*, and especially to the wonderful Harold Frederic novel, *The Damnation of Theron Ware*.

-1-

### Industry, Modernization, Know-How

[I]f railroads are not built, how shall we get to  
heaven in season?

—Thoreau, *Walden*

Following other writers who have taken this tack, we can begin by examining the ostensible purpose of the Pequod’s voyage. For an American whale ship was a factory ship, and to a large extent its production facilities had been rationalized in a manner that suggests a high degree of modernization. To let it go at that, however, would be cheating, because to some extent seafaring people have had to develop such kinds of specialization through the very nature of voy-

ages by water. Specialization existed there long before the industrial age. Indeed, one can argue that sea-practice in certain ways pointed the direction for other areas of social organization. Add to this the special demands of whaling, in which large numbers of production procedures and processes take place right on the whaling ship, and the tendency seems even more marked.

It seems worthwhile to ask, then, whether the Pequod is a small modern factory or a floating craft enterprise closer to the models of a time before the Industrial Revolution. One minor technical flaw in *Moby-Dick* is that there are too many characters aboard the Pequod. Flaws, inconsistencies, factual ambiguities are interesting. When they appear in works by major writers they sometimes point to things the authors are unsure of, to areas of ambiguity and change in the society. This may be the case here: a large number of specialized positions suggests "factory"; a small number of workmen performing a variety of jobs at different times suggests "craft establishment."

Melville's fiction tells us that he has seen both kinds of shops. Both still exist in his America and England, as do hard-to-define transitional enterprises. There are a large number of specialized functions to be performed on a whaling ship, and Melville gives names to more than a few of the functionaries who perform them, assembling, if one keeps count, a crew of specialists larger than the number of sailors who could reasonably fit on board. Well, perhaps Melville failed to count accurately, but most of the functions are real, and he gives us clues about how all the jobs really got done. People doubled in brass. Melville shows his harpooners performing a number of different functions; the same must have been true of other sailors as well. We may be sure that the mincer, for example, had other tasks when there was no fat to be minced.

Thus in some ways the Pequod as a factory ship has a little less in common with the highly rationalized processes of a large factory than it does with a large craft establishment in which employees, relatives of the master of the establishment, servants and the master himself performed a succession of processes. In truth, it seems somewhere between the two patterns, and brings to my mind first, what I have read of the severe psychological problems encountered by workers in those plants so highly rationalized that a given employee performs

only one or two functions repetitively throughout the working day, and sometimes throughout a working career; and, second, the obvious healthy attitudes in evidence in two smaller enterprises which, quite by accident, I came to know first hand, in both of which employees worked as a team, following their products through various stages of production. The workers were specialized in their functions, but able to perform a succession of functions with the team.<sup>2</sup> An enterprise about the size of a nineteenth century whaling ship, then, may offer some useful models for industrial psychologists who have endeavored in recent decades to vary and diversify the work experiences of people in large plants. Thus though naval enterprises may have helped lead the world into modernity, their nature also made them conserve certain craft attitudes and procedures which may well be still of use to us. I would suggest that Melville's mistake in counting is partially the result of an author's carelessness and in part the result of his awareness of connections between the ship and things he saw going on in America. Hence, perhaps, his obvious pleasure at showing us the high development of rationalization and specialized skill.

The sailor is in several different ways the forerunner and, in the eyes of some historians, even the bringer of modernization. One thinks of the extensive and highly rationalized research project of Prince Henry the Navigator, who created, in effect, a fifteenth-century think-tank in order to make voyages of exploration possible. As a recent writer suggests,<sup>3</sup> Prince Henry's work anticipates the space program. There is the same self-conscious attempt to solve specific technical problems by gathering appropriate expertise and by innovating in technology. Prince Henry's research team produced specific and dramatic results—new instruments of navigation which made possible reliable voyages out of sight of land; a new kind of long distance ship, the caravelle, which could sail much more closely into the wind, and so forth. Thus it is not only that the rise of long-distance navigation acted to stimulate exploration, that it led also to a revolution in the conception of the nature of the earth, to massive increases in the size of trade and radical changes in its nature, but also that it helped to promote a new and active model for problem-solving based upon the idea of the application of rational scientific investigation to specific problems in the hope of direct, measurable,

and even spectacular results. The history of navigation continued to have that sort of “resident” relationship between research, innovation and accomplishment. Beyond the tools of the trade—the ships and seagoing instruments of navigation—is also a family of research institutions and investigators running in unbroken line down to the time of the Pequod. One thinks of the Royal Observatory, of the work in oceanography of Benjamin Franklin, and, in the nineteenth century, the very important information gathered, analyzed and disseminated by Lt. Matthew Maury, U.S.N., who is, appropriately enough, mentioned in *Moby-Dick*. Melville’s whale ship, then, is the very type of modern technological expertise and application, and Melville’s citation of Maury and his bragging about national achievement in the fishery show that he is aware of it.

I believe that the Pequod can also be shown to parallel very closely the tendencies discussed in Eugene Ferguson’s essay on the origin and nature of American mechanical know-how:<sup>4</sup> by mid-century, Ferguson argues, Americans had developed a sure competence with processes, gadgets, manufacturing methods and technological procedures that had simply not existed early in the century, a competence admirably recognized abroad by other industrializing nations, and evident at home in a cocky confidence. *Moby-Dick* reflects it plainly; American ships, methods and crews are repeatedly shown to be superior to those of European nations, and the scope and dynamism of the industry are praised in almost chauvinistic terms. The process was to continue beyond the date of *Moby-Dick*. Architecture historians, for instance, point out that certain innovations in the use of prefabricated metal structural elements, innovations necessary for the construction of true skyscrapers, appeared first not in a building at all, but in large ships such as Isambard Kingdom Brunel’s mighty 690 foot steam vessel The Great Eastern, launched in 1858. It is no accident, then, that Ishmael suggests innovations and improvements on devices and procedures he has seen on board the Pequod, or that Melville invents some. There is a long tradition of such innovations among mariners, and, by the late forties and early fifties, a very strong national commitment to ingenious innovation and efficiency. Know-how connects firmly with future-orientation, and with those sacred values which relate to expertise, creativity, rational problem-solving,

objectivity and, ultimately, meliorism: confidence that we can do something better in technological matters is related to manipulative national assumptions about society and government, about the efficacy of rational planning for “a better tomorrow.”

-2-

Race and Ethnicity, 1851

I saw parch'd Abyssinia rouse and sing  
To the silver cymbals' ring!

—John Keats, “Endymion”

When, as I have suggested, the evidence from literature on a given subject is ambiguous, chances are good that we are dealing with an area of some stress in the period. The ambiguities seem to show up along fault lines, places in which major shifts are taking place, and new alignments are not entirely clear even to observers as astute as some of our writers. In periods in which sharp changes are taking place in sex roles, for instance, odd ambiguities and contradictions turn up in fictional treatment of those roles. Similarly, as redefinitions occur in the matter of who is American and who is alien, the resultant tensions are evident, sometimes inadvertently, I think, in literature. Immigrant historians have shown us the process by which the successive waves of immigrants who arrived in the United States at first shocked and dismayed prior Americans, and then gradually, through a process of familiarization on both sides, through assimilation and accommodation, came to be thought of as component parts of our national life. Though the case is different with each large immigrant group, there are similarities: patterns of exploitation, bigotry and fear recur with most successive ethnic groups. Moreover, the ethnicities appeared to residents to grow more and more exotic and more menacing as the nineteenth century progressed. The Catholicism of the Irish fleeing the potato famine was alien and threatening; with southern Europeans there was not only the gap of religion but those of language and physical appearance as well. Eastern Europeans, Jews fleeing the pogroms and orientals arriving late in the century aroused nativist fears again.

As a general rule, writers in the canon were liberal in their attitudes toward the newcomers and whenever appropriate used their works to preach a message of tolerance, compassion and brotherhood. The notable exceptions with whom we deal in this study are Poe and Frank Norris. Yet there are apparent fault lines even in the works of liberal authors. I am not in any way trying to condemn them; if we refused to read all the works in our literature or in world literature which reflect racial ideas that are now obnoxious to us, there would be very little left. I do not believe, on the other hand, that we should sweep such racism under the rug. Sometimes it is very offensive; sometimes, indeed, we feel that the authors should have known better. My notion is that we should hold such things up to plain view, look at them, and then go on reading the works. What Hawthorne says of people may be true of books, too: one's love for them is deeper when one has an open-eyed knowledge of flaws as well as virtues.

Moreover, I dare say, most Americans were brought up believing if not in the superiority of whatever their own group was, at least in the undesirability of certain other groups. What is interesting and characteristic is the manner in which these ideas change and are modified with time. Catholic and Protestant continue to murder one another in Northern Ireland; in America, for various reasons, some simply economic, those two groups would probably by now long since have found ways to get along, and might both now fear and dislike Blacks, Jews, Puerto Ricans, or some other more alien people. Our concern, however, is not with obvious instances of racism among our major authors; a very useful book covers racial issues among at least our Romantic writers.<sup>5</sup> I am interested rather in those cases in which authors who are consciously working to combat bias retain ambiguous signs of it themselves. One such case we have already discussed, the passage in which Samuel Sewall, having just published his remarkable pamphlet "The Selling of Joseph," then responded to an attack on himself in which he was accused of having treated a colleague "as a Negro" by using the same language himself. The passage is ambiguous because one cannot tell in precisely what tone of voice Sewall intends that phrase "to use someone as a Negro." Sewall did not believe the races could live together in real intimacy, yet saw both the black man's humanity and the injustice of slavery. He did not add

the note the modern sensibility cries out for—“And why should I treat a Negro any less well than I treat Increase Mather?”—but then in his *Diary* he does not always spell out how he feels. Clearly the context is somewhat playful and ironic, but beyond that, one cannot be sure.

Similarly playful and ironic—and also ambiguous—is Benjamin Franklin’s report in his *Autobiography* of a conversation with Governor Robert Morris:

In gay Conversation over our Wine after Supper he told us Jokingly that he much admir’d the Idea of Sancho Panza, who when it was propos’d to give him a Government, requested it might be a Government of *Blacks*, as then, if he could not agree with his People he might sell them. One of his [the governor’s] Friends who sat next me, says, “Franklin, why do you continue to side with these damn’d Quakers? had not you better sell them? the Proprietor would give you a good Price.” The Governor, says I, has not yet *black’d* them enough. He had indeed labour’d hard to blacken the Assembly in all his Messages, but they wip’d off his Colouring as fast as he laid it on, and plac’d it in return thick upon his own Face; so that finding he was likely to be negrify’d himself, he . . . quitted the Government.<sup>6</sup>

The implication that “black” means “degraded” is unfortunate there. One can argue, however, that Franklin was doing no more than using contemporary idiom, that his love of verbal wit and word-play in this context outweighed his sense of justice, or that an eighteenth-century writer might not have thought at a given moment to connect one topic with another with the consistency our sense of justice demands. Yet if you are a black student reading his *Autobiography*, I submit, this is a hard passage to go through.

A colleague with whom I discussed various passages of this sort in American literature said to me that if it had not been for a supersensitivity induced by the civil rights activists of the past years, I would not have noticed such slurs. Although he is a good friend and a good scholar, his response on this score is simply dumb. No American of

oppressed minority background—Oriental, Jew, Black, Native American, Chicano, whatever—ever misses passages like that; they hurt. They hurt especially when they come from authors one likes, enjoys, and admires. My main point in this discussion, however, is to suggest that as one moves through the years, the location of the hurt changes in a way which very strongly suggests what I have called a pattern of “expanding circles.” *Moby-Dick*, for example, self-consciously goes out after racial bias and prejudice, most notably, of course, in the famous friendship between Ishmael and Queequeg. Melville shows Queequeg as grotesque and alien to intensify the drama of Ishmael’s acceptance of the friendship, and deliberately emphasizes his point with both action and preachments throughout the novel.

Ishmael speaks of the bigots on the Moss, the little schooner that carries him and Queequeg down the Acushnet and out to Nantucket, as “a lubber-like assembly, who marvelled that two fellow beings [Ishmael and Queequeg] should be so companionable; as though a white man were anything more dignified than a whitewashed negro.” They are “boobies and bumpkins,” he says, and green—nay, so intensely green, they “must have come from the heart and centre of all verdure.”<sup>77</sup> Queequeg’s heroic rescue of the greenest bumpkin a few moments later is the first of a number of episodes which illustrate the noble qualities of non-white people. Queequeg is the cannibal who feels, in effect, that “It’s a mutual, joint-stock world, in all meridians. We cannibals must help these Christians.” (I,76) Thus the rescue dramatizes his “unconscious” ability to turn the other cheek. Queequeg’s nobility is reemphasized when he rescues the admirable Indian Tashtego (I,78-9); black Daggoo also behaves heroically—all instances in which the plot itself says that these “savages” are heroic and admirable.

Daggoo’s dignity is emphasized by his great size, especially in the passage in Chapter Forty-Eight in which the diminutive third mate Flask, eager for a better view from his whale boat, mounts Daggoo’s broad shoulders;

But the sight of little Flask mounted upon gigantic Daggoo was yet more curious; for sustaining himself with a cool, indifferent, easy, unthought of, barbaric majesty, the

noble negro to every roll of the sea harmoniously rolled his fine form. On his broad back, flaxen-haired Flask seemed a snow-flake. The bearer looked nobler than the rider. Though truly vivacious, tumultuous, ostentatious little Flask would now and then stamp with impatience; but not one added heave did he thereby give to the negro's lordly chest. (I,279)

Queequeg, then, is noble and admirable; Daggoo is regal and impressive; Pip, of course, is fully human—indeed, more human than the rest of the crew, men, he says, who have “no bowels to feel fear.” After Pip has shown himself sane enough to be frightened out of his sanity, he becomes Ahab's favorite; the close inter-racial friendship of the two madmen parallels that of Ishmael and Queequeg. In all these passages, the book is as self-conscious in its promotion of racial understanding as those motion pictures about brotherhood which we all remember from Hollywood's production of a few decades ago. Indeed, it is in the same tradition. Like the war movie with its three heroes—Johnson, Pascarelli, and Cohen—*Moby-Dick* points the racial implications of shared values.

It has also a sort of anthropological detachment about alien cultures, as one would expect, given Melville's South-Sea experiences and the thought he had devoted to such topics since the *Typee* adventure;<sup>8</sup> thus there are passages in which the ways and lore of “primitive” or exotic cultures are compared favorably to those of Melville's English and American readers. Sometimes Melville's one-world sentiments conflict logically with other aspects of the novel. The gothicism gets in the way now and then.

Melville wants some alien people to be strange but lovable, but Fedallah is strange and diabolical. Even the generally admirable Gay-Head tribesman Tashtego, whose function in general is similar to those of Queequeg and Daggoo,<sup>9</sup> serves briefly as devil. The problem is that it is hard to see exotics as one's equals and brothers when they are also used as creatures of horror. But in general it is clear enough that *Moby-Dick* means to assert human kinship and to show bigotry as ugly.

Perhaps even stronger than the Moss episode in its portrayal of ugly race feeling is the scene at the close of Chapter Forty when the

terribly insulted Daggoo and the sailor who has slandered him square off in a ring which is as wide and as old as the universe. (I,220-221) Hatred and violence, it implies, are simply a part of the human condition, and race hatred only a corollary. Still, Daggoo stands to defend black pride in the face of white insults. Although a fight in this case does not take place, something has been said not only about human violence and hatred, but about black dignity as well. The passage is obviously intended to make strong statements about the human condition, hatred, religion and violence:

BELFAST SAILOR. A row! arrah a row! The Virgin  
be blessed, a row! Plunge in with ye!

ENGLISH SAILOR. Fair play! Snatch the Spaniard's knife! A ring, a ring!

OLD MANX SAILOR. Ready formed. There! the  
ringed horizon. In that ring Cain struck Abel. Sweet  
work, right work! No? Why then, God, mad'st thou the  
ring?

What the Belfast sailor says is of course intended ironically; he juxtaposes the virgin and a brawl. The speech of the Manxman restates the same idea in cosmic terms; it moves even beyond the hypocrisies of religion and fixes the blame directly upon God.

Melville's prime intention in all this, then, seems clear enough. There are, however, enough uncomfortable implications from time to time to indicate jagged edges and fault-lines. Have another look, for example, at the scrap of dialogue just quoted. To make his scene come off, the author has played on ethnic stereotypes. The English sailor calls for things to be done in an orderly manner, and for fair play, while the Irishman whoops it up for violence and the virgin. In a book so carefully designed to fight ethnic stereotypes, why does the author use them himself?

There are a number of possible answers. For one, in a passage such as this, in which rapid character development is not possible, stereotypes are very useful as a shorthand. Stories with hosts of characters have relied on stereotypes at least since the *Iliad*; a modern instance, much praised when first published, and also a sea-tale

involving the interaction of a lot of people whom the author helps us identify through stereotypes, is Nicholas Montsarrat's *The Cruel Sea* (1951). We shall, indeed, have occasion to note such stereotyping in American works of the twentieth century. Stereotypes provide an economical way to help the reader identify attitudes and characters. Second, some stereotypes are in fact based to some extent on reality. They may reflect real traits of those stereotyped, colored, of course, by biases in the perceptions of those doing the stereotyping. Third, Americans of Melville's day were exceedingly aware of Irish Catholics, who constituted the largest group of new immigrants around them, and who did seem also both religiously superstitious and violent to even many of their liberal-minded Protestant neighbors. The circle, if you will, had not yet expanded to include them. The Irish were the first large block of "alien"-seeming immigrants, and it was not clear to many Americans that they were not a menace to the nation.

Given all that, however, there is still that in the passage which leaves me feeling a trace uncomfortable. The uneasiness increases when one considers the manner in which members of the same races whose members are being dignified are treated in other passages in the book. There are uneasy ambiguities, for instance, in the passage in which Stubb baits the black cook Fleece. Fleece is shown as a shambling darky (II, 15ff.). But at the end of the scene in which Stubb bullies him into delivering a sermon to the sharks comes the sermon itself, obscene and blasphemous, but deceptively powerful, and thoroughly congruent with the statements which the book makes about the nature of creation and the reality of evil. Fleece, like the Manxman or like Ahab himself, has thought out the world and reached the terrible conclusions. In the odd dynamics of *Moby-Dick*, that makes him intellectually and spiritually mature. But we cannot quite conclude that Melville is deliberately showing us an uneducated black man with high native intelligence in order to counteract Stubb's racism, first, because it is the narrator,<sup>10</sup> not Stubb, who stereotypes him and calls him "this old Ebony," and second, because Stubb is so engaging a person. Melville's main intention here, as in the more violent confrontation involving Daggoo and the white sailor, of course, has to do with evil in the universe, but racial prejudices and stereotypes are important in both passages. In terms of our concerns in this study,

the unresolved tension between Melville's "official" policy and the uncorrected biases of likeable or even admirable characters and narrator seems critical. Stubb's personality is extraordinarily interesting—he is one of the best-developed characters in the novel, and in general is shown in quite a sympathetic light: he is very intelligent, but refuses to follow the implications of what he observes to their logical conclusions, not because of intellectual torpor, but because he knows that those conclusions are bleakly depressing, and wants to enjoy life. It is he who tells us about the eleventh and twelfth commandments, which turn out to be "Think not . . . and sleep when you can. . . ." (I,159) "Wise Stubb" has learned that honest thought on profound subjects leads to conclusions too grim to allow for sleep or even sanity. Thus his analysis of what the doubloon means is as appropriate and profound as anyone's: he turns to an occult system of knowledge, in this case astrology, to figure it out. In the epistemological scheme of *Moby-Dick*, mystical, exotic, and occult knowledge is generally more reliable in such cases than knowledge from conventional sources: Queequeg consults his tattoos; Fedallah's prophecies are true. Stubb, interpreting the symbols on the coin, succeeds in sounding the depths, but though he refuses to let his soul listen to their echo, we respect his ability.

Does Melville, then, in the scene with Fleece, mean to show Stubb's racism as an ugly side of him? Is he just using him to set a conventional comic situation involving a black man, something similar in kind to those passages in *Huckleberry Finn* in which Jim ceases to be the warm and three-dimensional man Huck loves, and becomes instead a stage ducky? Is he consciously demonstrating the biases one would find in an American of Stubb's sort in the middle of the nineteenth century? Or has he himself, as author, not noticed what he has done because he, too, is an American of 1850? Let me confess that I do not know precisely where Melville is in this passage, and let me add that I feel that uncertainty to be important for understanding race in American history. The circles expand, but residues and rings—grey areas—remain behind to mark the progress of their spread.

More troubling still are passages such as Ahab's crack about soot in Chapter One Hundred and Eight (II,237), the places in which

Ishmael refers to Queequeg's idol as negro and devil, or the end of Chapter Sixty-Six, when Melville has Queequeg himself, messmate of his fellow-harpooneer the Indian Tashtego, say, after a dead shark has nearly severed a limb, "de god wat made shark must be one dam Ingin." (II,26) Such places are interesting because Ishmael and Ahab in general throughout the novel speak from a kind of universal point of view. (Queequeg rarely speaks.) Ishmael, it is true, shows himself growing towards such breadth; he was initially frightened by Queequeg. But he gives us repeated lectures on the brotherhood of all in this joint-stock world. Certainly Ahab is intended to be above anything as petty as racism; a man who would strike the sun if it insulted him, who means to deal in cosmic absolutes, cannot be bothered with human biases based on trivia like complexion. Yet there he stands by the carpenter, watching the blacksmith work on fittings for his new leg, and musing about Prometheus, "who made men, they say. . . . How the soot flies! This must be the remainder the Greek made the Africans of." (II,237)

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### Race and Ethnicity, 1896

. . . hard fares the white waiter who  
waits upon cannibals.

—*Moby-Dick*

It does not take much critical acumen to recognize that *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, like *Moby-Dick*, preaches brotherhood. Biases are shown as biases, and the author assumes an extremely comfortable attitude toward his principal minority group, Irish Catholics, a stance designed to disarm readers who harbor lingering fears of the Irish menace. Frederic's novel applies the same values—fair play, indigenoussness, humanitarianism, "the broad view"—to race as does Melville's. One hopes for evidence that the intervening decades have enabled the "circles" to expand. Certainly Frederic's world has considerable ethnic and racial variety; thus at one time or another the novel mentions Negroes, Italians, Jews, Chinese and others. To some extent, Frederic simply reports: we learn of race/job roles when, for

instance, we meet black railway and hotel functionaries. But just as in *Moby-Dick*, neither reporting nor the author's anti-racist intention accounts for all we see. The treatment of the Chinese character, for example, is in some ways troubling. He is Dr. Ledsmar's servant, and, since Ledsmar is a Hawthornian mad scientist in the tradition of Rappaccini, one doesn't know how seriously to take the servant: Frederic may be introducing him not as a real personage but as a means to caricature his employer, who is himself certainly the least three-dimensional major character in the novel. Ledsmar, we recall, administers enormous dosages of opium to his employee as part of an inhumane-sounding "scientific" experiment. He makes remarks about the Chinese being able to absorb doses of the drug that would kill a white man. I confess once again that I cannot tell precisely where the author is on this matter. Does he really see this Chinese servant as a different species of being? Has he simply not devoted any thought to the matter, using him only as a tool to make a point? Or does he merely think the idea funny, an equivalent of the Polish jokes of a few years back, which sometimes imply a terrible ethnic slur, and at others don't seem to mean anything beyond the gag involved? I don't think we can tell, but I think we should go on feeling uncomfortable with the matter.

Comparable uncomfortable ambiguity comes in places in the novel in which extremely sympathetic characters casually, and without thought, use phrases that have offensive racial or ethnic implications. These are fault-lines of the sort we noticed in the earlier novel. At the very end of the second chapter, Alice Ware, bracing her young minister husband for his encounter with his tightwad trustees, says "'and just keep a stiff upper lip about the gas, and don't let them jew you down a solitary cent on that sidewalk.'"<sup>11</sup>

The second instance is very similar. Theron, on his famous alcoholic binge, somehow staggers his way to the Soulsbys' home. The Soulsbys are among the nicest people in the book. Former con-men (should one say "con-persons"? Perhaps "con-folks" would suit these two best), they now have an innocent way of making a living as good frauds in the service of the church. Their live-and-let-live attitude towards people very different from themselves, their garden, and the fact that they are comfortable with a reversal of sex roles which

would upset many couples (Candace, we are told, wears the pants; her husband tends the garden) are all meant to be endearing, especially in terms of the values and tensions of the novel. When Theron stumbles in, soused, Brother Soulsby takes care of him, and then returns to bed. He and Candace discuss Theron's state, and he says, at one point, that Theron is "'all right. I put him on the sofa, with the buffalo robe round him. You'll find him there, safe and sound, when it's time for white folks to get up.'" (488)

The evidence of the novel itself fails to tell us whether, in these passages, Frederic is simply recording language accurately, repeating phrases which people such as Alice or Soulsby would use, while he himself is aware of the slurs, or using them without any special thought because they are idiomatic. There are other possibilities as well—an author, for instance, can be aware of such overtones, but decide not to think out fully their implications in his work simply because one cannot control or explore every connotation. It is also possible that he may intend them bitterly, as an ironic statement about the submerged bigotry which even sympathetic people carry about within them. One thinks of John O'Hara in that regard, of a pair like Lute and Irma Fliegler in *Appointment in Samarra*. Their humor, honesty, directness, their love for one another—affectionate, whimsical, and also deeply passionate—and their social modesty all set them off from less attractive citizens of Gibbsville. But O'Hara in this period of his work seemed compelled to undercut everyone, perhaps because he felt, in honesty, that such undercutting was the only way to be true to the society he portrayed. So he revealed an ugly strain of anti-Semitism in his most engaging characters.<sup>12</sup> Some readers feel that O'Hara's consistent X-raying of his people showed a coldness, a lack of involvement which kept him from being a major artist. The evidence of his last stories suggests rather a Hawthornean love for them, democratic and inclusive, and based on compassion for just such frailties and blind spots. But the fact remains that in earlier fiction, O'Hara did deliberately undercut any character toward whom his reader was likely to warm up. Harold Frederic, writing three decades earlier, was certainly sophisticated enough to have intended such undercutting, though my own best judgment says "No," or at least that Frederic was certainly not as deliberate. Grey areas, if you

will—we cannot understand literature or society without acknowledging their presence; it is easier to claim certainty, but more honest to admit that grey areas exist.

What one can see clearly, however, is that the grey areas shift outward in the fiction we have mentioned. Melville's Irish may be what Americans fear; Frederic comfortably drinks beer at their picnic while the ambiguity shifts to later immigrants. In *Appointment in Samarra*, the author himself is Irish.

I anticipate an objection to this line of reasoning: even if it is true that some authors reflect such movement in what is defined by the expanding circles, what evidence is there that their opinion reflects any broad change? There are still plenty of bigots in 1898 whose anti-Catholicism, for instance, is as strong as what Melville might have mirrored in the '50's. I have already suggested a manner of visualizing apparent anomalies in the operation of such social processes as our expanding circles. Not all Americans, obviously, respond in the same manner and at the same time. Biases that have been banished for generations in one family, say, remain strong in another; in a third, the pattern is less clear, with some members feeling one way, some another, and various shades of grey describing the rest. During the period in which American television first began, self-consciously, to show black people in prestigious situations, in family contexts or in commercials, an acquaintance of mine, a kindly and hard-working older woman, called us from the dinner-table with some excitement: "Come see the nigger-babies! Ain't they cute?" Her own biases were unshakeable, so far as I could tell. She found the black kids on the TV cute in about the same way that monkeys in a cage would be, and she found Negroes in general hateful, though she had very little first-hand experience with them, since the town where she lived—she died several years ago—has not one resident Negro. But her closest friend, a lady of no more social experience or education, having thought the matter through in terms of precisely the list of values we have discussed, has reached different conclusions, and will express them even in the face of acquaintances with less tolerant views. The sharp disagreement on a matter one could hardly escape in the 60's—both were avid TV-viewers—was not sufficient to hurt a long and devoted friendship; indeed, the liberal lady even converted

to Catholicism largely for motives of companionship, to share one more aspect of life with her friend. I take this anecdotal evidence to mean that the pattern of expansion of our circles is complex and irregular, even unpredictable in individual cases. Yet the *direction* is unmistakable: black Americans are thought of as “real people” by more other Americans now than some years ago, and the sentiment is reinforced by legislation and social fact.

Though Melville’s narrator says that “Americans” provide the brains, and the rest of the world, the muscle, in the whaling industry, the reader sees non-whites in positions of responsibility and even some slight authority in his novel. The movie public viewing those propagandistic films of the 40’s seldom did. Johnson, Pascarelli and Cohen were not black, and did not deal with black comrades-in-arms in large part because the U.S. armed forces in World War II were racially less integrated than the sperm-whale fishery of the 1840’s and ’50’s or the cattle industry of the late nineteenth century. The model which all of this suggests to me is that stepped affair which I visualize moving laterally across our social fabric.



1620    1700    1800    1860    1900    etc.

“Moving stairs”

It is meant to suggest that certain ideas—in the present instance, ideas of social equality applied to a specific minority—have impact on different groups of Americans at different times and even in different degrees: this, again, is why I have drawn the steps in thick grey, rather than sharp black, lines. The direction, however, despite occasional pauses, “backlashes,” or retrogressions (such as the unhappy era of the 40’s for Nissei and other Japanese-Americans), always seems clear, and it seems important to me, for the future health of the nation, that it always remain so.

-4-

Ishmael, Theron and Michael

If, drunk with sight of power, we loose  
Wild tongues that have not Thee in awe,  
Such boastings as the Gentiles use,  
Or lesser breeds without the Law—  
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,  
Lest we forget—lest we forget!  
—Kipling, “Recessional” (1903)

We do not know precisely what it was in Ishmael’s background that enabled him to overcome his initial white Protestant repugnance for purple pagan Queequeg, though we take his commitment to rationality, to knowledge and, indeed, to the educational system itself, as hints; Ishmael coyly hides his name, but frankly tells his profession—he has been a schoolmaster. Perhaps, then, the change in attitude was made possible by values which enabled him to overcome biases. It is this sort of process for which the model of expanding circles—used, in this case, on an individual, as opposed to a societal, level—was designed. Melville has chosen to dramatize it, to make his point through exaggeration, if you will: this witty and sympathetic narrator, clearly “our kind” of person, becomes bosom buddy to a man who strikes “our” sensibilities as repugnant. The author’s strategy for changing the reader’s perspective involves exaggerating and dramatizing, but the process he described is characteristic of the personal experience of so many Americans that its enactment provides plot patterns for many of our fictions.

*The Damnation of Theron Ware* is a good example. It is useful to state that plot pattern, at least in a one-sentence abstract, both to emphasize the pattern and because there are a great many people, including those in the literary professions, who do not know the novel—it entered the canon fairly recently. I will confess that it was new to me, too, not too many years ago when, nagged by colleagues who had been telling me I should know it, I inserted it into a course so that I would be forced to read it. Critics who like *The Damnation of Theron Ware* have called it such things as “a minor masterpiece.” I

am not sure what such labels mean, or what the difference is between a minor and a major masterpiece, but I do feel that it is a very good book indeed. My students, however, thought that it was wonderful, and identified with it very strongly—so strongly that I did some prying to find what it was that so moved them.

A brief plot summary would have to read about as follows: Ambitious and “modern” young Methodist minister, resentful of unrewarding assignment, and struggling with narrow-minded small-town congregation, is befriended by a clique of Catholic intellectuals whose cues he misreads, causing professional, ethnical, and moral crisis. The pattern, then, involves moving from a narrow circle to a broader one: Theron did not know about “nice” Irish Catholics, about literature, music and scholarship until he met his new friends. The drama of the novel grows from the tension he feels in the new environment. Ishmael’s transformation is one plot element among many; Theron’s provides the main movement of the novel. I take the warmth of my students’ response to indicate the typicality of the pattern, and to suggest that Frederic’s strategy succeeds because it is based on widely-shared experiences. My prying revealed that what made my students empathize so strongly was not any of the specific “illuminations” that Theron undergoes<sup>13</sup> but rather the flavor of the process itself. What Theron goes through as he overcomes biases against Irish Catholics, and then uncritically accepts aesthetic, scientific, philosophical, and moral ideas he only half-understands, struck them as being strongly analogous, say, to what a naive freshman goes through on coming to a large university. They told me parallel stories of times when they or their acquaintances had found themselves in Theron’s boat. Even more broadly, it seemed to them that everyone at one time or another in his life had gone through something like the process which Theron undergoes.

They were wrong, of course. Billions of people in human history have gone through life without ever finding themselves in the situation in which the benchmarks, parameters, social cues and values in which they were raised turn out to be inadequate or inappropriate in some new social context. But that process is so common in the United States that it strikes students as universal. One can define it in various terms, depending on which contexts one has in mind: it

seems more likely in a modernizing society than in a traditional one, more common in a socially fluid society than a static one, and so on. Even the cliché about the normalcy of change applies; in such cases, the shock is greatest for those from sections of society less acclimated to rapid change.

If one focuses on specific aspects of this kind of social transformation, of course, such as the acceptance of people hitherto deemed exotic or of lower caste, or of accommodation to new ideas, one discovers that it is not even universal in our society, even among naive freshmen. The truth, I think, is just that it is common enough to seem very familiar. But all college teachers, for example, know of students from relatively constricted backgrounds who come to the university and change not at all, sometimes because they have not the intellectual energy or curiosity to consider seriously new ideas and attitudes, sometimes because they succeed in isolating themselves from unsettling ideas (or all ideas, one sometimes thinks), sometimes because they are secure in the beliefs and attitudes they brought with them. Thus for every Theron Ware, whose change is so drastic that he loses his sense of balance, there is a Michael Madden. Michael is the sober and kindly older brother of Celia. She is the book's amusing parody of a sort of pre-raphaelite hippie, beautiful, cultured, artsy, and difficult for the enchanted Theron to read. Her devoutly Catholic brother remembers how, as a child being educated in that great American expander of circles, the public schools, he came to like and respect any number of Protestant schoolmates. (Shall we imagine that Ishmael was his teacher? Chronologically and geographically it will almost work.) But though the plight of his friends' souls moved him deeply, he never thought to challenge the religious principles with which he had been indoctrinated. He says,

I was tormented just then, do you see, that so many decent, kindly people, old school-mates and friends and neighbors of mine,—and, for that matter, others all over the country—must lose their souls because they were Protestants. All my boyhood and young manhood, that thought took the joy out of me. Sometimes I use n't to sleep a whole night long, for thinking that some lad I had

been playing with, perhaps in his own house, that very day, would be taken when he died, and his mother too, when she died, and thrown into the flames of hell for all eternity. It made me so unhappy that finally I wouldn't go to any Protestant boy's house, and have his mother be nice to me, and give me cake and apples,—and me thinking all the while that they were bound to be damned, no matter how good they were to me. (438-439)

Most people who undergo comparable “broadening” respond neither in Theron’s manner nor Michael’s; they modify certain ideas, drop some, retain others, and are not unduly preoccupied with any inconsistencies or contradictions. It is true that some stress is always involved; even the process of entering a new group of acquaintances whose style is unfamiliar is stressful. But it may be that the process is common enough in our society that we have developed a stomach for it. I connect it with our sense of choice and freedom: one is insecure where the benchmarks are unfamiliar, but one insists on the right to choose to be there. Freedom and insecurity have always been opposite sides of the same coin.

-5-  
Values

“Don’t stave the boats needlessly, ye harpooneers; good white cedar plank is raised full three per cent. within the year. Don’t forget your prayers, either.”

—Captain Bildad, in *Moby-Dick*

Read Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance* and Melville’s *Moby-Dick* in close conjunction and you will be struck with the similarities between two very different works. They share major themes and minor details. Each is largely about a charismatic monomaniac, for example; there are also similarities as small as common phrases, turns of language and allusions. There are, of course, special reasons for the likenesses between landlocked romance and whale-opera; the

books were written when their authors were close friends. But that such comparisons are fruitful and rewarding suggests again that, as subject matter and setting are not all a literary critic looks to in fiction, so subject matter and setting are not all to be examined by the reader interested in literature as a record of society. Values transcend such concerns; *Moby-Dick*, with its cast of aliens, its salty setting and its paucity of women, still reveals nationally-significant values. Let us consider some which relate first to cash and commerce, and second to faith and religion.

We follow in the wake of good writers who have discussed the commercial side of *Moby-Dick*,<sup>14</sup> but for our purposes it seems appropriate to recall our discussion of trade and cash in *The House of the Seven Gables*, and suggest a way to tie similar concerns in *Moby-Dick* to values. Both novels are ambivalent on matters commercial. Pyncheon greed is ugly and antisocial, yet Hepzibah's attempt to turn a dollar is health-giving, and Holgrave's easy grasp of assorted ways of making money is the wave of the future. In *Moby-Dick*, while on the one hand we are expected, in early chapters, to dislike the grasping and hypocritical Quaker Bildad because he makes judgements on a cash basis, attempts to get the sailors to sign on for infinitesimally small "lays," and is obsessively frugal about ships' supplies, in much of the rest of the book the commercial purpose of the voyage is seen, first, as exciting, and second, as a source of sanity and stability. To put it in the terms in which we have discussed values, profit in *Moby-Dick* clearly is not "sacred" because greed can be ridiculed. But it is not evil, either, providing its pursuit does not violate sacred norms.

Melville knows how to get a reader concerned about money; the reader's sense of how much young Wellingborough Redburn has left in his pockets in *Redburn* reminds one of similar worries imposed upon readers by Dickens. There is less financial tension in *Moby-Dick*, but we know about the major owners of the Pequod, as well as widows and other small investors whose futures ride upon whaling success. The sailors themselves, indeed, are investors in the sense that they are paid not fixed wages, but rather a percentage of the take. Hence the sense of hard times which hangs over unsuccessful ships seen during the gams, and the great joviality on board the Bachelor, booming homeward after a famously successful voyage,

the men dancing with native girls on the decks, and oil stowed in every available receptacle down to the cook's coffee pot.

More importantly, the cash concern is Starbuck's only effective weapon against Ahab's more dangerous eccentricities. When Starbuck tells Ahab that he signed on to hunt whales, and will do so as bravely as need be, but not to hunt the captain's vengeance, financial interest comes to equal sanity. In the passage in which, despite serious leaks somewhere deep down in the hold, Ahab refuses to "up Burtons and break out," Starbuck finally prevails because Ahab understands that the ostensible commercial goal of the voyage must be pursued.

These recurring contradictions in Hawthorne and Melville dissolve, however, in the solvent of values. Unethical and grasping business practices violate fair play. Successful whaling requires knowledge and the other values from the left side of the sacred-values chart, as well as specialization or compartmentalization. In well-run whaling ships and cent-shops, there is scope for self-expression, creativity and other "right-hand" values.

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So that the reader doesn't have to thumb back to page 17 to look at the arrangement of values, here is the chart again:

1. Orderly Universe  
or  
Process
- |                            |                          |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| 2. "Truth"                 | 9. Fair Play             |
| 3. Objectivity             | 10. Individual Potential |
| 4. Broadest view possible  | 11. Talent or Genius     |
| 5. Knowledge               | 12. Self-Expression      |
| 6. Education               | 13. Creativity           |
| 7. Meliorism               | 14. Innovation           |
| 8. Specialization          | 15. Diversity            |
|                            | 16. Indigenoussness      |
|                            | 17. Naturalness          |
|                            | 18. Humanitarianism      |
| 19. Sanctity of Human Life |                          |
- 

Commercial activities that can be degrading or cruel are not when they are conducted in accord with sacred values; on the contrary, in *Moby-Dick* and *The House of the Seven Gables*, they can be therapeutic.

The same values underlie Melville's handling of religion in *Moby-Dick*, though the case there is more complicated: so much attention is paid to God and gods, man and meaning, knowledge and reality. The extent of that concern is itself a convenient place to start. Perhaps one reason that American literature deals so frequently and consciously with epistemology, with the nature of man, the existence of God and other basic philosophical issues is the unusual strength of commitment of many Americans to those values related to rationality, values whose corollaries say "challenge everything—accept nothing without verifying it yourself." Our famous multiplicity of religions is certainly a related phenomenon. To say that they are the result of the Protestant impulse is true enough, but it is also true, first, that that impulse itself is related to post-Renaissance faith in the worth of the individual and in rational inquiry; second, that other largely Protestant nations have not fragmented as we have; and third, that religious multiplicity is congruent with our other forms of voluntarism, and rests on the same sacred national values.<sup>15</sup> The tendency is extreme in Melville, but can readily be related to Roger Williams' observation that even the best-constituted religious authority was likely to be wrong.

Just as Melville makes an effort to equate all races of men, so he attempts to equate all religions. And as in the case of race, some religions turn out to be more equal than others, though the pattern in both cases is complex. Queequeg, we recall, is morally superior to the bumpkins on the ferry, but later in the book, oddly condescending things are said or implied about nonwhites. Similarly, Ishmael is at great pains to show how he came to have respect for Queequeg's exotic religion, and notes that Queequeg gave Christianity a practical test by looking at its cities—seeing evil there, he decided that Christianity had no monopoly on virtue. Yet Ishmael—or whoever is speaking at given moments—also condescends to alien religions.

What is said about religion is further complicated by the demands of literary gothicism. As we noted, one can say that as a general rule in *Moby-Dick*, the more occult religions seem to "work" better than the more "modern" and "rational" Christianity. Thus Queequeg's occult encyclopedia tattooed upon his body seems to give reliable guidance. That, when he is faced with primal forces, he consults a

part of his body close to his sexual organs is certainly no accident, and seems connected to Melville's own very considerable knowledge of "primitive" religions. Fedallah's religion seems to "work" in an even more impressive way. The prophecies which he makes are very specific, and they come true. In a sense, Melville is unfair to Fedallah's Zoroastrianism: as Ishmael treats it, it comes across as a kind of diabolism. Ahab's experience with it and his own quite explicit diabolism, and Stubb's only half-whimsical observations about Fedallah's devilish smell and hidden tail, strengthen the impression that Melville is sacrificing Zoroastrianism to the demands of the gothic side of his plot. Nevertheless, one has to say, in general, that if one contrasts it to the Christianity represented in its most attractive form by Starbuck, Fedallah's religion seems pragmatically impressive. Huck Finn would find it so.

On the other hand, in different moods, Ishmael mouths far more optimistic sentiments about a kind of bright and hopeful nineteenth century Christianity. These are often regarded as no more than window-dressing. As Lawrance Thompson suggested,<sup>16</sup> Melville deliberately indulges in religious double-talk; relatively innocent-eyed readers can go through *Moby-Dick* without being aware of its challenges to conventional religious faith. The author provides cheerful and reassuring passages for them to latch on to. And yet, in some of those places, particularly those with a transcendental flavor, one strongly feels the attraction of certain forms of faith. It is almost as though Melville had *found* sure belief, or very much wanted to, or perhaps, sensed that he had just for the particular moment in which that passage was being written. This is especially true of several quasi-Emersonian passages which are less Christian than bright-transcendental. One thinks of the lovely isle of Serenia, the transcendental haven which seemed the rainbow's end to all the questers of Melville's *Mardi* except his misanthropic hero Taji—and which looked temptingly good to Taji, too. Within such radiance one doubts the doubts.

*Moby-Dick*, of course, needs transcendental assumptions to operate. We must believe in the possibility that nature is identical with spirit or we are not going to believe that "meditation and water are wedded forever," (I,3) or that a whale represents anything

beyond so many barrels of rendered oil. Transcendentalism or any meaning in nature may be illusory, of course. As Ahab fears, had he “struck through the mask,” and killed the whale which represents all his torments, he might find that there was “naught beyond.” I do not believe that any critic of the book would dispute the assertion that atheism is a distinctly presented alternative interpretation of the meaning of the universe in *Moby-Dick*.

For our purposes, though, I think it is fair to conclude with some such statement as this: the book makes a deliberate attempt to put Christianity as a faith and as a practical guide for life in context with other religions; the result is generally detrimental to Christianity. *Moby-Dick* shows greatest respect for those religious positions, oriental or western, which seem the most mystical, occult or “transcendental” in nature. But respect even for these is undercut by the possibility that the universe is meaningless. One of the things that whiteness represents is the “colorless all-color of atheism.” (I,243) Curiously, the book also occasionally shows a more conventional Christianity in an attractive light; indeed, Melville has “coded” his messages for different levels of readers.

Complex as is the religious content of the novel, however, it is consistent in at least one way. Though the religious positions represented by diverse religions are ambiguously challenged, endorsed, mocked or undermined, all discussions of religion—even those which apparently reach contradictory conclusions—are conducted in terms of the same values. There are no contradictions there. Thus in his effort to transcend the perspective of familiar religious principles, Melville seeks detachment and the broadest possible view; in bending over backwards to see exotic religions as coherent, “realistic” and morally effective, he applies fair play to an area in which it is unusual to see it applied; in suggesting that all religions may be delusions, he is—among other things—asserting objectivity and other rationalist tenets. All of these values—fair play, detachment, breadth of perspective, objectivity—are from the chart of sacred national values. There are, indeed, several others that apply to the treatment of religion in the novel—diversity, indigenoussness, self-expression—and it seems clear, at least within the context of the novel, that these values outrank in sacredness the “local” values of specific religions.

The same is true in *The Damnation of Theron Ware*. What has changed is the mood in which the conflict between such rationalist values and theologies is presented: everything has become matter-of-fact. Whoever is narrating assumes that readers will not be shocked by the detached and urbane attitudes of Father Forbes and his circle of Catholic intellectual friends. There is no narrative preaching of either religious or rationalist tenets, no overt attempt by the author to challenge belief. Frederic simply assumes the dispassionate, almost anthropological detachment for which Melville labored so hard. Frederic labors not at all; his narrator cozily assumes an audience sophisticated enough not to be shocked. Melville wrote as though *that* audience existed, but was only one part of his readership; he sweated to placate others, to reassure them that their views are valid, while at the same time, of course, doing his best to murder their faith. No such tension and energy are needed in *Ware*.

The range of values listed on the left-hand side of the “arrangement of sacred values” operates in *The Damnation of Theron Ware* to an extent which strikes those foreign readers to whom I have taught the novel as, on the one hand, somewhat comical, and on the other, somehow “characteristically American.”<sup>17</sup> The key to our national peculiarity in this regard seems not to be in the values themselves, which, after all, we share with any number of culturally-related peoples, but in the national penchant to apply them in areas somehow off-limits in most other countries. A colleague of mine devoted a good part of his career to studying the literature which Americans produce and read on the subject of bringing up children. He said that when he was pressed to decide what it all had in common, the answer for a long time eluded him. Its volume is immense, but the nature of the advice offered changes every so many years, often drastically, seeming to reflect in one period very different concerns from those which prevail in the next. My colleague decided finally that what was most important about American child-rearing literature was its very volume and its demonstrable broad dissemination. In this area which in most cultures is handled by traditional wisdom, by consulting with older members of the family, by custom or by tradition, Americans increasingly over the years have turned to “expert” “scientific” advice, reflecting the national commitment to those left-hand “cartesian”

values.<sup>18</sup> What the manuals say seems less important than the faith our countrymen and women place in the fruits of (presumably) rational inquiry. I confess that I have found it difficult to convince students and some colleagues of the exotic nature of such national behavior. Cross-cultural show-and-tell is the best way I know to make clear the contrast between us and our cultural or geographic neighbors.

Teaching a graduate seminar at the National University in Mexico at Mexico City, I was amused one day by an Austrian emigre woman who was baiting the male native-born Mexicans in class for having decided to go on living with parents after their marriages. She was a witty and bright woman, and thought to tweak them on their sense of masculinity, knowing the notorious Latin male sensitivity on such matters. She asked them in effect whether they wanted to go on being “Mama’s boys” or whether they had the masculine independence it took to strike out on their own, to leave the nest, and so forth. These sophisticated adult men were neither shaken nor embarrassed, responding uniformly by asking her why on earth they would want to leave, and what “independence” and “free choice” had to do with a part of life in which one already knew what was best and right. Certainly my students believed in those values associated with individual expression and innovation, but they were not in the habit of applying them rigorously to areas governed by tradition.

My point in these two anecdotes is that even in relatively modern societies, there seem to be more areas immune to the challenges which some Americans will direct at anything. A large part of Theron Ware’s education consists of discovering that the challenge of “truth” may be focused on even the most tradition-bound of areas. When “truth” comes in contact with ideas or modes of behavior supported by custom and tradition, “truth” turns out to be more sacred. In the course of *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, we learn that anything can be looked at critically and challenged: Theron’s religious assumptions; the very different faith of his congregation; religion in general; ethnocentric social ideas; courtship patterns; finally, condoned sexual behavior and the family itself. Celia puts it succinctly as “Absolute freedom from moral bugbears.” (300) She means unexamined strictures from the past, the same sort which Ishmael mocks when he tells about how the peeled white bodies of beheaded whales, mistaken for hazards,

have been “set down in the log” with “trembling fingers” as “*shoals, rocks, breakers.*”

And for years afterwards, perhaps, ships shun the place;  
leaping over it as silly sheep leap over a vacuum, because  
their leader originally leaped there when a stick was held.  
There’s your law of precedents; there’s your utility of  
traditions; there’s the story of your obstinate survival of  
old beliefs never bottomed on the earth, and now not even  
hovering in the air! There’s orthodoxy! (II,35)

-6-

Who is Nice, and Why

“You’re a good old boy.”

“Now you see. Underneath we are the same.  
We are war brothers.”

—Tenente Henry and Dr. Rinaldi,  
in Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell  
to Arms*

Another approach which should work in *Moby-Dick* is related to what American Studies people used to call “national character.” It is a concept of which scholars have in recent years become justifiably suspicious, I think, though all agree that there is “something in it.” Any foreign traveller will tell you that, while there is an immense variety of personalities within any civilization, there is still a difference from one country to the next in the flavor of personality one encounters. American Indian people provide a convenient domestic demonstration. Haskell Indian Junior College (its current [2013] name is Haskell Indian Nations University) is located in the town where I live. Colleagues who know it well tell of apparently irreconcilable differences and hostilities which develop between students of certain tribes or groups of tribes and those of others, quite often despite sincere initial attempts at good will. Haskell students will explain that they tried to get along with given people, and then name the traits that make it difficult. Many of the things they complain about would

be familiar to a reader of Edward T. Hall's *The Silent Language*,<sup>19</sup> for much of the misunderstanding results from cultural differences in gesture, expression, time perception, dress, manner, and so forth, issues also related to "what you're supposed to be like." The point is that different cultures produce different kinds of desirable traits; what will make one an effective member of one may be "read" as contemptible, despicable, slovenly, overly aggressive, or insufficiently assertive in the next. What is true of Native American tribes and regional groups of tribes is true among nations as well.

If in *Moby-Dick* one made a list of the characteristics which the author uses to make us as readers like his most sympathetic characters, we would find that underlying the personal variations would be a common group of traits. Examining them, we would be likely struck with the apparent absurdity of the exercise—"Of course these are nice people; these are nice traits." But that is just the point: the exercise would not seem absurd to someone outside our culture to whom a person exhibiting such traits might seem a fool, a rogue, or a lunatic. Somewhere—perhaps in a novel—I read recently a passage in which a Native American complains that people from the dominant culture who had come to deal with his tribe were all smiling like crazy, normal behavior in a culture in which projecting friendly and confident trust is condoned even during the first encounter between groups of strangers. Such behavior may seem loco or even dangerous to aliens.

Thus even a novel set on a womanless ship half a world removed from any American city should convey important information about what people were supposed to be like in the civilization which produced the novel. We are expected to like Ishmael, for example. If asked to list Ishmael's personality characteristics, I would say that beneath the brash grimness we see in Chapter One, and the loneliness, he is honest, bright, generally fair and open-minded in dealings with others, very capable despite his occasional whimsical self-mockery; that he has a good sense of humor, a proneness to be flippant, and that he believes deeply in an important range of human values. Starbuck is a very different person, but Melville intends, I believe, for us to like him too. If we generated a list of traits to describe him, we would find that while some of Ishmael's do not fit him, others do. Thus we never see Starbuck flippant; in place of Ishmael's sometimes bitter

humor is a sense of irony. Like Ishmael, he is honest—indeed, in his case one wants to say “upright”—, fair, eminently capable, and very intelligent. If we knew a little bit more about his behavior in more normal situations—whether, for example, his seriousness was cut by a strain of humor—we could almost call him Lincolnesque.

Stubb, too, is meant to be likeable, but somehow not as admirable as the two men we have named. I think we hesitate because we wonder how deep is his commitment to honesty, fairness, and that range of important human values so evident in Ishmael and Starbuck. Note the extent to which we have to project ourselves into the novel to make the judgement. In doing so, we are saying, in effect, that our profile of “favorite traits” works in the fiction of a century and a quarter ago. These people are Americans in senses we would understand. The profile works as effectively in *The Damnation of Theron Ware* or in *Appointment in Samarra*; in a later chapter, we shall see how well it works in a Hemingway novel. There are pitfalls: we sense variables and exceptions, and make mental reservations as we think though the method which I am proposing, yet it seems clear enough that the process produces a list of desirable traits which would strike an alien who knew our civilization as “characteristically American.”<sup>20</sup>

I would conclude from this series of lowerings that a reader sensitive to the varying parameters of culture and society need not hesitate to read meaning in works in genres or schools far removed from “realism.” *Moby-Dick* is no social tract or social-scientific study, but it is undeniably the product of a culture and national sensibility which it can easily be made to reveal. Our list of approaches is by no means exhaustive—I have one colleague who will doubtless be angry at me for not including sections on psycho-sexuality and on “parenting”—but it should suggest that students of literature-and-society do not have to skip *Moby-Dick*, for it expresses national concerns, values, fault-lines, foibles and aspirations deeply, unmistakably, almost unavoidably.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See William Norris’ excellent “Abbott Lawrence in *The Confidence Man* / American Success or Failure?” *American Studies*, XVII, 1 (Spring, 1976), 25ff. for a discussion of the thoroughgoing manner in which Melville

thought out business morality, charity, the tyranny of the factory and other specifically social themes.

<sup>2</sup> The first enterprise was a cookie-factory in New England where a distant relative worked; he took me proudly on a tour of the plant, introduced me to his boss and to members of the staff. Employees repeatedly told me, "We work sort of like a team," and, so far as I could see, they certainly did, moving together from one phase of production to the next. Twice employees pointed out features of the procedure and equipment one of their member had invented. The second enterprise was a daily newspaper in a provincial city in Argentina, run not only through comparable teamwork, but as a cooperative, though there seemed more specialization in the latter enterprise, made necessary by the nature of the jobs to be performed.

<sup>3</sup> Marshall Smelser, "Prince Henry Made it Possible to Cross Oceans," *Harvard Magazine*, LXXX (July-August, 1978), 42-48.

<sup>4</sup> "On the Origin and Development of American Mechanical 'Know-How,'" *American Studies* III, 2 (Fall, 1962), 3ff.

<sup>5</sup> Vincent Freimarch and Bernard Rosenthal, eds., *Race and the American Romantics* (New York, 1972). I reviewed it in *American Studies*, XIV, 1 (1973), 138.

<sup>6</sup> *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, edited by Leonard W. Labaree, Ralph L. Ketcham, Helen C. Boatfield and Helene H. Fineman (New Haven, 1964), 213-214.

<sup>7</sup> At this writing, the Northwestern-Newberry Edition volume of *Moby-Dick* is not yet available. This and subsequent attributions are to the older "Standard Edition" (London, 1922-24), in which *Moby-Dick* appears in two volumes. Subsequent references will be handled parenthetically in the text; the present passage is from I,74.

<sup>8</sup> Although H. Bruce Franklin's *The Wake of the Gods: Melville's Mythology* (Stanford, California, 1963) has been severely criticized, its underlying premise—that Melville's imagination was profoundly stimulated by comparative cultural and religious information and speculation—seems sound. The standard guide to books Melville knew is Merton M. Sealts, Jr., *Melville's Reading / A Check-list of Books Owned and Borrowed* (Madison, 1966). Among the entries in this carefully-contrived and most valuable work which might be germane are items 49, 50, 85, 135, 140, 175, 186, 223b, 224, 235, 293, 313, 323a, 327, 396, 399, 488, 514, 528, 532, 536, 555, 559 and 559a.

<sup>9</sup> So similar, indeed, that Melville sometimes confounds them. *Moby-Dick* has never been praised for its factual consistency. For Tashtego as devil, see the second "Knights and Squires" chapter, Chapter Twenty-Seven in Volume I of the "Standard Edition."

<sup>10</sup> Any discussion of *Moby-Dick* opens a can of worms. I am very much aware, for example, that Melville does not equal Ishmael, and that sometimes Melville forgets that Ishmael is supposed to be his narrator. An old Melvillian, I feel the urge to explore again the complexities of the book, but feel I must

limit myself here to the topic at hand, so when the subtleties of the novel do not affect the point, I try to ignore them.

<sup>11</sup> This and subsequent citations are to the first edition of the novel (Chicago and New York, 1896); henceforth citations will be treated parenthetically in the text. The present quotation appears on 37.

<sup>12</sup> And then, later in the novel, quietly gave us cause to dislike the targets of the hatred, the Brombergs, too.

<sup>13</sup> *Illuminations* was the title of the English edition of the book.

<sup>14</sup> But, curiously, are unable to acknowledge their work. Though I believe I have read two discussions of Melville and business, diligent searches of standard bibliographies of studies of him have failed to turn them up. A letter to Kenneth S. Lynn, whose undergraduate honors essay at Harvard (the Helen Choate Bell Prize Essay, History and Literature, 1947), "Cash Nexus," dealt with such matters, revealed that he, too, remembered two studies, but could not bring back authors or titles. William Charvat's "Melville's Income," *American Literature*, 15 (1944), 251-61 is as near as I have been able to come. [*In 2013, I did a quick Google search and failed to find these pieces, perhaps because they are not yet available online or because of my limited computer skill. The search turned up a number of more recent studies that touch on Moby-Dick and economics, however, so the subject apparently retains its appeal. It was interesting also to see that "the Melville industry," as it was called decades ago, seems unaffected by any economic downturns, meltdowns, recessions or bursting bubbles.*]

<sup>15</sup> The connections between religious seeking, the Protestant impulse, American values and nineteenth century Romantic authors are spelled out with great clarity in Emerson. See in particular his lecture "Martin Luther" in Stephen E. Whicher and Robert E. Spiller, eds., *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Cambridge, 1959), I, 144ff.

<sup>16</sup> In *Melville's Quarrel With God* (Princeton, 1952).

<sup>17</sup> I feel that I have learned so much from foreign students that it would be appropriate to thank those in my classes in American Studies, in English and in Art History at the University of Kansas as a group, and also individually, as in the cases of Hans Borchers, Annie Desprez and Guiseppa Puglisi, the students whose reactions to this novel I remember most clearly. I do not have the names of my Mexican students who read it in 1972, but their responses were also valuable.

<sup>18</sup> For discussion of these aspects of this phenomenon, see Don S. Kirschner, "Publicity Properly Applied: The Selling of Expertise in America, 1900-1929," *American Studies* XIX (Spring, 1978), 65-78. The colleague who worked with child-rearing literature is Geoffrey Steere.

<sup>19</sup> (New York, 1959).

<sup>20</sup> It would take a great deal of tact and subtlety, for example, to apply the method to the Sut Lovingood tales; one would get involved in such questions as whether the reader is really supposed to like Sut, and what to do with the almost affectionate treatment of traits which seem not admirable,

but downright anti-social. Without claiming too much for my simple-minded method, I think it has merit. Try it on literature from a genuinely alien culture and different “admirable” traits will recur.



## Chapter 7

### The Death of the Beautiful Woman

Did you like yesterday's word golf? Let's play again, let's see if we can get from "love" to "free," those two subversive words so dear to deluded Americans.

—John Updike, *A Month of Sundays*

My title is from Poe, who meant by it, literally, a lady expiring, and said that it was the most poetical of subjects. He was wrong; it is about as ugly a subject as one can find. I intend the phrase in a different sense: an end to the despotism of a single ideal of feminine beauty. The topic is useful because the nature of a woman's beauty is a subject so enveloped in cultural assumptions that it seems the last thing one would think to question on "rational" grounds. "Everybody," presumably, knows why a pretty girl is pretty. That the idea is examined, that it may finally come to seem unjust, inhumane or ethnocentric, suggests again the extent to which our countrymen are sometimes willing to apply "rationalized" criteria to areas hitherto accepted without analysis. In a sense, then, this is a chapter about "modernization."

The strength of the idea of beauty provides entry to a discussion of related tensions and confusions in courtship and in female roles in a number of different works, but principally in five dissimilar novels whose dates span about a century: *Arthur Mervyn*, *The Blithedale Romance*, *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and *The Awakening*.

-1-

Eliza and Achsa

The lovers drank at the Shaker spring, and then, with chastened hopes, but more confiding affections, went on to mingle in an untried life.

—Hawthorne, “The Canterbury Pilgrims”

*Arthur Mervyn* is not a very good novel, but it is an astonishing prediction of the shape of things to come. Perhaps were it better—were its author better at creating a real world—it would seem less remarkable, for certain of its characters, more constrained by the convincing friction of rubbing their lives against real people instead of against Brown’s phantasms, would then be unlikely to reach the revolutionary—one almost wants to say utopian—social opinions they come to hold. Its dates are 1799 and 1800 (it was published in two parts, eighteen months apart), its author the energetic ex-Quaker, rationalist, gothicist, “liberal Federalist” self-made editor and author Charles Brockden Brown (1771-1810).<sup>1</sup> I have to feel that its date has something to do with its social prescience, for what happens between the sexes in *Arthur Mervyn* seems to embody the brave meliorism of an age of revolutions and declarations.

In saying that Brown’s novel is not very good and is short on what might be called social density, I do not mean that it is hard to read or that it tells us nothing of the real Philadelphia of 1793. The plague rages; we do have some sense of the response of city and countryside. Indeed, I find even the gothic elements, the vaguely-drawn minor characters and the melodramatically-portrayed villain very interesting. But things remain sufficiently arbitrary for the author to indulge in a sort of “what-if” treatment of human relationships one would never find, let us say, in a solid Victorian novel. Like a writer of declarations and manifestoes, but unlike a richer novelist, Brown can carry social logic to its conclusions. There is something in Brown’s bald confidence in logic which makes his novel silly, yet also very “rational.” If American courtship were only as rational as Brown and Mervyn think it should be, our people would have been spared untold grief and thousands of novels, bad and good.

“The next five or eight years of my life,” says Brown’s young hero, explaining why he does not want to settle down yet, “should be devoted to activity and change. . . .” Arthur’s attitude toward occupation sounds very much like that of the deliberately unsettled daguerreotypist Holgrave, with whom he shares precisely his attitude about the relationship between skill and occupation. He can think of any number of ways to earn a living, and feels that even as a farmhand he can be a literate and thoughtful citizen. It is a modernized, which is to say, non-traditional, attitude. Modernization is supposed to involve urbanization. In the same passage, we learn that Arthur associates “activity and change” with the city, for he says, “. . . if cities are the chosen seats of misery and vice, they are likewise the soil of all the laudable and strenuous productions of mind.”<sup>22</sup> Deeply attached to and moved by the beautiful young daughter of a farmer who had befriended him in his need, a girl whom he now in turn has befriended and protected, Arthur decides that he does not want to get married. Though his heart and the traditional patterns of love stories pull him toward Eliza Hadwin, the head makes him explain to Eliza in the gimpy prose of Brown’s dialogue that he does not want to be tied by the routine which her femininity would impose on a marriage. He wants to be footloose but also to improve himself in a way that readers of Franklin’s *Autobiography* would fully understand. Arthur is idealistic enough not to care whether the change in himself will make him rich, but we are sure that a sharp upward shift in class is in the cards as he transforms himself from an eager farmhand to an educated gentleman. Income, as we noted at the outset, is only one of a number of determinants of class in America. The response of fifteen-year-old Eliza (“Bess”) to these plans, surprisingly, is a women’s liberation speech:

Ah! How much you mistake me! I admire and approve of your schemes. What angers and distresses me is, that you think me unworthy to partake of your cares and labors; that you regard my company as an obstacle and incumbrance; that assistance and counsel must all proceed from you; and that no scene is fit for me but what you regard as slothful and inglorious.

Have I not the same claims to be wise, and active, and courageous as you? If I am ignorant and weak, do I not owe it to the same cause that has made you so; and will not the same means which promote your improvement be likewise useful to me? You desire to obtain knowledge, by travelling and conversing with many persons, and studying many sciences; but you desire it for yourself alone. Me, you think poor, weak, and contemptible; fit for nothing but to spin and churn. Provided I exist, am screened from the weather, have enough to eat and drink, you are satisfied. As to strengthening my mind and enlarging my knowledge, these things are valuable to you, but on me they are thrown away. I deserve not the gift. (II,80)

For Bess, then, rational values seem to outweigh something as basic as the sex role patterns in which she has been reared. Little girls learned to spin and churn; these and other skills made them valuable components of the family work-force. But now the world is changing; Hawthorne will tell us, in a few decades, that women no longer spin. The family is becoming something else, and a new attitude is abroad and spreading which makes Americans feel that any tradition is susceptible to question and challenge.

Remarkably, Arthur, although he is “surprised and disconcerted” by Eliza’s unexpected attitude, on hearing her argument, agrees—the values operate for him, too, even though he had never before thought of this. (80) Before the passage is over, Eliza has even come to say, in effect, All right, then, who says we have to be married, anyway? (81) The decision they reach, for the time being, (82-83) is to live close to one another; they take this to be a pragmatic compromise between rational ideals—Eliza would like them to move in together—and the social mores of the society in which they live.

The novelist goes to great extremes to make possible the kind of completely fresh start exemplified by the relationships between Arthur and Eliza, and, later in the book, Arthur and Achsa Fielding. We learn (175-176) that with the death of his father, Arthur Mervyn is totally alone; Eliza Hadwin had lost all of her kin, as well, and with

them died the religious objections to the marriage (the family was Quaker), thus making possible the “free choice” marriage—which, in an extreme display of freedom of choice, the couple then rejects. This killing off of relatives and severing of ties is a familiar device in certain special kinds of fiction: Edward Bellamy uses it in *Looking Backward* to make it possible for his sleeping (or dreaming) hero to remain undetected; pornographers use it to supply themselves with unconnected young orgiasts. Its appearance is a sign that the author has in mind fantasy of some sort, that he needs to work something out without the usual social complications. In Bellamy, it liberates the author to project his utopia. Brown is not, I think, consciously creating a utopia, but he is daydreaming about the “ideal” or abstract possibilities in work roles, sex roles, class, and courtship. The abstractness makes possible a remarkable projection. Brown’s American logical stubbornness enables him to do clearly on paper what generations of equally stubborn compatriots would struggle for—still struggle for—in the messy arena of real life.

Bess’ and Arthur’s attitudes toward work, courtship and rapid social advancement interconnect in complex ways with the strains which modernization puts upon sex roles and upon the courtship process. Jewish immigrant families in the early twentieth century spoke of the girl who was “holding the book.” What this meant was that she was going with a boy who was studying for something—typically, if the setting was New York, and the date was late enough so that Jews were allowed such employment, he was working full-time at a job in the Post Office, and going to college at that great avenue of escape from the ghetto, C.C.N.Y. Studying was done largely on the subway or in combination with the courtship: he wanted to see his girlfriend, but could not spare the time (nor the money, probably) to take her anywhere. Moreover, he was physically close to total exhaustion. And so, when he came to see her, she “held the book” for him so that he could study, perhaps while taking a little nourishment. The danger in such situations, however, was that while the girl helped with feminine tasks and chores in her family and circulated mostly around immigrant people and the neighborhood, the boy was downtown mixing with more highly educated and socially impressive people. By the time his education was complete (or as complete as social prejudices,

admissions, quotas, and economics would allow it to be—whole generations of Jewish druggists were created from ambitions to produce physicians), he was likely to have set his standards higher. The sweet girl who held the book for him still seemed sweet, but she also seemed limited. Bess and Arthur, seeing that such a thing can happen to them, try to devise a rational scheme to protect themselves. The novel, then, suggests both the attraction of rationalist values and the prevalence of social change through “self-improvement.”

We are not too surprised to find a similar problem, potential male disillusionment with a woman who has not shared his intellectual and social transformation, in a late nineteenth century book; it is a surprise in the late eighteenth. Theron Ware’s new acquaintances tell him that Americans marry too young, and, although we as readers feel that he is wrong, and that he badly underestimates his wife Alice, they do succeed in convincing him that he has made a mistake. Charles Brockden Brown has Arthur Mervyn perceive the same problem; it is one more reason why he decides not to marry “his Bess.” (187) He tells her that at the end of his period of adventure and personal remodeling, they may find that they have little in common.

Other matters we have discussed also appear with great clarity in this remarkable novel. We are told repeatedly that Arthur does not understand social conventions. He does what he feels he should, and damn the consequences. He wants people to like him, but feels that the truth is always the best path to that goal. If it fails, he thinks, in effect, Well, I’ve tried. One thinks on the one hand of the conception of the American as Crèvecoeur’s new man or as Lewis’ “American Adam,”<sup>23</sup> making a fresh start, a clean break with the past; and on the other of the Emersonian impulse to base American life on direct and honest responses rather than precedent or tradition.

Committed to reason, rationality and fairness as Arthur is, however, he is occasionally inconsistent in ways we have already observed in our discussions of other, later books. We find him, for instance, condescending in the case of two black women (153) who ride with him on a stagecoach trip—although to be fair, he treats them about as well as he does the Frenchman who is the other human passenger (there is also a monkey, present apparently to make possible snide comparisons). Yet despite such cheap shots, one feels a determination

to overcome deep-seated prejudices. The inconsistency is, as usual, an indication of a fault-line. One minor black character is treated with some sympathy. Arthur tells us about "a black girl . . . whose innocent and regular features wanted only a different hue to make them beautiful." (155) That is a wonderful illustration of ethnocentric bias in conflict with the value "fair play." Given time and the direction of social change in America, fair play will win. Moreover, as we will see in a moment, author and characters seem capable of moderately unbiased attitudes towards Jews. Charles Brockden Brown's performance in *Arthur Mervyn*, then, seems also to fit very nicely with what we have said about expanding circles; it contains signs that the author is in principle committed to enlarging the circumference, but that his own circle is smaller than Melville's in the '50s or Frederic's in the '90s.

But it is in the area of courtship and marriage that the novel makes its most remarkable statement about modernization. For the relationship between Arthur and Achsa Fielding predicts most of the major themes which troubled thoughtful writers dealing with these issues in the nineteenth century. Her relationship with Arthur is unconventional in various ways; each of these unconventionalities troubles the characters, and must be talked out. We thus have the clearest evidence of the author's self-conscious recognition of what he is about. Like Hawthorne's Zenobia or Frederic's Celia Madden, Achsa Fielding is financially competent. She is somewhat older than Arthur. An orphan, Arthur comes to call Achsa "Mama." Their friendship at the outset does not involve courtship. She is an older and more experienced friend to whom Arthur comes to talk. One thinks of Theron's Ware's pleasure at sitting at the foot of Celia Madden and learning from her, and also the very explicit mother-son line developed in that book. Blurrings and ambiguities in sex role definition come to mind, are discussed and rationalized. Bachelor male discomfort with a sexually experienced woman, explained to us so painfully by Hawthorne's Miles Coverdale in *The Blithedale Romance*, is anticipated here in Brown. Achsa has been married before—she came to the United States after her husband deserted her, moved to France, took a French name, and married a French woman. He died, apparently, in the Reign of Terror. (209) The bias which

Arthur must overcome here is precisely that which the characters in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* discuss in the famous dinner party in the Lapham's honor at the Corey's home, namely the respectability or previously married persons. Achsa, moreover, was born Jewish, and although the author himself perpetuates some hoary anti-semitic stereotypes, his portrayal clearly tries to show Achsa and her family in sympathetic light.<sup>4</sup> We feel the range of values connected with fair play in action when we are told, "Her nation has suffered too much by the inhuman antipathies of religious and political faction; she, herself, has felt so often the contumelies of the rich, the high-born, and the bigotted [sic]. . . ." (217) The religious stance of the novel is a sort of blurred Deism. Interestingly, while both Quakers and Jews are shown sympathetically, their offspring are more like Deists than anything else. Achsa once became Anglican to facilitate a marriage, and "Bess" is not much of a Quaker now that her parents have died. Brown's Quaker background is obviously speaking here, and his attitudes prefigure those of some later "minority" novelists. We are given to understand that Arthur and Achsa are open-minded people who wish to be unfettered by the superstitions of conventional religions while retaining respect for anyone's beliefs.

Finally, like Penelope Lapham, Achsa does not match canons of conventional beauty. Stevens, the doctor who is training Arthur in his trade, summarizes Achsa Fielding's "defects": "she is six years older than you. . . . she has been a wife and mother already (216). . . . she is a foreigner: independent of controul, and rich. . . . she is unsightly as a *nigh-hag*, tawny as a moor, the eye of a gypsey, low in stature, contemptibly diminutive, scarcely bulk enough to cast a shadow as she walks, less luxuriance than a charred log, fewer elasticities than a sheet pebble." (Ibid.) Arthur could not quite see a black girl as beautiful, but he can overlook lack of conventional beauty in another very dark girl. He turns his back upon, indeed, or transcends canons of beauty themselves in rejecting the comely Bess.

The tyranny of those canons is as forceful today as it ever was. I am as impressed by the statement of Brown's plot on this topic as I am by the other liberations he shows. This is another kind of death for the beautiful woman, more creative than what Poe codified: a death of the tyranny of one ideal of beauty over people of both sexes

throughout the society. Would that we were all as liberated in the late twentieth century as was Arthur Mervyn in 1799.

There is a great deal that is ambiguous and even slipshod in *Arthur Mervyn*. One can, for instance, read Arthur's high-mindedness as hypocrisy (though I think it is not—it too often makes life hard for him).<sup>5</sup> To emphasize the elements I have stressed is to ignore most of the book—sloppy plot, narrations-within-narrations-within-narrations, gothic scenes of deaths and burials, board-stiff dialogue, clumsy prose, comically self-conscious rationalizations and inconsistencies. Yet what the book shows about the overlapping areas of urbanization, about social mobility, skills and careers, about “expanding circles” of tolerance, about sex roles and courtship, and about values does seem remarkable. One knows that the battles which Arthur fights and resolves were still unresolved for many a century later: most, indeed, are not fully resolved today. But if we are right that most are connected with those forces that Emerson identified, and which today are associated with “modernization,” Brown's pinpointing of them all in 1800 seems vivid illustration of the accuracy of Shelley's maxim about the artist and the shadows of the future.<sup>6</sup> Brown's somewhat jejune hero, *because* he applies rationalistic values in a completely literal—sometimes a comically literal—way, does more than locate the areas where redefinitions will take place. He tells us where our values are going to lead us, what will happen if we push them to their logical conclusion. *Arthur Mervyn* in this sense becomes a sort of social-science fiction; it predicts the future of American sex role tensions. If our model of how

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1620    1700    1800    1860    1900    etc.

“Moving stairs”

change affects society is valid, Brown belongs at the top step. The present chapter discusses just the issues he dramatized, placing prime emphasis on family history and sex role conflict, in writers far better, but socially no more perceptive, than he.

-2-  
Celia

He felt that he had lived at Geneva so long that he had lost a good deal; he had become dishabituated to the American tone. Never, indeed, since he had grown old enough to appreciate things had he encountered a young American girl of so pronounced a type as this.

—Henry James, *Daisy Miller*

Simple statements about the directions in which large social forces are moving may be demonstrably true without being true enough. Pulled out of the complex context of the American social web, they can be more deceptive than illuminating. Generally in our society more than one thing is going on at a time, and many changes about which we would like to generalize over a long period of time do not move steadily in the same direction. Aware of the constricted roles which women perform in many traditional societies, for example, we are likely to assume that the course of women's history is a steady, if troubled, movement in the direction of freedom and emancipation. We could, if this reasoning were really true, use Benjamin Franklin's attitudes as a sort of base line, for, though Franklin embodies all those experimental, rationalist values we associate with challenge to the accepted and the conventional, he does not always apply them to sex roles. In his whimsical "Advice to a Young Man on the Choice of a Mistress" Franklin, in a context meant to be conventional, argues for marriage, and offers a traditional definition of sex roles: "Separate, she wants his Force of Body and Strength of Reason; he, her Softness, Sensibility and acute Discernment."<sup>7</sup> Although Franklin's attitudes on the subject are a little more complex<sup>8</sup> than such evidence implies, I assume that these sentiments would seem sufficiently square today

to offend most modern women, not to mention men of “Sensibility” and “Discernment.” The attempts in the late 1970s by conservative religious leaders in Iran to redefine feminine sex roles and behavior, and to restore old practice with force, strike us as an aberration, because we are accustomed to movement in the other direction. Yet an influential study<sup>9</sup> argues that in the Jacksonian period, the ideal model for behavior for middle class American women actually seems to have “retrogressed.” If we examine American society in the eighteenth century, that is, we find that a surprising number of women performed what we now see as professional roles, tending the sick, managing businesses, and so forth. But in the first few decades of the nineteenth century, a period marked by an enormous spread in literacy and the development of a mass reading audience, a great deal of material begins to appear in print which argues for more proper and ladylike roles for women. It is just at this period for the first time that significant numbers of American families ceased to be integrated units of production in which the man performed certain functions, his wife others, and each child large enough to help swelled the work force potentially available. All other things being equal, a child increased the productive capacity of the unit.

As we have noted, in the new pattern, the man had become the sole breadwinner, and, characteristically, left the home to go to some other place where he earned the income. Now only a housekeeper where she had once been part of the family’s economic force, a woman was in a new position, and soon people were giving her advice about how she should behave. To make a long story short, the advice amounted to being “ladylike,” which is to say, genteel, cultured, tasteful, a model for family morality, but not productive.

Social history, however, is never that simple; other contradictory forces were at work as well. By the end of the century, for instance, foreign observers said that they were fascinated with the personality and behavior of many American women they met. The women seemed more independent, capable of forceful thought, and of unconventional conclusions. In short, they seemed to have minds of their own to a degree which surprised most Europeans and ran counter to the advice and guidelines of the ladies’ magazines. When one of these intellectually aggressive women was portrayed in European or American

novels, critics sometimes called her the “New American Woman.” We will examine some of her manifestations in books as different as *The Blithedale Romance*, *The Damnation of Theron Ware* and *The Rise of Silas Lapham*.

Now, obviously, neither the new lady nor the New American Woman would appear throughout the society all at once. In order to be ladylike, for instance, a woman had to have some leisure. If she lived in a place or in a situation in which she was a hard-working member of a tightly integrated unit—if, for example, the family had a craft business in which her work played an important part—she might be unable to play all the roles which were suggested by the new ladies’ magazines, nor could she if her family farmed.

Moreover, foreign visitors quite early in the century noticed that American children, male and female, seemed to behave very differently from European children: they spoke up more frequently, were solemnly consulted on family decisions, were urged to express opinions, and in general, as we would see it, seemed to be socialized to a greater aggressiveness, independence and assertiveness.<sup>10</sup> In addition, at the height of the period associated with “the invention of the lady” one also begins to notice women making an attempt to enter certain kinds of professions. Even this conflict is refigured, incidentally, in Brown’s *Arthur Mervyn*: we are told about Fanny Maurice, who had always wanted to be self-supporting—“to owe her subsistence to her own industry, and was only held by the pride of her family . . . from seeking out some lucrative kind of employment.” A financial disaster to the family gives her her chance, and she not only succeeds, but is respectable—Brown’s pointing this out suggests both the strength of “ladylike” taboos several decades before the period which Gerda Lerner discusses<sup>11</sup> and the strength of the countervailing values: Miss Maurice “now teaches music in Baltimore for a living. No one, however, in the highest rank, can be more generally respected and caressed than she is.” (168)

The feminist reformers of Henry James’ *The Bostonians*, then, have enough tradition behind them to be recognizable as types; Hawthorne’s Zenobia is their predecessor, and like them, is based on real women who spoke out in terms of those values to which we have so often referred. One newly extensive profession—teaching—they

came to dominate, not always for the best reasons, and generally under difficult conditions, but overwhelmingly, nevertheless.<sup>12</sup> Though women teachers had less freedom and meaner salaries than men taking up comparable new work, they operated with greater independence than they would have in more traditional family-centered roles. So apparently values and opportunities connected with independent thought and “standing on your own feet” were being inculcated at the same time that women were being told to be ladylike, passive, submissive, and so forth.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, to make the pattern even more complex, many of the best known commercial writers who argued this ladylike definition of proper role were themselves women, for the nineteenth century had seen the development of a surprisingly large corps of female professional authors. A recent study argues that these authors, in league with ministers, played an important part in “the feminization of American culture,” a process linked with the development in our society of a kind of dichotomy between popular and elite culture.<sup>14</sup> The spread of sentimental attitudes towards gender roles and the association of femininity with the minister’s role will be of more than passing interest to us in this chapter as we look at the texture of several novels. Our present point is the complexity of the picture—certainly the ideal of feminine behavior projected by such writers is very different from what we associate with the New American Woman, but the role model which created her, probably based on those values we have just been discussing, was contemporary with that purveyed by sentimentalists.

Our best writers were not only aware of each of these apparently contradictory tendencies but were able self-consciously to discuss and to dramatize them. I am a strong admirer of the work of the New Historians and others who seek to recreate the texture of life in the American past, but it does seem to me that very often what they are doing amounts to confirming and fleshing out things which we already knew from our literature, and, indeed, often can see there in much more convincing realistic complexity because it is embodied imaginatively in characters whose personalities grow from real tensions and characteristics which interested, amused, or troubled the authors. Thus Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance* is a very explicit attack on the worst and most malicious aspects of popular sentimen-

tality, but it also embodies all of those other tendencies in nineteenth century sex role change and development which I have mentioned. And what Hawthorne saw in the 1850's was visible still in Frederic and Howells forty years later, for the conflicts in role expectations were still causing hurt and mischief.

*Blithedale* is among other things an attack on the death-sacrifice-beauty-join-one-another-in-Heaven nonsense which Hawthorne hated. We have already discussed the psychological significance of this theme when we connected Poe's statements about the death of the beautiful woman to broad social tendencies. The popularization of such slop had baneful effect.

We concluded our last chapter talking about a continuity in values from *Moby-Dick* to *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, about their authors' desire to cut through prejudices, to allow fair play to operate even in areas in which it contradicts popularized stereotypes. I think that this is why Frederic places Celia Madden's most extended women's liberation speech at precisely the point in the novel in which she is described as most beautiful.<sup>15</sup> She speaks of the "old-fashioned idea . . . that women must belong to somebody, as if they were curios, or statues, or race-horses," and finds it as absurd as the idea of selling Theron into slavery. Theron, tantalized but out of his depth once again, can only respond, "That is not the generally accepted view, I should think," to which Celia produces a star-spangled, challenge-all-conventions answer cut directly out of the left side of our value table:

"No more is it the accepted view that young married Methodist ministers should sit out alone in the woods with red-headed Irish girls. No, my friend, let us find what the generally accepted views are, and as fast as we find them set our heels on them. There is no other way to live like real human beings. What on earth is it to me that other women crawl about on all-fours, and fawn like dogs on any hand that will buckle a collar onto them, and toss them the leavings of the table? I am not related to them. They cannot make any rules for me. If pride and dignity and independence are dead in them, why, so much the

worse for them! It is no affair of mine. Certainly it is no reason why I should get down and grovel also. No; I at least stand erect on my legs." (379)

Theron, good American that he is, knows what he is hearing, and responds to the values beneath it: an "involuntary thrill" runs through him, and he connects it to the feeling he remembers from childhood when "the Fourth of July reader bawled forth that opening clause: 'When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary,' etc. It was nothing less than another Declaration of Independence he had been listening to." It is hard to imagine a more direct connection between rational values and the national bent to apply them to areas generally governed by tradition. That the author chooses this place to tell us how beautiful and desirable our revolutionary heroine seems to him and to Theron says a great deal about his own game commitment to the values, just as his revelation of Celia's loneliness and her sometimes immature judgment speak of the difficulties of a woman going it alone in the face of all conventions.<sup>16</sup>

Frederic had ample precedent in Brown and in Hawthorne, for in *The Blithedale Romance* Hawthorne insists that Zenobia, with her fame and public activity, her intellectual aggressiveness, her unusually large size and—Hawthorne does not miss a thing—her incompetence in the kitchen, is still radiantly beautiful. She has, moreover, like Celia, a kind of power often associated with males because of her wealth, and, though unmarried, she is apparently sexually experienced. Thus although her characteristics remind us of Dr. Stevens' list of Achsa Fielding's "faults," a veritable catalogue of things that are supposed to be threatening to male egos, Hawthorne tries to be on her side, and seems to want to come to terms with this new kind of woman.

So practically as soon as the "lady" is invented as an ideal for the aspiring middle-class woman, her opposite appears, a woman unwilling to accept only the more passive roles of wife, mother, or moral and cultural model. The way is hard, though. Independent and liberated though she is, Zenobia still reacts to the old models. Thwarted in love, she behaves like the sappiest of romantic heroines, and kills herself. Hawthorne's narrator tells us that the real tragedy is that so capable a woman could have responded to such miserable and unjust nonsense.

We understand the confusion of a person caught between conflicting models of behavior. Hawthorne, outraged, shows the death of a beautiful woman as it appears to people who value  $\pi$ —life: Zenobia has in mind the graceful death of an Ophelia, a gentle departure by water. But she dies hideously, struggling, and her ghastly corpse is brought up from the sloppy bottom of the farm pond by an earthy farmer's strong arms and his pitchfork through her breast.

The tensions and ambiguities in sex role designation to which Arthur Mervyn's friends so readily and reasonably adapted bring tragedy to Zenobia. If their impact is less tragic in *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, it is still extremely clear. It is not merely that gender problems show up repeatedly in the action of the novel, but that the author is completely aware of them, has the characters discuss them by their own varied lights and deliberately sets up situations in which the complexities and ambiguities can play themselves out.

Consider this group of related passages: Theron's wife, seeing him return home on a hot day, says that she wishes that he had carried an umbrella—she doesn't see “why a minister shouldn't carry one as much as a woman carries a parasol,” to which Theron replies, “I suppose people really do think of us as a kind of hybrid female.” (171) Late in the book, the dying Michael Madden remarks of his sister Celia that she is “no theologian.” “Women have no call to meddle with such matters.” (440) Michael is a direct, sincere modest and pious Catholic. The Soulsbys, in contrast, are reformed sharpies, who used to turn a quick buck in various rackets, but now work as itinerant debt-raisers for financially troubled protestant churches. They are well-adjusted people, but Brother Soulsby enjoys his new-found stability and his garden; Sister Soulsby takes the aggressive “masculine” role in the pair. Theron says, “I believe *she* is the head of the firm.” To which Levi Goringe replies, “Yes; she wears the breeches, I understand.” (181) When the crowd has gathered in the church, “looking forward to another notable and exciting season of grace,” it is Sister Soulsby who defies not only older religious prohibitions, but also what we have been told were special nineteenth century taboos against women assuming ministerial roles or even speaking in public<sup>17</sup> by mounting the pulpit stairs and, in her breezy way, proceeding to perform the series of devious maneuvers which will raise the debt.

The issue of the woman in the pulpit is on everyone's mind; Frederic tells us that Candace Soulsby "deferred to Paul's views about women preachers on Sundays," going on to say that "on week-days she had just as much right to snatch brands from the burning as Paul, or Peter, or any other man." (239) One remembers again the scene in which Theron sits "out alone in the woods" with his "red-headed Irish" lady friend (379). Celia explains her feelings about "Greeks and beauty" (her ideas are not much more profound than my three-word synopsis suggests, but Theron is impressed), and the thought occurs to him that it is a pity that she cannot "change estates" with him so that she can see how moved he is by her explanation of the Greeks, beauty, and the "maternal idea." (385) He concludes by telling her that while she spoke "the strangest sensation seized upon me. It was absolutely as though I were a boy again, a good, pure-minded, fond little child, and you were the mother that I idolized." Celia tells him in response "I find myself liking you better at the moment . . . than I have ever liked you before." (385-386)

A great many things, then, are floating around in these pages. It is not merely that the priestly role parallels what were felt to be women's moral and aesthetic functions, but also that intellectuality is supposed to be masculine, and reversals of these things produce strange emotions and ambiguities. To my mind, all of this comes to a head in a wonderful scene in which Theron and Father Forbes are talking. Forbes says, "When I look at Celia, I seem to see in my mind's eye the fair young ancestral mother of them all." Frederic writes,

Theron gazed at the speaker with open admiration. "I love to hear you talk," he said simply.

An unbidden memory flitted upward in his mind. Those were the very words that Alice had so often on her lips in their old courtship days. How curious it was! He looked at the priest, and had a quaint sensation of feeling as a romantic woman must feel in the presence of an especially impressive masculine personality. (417)

This brief inventory of passages that involve ambiguity of sex roles as they concern priests and ministers could be further developed.

For our purposes, suffice it to say that Frederic builds a complex cat's cradle, indeed, and plays with it very self-consciously. This is why he juxtaposes an inexperienced and somewhat passive young male who learns to value those things associated with femininity by nineteenth century propagandists, and an intellectually aggressive—almost sexually aggressive—and financially independent woman. The tensions which result tell us about fault-lines in a culture undergoing rapid, complex and sometimes contradictory alterations in very basic dimensions.

-3-

Persis and Penelope

Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face,  
Thy Naiad airs. . . .  
—Poe, "To Helen"

In some ways *The Rise of Silas Lapham* brings these tendencies to a culmination. In *The Blithedale Romance*, Hawthorne worked very hard to show that although Zenobia in behavior and appearance ran counter to the canons of feminine propriety and respectability, she was an attractive and desirable woman. Yet, truth to tell, when the chips were down, the two eligible bachelors in the book were looking elsewhere. Zenobia was all right to visit, but you wouldn't want to live there. Celia Madden, in *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, is very much in the same tradition—intellectually aggressive, forceful, creative, independent and exotic. She is also, as she tells us in several places which generally are not stressed in discussions of the novel, very lonely, and it seems unlikely, unless the family should resettle in a place in which there was a more extensive intellectual and artistic community, that she will never find a suitable mate. Though she has, in fact, been vamping the local Methodist minister, I do not imagine that she would admit even to herself that she had been doing so, and certainly she is unwilling to allow anything to come of it.

If Zenobia and Celia seem rather exotic examples of the "New American Woman," Pen Lapham is suitably homespun, but she shares the more important of their characteristics. Unlike Celia and

Zenobia (but like Achsa Fielding), she is not “pretty.” Nor does she have their notoriety—Zenobia has a national reputation; Celia, as eccentric daughter of the town’s most important industrialist, is at least famous locally. In an era in which “fair” is almost synonymous with “beautiful,” Pen is dark. She also thinks for herself, holds unconventional opinions, and reads extensively. One could even say that Howells, in portraying her as “plain,” is doing something very radical, challenging even current canons of beauty, canons which, as Thorstein Veblen was suggesting, are not based on any abstract and lofty aesthetic ideals anyway.<sup>18</sup>

Penelope, moreover, has a sense of humor. So do Celia and Zenobia. We are told that humor—particularly her laconic kind—is considered a masculine trait in the nineteenth century.<sup>19</sup> Whereas Celia and Zenobia show their humor in a kind of haughtiness, Pen Lapham is a genuine clown whose monologues, imitations, yarns and so forth, delivered in her “lazy tone” (135) provoke people to “joyous laughter” and “peals.” (135)

Howells not only goes further in making his sympathetic girl unpretty and a comedienne, but he underlines his point by having the attractive and eligible bachelor fall in love with her. Though the Corey women reflect genteel disapproval, or at least bewilderment, at Penelope’s personality, their brother wants her for a wife. As far as we can tell at the end of the novel, they are a good match.

The final statement on the matter seems to be not only that this newly independent, somewhat aggressive and humorous woman is on the scene and has to be reckoned with, but that we are developing a generation of attractive and intelligent men who not only appreciate her intellectually—as the poet Coverdale did Zenobia—but find her attractive in other ways, as well. It is as though Hawthorne had his heart in the right place, and wanted, in Zenobia, to show sympathetically the remarkable new woman he had seen in his society—and we need not enter into the debate about the extent to which Zenobia is Margaret Fuller—to show her as worthy, human, and warm. He also showed her, however, as handicapped by her freedom: a little scary to the narrator, for instance, who admires her, even roots for her, but cannot fall for her. Caught between new ideals of liberation and old social realities, Zenobia is destroyed. Celia survives, but only as a

lonely spinster. But Pen Lapham, even more “handicapped” than her fictional sisters, lacking both their beauty and their poise, finds someone who not only accepts her and admires her—Coverdale accepts and admires Zenobia—but loves her. The marriage is strange enough, one might argue, that the newlyweds must go off to live in Mexico, but it is made, and suggests an odd but important instance of our expanding circles, the liberated woman accepted not only as an ideal, but as a wife.<sup>20</sup> It is significant, too, that Pen comes from a very plain background—but for the accident of Silas’ paint-mine bonanza, she would be a poor girl from a rural place. The woman with these new traits, then, is not perceived as a phenomenon of the privileged classes.

All of this implies belief in a system of courtship based not upon the traditional ways in which cultures handle such matters, but rather upon the application of certain sacred values. One might argue that in this case American behavior is exotic because we stress the right-hand values—those connected with individuality, fulfillment and free choice—while other societies behave more “rationally,” pairing couples whose unions make sense in terms of the needs, structure or beliefs of the community, and especially in terms of economics. Left-hand, rational values underlie such choice, one would think. But this implies more logical consistency than a system of values really possesses. As we noted at the outset, our terms for the values are arbitrary and after the fact; the values overlap. A person deciding to go against parents’ wishes or community traditions probably does not feel that the decision is “irrational.” The picture is actually a little more complicated. If Americans are loud in defense of free choice, and very romantic in attitude about our choice of mates, there are studies which suggest that in practice most of us marry people from similar social, ethnic, and religious categories. That “most,” of course, is perilous; no statistics can tell us how many unconventionally-paired couples it takes to affect the social structure, or what the effect would be. Certainly intermarriage—economic, religious and now, increasingly, interracial—has altered the American social fabric.

“Romantic” is a tricky word, too. Condoned American courtship practices place more emphasis on romantic love and romantic choices than do, say, European. We expect our marriages to be based upon

romantic love. That itself, curiously, reflects our modernized state, I think, in that specialization and industrialization have destroyed the family's economic function which used to be the backbone of marriage, thus placing much more emphasis on the remaining purposes, "emotional maintenance" (to use the funny term of the historians of the family) and romantic love among them. It seems odd to think of Americans as more "romantic" in this sense than are continentals. Perhaps it is because of our stubborn quest for the romantic *within* marriage. Europeans, we are told, traditionally visualize it outside. In Mexico, patterns are different from those in Europe, but perhaps even more alien to ours. Two *gringas* were enrolled in a course in Spanish for foreigners during the Spring of 1979 at UNAM, the national university in Mexico City, because they were engaged to Mexican boys and wanted to learn the language of the country where they planned to live. But both broke off their engagements on discovering the patterns of family life which their fiances had in mind: the wife to stay within the household; the husband to spend perhaps an evening a week being with her. "That ain't enough," says one. "I want a husband who does things with *me*."

The girls' disaffection was probably not entirely on "romantic" grounds, but it was clear enough that they hoped for kinds of experiences within their marriages that were not going to be available. Both had good looks at the patterns available within their prospective in-laws' households; both found them restrictive and demeaning.

Our modern courtship behavior looks weird to foreigners; the practice of "dating," with its (always thwarted) underlying rationale of a reasoned choice after a suitable period of shopping around flies in the face of ways more familiar to those brought up in different cultures. The dating business, I think, is the area of our behavior most badly misread and misunderstood by foreigners.

The trouble with it is that while it does embody ideals having to do with freedom, choice and personal expressiveness, it is damnably inefficient and needlessly painful. As we have already noted, with each new freedom comes another new insecurity, and our adolescents and young adults, social psychologists tell us, are put through needless and occasionally terrible tensions during the "dating years." The complex rules of a game of liaison, the unfairnesses, the stress upon

transient fashion, glamour, fad, and so on are comparatively harmless when they operate, say, in the context of an aristocratic seventeenth or eighteenth century court, or among psychologically pretty secure twentieth century teenagers. Restoration comedy and teenage dating comic strips reflect phenomena in some ways parallel. Freedom seems associated with being naughty and a little rebellious; propriety itself seems somewhat supple and flexible. What is harmful is a situation in which such freedoms come to be taken dead seriously, and in which the overlapping ideals of romantic love conflict with strict definitions of propriety. It is in situations in which the elaborate mating rituals with their easy-to-misread cues combine with the ambiguities of sex role definitions that sexual tragedies of the sort we associate with Victorianism become too prevalent. This is the situation that infuriates Hawthorne and Howells. Zenobia, independent and intelligent though she is, is unable to shrug off Hollingsworth; the courtship mixup in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* comes straight out of light stage comedy, and would be perfectly congruent with the silliness of a “bobby sox” comic strip of the fifties, but it nearly derails the Lapham family.

Thus, while American courtship patterns may seem comical or exotic to foreigners who share the values on which our courtship ideals are based, but in practice behave in far more traditional ways, to the thoughtful American author offended by sentimental distortions of reality, inefficiency and false expectations seemed part of a cruel system. *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is many other things as well, but it is clearly an attack on the workings of that system. The sturdiness of the marriage between Silas and Persis is there throughout the novel as a reference point against which less stable relations may be measured. I think in particular of how well the Laphams stand up as they face their deepest crisis in Chapter 21. What they turn back to for strength is the period of their lives when their marriage was in fact an economic partnership, close to those which, as we have seen, were characteristic of American marriages before modernization.

The assertion of the strength of this relationship is tied very explicitly to those earlier times: “. . . they fell asleep that night talking hopefully of his affairs, which he laid before her fully, as he used to do when he first started in business. That brought the old times back. . . .”<sup>21</sup> That Persis Lapham functions as keeper of morals in the family is plain to everyone involved. Silas tells the reporter Bartley

Hubbard that this is true, and we are not very many pages into the novel before we see it happening: Persis will not let Silas rationalize the manner in which he bought out his partner Rogers. It was not a "business chance" at all, she says: "You crowded him out." How directly this special role for women is connected to the alteration in sex roles within the family is shown just a few lines later. Silas says, "I'm sick of this. . . . If you'll tend to the house, I'll manage my business without your help." Persis responds, "You were very glad of my help once." (47) That point is well taken in both the context of the novel and in our context, because the Lapham's marriage recapitulates the history of sex role changes in the family in the nineteenth century. Persis, we recall, was a professional when she and Silas met: she taught school. He was proud to have won her, for her (obviously modest) educational accomplishments counted for status. Early in the marriage Persis was Silas' real partner, keeping books for the firm and sharing all important decisions. With the growth of the enterprise and the move to the city, she has lost those functions; all that is left is to be Silas' conscience, and to tell him of the home he is building with his wealth, "And don't you ask me to go to that house with you any more. You can sell it, for all me. I sha'n't live in it. There's blood on it." (48)

The Lapham's marriage is, of course, immensely durable, and it is at the start of Chapter Four, immediately after this quarrel at the end of Chapter Three, that the author gives us a lecture on the strength of Silas' love for Persis. It is a discussion that includes the statement, "In that affair of the partnership she had tried to be his conscience, but perhaps she would have defended him if he had accused himself. . . ." (50)

We see other aspects of the conventional definition of sex roles and the people who break them. It is not surprising that it is Penelope who is the first of the Lapham family to understand the arts, but perhaps it is a surprise that it is the very feminine and conventional Irene who, we are told, has a good head for business; Howells says that "she showed a business-like quickness in comprehending [business affairs]. . . . that Penelope had never pretended to." (347)

I conclude from all of this that we are dealing with an author who is trying very hard to make it plain to readers that people can follow their talents and impulses and ignore these conventionalisms. Persis,

rich or poor, is willing to do housework, but she observes accurately that the family was happier when they were poor, when there was less leisure to suffer, and, we might add, when she had a clear economic role. The Laphams poor illustrated marriage as an economic partnership; the Laphams rich suffered the tensions of marriage for “emotional maintenance.”

-4-

Edna

And in the end, the nerves get even.

—Willa Cather

As the family became less an economic unit, its other functions, child-rearing and emotional support, came to receive more emphasis. Too much, in the eyes of some modern observers. A marriage founded solidly on mutual economic advantage may not sound very romantic, but with luck, the couple may come to feel a kind of commitment which even the most dewy-eyed sixteen-year-old would admit to be love; if not, there is still generally the respect for competence to fall back on. A marriage founded only on romantic attraction is far more fragile. Ecstasy is not a perennial, and unreasonable expectations can lead to bitter disillusionment once the glowy happily-ever-after wears off.

A pattern of plot development with which we are all familiar may be briefly summarized: hero and heroine, in love, are kept from marriage by assorted difficulties. Overcoming them provides happy resolution. I am not a folklorist and do not want to get into the theory of such things, but I suppose that it is safe to say that this plot pattern is related to folktales. It sounds very much like marriage to the prince and the couple living happily ever after. Both this plot-pattern and folktales must be related to the ideal of romantic love, and I do feel that recurrent plot patterns characteristic of the culture have to be regarded as something like myth.

The particular pattern we are talking about is very old but it is not as old as the hills; it is widespread, but it is by no means universal. It is not, for example, notably prevalent in Jewish scripture. Adam and

Eve do not experience troubled courtship, nor do they live happily ever after. The story of Esther and King Ahashverus comes closer, but somehow there is a great difference between being the king's favorite wife and the fairy-tale pattern we have been discussing. The reason, of course, is simple: the cultures upon which the Biblical tales are based were organized differently. And that is my point: that these plot patterns can be called mythic and cultural because they exemplify both ideals and the way that specific societies are organized. Esther comes to occupy front couch in the harem; Cinderella expects to have the prince to herself.

The strength of these patterns is undeniable. The authors whose novels we are discussing in this chapter seem to me deliberately to try to avoid the characteristic pattern of "marriage, and curtain," yet one always feels its presence. Thus Brown avoids the Arthur-marries-his-Bess pattern, yet the book, which is certainly much more than a love story, does end with the coy revelation of Arthur's marriage to Achsa Fielding. If the reader is unfamiliar with the novel, I should point out that most of the material which I have cited which has to do with the development of what might be called the love story occurs quite late in the book, the bulk of which is concerned with an impossibly complex tangle of strange happenings, mysteries and misunderstandings. Resolution is delayed, however, until Arthur's marriage is set up.

In *The Blithedale Romance*, the failure of Hollingsworth, Hawthorne's idealistic proto-dictator, to play lead tenor to Zenobia's contralto leads to her tragic death; Hollingsworth goes on to marry the soprano, Zenobia's mysterious, passive, conventionally feminine and badly exploited half-sister Priscilla. But even in this plot, what Hawthorne does is related to "happily ever after," because as recent studies have shown, a special nineteenth century variation on the pattern involves the idea that no earthly union is adequate to unite the lovers' souls, and death becomes a metaphor for complete merger. Wagnerian opera, I suppose, is the ultimate expression of this sort of tripe. I do not know how fully Hawthorne had thought all that through, but he knew that the love and death business was sick, and he would carefully temper his "marriage, and curtain" endings. Hence the guarded statements about the future which the Hollingsworths

will face. And in *The House of the Seven Gables*, the curtain does not come down until we have had a somewhat rueful though also whimsical look at the very different kind of person that Holgrave is to become in his domesticated years.

The tale “The Canterbury Pilgrims” is an especially good example of this sort of tempering in Hawthorne. The wife of a ruined yeoman says that the most terrible trouble a couple has to suffer is not failure or the death of children: it is that “love will wear away little and little.” When the lovers fleeing the Shaker settlement decide, despite this news of the outside world, to try love and the world, they do so with both affection and “chastened hopes.” In *Theron Ware*, the happy marriage and happily-ever-after have already occurred before the “time of the novel.” Theron and Alice were an extremely attractive and loving couple before they came to Octavius; economic woes produced their first real unhappiness, but they would doubtless lovingly have survived even those had it not been for Theron’s sudden and weedy intellectual growth. The passionnal climax of the book would be a union between Theron and Celia, but nothing of this sort happens. At the end of the novel we have in effect another wedding, as a very different Alice and Theron take off together for a new career (shades of Arthur Mervyn and Hollingsworth) on the West coast. The romantic plot of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* does end with a happy marriage, as the craftsman in Howells strives to have his various plot lines resolve simultaneously. But Silas and Persis have had to trim their sails, and their daughter and new son-in-law do not precisely sail into a glorious sunset: their ship, rather, is bound for Porfirian Mexico, where young Tom Corey will have to learn to live with graft, bribery, and governmental corruption—he will be peddling his fancy paints under less than ideal conditions.

The plot pattern which ends in a happy marriage, then, is something that we as readers feel just beneath the surface of each of these books, even when the author does not give it to us. But not every reader would carry the same expectations; it is for this reason that I said that these patterns are cultural, not universal. I will confess that I did not understand this point fully myself until, following a class in which we had been discussing it, a good student loaned me a copy of a Chinese novel which he was reading for another course,

a novel about a young couple eager for marriage but kept from one another by strong family objections resulting from the differences in the families' social statuses. Along about chapter sixteen they seem to get these things worked out, and the wedding takes place. The conventional occidental pattern was working on me so strongly that I expected the chapter to end the novel. The love story seemed to be the point of the thing—there were no strong sub-plots—and I felt a sense of resolution. What then were these umpteen chapters still to come? Titillating accounts of exotic oriental sex practices? No, rather they were (apparently) meaningless relations of seemingly routine occurrences—encounters on the street between assorted people from different families, a dinner party in which there is a good deal of fussing about who is to sit where, and other matters which made it difficult to keep one's nose in the book. These, of course, would be among the most exciting chapters for someone attuned to the culture which produced the novel, for the novelist, as I eventually realized, was giving us the drama of the working out of the relationships between the two previously ill-matched families. In the right cultural setting all those chapters packed plenty of tension; for a reader outside the culture, none at all.

I conclude from this that an element as basic in fiction as whether "marriage, and curtain" will be a suitable ending is in itself an important piece of social-historical evidence.

It relates to modernization, as well, in at least two ways. First, as we have noted, modernization produced radical changes in gender roles within the family, and in the definition of what functions the family was supposed to perform. This produced some of the special tensions and helped dramatize the rift between reality and the idealized patterns of romantic love which are evident in that fairy-tale-like plot pattern. Second, the increasing rationalization of society and the increased contact of governmental agencies with citizens made available better statistics. Divorce rates are a superficial, but compelling, argument against happily-ever-after as a suitable ending for your novel.

Note, however, that we are not arguing that modernization produces greater marital instability. The popular notion that the American family is disintegrating is not, according to specialists,

susceptible to documentation. We are not really sure, that is, that if we had access to adequate records for the past, we should find more stability among couples at some period in that the past then we find now. Our impression of greater instability is a result of a number of factors. First, through modernization, far better records are kept. Second, it is probable, despite the recent increase in frank “living together” relationships outside of marriage, that a higher percentage of Americans who are living conjugally today are in fact formally married than was the case, let us say, a hundred and fifty years ago. If the sociological concept of “value stretch” has any validity at all, it would appear that formal marriage did not seem like a reasonable possibility for a large numbers of people in the lower socio-economic strata of our nation in the past. What fiction we have which deals with such social classes<sup>22</sup> shows relationships which, even if they are more than casual, are not dignified by marriage vows. The dissolution of such relationships simply never appeared in any official statistics.

My family and I were struck, when we were living in Mexico in 1972, by a campaign to encourage large numbers of Mexican couples who had been living together unmarried to formalize the relationship through marriage. Spectacular public ceremonies, sometimes covered on television, were held in which thousands of couples, many with their children looking on, were wed at once. One may be sure that for the areas in which such “reforms” have taken place, divorce statistics will go up, though in fact the institutionalization of these relationships has probably, if anything, made them somewhat more permanent than they were before. It’s that before, there was no official record when one of them dissolved. Now, there generally will be. One strongly suspects that similar processes were involved as the United States went through its more gradual modernization.

*The Rise of Silas Lapham*, at any rate, says a number of things quietly about the normalcy of familial instability. There are specific instances of marital trouble: Silas’s old war buddy and his wife have not had a viable marriage for years; their daughter, Zerilla, the typist in Silas’s office, is seriously considering an unattractive marriage simply because she is under terrible financial and psychological pressure; the reporter Bartley Hubbard and his wife are having difficulties which, if we know other Howells novels, do in fact lead to

a divorce. Moreover, as we noted, there is explicit discussion of the matter, and the point of view which argues that in many cases divorce is a rational and moral alternative, and that divorced people should not be considered moral lepers, receives condonation not only by the Coreys' aristocratic friends, but by Silas as well. The discussion takes place at that dinner party, and Silas is a little too drunk to have the nerve to indicate to the others how strongly he agrees with the sensible things he has just heard said. It is fair enough to conclude, then, that this condonation by most of the sympathetic characters in the novel illustrates both that marital breakups are very common and that some Americans in the 1890's were ready to apply "rational" criteria to an area which even in many twentieth century nations which we think of as quite modern, has remained far more a matter of tradition and even prejudice than it has in ours.

These people really expect the passion of love to fill and gratify every need of life, whereas nature only intended that it should meet one of many demands. They insist upon making it stand for all the emotional pleasures of life and art; expecting an individual and self-limited passion to yield infinite variety, pleasure, and distraction, to contribute to their lives what the arts and the pleasurable exercise of the intellect gives to less limited and less intense idealists. So this passion, when set up against Shakespeare, Balzac, Wagner, Raphael, fails them. They have staked everything on one hand, and they lose. They have driven the blood until it will drive no further, they have played their nerves up to the point where any relaxation short of absolute annihilation is impossible. Every idealist abuses his nerves, and every sentimentalist brutally abuses them. And in the end, the nerves get even.

The quotation is from Willa Cather, from a review published July 8, 1899 of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*.<sup>23</sup> It is convincing evidence again of the sensitivity of creative writers to those aspects of social change that produce flaw-lines and tensions. I find it particularly

exciting because of the connection it makes between unrealistic expectations from romantic love—an epidemic cause of feminine unhappiness only since modernization—and sentimentality of precisely the sort identified in Ann Douglas' *The Feminization of American Culture*. The novel Cather is reviewing is an apt subject for such connections, and of others which one can mention, so many that the plot of *The Awakening* can serve to summarize all we need to say about the effect of those changes which we connect with the impact of modernization upon the function and structure of the family, and upon sex roles and work roles.

What the novel says about childhood is a good place to begin. We noted early in this study that children are an economic asset in the family before modernization. Edna Pontellier is not sure what their function is in her family. She has married into a French Creole family and moves, somewhat reluctantly, in a society in which traditional ways of doing things are not examined as constantly and as critically as she examines them. When she contrasts herself to her young Creole lady-friend Madame Ratignole, she concludes that unlike Madame R., she is not a “mother woman” at all.

Now, childhood is one of a number of strands closely interwoven in this subtle and sensitive book. One would, in fact, be justified in calling this a modern psychological novel, because the author builds it around ranges of association. I say this by way of apologizing for extracting what is said about childhood and children; ideally, one would want to show how childhood interconnects with every other association in Edna's mind. Edna's memories of her childhood are very important; her growing up means dropping childish illusions. But Edna is an artist. By the time she decides to change her life, she is studying painting and even selling some of her works. And an artist should not really drop her ties to the world of children. These associations are all very explicit; for example, as she swims out to sea at the end of the novel, she thinks of the meadows of childhood in a passage meant to echo one earlier in the book (Chapter Seven) about the childhood experience of “a summer day in Kentucky, of a meadow that seemed as big as the ocean to the very little girl walking through the grass, which was higher than her waist. She threw out her arms as if swimming. . . .” (II,896)

Suffice it to say for our purposes that the matter of childhood is richly associated with many different aspects of the texture of Edna's mind, and that her feelings for her own childhood connect with attitudes toward her own children. At the risk of doing violence to this richness, we need only to say that for this lady, children are the barrier between herself and Robert, the man with whom she has fallen in love.

The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them. She was not thinking of these things when she walked down to the beach. (999)

Chopin provides her heroine with a group of friends who can offer advice and observations—a thoughtful and compassionate physician, a tough-minded woman who is an accomplished pianist, and so forth, and their presence provides opportunity for rationalizing her discontent and analyzing its causes. To some extent what Chopin has done is to set an “American” in a “foreign” setting, somewhat in the manner of James, so that we can see her personality, drives and values in sharper relief. But in truth, Edna Pontellier would probably have been as unhappy in her native Kentucky as in the Creole world into which she married. In terms of the values on our chart, her frustration has to do with her inability to act upon those connected with creativity, self-expression, and individualism. We know that she has been reading her Emerson (956),<sup>24</sup> while behaving like a conventional wife and mother.

In terms of family history, we can put this differently while saying about the same thing: modernization has taken her husband and the source of the family income away from the household, liberating her from economically productive roles, but sex role expectations frustrate her by circumscribing fields of activity in which she can operate effectively—or something of the sort, because I come away from the book feeling that if Edna really wanted to, she could. The trouble is that there is a side of her mind which wants the cake and the eating. Her pianist friend is so ugly and eccentric—is that what you become if you do what you want?

In many of the miscellaneous aspects of social history which we have discussed, the book is a goldmine. Even on the level of simple facts about products, media, and the texture of people's lives it is unusually fascinating. Thus one way that we are told about Edna's romantic nature is by being informed that when she was a kid, she had a crush on a famous actor, something that does not happen in societies in which one does not feel the pull of the mass print media. We also learn about sewing machines, about colored comic pages, and about transportation. The race picture presented in the novel bears comparison to our discussion of *Moby-Dick* and *Ware. The Awakening* does not demonstrate quite the same urge to reform evident in the other novels; we get rather little more than a tourist's view of creoles, quadroons (892), blacks (901), mulattoes (989), Spaniards (914-915) and Mexicans (924), but we do see some familiar stereotyping. Madame Ratignolle has known but one Mexican, "who made and sold excellent tamales, and whom she would have trusted implicitly," (924) but he was later arrested for stabbing his wife. The "Spaniard" Mariequita may well be based on personal observation and real personality types, but she strikes the modern reader as an example of ethnic stereotyping: she is flirtatious, bold, and sexually frank. Her flirtatiousness is simply a game to her and to her companion Victor. It is not so to Edna, who shows up during a flirtatious and mock-jealous quarrel the two are having on the last day of her life. Creole women, too, view flirtation differently than Edna does; the characters tell us this themselves. Madame Ratignolle, in fact, warns Edna's young friend Robert that Edna, not being Creole, is likely to take flirtation far more seriously than she would. By the time that Robert realizes that Edna is in love with him, and he with her, he sees the truth of these warnings and takes a long-postponed trip to Mexico rather than plunge into what he feels would be a damaging and dishonorable affair. (I have to wonder—did he meet Tom and Pen Corey there?) We have already discussed the matter of a character misunderstanding a flirtation because of an unfamiliar social context: Celia Madden's vamping of Theron is perhaps our best example. The recurrence of the theme is socially significant; it is a symptom of the fact that it is characteristic in our society for people from very different backgrounds to interact

socially; it is a sign of that great mobility and intermixing noted by foreign observers, of the richness of our ethnic and cultural heritage.

Edna has an affair after all, with a man sensually attractive to her but whom she certainly does not love. She does so in part for reasons that Zenobia or Celia Madden would have understood. They have to do with values connected with naturalness, with Emersonian respect for the instincts, with the courage to challenge orthodoxy, with the rebellion against what Celia Madden called “moral bugbears.”<sup>25</sup> Women, of course, have been having affairs since sexual morality was invented, without all this rationalization. But the context here makes Edna’s adventure special. One more unchallengeable area gets challenged. Willa Cather compared *The Awakening* to *Madame Bovary*, but on this score the books are not alike. *Madame Bovary* had neither a concert-pianist friend with whom to discuss courage and will nor Emerson in her library. Edna is not a French *bourgeoise* caught in a naturalistic trap; she is more like a Celia Madden with less stomach for frustration, more courage, and yet less common sense.

The assertion of her sexual drives is worth a short paragraph, because we have been reading a great deal lately about how the late nineteenth century had convinced itself that women do not feel sexual passion, and that sexuality is at best dutiful submission to one’s husband. People who write those studies are correct in so far as such advice, commentary, and conclusions were widely promulgated by “authorities,” but they too often make their conclusions far too broad. Anyone familiar with literature of the period is aware that most people knew that women had strong sexual drives. Some authors “coded” this information<sup>26</sup> in ways that were perfectly clear to contemporary readers and yet stayed within the bonds of propriety. Others, like Kate Chopin, were more frank, and on the subliterary level of pornography—which thrived in this period as never before or since, so far as I can make out—the emphasis on feminine sexual drive was simply enormous.

Edna goes to bed with Arobin because she wants to and because she makes a free will choice to do so. The same emphasis on freedom and choice was there in her courtship, where however mistaken her notions of Pontellier’s appropriateness as a mate, the actual decision had largely to do with “the violent opposition of her father and her

sister Margaret to her marriage with a Catholic.” (898) She did it because she wanted to, not only in spite of, but partially because of familial objections.

We began this chapter suggesting that some of the large scale tendencies that social and intellectual historians have discovered and described in the nineteenth century, while undeniably there and “true,” are also contradictory to one another, so that each one does not describe the whole truth. I suggested that the independent, thoughtful, and “untraditional” New American Woman appears at just about the same time that the lady is being popularized. It may be, indeed, that both spring from the same underlying causes, namely the changes which modernization brings to the family, together with the increased impact of various of the values from our chart. I would even suggest a continuum for this independent woman, running, let us say, from Bess or Achsa, through Zenobia, to Celia and Edna, and suggest also that our model for the way in which changes and new ideas make their impact upon a society—those “moving stairs” we have referred to several times—could be applied as well to “the invention of the lady,” which is to say that although the ideal of ladylike behavior was widely propagated, projected as a model, preached and embodied in novels, it never affected everyone in society. Perhaps, in other words, the main thrust of sex role development in the nineteenth century—if there is such a thing as main thrust—is in the direction of the New American Woman. Perhaps the combination of ladylike behavior, limited definition of feminine roles (moral and supportive but not executive, for example), prudery and propriety is no more than a silly excrement. That combination looks impressive to scholars who have examined it because it left itself well-recorded in pages of magazines and sentimental novels. Remember that a key to understanding the way the media work in our society is choice and selectivity. That famous short story writer *cum* daguerrotypist, Holgrave, widely published in the most fashionable literary and ladies’ magazines of the day, discovers that his young friend Phoebe has never heard of him. Phoebe (therefore?) has no compunctions about managing a cent shop and waiting on customers, activities which horrify her ladylike cousin. I think that the nearer we move to the present, the more prevalent a complex patchwork pattern of choice becomes in

our society. “The invention of the lady,” then, may well have missed millions of American women. For those affected, I think it often just caused a certain amount of role confusion and stress, as in the case of sensible gals like Achsa Fielding or Penelope and Irene Lapham. Lives *were* ruined, dreams were thwarted and unworthy dreams were cherished. But millions of women found adjustments as satisfactory as life generally makes available to us. There were drownings in farm pond and ocean, but there were other things as well. To me the moral would seem to be a kind of modesty when proclaiming new insights into social tendencies and forces. I like to read books and articles which describe newly perceived tendencies, but wish they were so labeled—as tendencies, perhaps even widespread, but not as keys to the psyche of a decade or a century.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The full title is *Arthur Mervyn; or, Memoirs of the Year 1793*. “Liberal Federalist” is Warner Berthoff’s good phrase, from his edition (New York, 1962), xx. I had no intention at all of including discussion of this novel in this book; Father Joseph Feeny, S. J., a participant in my N.E.H. Summer Seminar for College Teachers in 1978, browbeat me into rereading it. He is right; it is too remarkable in terms of our concerns to be left out.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Brockden Brown, *Arthur Mervyn or Memoirs of the Year 1793* (Philadelphia, 1887), II, 77. The novel appears as volumes II and III of *Charles Brockden Brown’s Novels*. Subsequent citations to this novel will be handled through parenthetical page numbers in the text. The passages cited here are all from volume II of the novel, which is volume III of the edition.

<sup>3</sup> R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago, 1955). Lewis discusses *Arthur Mervyn* at some length for Arthur’s Adamic qualities—see 92-98.

<sup>4</sup> He has Achsa herself say, “I suppose there is some justice in the obloquy that follows them [Jews] so closely.” (199)

<sup>5</sup> See Warner Berthoff’s “Introduction,” to his edition of *Arthur Mervyn*, xvii and xviii especially, for a sample of such an interpretation. The brothers Berthoff are very sharp readers.

<sup>6</sup> Lewis, indeed, calls Brown a “utopian idealist” (*American Adam*, 96); his discussion focuses on totally different issues and different portions of the novel, but is, I think, congruent with the present discussion. Lewis, incidentally, provides a good quick summary of the messy gothic plots and subplots of Volume I.

<sup>7</sup> “Old Mistresses Apologue” (“Advice to a Young Man on the Choice of a Mistress),” seemingly an essay in letter form, dated June 25, 1745, but

apparently unaddressed. The salutation reads, "My dear Friend." My text follows Leonard W. Labaree et al, *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven, 1961), III, 30-31.

<sup>8</sup> Franklin in the humorous essay may be posing as more conventional than he is. His fondness for the company of bright women is also suggestive.

<sup>9</sup> Gerda Lerner, "The Lady and the Mill Girl: Changes in the Status of Women in the Age of Jackson, *American Studies (MASJ)*, X, 1 (Spring, 1969), 5ff.

<sup>10</sup> William E. Bridges, "Family and Social Values in America, 1825-1878," *American Quarterly*, XVII (Spring, 1965), 3-11. A limitation of Bridges' argument is that his evidence seems to come from wealthier households, those likely to entertain the foreign visitors on whose testimony he bases his case. Very suggestive, nevertheless: one suspects he is right, and that the tendency spread in time.

<sup>11</sup> Lerner, *Ibid*.

<sup>12</sup> Keith Melder, "Woman's High Calling: The Teaching Profession in America 1830-1860," *American Studies*, XIII, 2 (Fall, 1972), 19 ff.

<sup>13</sup> Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Women's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven, 1977) attempts to account for some of the strains which produce these contradictions. See also Barbara J. Berg's *The Remembered Gate: Origins of American Feminism, The Woman and the City, 1800-1860* (New York and London, 1978), a flawed but suggestive discussion of response to certain aspects of modernization.

<sup>14</sup> Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York, 1977).

<sup>15</sup> It is the same passage in which the "glamour of a separate banking-account" adds "power" to her beauty, in Chapter Twenty-Four, 378 ff. of the Chicago, 1896 edition. Subsequent references to this edition will be treated in parentheses in the text.

<sup>16</sup> I am one of those readers who blame Celia and her friends for Theron's fall—given his expectations and his naiveté on the one hand, and the doctrines to which they introduced him all at once, what could they have expected him to do?

<sup>17</sup> I read recently a study which showed that "authorities" warned women that speaking in public could injure them sexually. See also Ann Douglas, *Feminization*, 111 ff. An extended discussion of the too-pervasive idea that an intellectually-active woman injured her femininity is the chapter "The Sexual Politics of Sickness," in Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *For Her Own Good/150 Years of the Experts' Advice to Women* (New York, 1978), 9-126. See also John S. Haller, Jr., and Robin M. Haller, *The Physician and Sexuality in Victorian America* (Urbana, Illinois, 1974), esp. 76 ff, or John S. Haller, "From Maidenhood to Menopause: Sex Education for Women in Victorian America," *Journal of Popular Culture*, VI, 1 (Summer, 1972), 49-69. The article contains an excellent sampling of proscriptive advice; see esp. 56 ff. But see note 25 below.

<sup>18</sup> In *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) Thorstein Veblen suggests, perhaps with wicked irony, that women look desirable to the extent to which they appear useless, incapable of productive labor—hence, in his day, the wasp waist, the crippling corset, the fair skin (protected from work in the out-of-doors), soft hands and long fingernails.

<sup>19</sup> I am indebted to my colleague Alfred Habegger for a discussion of this topic in which he shows that Howells was likely aware of recent publications on feminine humor; Pen's humor is not of that sort. A.H.'s discussion is from an as-yet-unpublished study of James and Howells, "Gender, Fantasy, and the Novel."

<sup>20</sup> A can of worms I don't care to open at this point is whether the "next" step in emancipation is the new, fulfilled and independent woman who is happy to live unmarried. *Arthur Mervyn* again foreshadows the possibility.

<sup>21</sup> References to *The Rise of Silas Lapham* are to the CEAA edition of his works (Bloomington, Indiana, 1968—) of which this novel is Volume 12 (1971). The quotation is from 278. Subsequent references are in parentheses in the text.

<sup>22</sup> I think off-hand of Crane's *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets*, for example, or Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*.

<sup>23</sup> The review appears in the column "Books and Magazines," in the *Pittsburgh Leader* of that date. It is reprinted in Margaret Culley's edition of Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (New York, 1976), 154. The standard edition of Chopin's works is Per Seyersted, ed., *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin* (Baton Rouge, 1969); references to the novel will be handled in parentheses in the text, and will be to that edition. *The Awakening* is included in Volume II.

<sup>24</sup> For other suggestions of what the references to Emerson might signify, see Margaret Culley's edition of the novel, 73, n.

<sup>25</sup> Common sense suggests that Victorian women were, by and large, far too healthy to believe everything the notorious marriage manuals preached. Moreover, as we repeatedly note, dissemination of information or opinion in a society such as ours is uneven. Millions of women probably never even saw the famous manuals. A very useful article by Carl Degler ["Women's Sexuality in the Nineteenth Century," *American Historical Review*, LXXIX, 5 (December, 1974), 1467-1490] analyses a remarkable sexual survey conducted by a contemporary woman physician. It suggests that the link between sexual gratification and the Emersonian ideals to which we allude was not uncommon: "Sexual intercourse 'makes more normal people,' said a woman born in 1857." She also wrote that intercourse was "a very beautiful thing, and I am glad nature gave it to us." (1468).

<sup>26</sup> A strategy discussed in Sheldon Norman Grebstein, "Dreiser's Victorian Vamp," *American Studies* (MASJ), IV, 1, 3-12.



## Chapter 8

### Steam Beer: Five Novels and American Society

MARK TWAIN'S BOOKS ARE THE  
QUICKEST SELLING IN THE WORLD

—From a promotional flyer de-  
signed to attract agents to sell  
*Huckleberry Finn*

Not just one kind of literature, and not just one method of studying it: the goal should rather be approaches broad enough to see our social traits in any literature our writers have produced. This means tolerance to different methods and respect for other people's approaches. At the outset we promised to explore ways of understanding America not only through works consciously designed to reflect it, but also through those which, whatever their design, cannot help but reflect their social and cultural origin. Both sorts are represented here: Dreiser and Norris intend to show us how their societies function. But Hemingway sets his tale in another country, and Melville in another time, out of sight of land.

Yet values, the relationship between taste in literature and social mobility, the web or net model for the national social fabric, the idea of "expanding circles," the alteration in sex roles and in the function of the family—all of the concerns we have monitored thus far in American literature—are still our topic, as they will be in the following chapter as well. I contend that the connections between these topics become increasingly dense as one approaches the present, and that our literature shows as much. These chapters should serve at once to review our approaches and to show how their interrelationships build toward a sort of climax as the values we saw embodied first in colonial letters, the ethnic mix which Whitman, Melville and Frederic tried to assimilate, and the technological and electronic interconnections which Thoreau and Hawthorne understood, came to interact as Ralph Waldo Emerson had foreseen, to affect the texture of our lives, the feel of our world and the very processes of our minds.

-1-

## Twain Takes his Stand

Hain't we got all the fools in town on our side? And ain't that a big enough majority in any town?"

—the king in *Huckleberry Finn*

Although there are controversies and ambiguities in the work of modern scholars of the antebellum South, and there are some things which we will probably never know with any kind of security,<sup>1</sup> certainly we are more aware today than we were in the heyday of apologist southern historians—Ulrich B. Phillips is the most famous—of the importance of middle-class southerners, of networks of slave trade within the South, of strong social and even personality variations in slaves of different regions or occupations, of endemic diseases, patterns of production, problems of nutrition, and especially of the physical, social and moral ugliness of American black slavery. *Huckleberry Finn* does not bear specifically on all of these issues, but wherever it does, it rings true. Even its ambiguities match the areas in which historians now quarrel. Let us begin this penultimate chapter, then, by returning to one of the first approaches we took to literature in this study, asking the simple question, “How does the novel compare with the best current historical picture of its place and time?” The central action of the story is motivated by the fact that a slave is to be sold away from his family, something the older historians told us very rarely happened, something which more modern historians, after their graduate students, one imagines, had picked their way through thousands of musty records, tell us was quite common. Jim’s owner is a kindly townswoman; if her decision to sell the male head of a slave family met with no special objection, one can guess what practice was like on those plantations which relied on slave-breeding and sales for a large part of their cash flow. Such places were mainly in the older areas of the South; their chief market for slaves was the newer South.<sup>2</sup>

Twain shows only two large plantations: the Shepherdsons’ and the Grangerfords’. Interestingly, these two families control the docks

where steamboats will land. We learn elsewhere in the book that boats will not stop just anywhere along the river. This accords well with what is known about patterns of southern trade in staple crop areas on major waterways. The large plantation was not, despite southern mythology, the typical unit. The number of these establishments was never very great; small farms were where most southerners lived. Too often, however, operators of the big places controlled trade, credit, services and transportation for the surrounding countryside. They were generally also socially and politically dominant. Twain does not get into all the details, but what we see of Grangerfords and Shepherdsons certainly fits the modern historians' picture. We see the social dominance and the control of transport. If Huck stayed longer with these repulsive people, we might see the slave-operated craft and retail establishments, important money-makers for many large plantations, and see also the plantations acting as middlemen for the staples produced by the small farmers who had to deal through them. We *are* shown, however, the competence of slave people to assist Jim in delicate, tricky, dangerous and confidential affairs; he is hidden, supplied, brought information and advised in ways which belie some old stereotypes about slave personality. The novel makes appropriate reading for students learning southern history.

Twain does not, perhaps, make a conscious effort to provide a systematic cross-section of social class throughout the portion of the southern Midwest and rural South through which the story moves, but he does give us a great deal. We are shown slaves, poor whites, loafers, con men, townspeople in various small and very small towns and hamlets, working people, professionals, farmers running "one-horse" farms and plantations, merchants, and the proprietors of large-scale plantations. That list itself reflects a more accurate image of southern society than do the numerous "plantation novels" which formed the basis for so much of the popular picture: in such novels, there are just plantation owners, poor whites and slaves. Professional historians had to rediscover small farmers in relatively recent times, but Huck and Jim knew all about them.

It is interesting, considering what apologist historians wrote, to note that the judgment which Twain passes on almost all these different groups of Caucasians is strongly negative. With a handful

of exceptions, white people who are not stupid, gullible, venal or hypocritical are arrogant, violent or vicious. Perhaps Twain's view reflects no more than the grim insights into human motivation and the nature of organized society which would make his later writings systematically pessimistic, but I think one could argue that *Huckleberry Finn* could have served as a healthy corrective to the ol'-Massa-mint-julip-cultured-plantation-life mythology that developed after the war. Indeed, since slaves and outcasts are shown as more sympathetic than most others, especially the more respectable citizens, one suspects a deliberate attempt to redress the balance. The contrast seems especially strong when the lives and behavior of these downtrodden folk are compared to the "culture" of the most pretentious and successful members of plantation society whom Twain allows us to see. The Grangerfords' "class" impresses Huck, but not the reader; their values and behavior are ugly in all important ways. Twain will not even allow them to seem cultured—their taste in home furnishings and the arts is at least as bad as that of the Laphams, and they revere the execrable poetry of their late daughter, Emmeline. Twain seems to be out to demythologize, and strikes me as a much better social historian than those twelve southerners who wrote *I'll Take My Stand* (1930),<sup>3</sup> for they generally followed apologist historians who were able to fool themselves into believing much of the magnolia-scented rot about life in the old South. Twain's view seems closer to the one I perceive in reading modern studies of slave narratives, histories of southern communities and of the workings of antebellum Southern economics. Thus on a very simple level one would argue that Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, like Cooper's *The Prairie*, records social reality more faithfully than did some schools of professional historians. Twain, of course, knew his region; Cooper faked his, learning from books and projecting experience which he imagined was analogous. But the reader who trusted the novelist over the historian in either case would have been closer to what at the present writing looks like Truth. Twain's picture in no way sounds like Stark Young's from *I'll Take My Stand*:

This way of life meant mutuality of interests among more people, an innate code of obligations, and a certain openness of life. . . . [Y]ou controlled yourself in order

to make the society you lived in more decent, affable,  
and civilized and yourself more amenable and attractive.<sup>4</sup>

I think too that interesting things could be done with modernization in *Huckleberry Finn*. A surprising amount of the drama in this novel has to do with conflict between old, traditional—one almost wants to say “folk”—ways of doing things, “non-linear,” if you wish, and newer, rationalized, logical ways. Some of these are dramatized in those awful minstrel routines which Huck and Jim get into, those places in which Huck becomes a straight-man and Jim a stage darcy. The basis of the humor, however, is usually the contrast between Jim’s untutored shrewdness and Huck’s not-quite-digested schoolbook logic. Jim is smart, but he doesn’t think the school way. The school way is rational and modern; the stage-darcy’s way is not. The theme is not totally different from what was expressed in the humor of Royall Tyler’s play “The Contrast” in 1787, where Jonathan’s rustic shrewdness was a foil to the urbanized ways of other characters. Urbanization, like rationalization, is a characteristic of modernization. The conflict appears again, of course, within Huck himself. He feels the tug between town, education, propriety, the modern world, and the lawless, anarchic but somehow freer ways of his Pap. The book closes with Huck saying, “Aunt Sally she’s going to adopt me and civilize me and I can’t stand it. I been there before.” I would even suggest, half tongue-in-cheek, that we consider Pap as a spokesman for the old way. What Twain is saying to me, for example, in the passages in which Pap rails about the injustice of there existing a well-educated black man, is that the traditional way of life about which the twelve southerners were so sentimental in the 1920’s may not be anything that anyone in the twentieth century would really want to live with. Twain’s picture is more comprehensive and more complex. Pap is, if you will, the un-modernized Southerner, your *homme naturel* complete with smell and fleas. But Southerners in closer contact with the nineteenth century mainstream are not much better. Pap is ugly, Colonel Sherburn is ugly, the Grangerfords are ugly: that takes care of a bum, a merchant, and ol’ Massa; the remaining characters pretty much fill in the interstices. We are to conclude that the society was ugly.

The sort of approach via audience reaction which we used in discussing *The Damnation of Theron Ware* should be fruitful in *Huckleberry Finn* as well. Thus, for example, the book gives entry into certain aspects of twentieth century social history. At several times in our own century, black spokesmen or civil rights groups have protested against the teaching of *Huckleberry Finn*. When we understand what in this book from the last century has hurt black people in our time, we comprehend special characteristics of our own society.

Since we know a great deal about the manner in which *Huckleberry Finn* was produced and marketed, the approach through audience, especially when combined with internal evidence in the novel, suggests important social aspects of the era of its publication as well. We can learn about such related topics as modernization, the spread of education, the commonality of certain kinds of knowledge, and the development of characteristic institutions. Salesmen with kits, samples and order-forms travelled about pushing the novel. The success of this subscription campaign depended on the book's popular appeal—what was in it, the promotional material stressed, was the kind of stuff you like. "HARD FACTS!" shouted a promotional sheet designed to attract canvassers, "Five Hundred and Twenty-five Thousand (over Half a Million) Copies of Mark Twain's Books/Have been sold *in this country alone*. . . ."

The campaign sold books, and customers felt satisfied with the delivered product: its contents might be thought of in that context.<sup>5</sup> The Duke and the Dauphin have a go at Shakespearian fraud. But their mangling of Shakespeare is not very amusing to a reader who does not know a little Shakespeare to begin with. That these passages did strike people as funny tells us how widely Shakespeare's plays were disseminated in mid-nineteenth century America—there is plenty of independent evidence of that outside *Huckleberry Finn*<sup>6</sup>—information which is important to more than intellectual history because it demonstrates the impact of increasingly universal education. The theatrical frauds of the Duke and the Dauphin, moreover, are possible only because of the Lyceum movement. Very small towns even in the rural South were likely to have public halls. Emerson had marvelled at how many Americans in obscure places seemed to want to

hear him speak, and, as we noted, Hawthorne's poet-narrator Miles Coverdale thought it remarkable how suburban and un-rustic were the rural people he met at a small-town New England lyceum. Twain's antebellum southerners are rustic enough, in truth, but the novel gives evidence in content and impact that even in the South, those agents of a spreading shared culture—education, cultural traditions, cheap printed works, public lectures and entertainments—were beginning to work a transformation. The Old South, I think, was doomed; had Grant and Sherman not done the job, McGuffey and *Othello* would have.

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*Billy Budd* and the Postmodern World

Truth uncompromisingly told will always have  
its ragged edges.

—*Billy Budd*

*Billy Budd* provides a nice challenge: How can you do American social history with a novel that has no American characters? One could, I suppose, argue that Billy himself is symbolically American: ignorant, innocent, associated with the Rights of Man, unintentionally dangerous, fated to be misunderstood. That is clever, but I guess that it is not social history. I would suggest three approaches, two which make use of the traditional materials of literary history and biography, the third dependent upon close textual analysis.

The first two are related. Important to each is the history of “the Melville industry,” and the rise of Melville's reputation since his rediscovery in the decade following the First World War. Melville is simply the most heavily studied author in our literature; the boom is especially impressive when one considers how recently it began.<sup>7</sup> That astonishing critical popularity is not without intellectual and social meaning, and I believe one could write profitably about the relationship between it and various national currents in the 1920's, 30's and 40's. I participated in a project that involved studying the importance assigned to various American authors in textbooks and anthologies since collections of American literature began to appear

in the nineteenth century. (The study, by the way, was interesting for its own sake, for the anthologies appear earlier than one might expect, and their contents are often surprising. It is pleasing, for instance, to see Melville represented as poet in an early collection.)<sup>8</sup> The period in which Melville's star rises is also the period in which other "dark" nineteenth century writers—notably Emily Dickinson and Mark Twain—also move higher on the "top ten," while Longfellow and other "Household Poets" slump.

This era, starting shortly after World War I, is felt by scholars in several fields to mark a kind of watershed in our national experience; they speak in terms of a national "coming of age," of a bitter reaction to the terrible revelations of the war, or of a dramatic alteration in the texture of national life. Some modernization theorists agree; they say that we enter the period they call "Postmodern." Right around 1920, all major indicators of direction of national development take dramatic turns—steep upward curves level off or turn downward, downward trends reverse themselves, and in general there is every sign that something very striking is happening.<sup>9</sup> Some writers suggest that we are looking at the impact of the automobile, or that the nation was transforming itself from an economy which stressed production to one which stressed consumption; others think in terms of a sort of consolidation following the immense impact of industrialization, the "New Immigration," the disappearance of the frontier, and the World War experience. Surely there are connections between all these things and the marked alteration in literary taste which the Melville boom exemplifies. The connections are undoubtedly both complex and subtle; they probably vary widely from one individual to the next. They are not of the sort one could quantify (though one could quantify many components of the "big-change-around-1920"), but they are certainly real. I am convinced therefore, that even when intellectual history is truly "the history of intellectuals," when it deals, that is, with something as apparently far removed from the texture of everyday life as fashions in literary scholarship, it can be related to vital and large-scale social issues. A dark author who wrote of horrors, feared both idealists' slogans and bigots' rigidity, saw what industry and bureaucracy could do to the human spirit and asked large questions about meaning would appeal strongly to readers of an intellectual generation which now faced the problems and asked the questions.

A second and related strategy for tying traditional literary approaches to social history is through biography. There are elements in Melville's life which make it a very good story. They fall into story-patterns that can be understood in very broad cultural terms; one can use an approach similar to that which we suggested in discussing other fictional patterns. (Our chief example was the one which ends, after various difficulties have been overcome, with the marriage of hero and heroine. The broader point was that such story-patterns are specific to cultures, and can be shown to be expressive of social and cultural facts about the people who use them.) *Billy Budd* is critical to the resolution of the patterns of Melville's biography, either as they were told by some of Melville's more sensational biographers or in the more tempered versions to which we now give credence. Some of the materials involved are very familiar—if from nowhere else, we know them from bad Hollywood film biographies of creative people.

We're familiar with the cliché, for example, about the artist who is unappreciated in his own time and land. There is certainly some truth in that one for Melville's career, though not as much as was once thought. Melville was of course very famous early in his career because of the exotic semi-autobiographical South Sea novels *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1897). *Mardi* (1849), *Moby-Dick* (1851) and *Pierre* (1852) did in fact receive unfavorable reviews; this fact suggested to some biographers, with considerable justice, the familiar figure of The Artist Scorned. But there were also reviewers and readers whose reactions today strike modern critics as right on target; *Mardi* and *Pierre*, moreover, seem flawed works of genius to most recent critics, even those most enamored of Melville. One can hardly be outraged that they did not become best-sellers in their day. Such "grey" information, however, is not what generally gets popularized.

Then there is the related matter of the famous "forty years of silence" from the early 1850's till the unfinished manuscript of *Billy Budd* is taken from Melville's desk and boxed up at his death in 1891. The forty years were by no means silent, but what a story that makes! And it is true, as a newspaper interviewer wrote in the late '80's, that most readers who remembered Melville from their youth must have assumed that he had died decades before. If, in short, the story of the Melville boom can be related to "the search for a useable past,"

the desire, that is, to find in the nineteenth century American writers whose view of reality, human nature and history is suitably dark to seem credible to contemporary readers, the patterns of Melville's biography can be understood, through these plot patterns, in terms of very basic national values. Van Wyck Brooks could perfectly well have given us a book entitled "The Ordeal of Herman Melville," or at least, *The [Hard] Times of Melville and Whitman*, for the popular understanding of the biography comes through in terms of the sufferings of a talented and sensitive genius in a crass and unappreciative society. That is a story we have read so many times in the biographies of geniuses that I think it appropriate to approach it through such concepts as fable, archetype and myth. The values that underly it, which make it especially attractive in cultures such as ours, appear in a group on our table of sacred values: creativity, individual potential, genius, expressiveness. Their suppression is felt to be a violation of fair play. The second approach, then, involves applying to the biography itself, as though it were fiction or folktale, those approaches to story pattern to which we have already alluded. "The Artist Thwarted" is a morality play in defence of creative values. All Americans are familiar with it.

The third approach involves the major critical debate about the meaning of the text itself. We should preface any remarks on the subject with some sort of humble statement about the impossibility of being really sure of Melville's ultimate intentions. *Billy Budd* is seriously incomplete; it is only in relatively recent years that we have had access to a text which honestly reveals the ambiguities and uncertainties which a good editor, faced with the welter of confusing and contradictory evidence which Melville left, should acknowledge.<sup>10</sup> Now, as the critical debate was popularized, it was understood to be about whether the book represented Melville's "testament of acceptance," or whether it was rather a final, bitter piece of rebellion, philosophically consistent with *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, though, of course, far quieter in tone. I am quite certain that the book reflects quiet bitterness, but not every reader may agree with me, and this fact adds a variable with which we have not previously dealt in our discussion. It should make us a little less certain of our conclusions. The methodological implications are fairly simple: I do not think that a social historian who would like to use literary texts should veer away

in fear when his evidence can be used only after it has been subjected to literary-critical judgment; I think that he is at an advantage if he has good credentials as a critic, but that it is always easy enough for him to state honestly just how sure he is of his position. Then readers can form their own estimates of the reliability of his conclusions.

In the most familiar way of reading *Billy Budd*, the novella was taken as a “testament of acceptance” in which Melville in effect was saying, ‘The world is imperfect, but in this imperfect world we must have, if not justice, then at least law and order.’ It is not appropriate here to take the space to show in detail why I believe that this reading is incorrect. It is fair to say that the feeling that it is wrong has become more widespread in Melville scholarship in recent years.<sup>11</sup> I should say candidly also that I am oversimplifying what was a rich and complex argument: some very bright critics believed in the “testament” reading; Melvillians learned from them. Moreover, in early Melville, acceptance and bitter rebellion sometimes stand side by side, as they certainly do in *Moby-Dick*. Melville knew all about ambiguity, and I see no reason to suppose that by 1890 he had forgotten. A too-pat reading of the book, alas, was the one most popularized. It affected the play, the opera and many public discussions in the media. It was based on the “testament of acceptance” idea, but in a simplistic and distorted form.

We can justify only a brief outline of some of the arguments against it. The basic shape of the plot is clear enough: the innocent “handsome sailor” Billy Budd, impressed from a merchant ship for military service, invokes the hatred of the master-at-arms Claggart, who sets spies upon him. We know that the spies learn that they can please him by telling lies about Billy, and that Claggart in this one matter is gullible because he wants to hear such things about the “handsome sailor.” One “cat’s-paw” tries to interest Billy in mutiny; Billy rebuffs him, but the spy apparently tells Claggart what Claggart wishes were true, for he goes to Captain Vere to accuse Billy of mutinous intent. Vere wants the accusation made in Billy’s presence. When this is done, Billy, stunned, and desperately frustrated by a speech impediment which keeps him from replying coherently, lashes out and accidentally kills Claggart. “Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!”<sup>12</sup> says Vere, prejudging Billy. Then, contrary to

the advice of his officers, who see no sense in such procedures, Vere convokes a drumhead court, sinks his rank so that he can serve as a witness (but then refuses to allow the court the freedom which this implies), and forces the court to condemn Billy to death. Following Billy's execution, distorted versions of the event are passed down.

The proponents of the simplified "testament of acceptance" theory feel that we are supposed to be on Vere's side, that the book says that laws, rules, beliefs must be upheld even if their workings are occasionally unjust, and that Vere is an honest man doing his best in an imperfect world. I think that there are numerous reasons for disbelieving this interpretation. First, everything that Melville ever wrote about maritime justice, wise commanders, and mutinous crews argues against justifying Vere. One of Melville's major novels, *White-Jacket*, is largely an attack on just such interpretations, and we know that Melville had the man-of-war experience on which *White-Jacket* was based in mind when he wrote *Billy Budd*, for the novella is filled with echoes of and even literal quotations from his earlier work, and is dedicated to his old friend Jack Chase, *White-Jacket's* guardian spirit and bosom buddy, a real and admirable sailor whom Melville knew during his stint in the Navy on board the U.S.S. United States. Second, the argument that Vere must act forcefully because of the danger of mutiny is undercut by Melville's clear indication that this is far from being a mutinous crew. Even the announcement that the captain is going to execute the most popular seaman in the crew brings only a small murmur from the assembled tars, easily dispelled by a roll of the drums. Third, the argument that utilizes the clear parallels with the Christian scriptural accounts of the death of Jesus to illustrate "acceptance" are puzzling. I am not a Christian, but even I know that it is not the intent of the story of the Passion to justify Roman authority. Similarly, the elements at the end of the book which show that the facts surrounding Billy's death were distorted in time through both official records in a fleet newspaper and through folklore, seem to make a bitter statement about the transmission of faith and history. It seems clear to me at least that the story says not, We must have law and order, but rather something more like, We crucify our saints.

Finally, there are senses in which Vere's credibility is undermined,

and the fated evil of Claggart picks up oddly innocent connotations. Vere does seem to be associated with God, or at least with the powers-that-be, yet we are told that he is ambitious; we are also told that Claggart's spies are likely to lie to him to please him, and that he is in this one situation gullible (certainly he is far too intelligent to accuse Billy to the captain if he does not think that he can make a case). Then, too, there is the matter of the rigged trial, in which Captain Vere says that he is going to sink his rank and function only as a witness, but then takes the physical position symbolizing authority, and refuses to allow the court the freedom it is supposed to have. The novella is unfinished, and Melville was still revising when he put it down, so we can never be completely certain of what these ambiguities were to imply. We can safely say that they *are* ambiguous, that they blur simplistic interpretations.

What all of this means for us in our attempt to see what the book has to say about matters connected with social history is best expressed in terms of those sacred values to which we have frequently referred. The reader of *Billy Budd* is made to resent strongly the terrible violation of fair play. We are given clear statements about the conflict between the sanctity of human life and the supposed exigencies of war—"supposed" because Melville makes clear that Vere's fears are foolish. Finally, there are important implications about the nature and possibilities of justice and judgment. The book points repeatedly to the French Revolution, to British justice, and to American experience: although the novel is set on board a British man-of-war during the war with France, there are references to American reactions and examples (see, for instance, leaves 27, 46, 54, 60, 61, 97-8, 99 and 280-281). Thus although I see *Billy Budd* as among the darkest of Melville's books, bleak in its conclusion, and as far as possible from being a testament of acceptance, I feel in it a lofty and thrusting idealism, unwilling to settle for less than the highest goals and standards, for less than truth. That stubbornness is, paradoxically, characteristic of the American meliorist tradition.

It has to do with Melville the reformer, the angry young tar who wrote a book about cruel and unproductive rules and practices in the American Navy which had persisted because the British Navy had used them, the sailor author who interested the administration in his

reforms, and whose attack on dead and tyrannical custom was fully successful. Melville feared the worst about the meaning of the cosmos, but on the human scale never doubted that we should do better than we were doing.

The answer, then, to the rhetorical question posed at the start of this discussion is that there are at least three ways to tie this novel devoid of American characters to our society. The history of its author's reputation, first, reflects the experience, spirit and concerns of the Americans who in a few years following 1920 made the obscure "mariner and mystic" seem our most substantial author. The reception of the ambiguous and incomplete fragment we knew as *Billy Budd* is especially remarkable: unknown until Raymond Weaver found a bundle of messy manuscript pages, it exists in several textual versions, in film, drama, opera and even comic book. I am not sure, to tell the truth, that it quite deserves all that fame; I love and prefer the more extroverted manner of Melville's novels before *Pierre*. But all works in the Melville canon which could be readily understood or misunderstood became quite famous; for Americans concerned with ideas and society, the fame was in large part because of the relevance of Melville to the "postmodern" world.

The shape of Melville's biography, second, is worth study, for it has been retold in terms of patterns of plot we recognize. They have analogies in folklore, literature and popular culture, and they reveal strongly held values.

Third, an interpretation of the meaning of the novella itself leads to the same range of values. If the interpretation is correct—we need that proviso—the novel suggests the great power of those values, particularly that meliorism so striking to foreign students of our country.

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### Racism and Urban Community in *McTeague*

... The genius of the United States is not best or most in its executives or legislatures, nor in its ambassadors or authors or colleges or churches or parlors, nor even in its newspa-

pers or inventors . . . but always most in the  
common people.

—Whitman, Preface to the 1855  
edition of *Leaves of Grass*

I confess to an affection for Frank Norris' *McTeague/ A Story of San Francisco* (1899) despite what seem some terrible flaws. The book is lively, solidly imagined and fun to read: I once read it aloud to my children, who still remember small details. But this is not supposed to be a book of literary judgment; the issue of the novel's quality concerns us less than its uses for social history, and *McTeague* is rich in social implication. Its Naturalism shows aspects of the growing national trust of "science," a sign of modernization. Its racism, significant in itself, fails to keep Norris from reporting usefully on ethnic relations. Norris' career, moreover, suggests the strength of certain "sacred" national values, and sometimes the pull of these values against his natural talents. The careers of his characters are even more interesting, for, if we remove the melodramatic disasters, the book seems to show his cast building a better life and community than their author seems to notice.

It seems a little hard to take Norris seriously. Though there are some skillful expositions of his work, life, and literary stance, he still strikes a modern reader as in some ways merely talented and silly, a mama's boy masquerading as something else.<sup>13</sup> One could argue that *McTeague* is philosophically confused, that its supposed Naturalism clashes badly with its sentimental elements and that its "scientific" side looks funny juxtaposed against its mysticism. But even were these problems not present—and not every reader will agree that they are—Norris' racial assumptions should put off a modern reader. In an excellent essay,<sup>14</sup> John Higham traces the history of the series of scientific, pseudo-scientific and intellectual currents which made it possible for a brief time for racism to gain apparent respectability. Norris' attitude towards several of his characters is based in large part on his assumption that racist conclusions are valid. And this attitude does not seem to mesh with certain others. It is not clear why, for instance, he goes on about the inferiority of only some of his people when he also seems to be arguing that all humans are beasts, that the

animal and the instinctual throb powerfully beneath a thin cosmetic surface of civilization. Norris' apparent intention in the novel is summarized by a sympathetic student of his work: "tragedy is inherent in the human situation given man's animal past and the possibility that he will be dominated by that past in particular circumstances."<sup>15</sup> The voice of the author intrudes repeatedly to tell us how half-human are some of the characters.

One of the things that makes the book unintentionally funny is that the evidence of the plot itself sometimes contradicts its author's generalizations. Thus the reader is led to believe that Maria Macapa, a poor and half-crazed cleaning-woman, is little more than an animal because of her "degenerate" Latin blood; the baby she has by Zerkow, the rags and junk man, is, in the author's curious genetics, a "strange, hybrid little being," a "puny" dumping ground of hereditary wastes. It has "not even strength enough nor wits enough to cry," (135) and soon dies, its passing hardly noticed by parents Norris regards as sub-human. Yet the plot also tells us that Maria is literate, that she is very cunning—she talks lodgers out of valuable items she can peddle, she snitches gold from McTeague—and that she is a competent vendor of lottery-tickets. Not an admirable lady, perhaps, but certainly enterprising and, I would say, capable. The characters think more of her than does the author, it seems, for they entrust her with the very considerable responsibility of organizing and administering a highly complex wedding-feast, supervising all the logistics, hiring help, getting the food out and so forth: of this feast, more later. Norris says still uglier things of Zerkow because he is a red-headed Polish Jew, and sneers even at the Sieppes, McTeague's Swiss-German in-laws, who operate, we are told, on "peasant instincts."

Norris's condescension extends to all manner of people. He seems to think of himself as a Naturalist looking at the gutter, though somehow Polk Street does not really seem to be the gutter. The veterinarians, dentists and small tradesmen of the street are more interesting and live more colorful and satisfactory lives than their creator appears to perceive.

McTeague himself, although nothing racially terrible is said about him, is portrayed as a kind of brute. He is our prime example, apparently, of animal impulse, of Norris' theorems about human nature.

Naturalists believe that we delude ourselves about the importance of ideas and plans; chemistry and “forces” are far more important, and a “scientific” novelist will stress them. Hence a good hero for illustrating a Naturalist thesis would be a fellow long on muscle and primitive impulses, and short on intellect; such a man, Norris keeps telling us, is McTeague. Yet Mac is a highly competent dentist, capable, without much formal training, of not only the routine fillings and extractions which apprenticeship taught him to perform, but also of successfully solving a difficult problem which he encounters in his future wife’s mouth, a dental challenge on which he can bring to bear only his own ingenuity and intelligence.<sup>16</sup> He has a small library of dental books, and knows how to use them; when a little prosperity comes his way, Mac subscribes to a dental magazine. The context implies that he does it for reasons of prestige only, but Norris has already said that Mac can read and understands technical essays, so we are not so sure.

A single quotation will have to suffice to illustrate Norris’ inconsistency: faced with Trina Sieppe’s complex dental difficulties, McTeague

grew obstinate, resolving, with all the strength of a crude and primitive man, to conquer difficulty in spite of everything. He turned over in his mind the technicalities of the case. No, evidently the root was not strong enough to sustain a crown; besides that, it was placed a little irregularly in the arch. But, fortunately, there were cavities in the two teeth on either side of the gap—one in the first molar and one in the palatine surface of the cuspid; might he not drill a socket in the remaining root and sockets in the molar and cuspid, and, partly by bridging, partly by crowning, fill in the gap? (15)

Dr. McTeague’s capacity for analysis here easily outpaces his creator’s.

Now, the information which Norris reports on the texture of life in San Francisco in that period is invaluable to the social historian, and I will shortly mention a couple of aspects of it which seem

especially interesting. But I think that the racism and the condescension are themselves grist for our mill, because they reflect important intellectual currents and hence provide another illustration of our point that it is foolish to isolate intellectual history from social history. Racism in its special “scientific” late-nineteenth century phase had ugly results in American social thought and behavior. But in real life as in this novel, performance was often better than theory. Thus Theodore Roosevelt’s racial record as President is better than his statements on race would lead one to expect. Black leaders came to think of him as in certain ways their ally and protector in the White House. I have read of the racism and unfairness of “Anglo” educators toward the children of the turn-of-the-century immigrants, yet know that before my dad left his eighth-grade class in a terribly poor and tough New York city ghetto neighborhood, his teachers had equipped him with a firm writing style, a love of reading, a solid grasp of practical mathematics including double-entry bookkeeping, as well as typing and enough Spanish so that, fifty years later, when Puerto Rican customers began to come to his shop, he could communicate with them and meet their needs. Whoever planned the curriculum carried better values than those which Higham’s article describes as characteristic of the era, and whoever taught my father’s classes must have believed in expanding the circles of opportunity in ways no systematically-applied racism could ever condone. Certain national values—fair play in particular—were, I think, durable enough to provide at least some check against even “scientific” evidence that tended to give bigotry a sort of official condonation. What Norris shows, at any rate, speaks better of American society than what he claims he is showing.

The racism and condescension in *McTeague* are interesting in a second, curious, way, also related, ironically, to “science”: it is impressive to see the dogged attempt to make scientific and predictable certain deeply ambiguous aspects of human nature. Thus a catalogue of some of the various ways in which Norris uses the concept “instinct” does not produce anything intellectually coherent, but does illustrate his “scientific” intention to record forces. Trina Sieppe has an “instinct” to hoard. When she is unconscious in the dentist’s chair and McTeague is sexually moved by her, we are

told that a primordial struggle takes place in the brutal dentist, and hear about something called an “unreasoned instinct of resistance” (18)—resistance, apparently, to his sexual instincts—an interesting concept which McTeague’s literary descendent, Li’l Abner, might have called “amoozin’ but confoosin’.” There is all manner of silly talk about the brute rising within McTeague, as in the billiard-ball swallowing contest and the wrestling match with his friend Marcus, or whenever he has some liquor. Even the elderly sentimental couple Grannis and Miss Baker “instinctively” feel “each other’s presence” (71); readers are also warned about something called “the intuitive feminine fear of the male” (102) on the McTeagues’ wedding night! There is no way to make real sense of all this except to say that it is supposed to be “scientific.” One almost wants to substitute Walt Kelley’s word, “scienterrific,” and to add that here is a novelist who seems as badly out of his depth with new intellectual concepts as was our Methodist minister friend Theron Ware.

For the peculiar purposes of the present study, then, it is less important that the racist doctrines which Norris believed have since been discredited, that Naturalist biology and psychology seem simplistic, or that more coherent thinkers than Norris were also fooled by them—than that the naive faith that science was already getting things right was so widespread that writers as unlike, say, as Frank Norris and Henry Adams (who certainly should have known better) were taken in by them. The confidence that science provides the trustworthy guidelines in all possible areas is simply a sign of modernization.

It is in this same period that a generation of leaders in the development of American psychology approached executives of the advertising industry in order to demonstrate how their evolving science could be used to motivate consumers to purchase things that they really did not need. Their teaching the industry how to utilize association, glamour and subconscious longings instead of logic was terribly successful. The episode is troubling to academic psychologists today, who are likely to be working in buildings named for these pioneers of the field, because it raises serious questions about ethics and freedom. But the story of the event<sup>17</sup> suggests the sort of hopeful and trusting attitude toward any science which was prevalent in educated circles at the turn of the century. It seems especially im-

pressive in the case of Norris, who is still often portrayed as kind of tough-guy Naturalist in our literary histories, but who seems to have been temperamentally something very different, a gifted youngster whose real literary talents I think lay in the directions of sentiment and sentimental humor.

Thus in *McTeague*, for example, it seems to me that the sentimental-humorous lines generally work better than the Naturalism. Norris' treatment of the incident at the vaudeville show involving August's "personal moisture" is famous, probably deservedly; there is also the tasteful handling of the potentially saccharine romance between the shy lovers Miss Baker and Old Grannis. In other circumstances, Norris might have wound up a highly successful family-magazine author. We would not then think of him as important. Our scholars, critics and historians pay most of their attention to innovative artists because of the force in our culture of certain values; craftsmanlike and talented writers who do not innovate are noted only as part of the backdrop of "popular authors, well-liked in their time." The same values which motivate the people who record and evaluate our arts drive ambitious artists, too, to what is felt to be the frontier of creativity. They are undoubtedly what motivated Norris to work with "forces," instincts, brutes, and what he took to be the lower depths. But creative values such as innovation and self-expression, which operate with such great force in our kind of culture, are less potent in others. Were our friend of Chapter Three, the tribal shaman, to try to innovate, if he developed a concern for expressing his real self or revealing his own creativity, his patients would die, his tribe would be misdirected and the rains might not come. I do not mean to be sarcastic; I believe in our creative values myself, though at times they have motivated artists to innovations so radical that they have scared away the audience. Certainly the force of these values, at any rate, sometimes explains why a writer does "A" when his gifts suggest "B." Certainly they suggest another way of connecting "purely" literary considerations to basic social and cultural facts. The tug-of-war in *McTeague* between Norris' talents and his ambitions is very interesting to the student of values.

Norris' career is fruitful for our purposes; so are the careers of his characters in *McTeague*. What the novel says about the status of jobs seems confusing by modern standards. *McTeague* is a dentist

whose most sanguine dream for the son he would like someday to have would be that he “would go to High School, and perhaps turn out to be a prosperous plumber or house painter.” (109) Norris seems to rank some of the other trades and professions of Polk Street lower than we would; the confusion suggests “fault lines,” social areas in which there are ambiguities because conditions are changing so rapidly. Yet the transformations brought on by modernization are visible here as well, and provide some keys to what is happening. Indeed, the plot of the book turns on an issue of specialization and professionalization: McTeague learned his dentistry through what amounted to an apprenticeship. He loses the right to practice because the state has adopted more rigid and regularized requirements. McTeague has no diploma. His loss of profession is what brings on the major crisis of the novel.

One is a little hesitant to say that secularization, another aspect of modernization, is stressed in the novel, because saying so implies that the characters have moved in that direction away from traditional religious belief, when, in fact, little information is given about their past beliefs. What we do see, however, is secular enough: the Sieppes fail to recognize their own minister; although Mac and Trina have a sticky-sentimental picture called “Faith” in their first apartment, religion is scarcely mentioned—their wedding is not held in a church, and, when, with prosperity, social ambition and optimism, they in fact begin to utilize the church, Norris makes it clear that they do so for social reasons: “He [McTeague] read the papers, he subscribed to a dental magazine; on Easter, Christmas, and New Years he went to church with Trina.” (108)

The reportorial impulse notable in other writers of this period is present in Norris. He feels it is part of his job to give us a good deal of the texture of everyday life. That he does so condescendingly, often making clear that he and the reader are not the kind of people who do such things, in no way invalidates the reporting. A noted historian of immigration concluded that unfortunately, turn-of-the-century fear of the New Immigrants—people from south and east Europe, or from the Orient—led to a change in the manner of visualizing the immigration process. The ideal national type had, he argued, been visualized by and large as a creation to be perfected in the future through an

amalgamation of the contributions of many nations. Now, in contrast, “melting pot” came to represent a process in which immigrants of various sorts were to be recast in the mold of an older, preexisting American type. The change was reflected in the immigration legislation of the 1920’s with its use of quotas based on the ratios of national population which existed before the “New Immigration” made its full impact.<sup>18</sup> Yet Norris, class snob and racist though he is, gives us the information we need in order to see an alternative vision of America developing even as he looks down his nose at its elements.

For one thing, his characters seem to be having a much better time of it than he is willing to admit. We note that public urban facilities were more prominent in America then than now. Mac, Marcus Schouler and the Sieppes make a great deal of use of trains, cable cars, parks, and theaters. Their attitude toward the town’s public facilities reminds one much more of what one finds in a European or Latin American city than of contemporary American usage. The key variables have to do not only with private automobiles, but with energy and the size of private homes. One of the reasons that Europeans and Latin Americans are relatively slow to invite acquaintances into their homes is that the homes tend to be rather small by American standards; they are not, by and large, the entertainment centers which our middle-class homes, with their large heated or air-conditioned areas and their recreational facilities, have come to be. Just as public transportation is more social and energy-efficient than the private car, so the neighborhood cafe or Frenna’s Saloon have very different social and ecological implications than the living room, den or finished basement. Norris’ Polk Street is more like sections of Paris or Mexico City today than it is like a late twentieth century American urban neighborhood.

The novel even suggests ways of understanding problem areas in our cities. Where Americans live in less spacious and less well-equipped places, they suffer not only from the obvious comparison between their lot and that of more fortunate people, but from the absence of those alternative urban facilities, so well-provided in McTeague’s San Francisco or contemporary European towns, which have tended to atrophy here.

Norris provides a good catalogue of the texture of San Francisco

life. Thus we learn about cable cars, specialized shops and services of various sorts; we are given a catalogue of workers and the clothes they wear; we see craftsmen of many types, shop girls, theaters and gas lamps. Though Norris wants to show his characters as uncultured, the popular arts and entertainments are by no means unrepresented. It is true that when the characters try to sing at the wedding, it turns out that they know but one song in common. But that suggests as much the diversity and multiplicity of backgrounds of those in the room as it does their culturelessness. I am impressed that this diverse group is making an effort to form a community. McTeague's apartment does have some books and pictures in it; we also hear a concertina, a song Maria Macapa sings and a melodion which Trina's kinswoman Selina knows how to play. A dancing academy is not far from Mac's dental parlors, and both photography and cinema are present, for although Norris sneers at the entertainment at the vaudeville show to which Mac takes Trina and her family, he is reporter enough to record that one of the "acts" in it is a motion picture.

The foods we are shown similarly suggest the emergence of new types of national experience and identity. The novel opens with the description of McTeague eating at the car conductors' coffee joint, where he puts away, among other things, a couple of different kinds of vegetables and some "heavy, under-done meat"; on his way back to his office he stops at a saloon and buys a pitcher of steam beer. Norris, as usual, thinks that he is showing us the lowest depths, but a slab of heavy, under-done meat does not sound bad in this era of "hamburger helper," and steam beer has become something of an expensive gourmet item in the Bay area. "Our kind of people," Norris implies repeatedly, would not be caught dead eating such things. A student of material culture might say that what is happening is that a new national cuisine is developing. Thus the characters buy tamales from the "half-breed Mexican" on the street; the city offers seafood and a variety of ethnic foods. The culinary culmination, I suppose, is the wedding feast at which the guests consume champagne, oyster soup, sea bass, barracuda, roast goose stuffed with chestnuts, eggplant, sweet potatoes, calf's head in oil, lobster salad, rice pudding, strawberry ice cream, wine jelly, stewed prunes, coconuts, mixed nuts, raisins, fruit, tea, coffee, mineral waters, and lemonade. (145-146)

All these goodies, we recall, are prepared by Maria Macapa: “Out in the kitchen Maria Macapa did the work of three, her face scarlet, her sleeves rolled up; every now and then she uttered shrill but unintelligible outcries, supposedly addressed to the waiter.” (96) And the guests plainly have a wonderful time: they joke with the waiter, share the newlyweds’ sense of hope and well-being and happily stuff themselves with well-prepared and tasty food. Norris’ assorted brutes, racial misfits, and half-breeds, in other words, are quite capable of putting together a satisfactory kind of life for themselves, complete with institutions, traditions, shared customs, and so forth. They know how to learn from one another, and, for all the implications about struggle and survival, for all their author’s snobbery, they get along quite well together, thank you. Mac and Marcus may perish in Death Valley; San Francisco is alive and well.

-4-

*Sister Carrie* and Social Theories

“Life is on the wire. The rest is waiting.”

—Karl Wallenda, quoted in Erving  
Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*

When she came to her own rooms Carrie saw their comparative insignificance. She was not so dull but that she could perceive that they were but three small rooms in a moderately well-furnished boarding house. She was not contrasting it now with what she had had, but what she had so recently seen.<sup>19</sup>

Dreiser’s ruminations about Carrie’s dissatification will serve to introduce a few pages of observations about the relationship between literature and hypotheses from history and the social sciences. I have deliberately chosen theories which are varied in scale and familiarity: a fairly recent social scientific idea that gained currency during the turbulent times of the Vietnamese War, a famous broad historical thesis from Max Weber, a “standard” way of interpreting American labor history, the “web” or “net” model for describing the American social fabric, modernization theory, and one of Thorstein Veblen’s

most idiosyncratic applications of his theory of conspicuous waste, consumption and leisure.

Sociologists who believe in the concept of relative deprivation say that rebellious behavior, activism, or at least itchy discontent with one's lot are likely to be most pronounced not among people held in helpless subservience, but rather among those who are rising socially, usually quite rapidly, but who perceive sharply the difference between the status which they can attain and the status of others whose rise is even faster. If the hypothesis is valid—and it is no more than a hypothesis—it has been suggested that it could help to account for such diverse phenomena as the apparent docility of the most seriously oppressed slaves in the American South or of the inmates in Nazi concentration camps. In the history of black liberation in the United States it can be connected to the observation that leaders of the few slave rebellions we know about tended to be relatively privileged slaves; or to the fact that protest in Black Harlem was far less visible, let us say, at the turn of the century, when conditions there were really very bad, than it was after mid-century in the period of the Civil Rights Movement, when Harlem, compared to itself half a century earlier, was extraordinarily prosperous. This interpretation assumes that such protest and rebellion were in general more likely to occur in places in which black people were relatively better off than their brethren, in Harlem before Mississippi, and that a disproportionate number of black leaders in the years before the Civil Rights period came from relatively privileged backgrounds, often Caribbean rather than southern. The concept has been used to account for some surprising results of the "Stouffer Report,"<sup>20</sup> which showed that certain types of psychological stress were far more severe a problem among those branches of the Second World War Army (notably the Air Corps) in which promotion was rapid but somewhat unpredictable than it was in those (notably the MP's) in which, while very slow, it went by the book and by the calendar. A newly promoted officer, a major still wet behind the ears and only a short while out of flight school, could still look with envious eyes at a classmate who was already a chicken colonel. Glamour, danger or popularity, which one would think would be important variables in contrasting two such different arms of the military, seemed far less significant than this perceived

relative unfairness. “The *less* the promotion opportunity offered by a branch [of the Army] . . . , the *more favorable* the opinion tends to be toward promotion opportunity.” (256) The concept seems to account for the behavior of the upwardly mobile who see others around them moving more rapidly. Like many such theories it is suggestive, though never definitive: it is too easy to think of exceptions to the behavior it describes.

Dreiser apparently believes that something like what is now called relative deprivation makes Carrie antsy. The passage quoted above is only the most explicit on the subject of those in the novel; there are several others. When the book takes leave of Carrie, she is rich, famous, triumphant, but still dissatisfied. (487) It is interesting that Carrie’s social restlessness is paralleled by a kind of restlessness in taste. What happens could also be visualized in terms of our model of expanding circles, used this time on a personal scale. With each new social level that Carrie enters comes a new range of aspirations and perceptions, and discontent with what she has known. One of the critical passages in the book is a conversation Carrie has with Ames, who makes the dubious statement that Carrie ought not to be in comedy but ought to be doing something “better.” Dreiser is on very shaky aesthetic ground here, but that is not the point. What is most important is the reminder in this passage that tastes change and develop (even though in this case the stages and directions of development are not very well understood), and that there is a tie between developing tastes and social location. Carrie is made to feel that she would be bettering herself if she involved herself in a “better” kind of drama. Unlike the downtrodden and resigned sister and brother-in-law with whom Carrie lives early in the book, Carrie is “upwardly mobile,” but her rise seems only to bring her to new levels of antsy. She has a bad case of the “relative depts.” I find the idea intriguing that a theory designed to describe very different social phenomena may also apply to social changes that are measured in terms of taste. We shall return to the connection between taste and social status in the last chapter when we discuss the phenomenon of the *avant-garde*. For the moment it suffices to point out that Carrie feels that one can “advance” in taste. The poor girl is likely to end up in experimental theatre.

The much older hypothesis formulated by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* might also be tried out in *Sister Carrie*. Certainly for Dreiser's characters, work, pretty much for its own sake, makes life meaningful—"Oh blessed are the children of endeavor," Dreiser gushes (171) when Carrie is busy. When she has leisure time, however, even though she is prosperous and employed in the theater at night, he warns, "Unconsciously her idle hands were beginning to weary her." (458) Weber's idea that a secularized remnant of the religious reason for work and achievement is what drives such people seems nicely borne out; the idle hands are dangerous even without the devil. Carrie's behavior does not "prove" the connection between protestant societies and the urge to work hard—for one thing, similar behavior is observable in certain strongly Catholic societies—but to the extent that a reader empathizes, realizes that he "knows the feeling," the novel does suggest a genuine characteristic of many people in our kind of culture.

The novel could also be used, inconclusively yet somehow significantly, in terms of a debate among our labor historians. An important argument in this field has to do with the question of whether or not American working people, particularly in the critical decades late in the nineteenth and early in the twentieth century when they were clearly being badly exploited, perceived of themselves as a "proletariat" in the European sense of that word. Rapid upward social mobility has not always been as characteristic of our history as we would like to believe; *Sister Carrie*, after all, also shows rapid downward mobility as Hurstwood plunges from affluence to poverty. The novel sheds some oblique light on the larger labor picture. Now, a position which some labor historians take is that labor in America differed from that in industrializing Europe in that our workers never developed a permanent sense of being a working class. Aware that they were exploited, they were far less interested in a major revision of "the system" than were their supposedly more theoretically-minded European counterparts because they felt their own difficult situation to be temporary. Thus the argument is made that our labor movement never really got off the ground as long as it pursued theoretical socialist goals. It began to succeed only when leaders appeared who fought instead merely for an acceleration of the process which would

enable the laborer and his family to better themselves—leaders who called, in short, not for another kind of pastry but for a bigger slice of the existing pie.

The portions of *Sister Carrie* that deal with the trolley-car strike suggest such a tension between emphasis on theory and emphasis on pie-slices. We see how authority, exemplified by the police, seems obliged to support a management which seems unjust: pay is bad; streetcar employees are poor. We are aware that the scab, Hurstwood, is being exploited at least as badly as were the strikers whose strike he is helping to break. But, although this episode is to end in hatred, violence, a gunshot and Hurstwood's flight, it also hints at a different sort of possibility. For some police show considerable fellow-feeling for the strikers and their cause, and a striking motorman tries repeatedly to give Hurstwood a sense of comradeship:

“Won't you come out, pardner, and be a man? Remember we're fighting for a decent day's wages, that's all. We've got families to support.” (426)

That certainly sounds like the speech of a worker who has a larger pie-slice in mind.

Everyone involved seems to know that tragic things are going to happen; appeals to comradeship or compassion are likely to be replaced with violence. Yet the fellow-feeling is probably genuine. One has again the strong sense of shared values which lead Americans held outside any given circle of privilege to expect a certain amount of sympathy from those within. One possible outcome of labor exploitation is class war and violent revolution. Another is that labor musters sufficient economic and political clout to make the system run “as it should.” Though in parts of his career Dreiser seems to have leaned toward belief in the former, the texture of his honest reporting suggests the possibility that many Americans might believe in the latter. Note that I am not arguing that any particular theory is correct or that the novel espouses it. About all one can “prove” from the novel is that the novelist perceived such ties and lines of communication. He thought they existed even in moments of tension and confrontation. And he perceived the situation before that labor hypothesis or

the debate about its validity had been formulated. Dreiser showed both confrontation and communication, both injustice and a sense of shared values by which to define it and perhaps to ameliorate it.

We have noted at least since our discussions of Hawthorne the simple usefulness of novels for catching the texture of life, material culture, popular interests, media and so forth. This is especially notable in the work of Realists and Naturalists, who make reportorial accuracy a part of their aesthetic. Strong in Frederic, Howells, and Norris, the impulse is especially powerful in Dreiser, who, in his usual unobtrusive way, stops the book for a moment to tell us that this is what he is about: "Lest this order of individual should permanently pass, let me put down some of the most striking characteristics of his most successful manner and method." (6) Dreiser is about to tell us all we need to know about "drummers," or travelling salesmen. At other places in the book we get feature articles on drinking resorts, chorus lines, transportation, and lodging of different classes, among other things. Indeed, a great deal of the thrust of the novel—and of Dreiser's fiction in general—is journalistic, and reminds us of Dreiser's long apprenticeship in the commercial magazine, as well it should, since Dreiser had covered labor trouble as a reporter, and actually patched part of his published journalism into *Sister Carrie*. He asks in *An American Tragedy* how a boy from a religious family and with a promising career ahead of him could come to be a murderer, and sets out ponderously and with terrible power to answer that Sunday-supplement question. *Sister Carrie* also gives answers to journalistic questions. How is it, for example, that a citizen comes to work as a scab? What kind of a man, since Dreiser raises the issue, is a travelling salesman? How does a poor girl from the country come to be a famous Broadway star?

*The Rise of Silas Lapham*, we recall, opened with a newspaper interview. Bartley Hubbard was adding Silas' career to the "Solid Men of Boston" series. I think a reason for the continuing popularity in our culture of information of this sort is related to the same social restlessness and flexibility we have repeatedly noted. As we move toward the present, and that web or net, complex, individualistic, strong in its emphasis on choice and voluntarism, comes to describe

our social texture, it seems natural that there come along with it a curiosity about people whose locations on the network are in one way or another unusual. Silas' biography to that moment is a success story whose patterns one can see as enactment of a popular drama as familiar in its outlines as a movie western, and just as interesting in terms of cultural meaning. And although Bartley Hubbard suggests that the pattern of Silas' life is one which he has encountered before, often careers take surprising turns, or associational patterns show unexpected connections: the Broadway star comes from a very unglamorous background, the scab was once prosperous, the taxi driver likes concert music, the general knows Dante.

An interesting conflict within Dreiser's design can also be understood in terms of modernization. According to Naturalist theory, as we noted, human planning and volition are supposed to count for very little, and "forces" for much. There is no question that Dreiser thinks that he is showing the working out of these forces; he refers to Carrie as "a waif amid forces," and goes out of his way to show that his characters do not fully understand why they do what they do. Some of them are able to dream, hope and aspire, but even they are not really in control of their destinies. Just as the most important turn in Hurstwood's life is supposed to be caused by the accidental closing of a safe door, so the real answer to the question, "How did a poor girl from a small town background come to be a major star?" is supposed to be, "Through forces she did not understand and a series of accidents," such as the one that got her a part in an amateur theatrical. Dreiser's early version of the novel contained quite extensive expositions of such Naturalist theory. (520)

Now in a modernized society, you are supposed to get where you get in good part because of ability and training, rational, not traditional, criteria for prominence. And Dreiser is striving to portray accurately a society which one writer said was at a "climax" of modernization.<sup>21</sup> So any careful reader understands that while Carrie was lucky, and had breaks, she became a star largely because she was very talented; we are told repeatedly of her wit, charm, and spunk. The critical turning point in her career comes when a comedian in a review in which Carrie is a member of the chorus directs an ad lib line in her direction, and Carrie has nerve and wit enough to ad lib

back. (I know of no more distressing example of Dreiser's limitations as a writer than that scene: all he needs is a one-line gag to make his scene plausible, and he cannot come up with one. We generous readers take his word that what Carrie said struck an audience as funny, and that its laughter induced the show's directors to leave the line in, thus starting Carrie on the road to stardom. But the line is not at all funny. Poor Dreiser.) No one would argue that luck, chance and forces were not involved in Carrie's career. Perhaps Dreiser would have argued that there were thousands of girls as pretty and as talented as she was who never did become stars, and that is doubtless true. Yet there is a real sense in which "merit" was in fact, involved. If there were Civil Service Exams for Broadway comedienues, Carrie Meeber would score high.

The long battle for equality of rights and opportunities for women can be understood in terms of the application of values such as fair play to areas of human experience traditionally governed not by such rational criteria, but rather by custom and tradition. As I have repeatedly suggested through our model of the "moving steps," the application of such ideals to reality takes place very unevenly and incompletely. Having discussed a series of nineteenth century novels in which male characters came to terms with women whose characteristics clashed with those which women were supposed to display, it is worthwhile mentioning that in many twentieth century books feminine desirability is explained in extraordinarily old-fashioned ways. It is not merely a matter of freedoms and rights, either: it is that the Beautiful Woman, defined too narrowly to allow even most healthy and attractive women to meet arbitrary and preposterous criteria, still tyrannizes our society. Thus assigning a romantic role in a movie, let us say, to a woman who does not meet such criteria, a decision which one would suppose would enable countless people of both sexes to "relate" more strongly to the film, is to this day not the routine decision one would expect it to be but rather a conscious, almost political, act—and too often accompanied with condescension.

I see no reason for either guilt or anger in the matter. No conspiracy was ever involved. The origins of canons of beauty are ancient, and their tyranny today is extreme only because the media

disperse standardized versions of beauty more widely than was possible before nineteenth century book and magazine illustration and its successors come upon the scene. Moreover, the process does not work most cruelly in the United States: glamour in Mexico is defined exclusively in European terms, and movie stars, beauty contests, governmental posters, and ads all proclaim the desirability of kinds of looks simply not available to families with strong heritage from any of the handsome and interesting Indian stocks. That people from such backgrounds by and large are at the bottom of Mexico's socio-economic heap adds an economic dimension to the racism inherent in such definitions of beauty. For me the social results in Mexico are far more discouraging than anything I see in the States.

Howells, we noted, showed a desirable bachelor who could find beauty in a "plain" girl. But Dreiser explains Carrie's attractiveness to men in ways which would have made Thorstein Veblen chuckle; they are almost enough to make one forget that Carrie is, after all, a career woman. In the wicked "Introductory" chapter to *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Veblen developed the idea of woman as a prestige-giving commodity desired by males to the extent that she bestowed "honorific" connotations through her obvious uselessness and inability to do productive work. Hence, Veblen implies (he was writing at about the same time as Dreiser), you want your wife to have fair skin, long fingernails and to be built and dressed in a way which makes useful labor difficult or impossible. In that era, that meant plump, but crippled by a tight corset. In Chapter Sixteen of *Sister Carrie*, Carrie looks out a window at working people, and decides that toil is "desolate." We are then told why she appeals to Hurstwood: ". . . there was tenderness in her eye, weakness in her manner, good nature and hope in her thoughts." (146) The weakness is important.

Sounding more like the author of flowery popular magazine prose than a tough Naturalist, Dreiser calls her a "lily" and speaks of her "waxen beauty and perfume." He then writes,

In a material way she was considerably improved.  
Her awkwardness had all but passed, leaving if anything  
a quaint residue which was as pleasing as perfect grace.

Her little shoes now fitted her smartly and had high heels. She had learned much about laces and those little neckpieces which add so much to a woman's appearance. Her form had filled out until it was admirably plump and well-rounded. . . . Her dresses draped her becomingly, for she wore excellent corsets and laced herself with care. (146)

There is a study<sup>22</sup> which discusses with considerable perceptiveness the nature of Dreiser's sexual imagination; it does not take a terribly perceptive reader of his novels to see that appeal is apparently connected with the kind of Veblenian criteria to which we have just alluded, and also with the idea of seduction and conquest. Carrie is not nearly as exciting to the two lovers we meet once she has become mistress.

I also find Carrie's friend in the chorus line, Lola, interesting in that Dreiser apparently feels her very attractive, and assigns some of her qualities to Carrie as well. The quasi-military uniform in which Lola appears in the chorus line is made uncomfortably appealing, and we recall that in one of the opening pages of the book, he has told us that Carrie herself is a "half-equipped little knight." (4) Sexual folklore is hard to find in times other than one's own; the New Historian interested in such important aspects of human thought and behavior would be foolish to ignore what literature can teach. Of the authors we discuss, Franklin, Poe, Hawthorne (especially in *The Blithedale Romance*), Frederic, Chopin, Hemingway and Updike seem especially rich in clues of this sort.

Each of the hypotheses to which we have fed data from the novel is susceptible to challenge. I know of academic challenges to several. Veblen's application of his ponderously-expounded principle to his reader's chubby wife may be as much satirical as serious; relative deprivation may be bunk, and even the "web" model, which seems uncontroversial enough, may be just an arbitrary pattern which unintentionally distorts a phenomenon which some other construct could better describe.

Theories themselves, however, are culturally revealing. They express cultural commitment to the idea of rational inquiry, to faith

that the world—including human behavior—is reducible to orderly laws. It is no cultural accident that sociology is sometimes called “The American Science.” And novelists who, like Dreiser, look to “scientific” principles as authority reflect the same underlying values.

Moreover, even if one decides that a given thesis such as relative deprivation is “wrong” or invalid, it is often likely that the theorists who produced it did so in response to some human or social principle of considerable force which operates strongly in our culture. Rapid upward social mobility provides a strong example. While it has not always been as characteristic of our society as we like to believe, it has been open to a high percentage of our population. It is probably the strong social fact which lies behind this particular theory. The opportunity for upward mobility to some extent can also be seen as a function of modernization because, as we noted, in rationalized modern societies, qualifications, and not heritage, are supposed to be the determinants of one’s status. This possibility of change, in different individuals and different situations, can produce ambition, insecurity, gratification, amused detachment, rebelliousness or whatever, depending on a wide range of variables. Certainly much of the literature we have discussed in this study has dealt with such consequences of rapid upward mobility. Its promise draws immigrants from early colonial times; the social anomalies it produces trouble colonial diarists and provide writers such as Howells and Frederic (the upward mobility does not have to be economic, remember) with many of their dramatic situations, and it has continued important in twentieth century fiction.

Illustrating social theories in novels does not prove that they are true. Neither, for that matter, does illustrating them with evidence from “real life.” Truth is seldom really the issue. One uses a good theory because it is economical, plausible, or even aesthetically satisfying; because it accommodates known data or predicts developments better than any other which one has available. Novels have the advantage, however, of providing an attractive arena in which to test the human validity of theories by “feel.” Moreover, sometimes one can pick up useful hypotheses from fiction which one can then try out on “real” evidence. My impression is that, by and large, our authors have done at least as well as the social scientists in putting their fingers on principles and patterns of human behavior.

-5-

Colonel Cantrell and Poor Richard

Going back over Hemingway's books to-day, we can see clearly what an error of the politicians it was to accuse him of an indifference to society. His whole work is a criticism of society: he has responded to every pressure of the moral atmosphere of the time, as it is felt at the roots of human relations.

—Edmund Wilson<sup>23</sup>

The European background shows Americans abroad in higher relief—at least, so runs the theory one encounters in discussions of the Americanness of Henry James. A Hemingway novel about an American officer in Italy after World War Two poses the sort of challenge one likes to accept: what can it say about American social history? Does it throw any national characteristics into high relief? I think so; let us look briefly at it in terms of what have been recurring themes in this study, desired personality traits, sex roles (and the tyranny of “the beautiful woman”), the web, modernization, and values.

Although it is set in and around Venice, and there is a great deal of conspicuous evidence presented to show that its hero, Colonel Cantrell, loves and has penetrated deep into Italian culture, I think one can argue that *Across the River and into the Trees* (1950) is really a book about the United States. For one thing, the Colonel's circle of Venetian acquaintances is composed mostly of such people as waiters, vendors in the market, and hotel employees. The treatment of Venice is respectful, lyrical, affectionate, and, I think, sincere, but it is not much more profound than a tourist's view.

The view of Colonel Richard Cantrell, however, is three dimensional and deep. If the novel is inexcusably self-pitying and sentimental, as its unfriendly critics say, the self-glorifying daydream of an aging macho, it is also undeniably an attempt to show the Colonel as a highly sympathetic person. Thus a preferred strategy for discussing it, I would think, would be through desired personality traits, in the same terms in which we approached Crevecoeur, Franklin and John

Singleton Copley, in order to see what characteristics an author would give a character he very much wants his readers to like. Since, as we have seen, desired personality traits are culturally determined, the process of making an inventory of desired traits should say something important about our culture.

Briefly, then: the Colonel is a nice man; he has taste (he loves Shakespeare, Dante, Red Smith, hunting when it is done right); he is modest (a good part of the book is devoted to Cantrell lecturing himself about his failings and limitations). He has a healthy and humane curiosity—as he is driven past a fellow who is reading a newspaper while riding a bicycle, he tries to see what paper it is. He is essentially friendly: he invites the Army doctor who checks his ailing heart to come along on the duck hunt, although he knows the doctor is a city boy and might ruin what may be his last opportunity for a perfect day of shooting. He is friendly also to the NCO's who drive his car. Though his illness is likely to make him grouchy, his intentions are always kindly. He would like the driver who brings him to Venice to enjoy himself, and to know the important things. A good soldier, Cantrell knows his craft, and respects people in his own and other occupations who know theirs as well. He values human life and he hates most those aspects of military stupidity which result in wasting it. The Colonel is also indefatigably boyish—he plays games, makes jokes to himself, seeks out new experiences, relishes whimsical secret codes and societies. One almost is tempted to conclude that Hemingway wants us to like Colonel Cantrell because the Colonel has succeeded in remaining silly to the age of fifty-one.

He also has a surprisingly great faith in what might be called the rational didactic process. It is not merely that *Across the River and into the Trees* is atypical Hemingway in that it contains frankly expository editorial passages,<sup>24</sup> but that Hemingway shows the Colonel's strong desire to pass on his knowledge and expertise, even if only to Jackson, his driver, or to Renata, his teenage mistress, who is asleep as he thinks out to himself what he would like to explain to her about the world, the Army, the arts and history. Like Dante, he wants to draw the circles; like Dante he may be drawing them somewhat unjustly, but desires to judge, to make moral decisions. Eisenhower merits a special apartment in Cantrell's Inferno. I confess that Eisenhower's

failure to show moral courage, to draw a circle or two himself, during the McCarthy era which followed publication of this novel, made me think that Cantrell may have known what he was about. If this side of Cantrell reminds us of the passionate religionist Dante—and it should, because Hemingway refers to Dante repeatedly, and says that Cantrell has him in mind as he judges his contemporaries—it also reminds us paradoxically of the rationalist Franklin. Hemingway's strategy for convincing readers of Cantrell's worth involves demonstrating that Cantrell is cultured, reminding the reader of Franklin's description in the *Autobiography* of the self-help-through-culture society that he organized as a young man. As in the *Autobiography*, we are to like the subject because he knows and laughs at his failings: Franklin's famous chart, his grade report on his moral performance, is roughly equivalent to passages in which Cantrell chides himself for gruffness, impatience or ingratitude. Franklin gives himself demerits for excesses of "Venery"; Cantrell wishes he had more of Franklin's patience and moderation.

Common to both is the teaching impulse, the desire to pass on whatever judgment and wisdom has been acquired in a lifetime of inquisitiveness, appreciation, responsible and conscientious action. "Making things clear is my main trade," (148) says Colonel Cantrell. As we watch Cantrell and Franklin evaluate themselves and the lessons to be learned from their lives, the two centuries separating them dissolve. They are playing variations on the same desirable personal traits, and are closer to one another than either would be to most of the alien people I know in the twentieth century. One could do worse than to recommend to foreigners interested in winning friends and influencing people in the United States that they first study closely the expressions on the faces of John Copley's sitters, and then read carefully Franklin's *Autobiography* and Hemingway's *Across the River and into the Trees*.

This conscious attempt on the part of the author to make a character likeable would be valuable, I think, even were there no autobiographical implications for Hemingway's own life and career. I find it even more interesting because Hemingway has also gone out of his way to identify the Colonel's good traits as American. It is as though the author himself were trying to set the record straight by

showing which traits he considers genuinely American, and which aberrations. Thus snide things can be said about career women, the pimply-faced writer and tourists, but the Colonel is careful to assert the worthiness of American soldiers, cities, roads, and automobiles.

The talk about cars might also be used to illustrate some other matters we have discussed. One of the Colonel's and Renata's favorite fantasies is travelling in the United States by automobile. Cantrell senses that web or net that we have spoken of so many times; he perceives it in a spatial way peculiar, I suppose, to people who have lived during the golden era of the automobile. Jackson, his driver, is ignorant in other ways: he is inexperienced (but not entirely without intelligence), for instance, in matters of art. But he thoroughly understands the Colonel's perception of highways and towns. A web of roads links cities and towns which the traveller remembers and perceives in terms of judgments of their feel, and in terms of their accommodations for travellers. The judgments are not necessarily "untrue," but certainly not very profound: some towns seem "tough," Cantrell says; some establishments, like the Roubidoux Hotel, are remembered fondly. We are not far from the network of highways and motels in which Humbert Humbert acts out his fantasies with *his* teen-age mistress in Vladimir Nabakov's *Lolita*. Although there is little detail in *Across the River*, I judge that Cantrell's attitude toward the points on the network is more affectionate than is Humbert's. (Humbert's is not as hostile as some early critics thought.) The Roubidoux is in St. Joseph, a city which was until a few years ago so unique and exotic in feel, function and appearance, that driving there from Lawrence or Kansas City, the perceptive traveller wondered whether he had somehow found a shortcut to a much older, eastern city, or whether a passport might be required to enter this town of strange knobby buildings and unexpected enterprises. There is a connoisseurship for such places.

Colonel Cantrell would enter it with his big Roadmaster and his open-minded true love, the youthful countess who loves him, I think we are to believe, because he has made the hard choices, tried to be true to his best ideals, been a man one should love: she is, if you will, the reward you might get if you succeed in being honest, brave, forthright, compassionate, skilled and open. The Countess Renata can also, however, be understood, as unsympathetic critics

of the book have portrayed her, as an older man's erotic daydream. Veblenian arguments about the symbols of feminine beauty, slightly modernized to account for changes in fashion, would apply to her again. She seems to be valued and desired because she is ornamental and unproductive. She is pointedly not a career girl:

His true love was sleeping again. She slept in a different way than his career girl had slept. He did not like to remember how the career girl slept, yes he did. But he wanted to forget it. (251)

Renata does not put her hair up in curlers at night. It is all very unfair. Renata, one wants to say, is lucky in having hair which is beautiful without being put up at night, and, since the Colonel responds to his culture's conventional ideas of beauty, what is a woman to do who does not look good unless she puts her hair up at night? It is all unfair also because a dual standard is operating. We are told again and again of Renata's great beauty. Yet men apparently can be handsome although they are ugly. The Colonel himself is our best example, but similar things are implied about Arnaldo, the glass-eyed waiter, and about the Colonel's good friend the "Grand Master." (71,55) Viewed this way, *Across the River* . . . is a depressing book, for Colonel Cantrell in 1950 is more a prisoner of impossible standards of feminine desirability than were Tom Corey in the 1880's or Arthur Mervyn in the 1790's. "The beautiful woman" dies damnably hard. Yet, to be honest, even readers who much prefer other Ernest Hemingway novels or stories do not find this one depressing, not only because of the great artistry of the passages in which the Colonel is absorbed in his memories or his play, but also because the book is imagined from a perspective so male-centered and so unconcerned with female perceptions or feelings as to seem more innocent than reprehensible. (No wonder Hemingway loved *Huckleberry Finn*.) But if we want to deal historically with male perceptions of feminine desirability, with the history and persistence of One True Definition of beauty, Cantrell's one last true and only love, or whatever he calls her, is a lady of importance. She connects to popular culture, to the "star" system in motion pictures, to psychohistory, and to the history of sex roles in America.

A few suggestions, finally, of other approaches to this novel which would enable one to discuss American society via a story set in Italy. Beyond Renata and hunting, Cantrell also loves good writers, good painters, Italy and the Army. The Army as Cantrell perceives it is rich in implication. One thinks of the brilliant discussions in the Third Book of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* of what armies will be like in democratic nations. Perceptive as he was, Tocqueville was often wrong if we take his work as prediction of United States history, as, for example, when he warns to beware the noncoms, for sergeants will be the fomenters of revolution. True enough in many Third-World countries, though never true here. But his observation that in protracted wars democracies and their armies are potent enemies seems to match what we learn in *Across the River and into the Trees*. Cantrell's respect for the best of the nonprofessional soldiers and leaders who come through in extended wars sounds like an affirmation of Tocqueville. Tocqueville also thought that democracies had a tendency, once finally aroused to war, to perceive of it in more "total" terms than do aristocracies. We see Cantrell, old professional that he is, reacting against this tendency as he bends over backwards to be fair in judging the enemy.

His professionalism itself is important, of course, for the Army is a modernized institution, specialized, compartmentalized and bureaucratic. Indeed, a good deal of the conflict in the Colonel's memories has to do with the clash between his understanding of the need for an effective bureaucratic organization and his dislike for the faceless and characterless leaders which that need is likely to put in power. Eisenhower is his best example.

What is said about Eisenhower suggests that an approach through values would work in this book as well. Indeed, I would suggest that the famous Hemingway code and the desired personality traits which the Colonel displays—the Colonel lives religiously by that famous code—could be understood in terms of that list of sacred values explained at the outset of this book. And it is interesting that the novel again and again attacks values which are widespread but not sacred. Business values in particular come in for a real beating; there is a sense in which this novel fits in with a long tradition of American works meant to awaken us from absorption by business

values at the expense of more important matters, works such as, to mention those we are discussing in the present study, *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, *Death of a Salesman*, *Appointment in Samarra* and *Rabbit, Run*. Richard Cantrell sneers at Harry Truman because he was a haberdasher, and dislikes Dwight Eisenhower because he behaves like a businessman.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, the interesting debate about the nature and importance of the southern yeoman farmer, especially Frank L. Owsley and Harriet C. Owsley, "The Economic Basis of Society in the late Ante-Bellum South," *Journal of Southern History* VI (February, 1940), and Fabian Linden's response to it and to related studies, "Economic Democracy in the Slave South: An Appraisal of Some Recent Views," *Journal of Negro History*, XXXI (1946), 140-189.

<sup>2</sup> In older Southern states, many historians believe, the land had usually been ruined and staple crop prices were generally too low for profitable operations. Staples were still grown because the lines of credit with factors in London or later in New York were well established, but cash had to be generated in some other way. This matter is controversial, too; one of the ideas attacked in Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Egerman's much-criticized *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston, 1974) is that slavery was unprofitable except when it involved slave-trading. Fogel and Engerman argued for a highly-rationalized, factory-like production system, much of it administered by highly competent slaves. That bears on the issue of slave personality, on which topic *Huckleberry Finn*, as we shall shortly see, gives limited but interesting evidence.

<sup>3</sup> This symposium argued respect for traditional values and a traditional way of life. It was based, however, on historical assumptions about the southern past that will not bear close examination. The twelve contributors were John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, Robert Penn Warren, Lyle Lanier, Frank Lawrence Owsley, John Donald Wade, Henry B. Kline, Andrew Lytle, H. C. Nixon, John Gould Fletcher and Stark Young. The publisher was Harper & Brothers, New York.

<sup>4</sup> "Not in Memoriam, But in Defense," *I'll Take My Stand*, 328-359.

<sup>5</sup> A fine account of all this appears in Walter Blair's *Mark Twain & Huck Finn* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1960), 361 ff. See esp. 362, a reproduction of the flyer "Confidential Terms to Agents" from which the quotation above is taken.

<sup>6</sup> See for example, David D. Hawes, "Much Ado About John Brougham and Jim Fisk," *American Studies*, VIII, 1 (Spring, 1967), 73 ff. For Brougham's Shakespearian mockeries of his despicable patron to have

been successful—and they were; everyone got the point—the audience had to know its *The Merchant of Venice* and other Shakespeare plays.

<sup>7</sup> I have been unable to locate the source of a piece of information passed on to me by a literature professor in the 1950's to the effect that more had been published about Melville from 1920 until about 1950 than on Shakespeare since his death. Given the enormous growth in size in American universities since then—and hence in the size of faculties, and in English departments, and therefore in people expected to produce new literary scholarship—and a relative levelling-off of the Melville boom, I doubt that this sort of statistical dominance would still hold true. The “Industry,” nevertheless, has been and continues considerable.

<sup>8</sup> Jay B. Hubbell published *Who Are the Major American Writers /A Study of the Changing Literary Canon* (Durham, North Carolina, 1972) before I had a chance to utilize the results of the study I directed. Hubbell's book is an informal and interesting review of assorted attempts to rank and list our authors. My own materials rest in the proverbial scholar's shoe-box, from which I hope to rescue them for a volume on the structure of the arts in America I want to write someday.

<sup>9</sup> Forrest Berghorn explains this approach succinctly in his introduction to a special issue of *American Studies* on change in America: “Introduction: A Perspective on Social Change in America,” *American Studies*, XVII, 2 (Fall, 1976), 5-10. See especially the chart on 5. The issue provides excellent illustrations of intimate yet often unsuspected connections between cultural, technological, social and artistic changes. Berghorn lists significant variables which he and his colleagues have been able to quantify to demonstrate that the period around 1920 is an important watershed.

<sup>10</sup> *Billy Budd, Sailor*, ed. Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts, Jr. (Chicago, 1962). Some documents in the debate about the meaning of *Billy Budd* are E. L. Grant Watson, “Melville's Testimony of Acceptance” *New England Quarterly*, VI (1933), 319-327; Charles Weir, Jr., “Malice Reconiled, A Note on Melville's ‘Billy Budd’” *UTQ* XIII (1944), 276-285; and Harry M. Campbell's “The Hanging Scene in Melville's ‘Billy Budd, Foretopman,’” *Modern Language Notes* LXVI (1951), 378-381.

<sup>11</sup> A development which is good for my ego, because I argued against the “testament of acceptance” interpretation in 1953 and 1954 in an honors essay at Harvard entitled, if memory serves, “The Craftsman's Memory” (Harvard University Archives, 1954). [It is now available, free, online at KU ScholarWorks, or as a paperback at kbookstore.com.]

<sup>12</sup> The Hayford-Sealts text uses leaf numbers; this quotation is in leaf 232, on page 101 of the paper edition. Subsequent references in parentheses are to these numbers, which are of course uniform in cloth and paper editions.

<sup>13</sup> The general essay on Norris with which I am in closest agreement is Robert W. Schneider, “Frank Norris: The Naturalist as Victorian,” *American Studies* (*JCMVASA*), III, 1 (Spring, 1962), 13ff.

<sup>14</sup> "Toward Racism: The History of an Idea," in *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860-1925* (New York, 1963).

<sup>15</sup> Donald Pizer, "Late Nineteenth-Century American Naturalism," from *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Carbondale, Illinois, 1966), reprinted in Mr. Pizer's edition of *McTeague* (New York, 1977), 353. Subsequent citations to *McTeague* are to this edition, and will be treated in parentheses in the text.

<sup>16</sup> This differentiates Dr. McTeague from one apparent literary predecessor, Dr. Bovary. When urged by an admiring friend to attempt an innovative operation, Bovary fails cruelly. McTeague, cautious and kindly, seems much brighter, and succeeds. When the dental work is done, Trina's mouth is all fixed up.

<sup>17</sup> Told in A. Michal McMahon, "An American Courtship: Psychologists and Advertising Theory in the Progressive Era," *American Studies*, XIII, 2 (Fall, 1972), 5-18.

<sup>18</sup> The immigrant historian is Oscar Handlin. Our immigration legislation became racist in 1882 when Congress restricted Chinese entry; the famous "quotas," limiting immigration to percentages present in the population in the late nineteenth century, are the products of the 1920's and of the further popularization of the quasi-scientific racist theories to which we have alluded.

<sup>19</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1981), 116. Subsequent references in parentheses will be to this radically new edition, whose editors have attempted to restore the novel to its state before the complex emendations it underwent at the hands of Dreiser's wife, his friend Arthur Henry, and his first publisher. The story of the alterations is complex, and is told on 503ff. of the 1981 edition.

<sup>20</sup> Samuel A. Stouffer et. al, *The American Soldier* (Princeton, 1949), 2 volumes. Part of a larger series under the general title *Studies in Social Psychology in World War II*, this material has been controversial since its publication. See esp. Volume I, *Adjustment During Army Life*. Subsequent citation to this volume in parentheses in the text.

<sup>21</sup> Richard D. Brown, "Modernization: A Victorian Climax," *American Quarterly*, XXVII (1975), 534-548.

<sup>22</sup> Sheldon Norman Grebstein, "Dreiser's Victorian Vamp," *American Studies*, IV, 1 (Spring, 1963), 3 ff.

<sup>23</sup> Edmund Wilson, "Hemingway: Gauge of Morale," in *The Wound and the Bow* (London; 1941. Revised, 1952. Reprinted, London, 1961), 215.

<sup>24</sup> This one in Chapter Seven is really quite astonishing: it is our introduction to the Maitre d'Hotel:

He had a fine face with the long, straight nose of his part of the Veneto; the kind, gay, truthful eyes and the honorable white hair of his age, which was two years older than that of the Colonel.

He advanced smiling, lovingly, and yet conspiratorially, since they both shared many secrets, and he extended his hand, which was a big, long, strong, spatula fingered hand; well kept as was becoming, as well as necessary, to his position, and the Colonel extended his own hand, which had been shot through twice, and was slightly misshapen. Thus contact was made between two old inhabitants of the Veneto, both men, and brothers in their membership in the human race, the only club that either one paid dues to, and brothers, too, in their love of an old country, much fought over, and always triumphant in defeat, which they had both defended in their youth.

(New York, n.d. [1959]), 55. Subsequent citations are handled in parentheses in the text.

## Chapter 9 Recapitulation

The use of literature is to afford us a platform  
whence we may command a view of our pres-  
ent life, a purchase by which we may move it.

—Emerson, “Circles”

The closing chapter of a book like this, like the end of a successful term of classical psychoanalysis, should probably be unsatisfying, even somewhat frustrating. For different reasons, I hope: mainly, in the case of the book, because there is so very much of recent American literature that it is impossible to discuss more than an insultingly small sample of it if the book is to remain reasonable in length. My principle of selection makes the analogy to psychoanalysis in some ways appropriate. Like the good shrink who helps the patient probe for the connections stubbornly secreted below layers of plausible or rationalized memory, I have generally chosen to look not at the works to which students of literature-and-society would naturally turn, but rather to a handful of those one wouldn't think of except in terms of aesthetic quality or literary history; not at works necessarily intended to tell how our society functions, but at works which, if we listen to them properly, cannot help but tell. Any work produced by an American, of course, is an artifact of our civilization. These happen to be beautiful artifacts. It's a pathetically slim selection, but it was chosen in good faith: a play solidly in the standard canon; another, not; the works of some poets; a few novels; some stories.

It is important to see that the various continuing strains which we have discussed in this book do more than endure into the late twentieth century. They continue to develop, to affect more people, to crystallize. The “circles” continue to expand both to include people who hitherto “didn't count,” somehow, and also to include successive waves of newcomers to our shores. Increasingly, the model of the web and the model of expanding circles come to describe interrelated phenomena. To put that in a plainer language: more Americans of

more different sorts find they have access to more social choices; the new transportation and communication both lubricate and help motivate the choices. No surprises, really—Mr. Emerson said this would happen. No utopia, either, for each of those voluntary choices can add a new insecurity. But lord, what potential for excitement, for that electric, tingling consciousness of which Mr. Emerson and his gardener wrote!

This book will have served its office if it suggests to other readers ways of perceiving American literature of all sorts—poetry, drama, short stories, novels—and at all levels of aesthetic value or audience, *avant-garde* to popular and commercial, in terms of broad tendencies and characteristics of our national life. This last chapter contains explanations of ways to approach works in various genres. We have dealt thus far mainly with fiction; I mean to make a few suggestions, by touching on works in other forms, of the broad applicability of what we have done.

I hope, as was said at the outset, that the approach will be useful even for readers who disagree with my interpretation of American social and cultural experience. For that reason, I will lay my cards upon the table by being very frank about my point of view and my methods. You may therefore expect explanations of “expanding circles” in a good craftsmanlike Broadway play, of values in Miller’s “Death of a Salesman,” modernization in a Flannery O’Connor story and a Toni Morrison novel, the “net” in a Thomas Pynchon and an Updike novel, and the implications of *avant-garde* writing for social history.

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### Coming on Line

. . . it was already the epoch of annihilated  
space. . . .

—Hawthorne, *The Blithedale  
Romance*

One sees increased social interpenetration very clearly in all kinds of fiction. I’m partial to the short stories of Flannery O’Connor. In

“Revelation” (1964), we are given a very careful and self-conscious catalogue of social levels as the fat farm lady in her doctor’s waiting room reviews in her mind her own attempts to stratify the society around her. She does it when she can’t sleep, and thinks somehow that people ought to arrange themselves neatly in layers, with black people at the bottom, then poor whites, then whites who own their homes, whites who own homes and some land, and so forth.

But the neat scheme does not work; she knows wealthy black people. It is as unreliable as that thermometer-like chart of the social classes one used to see in elementary sociology textbooks. So the fat lady is confounded by the anomalies of a society in flux as circles expand and boundaries become fuzzy. The story shows us poor whites, small farmers, several levels of black southerners, middleclass whites and a young college-educated white girl. The people we meet in the waiting room clash bitterly. Mrs. Turpin’s flaccid benevolence doesn’t match the facts around her, and the ugly college girl goes violent. Yet everyone present shares some points on the net. For example, they are all here to deal with a doctor, a specialist whose services to the ignorant poor whites remind us of the spread of modernization and specialization. In pre-modern times, poor people did not get treated by licensed medical practitioners. Moreover, although the poor white woman mouths hateful racist observations, we see that the fat lady, Ruby Turpin, has had gradually to change her opinions and her behavior. In her dreams of conversations with Jesus, she has decided there are far worse things to be than black, and she does not think she demeans herself by “loving niggers,” as she has to in order to retain efficient black help on the farm. A level above her is the middle-class lady, who pointedly mentions some valued black friends. We guess that the college girl’s rage is in part at the namby-pamby racial attitudes she sees around her in the South: her college is Wellesley. She may represent a more systematically tolerant view of race, though she may also be insane—perhaps, again, in part because of the pressures she feels in this southern environment. We do sense that these people are learning to live together differently than in the very near past, and that they are going to learn still more, and quickly. The processes of modernization, which we shall discuss in more detail in a Faulkner novel, will force that to happen.

The O'Connor short story (which is more complex than I am indicating) rings true in terms of my experience. I number among my good friends members of a very poor farm family, people who have in recent years returned to rural Jefferson County, Kansas, after seven years as migrant laborers in the Southwest. They are poorly educated people, I suppose you would have to say, whose speech is rich in the ungrammatical *patois* of the good ol' boys (and girls) of my part of the world, but their lives have changed in all the ways which the fictions we will discuss in this section indicate, and they have come through the experience whole, good and kind, without hatreds, with good morale. To my surprise they refer to their seven years as migrant laborers with some nostalgia. Their children remember these times as a period of high adventure, and excitedly call upon their parents to tell me about this or that episode in their lives. I think that this is in part because those years were materially and emotionally richer than prior time spent on an isolated and "un-modern" farm. They came to the Southwest with little knowledge of Mexicans, encountered the biases and prejudices of the Anglos in the area, but came to form their own quite different opinions of the people with whom they worked and lived during these years. They learned to pat tortillas; in return they taught their neighbors how to fillet a carp. They keep such things in mind when they listen to newscasts these days; I keep them in mind when I think through novels such as *McTeague*.

I think too of how recently it became possible for them to listen to the news. As recently as the 1950s, these folks had neither telephone nor electricity and, even more importantly, no all-weather road to their farm. The advents of these connections with the outside world were stupendous events in their lives. They are still poor today, in part because of the illness of the sole surviving adult male, though they are coping far better than the family in Faulkner's novel *As I Lay Dying*. They are responding to exactly the same forces which affected Anse Bundren and his brood: roads, media, communication, modernization, urbanization. They have a strange web of friends and acquaintances and a network of social events which includes country covered-dish meals, high school football games and *avant-garde* experimental theatre (a daughter dates a college boy who acts), not to mention that great web of highways to which they are now linked.

The members of this family, in other words, are, like the people in the doctor's office in the Flannery O'Connor story, in contact with broad changes in society. The contacts are complex, contradictory, terribly difficult to label or locate, but also very characteristic of how our society works, how circles expand. Their case reminds us again of the simple model I suggested at the outset—the “moving stairs.” Changes connected with telephone, electricity, and highways struck them very late compared with most other Americans, but they did finally arrive. Their lives, perceptions, styles of life, aspirations and social contacts were altered in fundamental ways. They are not, however, in any sense cultural ruins, and their lives demonstrate an encouraging coherence and cohesiveness which might be surprising to a social scientist trying to plot their location on some sort of socio-cultural chart.

In Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), the car which gave a prosperous black family status—but also isolation and loneliness—enables the hero to chase down his “roots.” This time a novel by a black woman records a leap into contact with all aspects of the web as sudden as that which affected the farm family we have just discussed. Hawthorne showed us the perceptions of a wronged colonial worker: the carpenter's descendant wrote fiction about his ancestors' lot. Now the descendants of the slave Scipio are at the literary wheel, and we are learning what it was to be black.

American “nuclear” families have recently been shown to be far more closely tied together than was thought. Although Americans are characteristically “neo-local” (which means simply that on marriage the new couple moves to a new place), there is now evidence that they continue to maintain close ties with a more extended family, chasing all over the nation visiting one another. The transportation net is what has made this possible. Our oil crisis and transportation problem are far more threatening, I think, than foreigners realize, for the car enabled many Americans to spread the family all over the nation and yet stay surprisingly close. I found myself worrying a little about the price of gas as Milkman Dead drove south on his terrible errand in the Morrison novel. The subtle relationship between the automobile, modernization, the post-modern era which began around 1920 and the shift to a consumption economy is amply reflected in our literature:

Julian English, we recall from Chapter Six, is a Cadillac dealer; a road changes the lives of Anse Bundren's family, and Rabbit Angstrom, whose father was a linotypist, is married to a girl whose father sells cars.

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The Old Road: *As I Lay Dying*, *Call it Sleep*

Durn that road.

—Anse Bundren, in *As I Lay  
Dying*

A recent study tried out the fiction of William Faulkner against the conclusions of recent historians of the South. Its conclusion on one aspect of that historiography follows.

Like historians in the 1930's and 1940's Faulkner clearly discounted the cavalier origin of the planter class and the grand manner of plantation life as presented in the plantation legend. Faulkner did not seem to be aware of the historical studies done on the antebellum middle class and perpetuated a defunct theory of a tripartite society composed of planters, slaves and poor whites. Nevertheless, the author did accurately portray the fluid class lines on the Southern frontier and the type of people who migrated to the Deep South. Faulkner presented a stereotypic image of the poor white, but on the other hand, placed more emphasis on the planter-poor white conflict than do some historians. The author consistently condemned slavery and racism and emphasized the fact that both the Mississippi Indians and the white man participated in these evils. In some cases Faulkner probably was not aware of the historiography on certain topics. In other instances he simply distorted or invented historical details to emphasize particular moral issues in the different short stories and novels.<sup>1</sup>

An example of a simple historical fact that Faulkner does not seem to have known is that Mississippi was not open to legal settlement until the 1830's. Limitations of this sort, it seems to me, should be pointed out when they are known. They in no sense invalidate other evidence in the fiction, especially in the present case, in which the error refers to a period of time earlier than the "main action" of any of his novels. There is also the possibility that a novelist who, like Faulkner, worked out of the texture of a society he knew intimately, may be aware of forces, pressures and tendencies which social historians have overlooked, or that his picture may be more accurate than the received opinions of scholarship in any given period for at least some aspects of the social situation. For example—to return to one of our first illustrations—the portrayal of the scattered residents out on the extreme fringe of the frontier in that most inaccurate of novelists, Cooper, seems to have been more accurate than what historians believed until quite recently.

By the same token, a historian working on the social history of the Reconstruction era who took his cue from earlier Faulkner novels would have been closer to what is now thought about that era than had he followed the southern apologist historians whose work was then generally accepted as authoritative: the images popularized in *Birth of a Nation* of corrupt and incompetent blacks dominating state government, of unscrupulous fly-by-night carpetbaggers and terrorized, peace-loving whites does not seem to us now to match reality, but they are congruent with the school of history writing which condoned the usurpation of power by certain white elements and the disenfranchisement of black citizens. (Faulkner, curiously, became somewhat more apologist in later novels.)<sup>2</sup>

Faulkner, indeed, is in some areas preferable to even recent historians and social scientists because he "covers" important social-history topics which are not yet in their work. The "revolt of the rednecks," for example, is amply treated in the historical literature,<sup>3</sup> but a recent search of both historical and social scientific scholarship found no coverage at all of the economic transformation in the lives of these hitherto backward and oppressed whites<sup>4</sup> which accompanied it. We know, that is, that poorer whites challenged the white establishment in Mississippi and other deep-South states; we don't know what that

record means in social and economic terms. But Faulkner shows it to us most fully. It is a major theme in much of his later fiction as we follow the baffling consequences of the Snopes clan's invasion of Jefferson. If the meaning of Snopesism is finally ambiguous, if the Snopeses themselves are not the simple villains representing new greed which early critics thought they were, if, indeed, these novels seem less "settled" than earlier Faulkner, I would suggest that this is because Faulkner is himself uncertain about just what the new force in his region represents. We have noted before that grey areas and ambiguities appear in the works of good writers when they deal with "fault-lines" in their societies, places where major changes, not yet fully understood, are taking place.

If Faulkner is unsure just what a respectable Snopes banker is going to mean, he has at least noticed that there is a Snopes banker. In socio-economic matters less ambiguous, where, as we might expect, there has been some historical scholarship, his fictional record often is excellent dramatization of their human meaning. A side of the modernization of the rural south was the gradual fadeout of the credit system under which tenant and small farmers operated. The crossroads store—no cash, high interest—finally died, first because sawmills and other providers of cash wages appeared, second because of the advent of government credit in the 1930's. Faulkner novels reflect the change faithfully: *Light in August*, for instance, shows us country people newly in touch with townsmen and the town economy because of sawmills.<sup>5</sup> On such matters, then, a good novelist is worth a historian's attention, even if he is no more infallible than a good historian, and even though he has a perfect right to lie about, distort, or ignore history. Common sense and context should make his intentions clear enough so that a sensitive reader knows how seriously the author believes in the historical characteristics of the world he presents.

A question which used to be asked with frequency was what to make of the "gothic" side of Faulkner—the violence, the grotesque happenings, the burnings, bestiality, rapes, the strangely warped and thwarted characters. I have ceased to regard that side as literary convention. By odd circumstance, I came to know well what one might call the scandal-history of a small deep-South town, and can relate

true tales more macabre than any in Faulkner, tales which I know to be true because I have met the people involved. Like Ishmael at the Golden Inn, I can testify that "I trod the ship; I knew the crew; I have seen and talked with Steelkilt since the death of Radney." My sense of the matter is that such behavior is not limited to southern small towns, or even to small towns at all. It may well be that it occurs all over, but that the network of gossip operates more efficiently in the small town so that we come to know about it. But the *grotesquerie* in Faulkner is, I am convinced, real, typical, part of the social texture of life in his region.

Turn we now to a specific Faulkner work in order to discuss its uses as social history in ways less obvious than checking it against historians' conclusions or personal conviction. Four somewhat related aspects of *As I Lay Dying* come to mind: first, the "model" of human consciousness which underlies the novel; second, the implications of a "traditional" as opposed to a "modern" cast of mind; third, the idea that cultures endorse or condone certain psychological states; fourth, modernization itself, and its connection with these other concerns. Linking them together not only makes a rich novel seem richer; it connects social and economic history with its psychological consequences, its human results.

First: the psychological model upon which the novel is based, and which the novelist assumes makes good sense to the reader, is "as-sociational." It sees consciousness as a complex web of connections, overlays, simultaneous interlacings of past experience and present stimuli. It does not have to be "Freudian"; it is broadly understood by people who do not know Freud because it can be absorbed in TV, film, newspapers and magazines. Our novels reflect it. So do our crime reporters, news teams and comic books. It is, in short, the model most "to hand" in our century.

Lest some spoilsport complain that in discussing the impact of an idea, I am dragging intellectual history into a study of social history, let me say again that the distinction between social and intellectual history, while useful for describing specialties or labeling courses, should not be regarded as a hostile border. The model under discussion does not belong "merely" in intellectual history. Not every American

even in the present decade has heard of it; the distribution of ideas does not work that way. But a great many have, and more have been affected by it. It has influenced our way of thinking about ourselves and our society. I suppose one could do a systematic study and trace its gradual dissemination in the arts, in cocktail party chatter, in distorted popular versions, in popular magazines, in serious cinema and exploitation movies and so on. One could also study its increasing impact on our institutions. Not only psychology, of course, but also jurisprudence and legislation find themselves turning again and again to this prevailing model, and, perhaps not surprisingly, there is lively interest in its legal implications among our prison population. John Updike's basketball player, Rabbit Angstrom, whom we shall meet in a few more pages, is neither very educated nor an intellectual, but even he picks up some rudiments of our psychology from his minister's wife.

Ideas trickle down from intellectuals to the Rabbits; they also well up from social or technological situations. In our national literature one sees movement toward the model under discussion as early as Emerson and Poe. In Melville and Whitman in the 1850's it is understood as clearly as it would be by novelists writing after the impact of Freud decades later. It is of course central to much literature since 1900: one thinks of Woolf and Joyce abroad, of Henry Roth, Faulkner and others here.

Now, sensitive authors much earlier than our century or the last have been aware that minds haunt themselves: either that or we are deceiving ourselves about *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*. But the stress on subconsciousness or involuntary, complex association as the key to understanding human experience is by and large a recent phenomenon. One sees it embodied in our literature as one could find earlier models, such as the "faculty" psychology, in the works of earlier writers. I think it is connected with broad changes in the shape of society, in technology, in the media; I think its simultaneity comes ultimately from the analogy with electricity we discussed earlier in this study, and which so intrigued Romantic authors. It probably connects to more than mind: Henry Adams saw the dynamo as an emblem for our era because of its electrical simultaneity, the "occult" manner in which it united modern "multiplicity." A society

tied together electronically seems an outsize extension of the model of the mind. The ideas of multiplicity and simultaneity are analogs of the web of consciousness and association in the psychological model; the next artifact is our computer, which electrically replicates certain mental functions.

If this begins to sound like Marshall McLuhan, it is because there is something true and valid in McLuhan's observations<sup>6</sup> about the interrelationships between media and the human condition. I can't prove that all those things are really related to a psychological model for the mind. I can, however, illustrate the presence of that model in *As I Lay Dying* and connect that in turn to social phenomena.

Little Vardaman Bundren, for example, associates his dead mother with the large fish he has caught; he also connects the memory of a traumatic near-suffocation with the situation of her body in its sealed coffin. In the case of this novel, associational patterns determine not only the way in which characters are understood, but the structure of the book itself. When possible, Faulkner allows associations to determine action. Thus Vardaman opens a window in a rainstorm to get water on his mother the fish, and bores holes in the coffin-lid so that his "suffocating" mother can breathe. To learn which memories, objects, images, and experiences these characters tie together is to experience a special kind of pleasure in the resolution of confusion and, on the other hand, to come to see the world the way Faulkner's characters do. Probably because of the importance of the child to Freudian thought, Faulkner stresses these patterns of association with especial strength in the case of children. I find it profitable to compare patterns of images and associations in the mind of young Vardaman in this novel with those of David Schearl in Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934). Both boys associate things connected with fear and mother with "vital forces," fish for Vardaman, electricity for David. Both are to some extent outsiders, Vardaman because he is "country," David because he is Jewish. Each therefore envies both the special prerogatives of other children and their toys—for Vardaman, the wonderful train set in the store window; for David, the skates which belong to a Polish friend. The connection with trains, indeed, is shared; David comes close to being electrocuted by a third rail. And both "invent religions" in attempts to understand the mysterious forces in

the world around them. Such striking similarities in very dissimilar stories perhaps suggest not only how pervasive is the new model for human consciousness, but also the specific Freudian emphasis on early childhood. It in no sense diminishes the achievement of Roth, Faulkner and other modern artists who respond to this complex of ideas to point out that we encountered the same cluster of insights in Melville and in Whitman. It is merely another example of the early sensitivity of literary artists to the direction in which change was to occur. Shelley was right, it would seem: the poets see the shadows.

Second: these connections between childhood, basic psychological forces and religion in novels produced in about the same period demonstrate also their authors' exposure to that popularization of anthropological approaches which was already strong by Melville's day. (Indeed, as we have noted, especially in our discussion of Emerson, the connection between ancient or "primitive" belief systems and a human psychology of associations is not a twentieth-century invention, either.) Certainly one of Faulkner's intentions in *As I Lay Dying* is to portray a kind of mentality different from that which we associate with the modern world. The twelve southerners who wrote *I'll Take My Stand* (1930) were speaking of the virtues and attractions of traditional society; Faulkner shows us such a society as he perceives it, but makes no attempt to sentimentalize it. We find Anse Bundren selfish, irrational, and maddening, but he is, if you will, the chief spokesman in the book for a "traditional" world view. Of this more in a moment.

Third: it has been suggested that different kinds of cultures condone different psychological states, that ours, for example, places a premium on those states of mind which make possible acute attention and analytical thinking, while disapproving of those we might associate with the mystical trance, with enebriation, or with a "high." Some writers suppose, for example, that one reason certain American Indian tribes have had difficulty with alcohol from the time of first European contact has been that their cultures highly condone psychological states which alcohol induces. Similarly, states which our society identifies as insane are sometimes revered in others, where the "insane" person may be considered a holy and inspired visionary. Faulkner assigned a good deal of the narration of *As I Lay Dying* to

Anse's son, Darl. Far from identifying Darl as insane, the reader for much of the novel considers him our most perceptive and sensitive narrator. It is not until Darl begins to narrate things which he could not possibly have known ("possibly," that its to say, within our "rational" system of understanding), or that a chapter of narration is assigned to the dead mother, Addie, that the reader understands that Faulkner is playing with insanity and even with magic in ways not customary in our culture. Ghosts and visions make sense in folktales; "folk" are supposed to believe in them.

Faulkner's use of such passages suggest how our categories—modernization, the psychological model, the quasi-anthropological qualities and the interest in condoned psychological states—overlap. Faulkner's utilization of such related concepts is hard evidence—if it were needed—of their availability. The historian who wondered whether such ideas circulated only among novelists and other intellectuals could get useful clues first from the reception of *As I Lay Dying* and similar works. Working outward, he would find such ideas, especially the psychological ones, increasingly ubiquitous in American life, utilized—as we noted—in advertising, dealt with in popular forms like the movies, magazine fiction and cartoons, and understood in at least popularized forms by large numbers of people, not all of them capable of the coherent synthesis of fields we see in Faulkner—good novelists are good interdisciplinarians—but all at least aware of the rough shape of the underlying model. It is a model that Emerson or Melville would have understood, very fully, I think, but which was far less widespread in their day than in Faulkner's. They had the anthropological detachment of the culturalist, they saw ties between psychology, culture, and belief, and knew of dark forces beneath the upper currents of consciousness. It is a view which makes the primer-Naturalism of Norris seem jejune, but it is not totally unrelated to that, either, for Norris' psychology also stresses the irrational, and both world views place faith in "science." That Naturalism could have developed, thrived, and withered after the development of this far firmer and more mature tradition illustrates again the multiplicity and diversity of forces and influences which operate in our society.<sup>7</sup>

Fourth: Darl Bundren's consignment at the end of *As I Lay Dying* to an insane asylum is an important dramatic shock, and an indication

that when the Bundrens' world comes into contact with our world, wrenching alterations occur. As so often, the process can be understood in terms of "modernization." As Anse himself recognizes, the new road that ties the Bundren farm to Jefferson is destroying their world. Thus Anse describes how the road deprived him of Darl:

. . . he was all right at first, with his eyes full of the land, because the land laid up-and-down ways then; it wasn't till that ere road come and switched the land around longways and his eyes still full of the land, that they begun to threaten me out of him, trying to shorthand me with the law.<sup>8</sup>

In a more traditional society, Darl's madness might have been considered sacred and visionary—an idea of which Faulkner was aware, for he showed Darl's "powers." Insanity would certainly have been handled within the family or community. In modern states, the government reaches out to deal with such things.

The road brings with it the various dimensions of modernization: Urbanization, in that it ties the farm to the town; specialization in that many of the functions which the family has performed by itself are now done through specialists and specialized services; increased contact between citizen and government, in that Anse—accurately—blames it for his taxes (363); and rationalization, in that the Bundrens don't know how to think the way town folk do. Members of the family are not good at handling the new institutions and the new ways yet. Thus the grotesque humor and pathos of the scenes involving drugstores, soda jerks, the doctor, and burial. Poor pregnant Dewey Dell's seduction by the soda jerk—he tells her he'll cure her pregnancy by a sort of hair-of-the-dog treatment—is a dirty joke out of the southwestern humor tradition in one sense; in another it says the same thing as her observation that country folk aren't as good as town folk. The ethical druggist Moseley lets us know that country people—"they"—are inarticulate, bumbling and confused, and that they run on a different time, an important indication of the contrast between "modern" and "traditional" people. Dewey Dell, pregnant, shy, timid and unaccustomed to dealing with storekeepers and other

businesslike people, is not unique; Mottson merchants have to deal with vague country customers all the time. Moseley, who means to be kind, says, "I wasn't meaning to hurry her, but a man just hasn't got the time they have out there." (486) We are likely to see Cash's famous list of reasons why he made the coffin on the bevel as merely comical; it is more, for it represents one of those weird combinations of modern "linear" rational thought with older modes of perception.

I MADE IT ON THE BEVEL.

1. There is more surface for the nails to grip.
2. There is twice the gripping-surface to each seam.
3. The water will have to seep into it on a slant. Water moves easiest up and down or straight across.
4. In a house people are upright two-thirds of the time. So the seams and joints are made up-and-down. Because the stress is up-and-down.
5. In a bed where people lie down all the time, the joints and seams are made sideways, because the stress is sideways.
6. Except.
7. A body is not square like a cross-tie.
8. Animal magnetism.
9. The animal magnetism of a dead body makes the stress come slanting, so the seams and joints of a coffin are made on the bevel.
10. You can see by an old grave that the earth sinks down on the bevel.
11. While in a natural hole it sinks by the centre, the stress being up-and-down.
12. So I made it on the bevel.
13. It makes a neater job. (397)

Anse blames the road for Cash's "carpenter notions." He does not see the obvious economic advantage of having a son learn a profitable skill; Cash's mail-order carpentry course is rather another way the "durn" road has deprived him of what is rightfully his. He views the family, the land and the farm as a coherent unit, and therefore carries

the premodern view of family as unit of production rather than the modernized one in which breadwinners go out from the home to work. And Cash's "logical" list, which begins in reason and swoops through magic before landing in craftsmanship, is familiar to anyone who has lived where traditional people encounter modernity too suddenly to assimilate it all; it is the combination one meets in societies which are having an uncomfortable time of "modernization." No one who has lived in Mexico for any length of time has failed to see thousands of examples of it in places far more exalted than the carpenter's bench. Faulkner sees the older ways of reasoning not only humorously but with a certain amount of respect and affection as well. Thus Cash's list, with its blend of "how-to" manual and magic, is not without a kind of beauty. And before we dismiss the Bundren's neighbor Cora as dumb or as a nosy hypocrite, we had best look again at her reasoning when she explains what happened when she attempted to bake some cakes to earn a little extra money. What she says is funny, and makes very little sense in terms of logic, but is beautiful in the way her mind fits each thing in its proper place.

But Faulkner is too smart and too tough to side with *Gone With the Wind* and *I'll Take My Stand*. Cora is dumb. If that road is the new South, and Anse the old, his age, selfishness and stupidity are not without point. No wonder that in this trip to bury Addie the Bundrens take not the new, but the old road. What Anse's road, Cash's list and Cora's logic have in common is what current students of modernization worry about when they look at developing nations.

-3-

*Home to Harlem*

"This hea is you' country, daddy. What you gwine away from it for?"

If Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is an example of a brilliant merger of black and "Ecumenical" cultural traditions,<sup>9</sup> perhaps Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928) could be called a flawed novel in which those traditions seem blurred, undefined. It represents a special, earlier stage in the process we have tried to describe with the model

of “expanding circles.” Not only are most of its characters excluded from many aspects of American life and privilege, its author seems uncertain where they do belong and how to define their nature. *Home to Harlem* accepts assumptions which we would now think of as racist; it actually shares some ground with Frank Norris’ *McTeague*. Its author is black, though he was not born in the United States, and lived much of his life abroad. He is, I think it fair to say, as unsure of the meaning of his blackness as are his characters. In a chapter in which I must make very arbitrary choices, I choose to look at this novel because the uncertainty and “fault lines” in it reveal changes and tensions, help us locate the grey perimeter of a circle expanding too slowly. Moreover, to make a purely aesthetic confession, for all its flaws, I like it; it has great vitality.

Jake Brown is McKay’s central character, amiable, good-hearted and proud that he works. Settling down would mean finding the brown girl he met at the opening of the book on his first night back in Harlem after returning from England. He got to England during World War I after deserting the Army in Le Havre on discovering that the black men in his unit were just going to be stevedores and not fight. This bit of plot suggests an important issue. The tense debate of the past decade about whether one is to consider black American culture as an underprivileged part of the Ecumenical culture; as a subculture, related to it about the way other ethnic minorities are; or as an alien culture in our midst, certainly comes to mind. That Jake is bitter because he is not allowed to do what white soldiers do suggests the second alternative, but our evidence, of course, is much too limited. Asking the question this way, moreover, implies that all black Americans are pretty much alike; clearly they are not. The terms “culture” and “subculture” were thrown around very carelessly a few years ago. For some of my students—and, alas, some colleagues, social scientists among them, as well—any group of three friends who shared a private slang came to constitute a “subculture.”

“Subculture” is slippery to define; I take it to refer to a substantial community which maintains a group identity (this may involve language, dialect or accent; customs, religion, location, race, taste, style-of-life, and so forth), but which shares broad norms, assumptions and values with the rest of us, with the Ecumene. I see the loopholes

in that definition, but it is the best I can do. My black students in Kansas and in California for years have been telling me that that is about how they perceive themselves. The extensive debate about Africanness they see as exciting in terms of pride and heritage, but they do not feel that proving a survival of African tradition in their own lives makes them alien. Moreover, when we read essays by black critics arguing for alienness, these students point out—I have not the nerve to do so myself—that the critics’ values are mine, theirs, those of the Ecumene, all of them among those listed on the chart on page 17. So perhaps it makes sense to say that where one finds emphasis on such values as indigenouness, naturalness, creativity, achievement and so forth one is looking at Americans more like ourselves than not; perhaps where one does not, one is dealing with culturally alien people. Native Americans provide our control. By and large, those who are still tribal in their everyday lives show up negative on this cultural litmus test. Most black Americans, I think, come out positive.

McKay’s efforts to define black identities seem far less confident than those of recent writers. He seems to “buy” certain stereotyped racial characteristics: there is even talk about the reality of “generalization,” which turns out to mean “racial stereotype.” The book says that Negroes, “like Jews,” love parade and luxury, and that gaiety and tragedy run together in black life. It also tells us how black people have “natural” and “primitive” feelings.<sup>10</sup> One is never quite sure how much detachment the author has. He harps on the importance of physical glamour throughout the book; the reader can’t really tell whether he approves or disapproves. Much of Jake’s success results from his looks. His buddy, Zeddy, from whom he takes his original brown girl, Felice, is unlucky mostly because of his squat bad looks. Clothes matter. Jake’s English suit is nicer than his “nigger-brown” suit. Complexion is important as well, and the author fails to undercut the idea that lighter is better. Perhaps McKay “worries” the matter so much because it bothers him—is it the “natural” love of display of a primitive (and inferior?) people? It is easy now to think of explanations more compatible with black pride, possible even to view the whole phenomenon without condescension. But McKay seems to have been uncertain, and that is very useful social evidence.

The book says important things about the work ethic and about race and work roles. Jake is a longshoreman when he first arrives.

Though he is a skilled carpenter, blacks are unable to get into the appropriate union. Jake also finds work on the Pennsylvania railroad as cook in a dining car. His educated friend, Ray, is a waiter on the car. Sleeping car porters, waiters and cooks were the railroad positions reserved for black men. In an era when moderately remunerative steady male employment was hard to come by, these jobs were important. Indeed, we had thought until recently that they were about the only decent jobs black males might hold, and therefore an important source of leadership in black communities.<sup>11</sup> Although we now know of an older, educated black elite, I connect Jake's railroad experience with the hints in the novel that at the end he and Felice are moving towards something approximating respectability. They again suggest the presence of the values of the *Ecumene*. Even our anger and the anger of the black spokesmen at the rotten practices and attitudes of the labor situation, indeed, is based upon those values, especially "fair play." I had the pleasure some years ago of editing a study of the black press and the image of "success" in the years between the two world wars. The author, Ronald Walters, concluded, correctly, I believe, that black propagandists for hard work and advancement were deluding their readers because

If you're white, you're right,  
If you're brown, hang around,  
But if you're black, Oh brother, get back.<sup>12</sup>

There is a nice confusion possible between commercial or business values and "sacred" values; most Americans carry both. In my mind, "profit" and "advancement" are commercial, while "fair play" and "achievement" are sacred, and therefore on the list of sacred values explained in the Appendix. Mr. Walters attacks faith in a group of commercial values. The basis of his attack is the range of sacred values: he is angry because of the same unfairness which made the more militant black leaders in the twenties and thirties angry, and which still produces anger in those areas of our national life where the cards are stacked against our people.

Shift from economics to aesthetics and the situation is similar. Addison Gayle, Jr. argues that white critics of the Harlem Renaissance

erred in neglecting to perceive that the distinctiveness of black life would make its literature different, too,<sup>13</sup> as different from the white works in the literary canon as jazz is from concert music or from commercial popular music. It is possible to agree with that contention while still pointing out that Mr. Gayle's anger is at violations of fair play, and his remedy is based on "indigenouness," both values we all share. Those are the values we turn to when we discuss jazz: pride in its indigenouness, because black Americans invented it, because it expresses their suffering and exaltation (and because it is beautiful); anger because its inventors often did not enjoy their fair share of the rewards and glory, or because "respectable" blacks found it embarrassing. Those are different values, I believe, than one finds among tribal peoples suffering their first wrenching contacts with the modern world in Africa, Brazil or Afganistan.

Although never overtly discussed, work roles are continually important in the book. Some men are kept by employed women; Jake tries it a few times. These are unsteady relationships, we have to understand, because they run against the characteristic pattern in the larger society around the black characters. With "normal" professions generally not open to them, McKay's people follow other pursuits. Ray has friends who are gamblers and pimps; some, as Ray points out to a somewhat shocked college-boy friend, are nevertheless good men. There is a chapter devoted to an anecdote about a pimp who killed himself for the love of his woman. Similarly, Jake's "lone wolf" friend, Billy Biass, is a reliable gambler, and we also meet a money-lender who is reasonably sympathetic, though he charges 25% a week interest.

Social gradations among the black people we see are cruel. They seem based in part on job status and class feeling and in part on color discrimination. We become aware of circles beyond circles. McKay tells us that your job helps determine what you are socially and even where you go dancing. "Longshoremen, kitchen-workers, laundresses, and W.C. tenders—all gravitated to the Sheba Palace, while the upper class of servitors—bell-boys, butlers, some railroad workers and waiters, waitresses and maids of all sorts—patronized the Casino and those dances that were given under the auspices of the churches."<sup>14</sup> Thus a kind of voluntarism defines connections between work and

recreation. The “web” or “net” available to these people is by no means as extensive as that available to other Americans we meet in twentieth century novels, but it is there, nonetheless, and again suggests that taste and style of life can be as important as determinants of status as is real income. Ray has some voluntary choices—a few more, because of his education, than does Jake—and associates himself with jobs and social groups which do not “match” one another in social prestige, a phenomenon discussed later in this chapter in the section on poetry and audience. That this peculiar characteristic of American social linkage was present among black people so generally excluded from privilege suggests not only the validity of several of our models—the web, “moving steps,” “expanding circles”—but also the cultural location of black aspirations, and the interconnectedness of all of these approaches.

What Ray says about his choices, however, is confusing. On the subjects of courtship we are probably hearing in Jake echoes of the author’s psychological difficulties. Jake seems enough like McKay to suggest reasons for the tensions and blurring which even a casual reader notices. Ray tells us, for example, that he does not want to be a “strutting Harlem nigger,” and fearing that marrying his girl, an aristocratic and educated black lady, will make him that, goes to sea as a cabin boy. One fears there are forces involved in that strange decision that are not being fully explained on the pages. But when one turns to Jake and Felice, the story is different. At the close of the novel, Jake and Felice, reunited, are going to Chicago to try life there, because Zeddy mentioned Jake’s desertion from the Army, and Jake no longer feels safe in New York. We as readers are glad that they are together, but have no illusions about the life they will find in Chicago. The book has no happy ending.

On the other hand, if we look to what it is in Felice that Jake likes, and to what in Jake is attractive to Felice, I think the result is a list of virtues and qualities one would have to label American rather than black, and cultural rather than subcultural, not so far removed from the list we discussed in the Hemingway novel. Jake and Felice are neat, attractive and (relatively) steady, reliable and friendly. A sociologist friend introduced me to the term “value-stretch,” used to describe the situation of people whose standards of behavior are

the same as those condoned by the society around them, but who, for one reason or another, are unable to live up to them. They do not challenge the standards; they are in no sense rebels against the mores of their culture. What they do, rather, is bend or stretch the mores to make them more accessible. If I am reading *Home to Harlem* right, and if there is anything in that concept, it seems to apply to Jake and Felice. Though Jake is a sporadically employed manual laborer and Felice has been a prostitute, they would like to be a “couple.” Nothing is said about marriage, yet what Jake and Felice have in mind seems to be closer to a “conventional” marriage than any other arrangement described in *Home to Harlem*. We are told that “real love” like his parents’ is not available to Jake. He must stretch the reality available to him to fit the pattern he wants, or perhaps bend the pattern. Felice is not pure, yet, relatively, she is, and they are not householders, yet are closer to the pattern than anything else we have seen.

*Home to Harlem* is so rich that it is worth touching briefly on some other connections one might make between it and aspects of social history, though there is no space to discuss them in detail. The book contains a good deal of data, for example, that one could use in a discussion of the relationship between education, class, mobility, aspirations and rationalization. There is a discussion about contraceptives (109-110)—Jake has a venereal disease, it seems—which suggests the relationship of literacy to “modernization.” Jake doesn’t believe in medical advice; as he sees it, it is for “book-people.” Similarly, had she spoken English “like in books,” Jake’s sister would have been like Ray’s girl Agatha (111). As Jake puts it,

“Ef I was edjucated, I could understand things better and be proper-speaking like you is. . . . And I mightha helped mah li’l sister to get edjucated, too (she must be a li’l woman, now), and she would be nice-speaking like you’ sweet brown, good enough foh you to hitch up with. Then we could all settle down and make money like edjucated people do, instead a you gwine off to throw you’self away on some lousy dinghy and me chasing around all the time lak a hungry dawg.” (144)

Jake's fear of a hospital (115) is worth explaining to Americans who have never had a special reason to fear medical institutions; the comparisons between black and Jewish doctors (116) merit attention in this era of debate about affirmative action. The book also says interesting things about violence. It is generally agreed now that the "generation gap" in black families which made protests and demonstrations possible for large numbers of young people in the 1960s and 1970s whose parents had never been activists was not a gap in ideology. The parents of the militants, we see now, resented the same injustices; they felt themselves to be as deserving as the more privileged whites around them. Indeed, they had by and large seen to it that their offspring understood these things. The difference rather was in the capacity to take to the streets, to demonstrate, even to threaten violence or use it. Relative deprivation again, perhaps: a modicum of social mobility making black people angry with how little upward mobility they had in relation to more fortunate Americans. Or one can view it psychologically: perhaps a capacity for violence is a necessary if unfortunate part of mature human personality (or is it just *male* personality? I don't know). If so, the move to the streets could be construed, paradoxically, to reflect a growing sense of worth and confidence. *Home to Harlem* is strangely ambivalent on the score of violence, and I have an uncomfortable feeling that we have just stated the reason.

Jake bitterly dislikes the fighting over sex that he sees around him. His near-fight with Zeddy makes him feel worse than anything else in the novel. He and Zeddy both apologize—yet fighting in the war somehow was desirable. A reader looking at this issue would want to consider also Jake's thoughts about Billy Baisse and his gun (150). It may be that we are looking at change from a situation in which there is capacity for violence against other blacks to one in which it can be aimed outward.

Some of my black students were surprised that a black author could have been so unsure of himself as was McKay as recently as 1928; certainly other black thinkers had long since evolved more sturdy definitions of blackness. Nor was such identity exclusively the property of black intellectuals. The black woman I knew best when

I was very young in the 1930s had little formal education, but she had a secure pride in race and identity. I remember bringing her one day a cartoon drawing of a black man—I meant to please her; I must have been five or six—and her asking me whether I thought Negroes really looked like that. She said there were artists who really knew how to draw Negroes, and showed me their pictures. Now William Faulkner in *As I Lay Dying* showed us poor rural white characters who honestly believed that country folk were not as good as townspeople, and a colleague tells me that there were and are blacks who believe in their own racial inferiority. But we can document the fact that on all social levels there were black folks who had long since come to the conclusion that any apparent inferiority was the result of bigotry and not genetics. (Indeed, some students of race see the Civil Rights Movement not as the expression of “new” black attitudes, but as the more confident expression of attitudes blacks had held for generations.) That an educated novelist was less certain of his racial worth than was my friend Eulie, who worked as a domestic and had just moved north from rural Georgia, suggests the stepped and uncertain manner in which attitudes change in the United States, even when the direction of change is unmistakable.

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“The Cutting Edge of Literary Advance”

Not words of routine this song of mine.

—Whitman, “Song of Myself”

My title is from Hyatt H. Waggoner’s *American Poetry*.<sup>15</sup> He uses the phrase to characterize the new poetry of the early twentieth century. It is a good phrase because our artists have in fact thought in such terms, as though they must press onward as scientists do. A friend of mine is an *avant-garde* composer who applies for grants modeled exactly upon the research grants pursued by scientific investigators of various sorts; he seeks to push back the frontiers of music, though I fear somehow there is no one there to listen on his frontier but other frontiersmen. The drive to do what is new, which we treated briefly in discussing (of all things) Frank Norris’ *McTeague*, seems “natural”

to us, a “normal” aspect of creativity. It is worth repeating that this impulse on the part of literary and other artists is specific to our kind of culture, rooted in our values, and not universal. It therefore suggests one way to analyze the socio-cultural import of *avant-garde* poetry or the “difficult” prose which many of our writers have produced in the twentieth century. Such phenomena appear in large part because of the value we place on innovation, originality, personal creativity. The impulse is visible not only in our extreme *avant-garde* work; much of our literature extols the exploration of the forbidden, or at least the unexplored: from “In Paths Untrodden” to “The Road Not Taken,” we glorify the new and dangerous discovery.

There is another way to tie the phenomenon of the *avant-garde* to society and culture. The change in the taste of an individual who is “into” literature or another art is socially meaningful. With each change in taste, the member of the audience associates himself with a different range of people with whom to discuss or share the art in question. Most Americans who are involved in the arts have come to them in the course of growing and maturing. They were not born to them; Americans, curiously, seem to take their tastes pluralistically, too. Thus, while probabilities are higher, there is no real guarantee that the children of a couple who enjoy paintings will themselves be a part of the art audience, or that a young man who loves to read good novels comes from a family in which literature was treasured. There is a study of the concert audience, for example, in which the audiences at three very *avant-garde* chamber music concerts were asked how they had come to their interest in such music. One of the most extraordinary facts revealed in the responses was that practically no one in these three concert halls had liked concert music of any sort in the early portions of his listening career. These were not people who had always loved experimental chamber music; they were not people who had always liked chamber music. Few, in fact, came from backgrounds in which concert music of any sort was listened to. The questionnaire in effect asked for a history of their tastes, and the stories which they told revealed a continuing process of change and development, always in a direction which the individual listener thought represented an improvement in taste, although—and this is very characteristic of American voluntarism and the peculiarly indi-

vidualistic nature of that “web” or “net” of which we have spoken so many times—many of these aficionados of what was “newest” and “most difficult” in the world of music tended to like music of many different sorts, including not only the various genres of symphonic and chamber music, but contemporary American commercial and popular forms as well.<sup>16</sup> Like Ray in *Home to Harlem*, they made choices which don’t seem to “match.”

Although I don’t know of a comparable study of literary tastes, and know enough of social science to say that we should not be too certain of assuming that what is true in music is true also in literature, years of teaching literature courses lead me to expect that the situations are in fact comparable. As a reader’s tastes change and develop, as friends, teachers, and social peers introduce him to new kinds of literature, his development in taste has social concomitants, for he feels himself now in some sort of communion with people of “better taste.” The range of choices available to him says something about voluntarism and the “web.” His own perceptions and the nature of social class in America say that any change of taste must be understood to some extent as analogous to class change.

On the individual level, there is still one more aspect of this phenomenon worth explaining. Since most of us come to the arts quite unsophisticated—we are not José Ortega y Gasset’s model aristocrats brought up knowing the language of the best arts of our time—our initial response to any level of any art involves a certain amount of surprise and confusion. Often, however, help of one sort or another is available. If we come to the art through the recommendation of friends or acquaintances, they are usually willing to lend a hand. If we come to it in music, literature, or art history classes, there is the expertise offered by the instructor. I visualize a continuing process or puzzlement or surprise, followed by explanation, and then aesthetic pleasure.<sup>17</sup> Almost all of us have been through this process because almost all of us have “tried” something new in literature or in some other art. And this process of surprise, explanation and gratification is in itself very rewarding. I have a notion that some of us remember our first runs through it with such pleasure that we want them to happen again, and that we as audience therefore put pressure on our artists to continue to develop and innovate so that we can again be surprised

and confused, and then have the special aesthetic pleasure that comes through learning to enjoy and “appreciate” whatever the new work is.<sup>18</sup>

The combination of this process and the pressure of the underlying sacred values on which innovation depends probably means that, if societies of our sort sometimes produce vulgarization through popularization, they are also the only kind of societies which can produce an *avant-garde*, the only kind which will place that stress on newness and diversity that made twentieth century art and letters so exciting and so bewildering.

We see evidence of this pressure to innovate wherever we look in modern poetry. Thus Hyatt H. Waggoner reports that Robert Frost felt that modernist poetry (T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and beyond) left his own work old fashioned: “. . . Eliot’s *Prufrock* made Frost’s writing seem as out-dated as that of the late Victorians. . . .” (332) This is ridiculous, of course; poetry—or any art—need not change with each new model-year. But that many of our artists themselves feel the terrible pressure is undeniable. The result has been a constant restructuring not only of our literary norms but of our audience as well: the poetry of the “cutting edge” is likely to be more demanding than poetry was before. The audience is a first puzzled (perhaps shocked and angry, too). It is also often smaller. People who believe in innovation, though, desire to support the radical artist; some struggle though to aesthetic response to the good new material. And so the process of taste development of which we have been speaking is continued as cycles of surprise, explanation and appreciation keep readers in a dynamic state of aesthetic and social development.

When the process seems to stop, we note a sense of critical disappointment. So a recent intelligent survey of the state of poetry in the United States complained of the “lack of leading figures.”<sup>19</sup> Since there are any number of capable poets at work now—W. D. Snodgrass, David Ignatow, Carol Hebard, William Stafford are a few I have read with pleasure recently—our sense that there are no big gunners must be related to the process we have just described. What “great leap forward,” comparable, say, to what T. S. Eliot did, might still be available to a poet? Having taken it, would he be good enough

to hold some audience of at least fair size, or would “it” leave the game little crowd of lovers of the new puzzled and discouraged? The Beats peddled their shagginess a couple of decades ago, and at least one of them, Ginsberg, knew a thing or two about making poems, and so has continued with some reputation, but my poetry-critic friends do not consider him a “leading figure.” Now, I do not really want to get into speculation about “the future of American poetry” because, while it is an important and interesting topic, our subject is the uses of literature for understanding society. I raise these issues to demonstrate how strongly our judgments of any subject in the arts are bound up in our cultural values. If I opine that the poets I like now are good and have found their distinctive voices, or speculate that we shall, in fact, have more major poets in our own time (I think that well may be true), notice the value-judgments that are involved: 1) We as a people are more worthy because we have produced fine poets. 2) Innovation, indigenoussness, “naturalness” and personal creative expression are meritorious. Those, once again, are judgments in which I concur, but they are also emblems of our culture and not universal human facts.

It is not hard to connect the size of the audience for poetry to broad social characteristics. The American household poets had something valuable which their literary descendants lack: a swarm of warmly responsive readers. Perhaps those corollaries of moderization, innovation and rapid change (which in poetry add up to difficulty) are the major reasons for the lessened impact of poetry in our age; they are clearly an important part of the story. I do *not* mean to imply, by the way, that we face the impending death of the art of poetry. The day after tomorrow some combination of national mood, artistic genius, and media texture could produce a school of American poets not only worthy but popular as well. The histories of all the arts are wonderfully surprising.

Less surprising are the values that motivate innovation. For me, at least, they provide a continuity in our literary history which ties contemporary writers to our past. The strongly implied conclusion of Waggoner’s book is that those innovative and experimental poets who, in moving forward, in being “the cutting edge,” have succeeded in producing significant and lasting poetry, seem to have been those who have found that “literary advance” in fact led back to where

Ralph Waldo Emerson had been a century earlier. Emerson's spirit, values and perceptions are in some ways at the heart of the present book, as well. It seems to me that a sign of maturation in an American intellectual or artist is the discovery of how very radical American tradition, the American past, underlying national values, or Ralph Waldo Emerson, truly are. Our strong sense of social wrong and evil is in itself a sign of our commitment to meliorism. For the artist, there is the discovery that the chaos of the modern world, whatever it does to religious or traditional aesthetic foundations, does not leave man without the potential for creativity. We connect with a national tradition when we realize that our own discovery of the modern situation was anticipated—indeed, even to some extent made possible—by a writer named Emerson who had been there before, had seen, at a time when the factory, the telegraph, the railroad and the daguerrotype were new, what their implications would be, and even had some answers to the unsettling questions they posed.

Thus the simplest kind of observation one could make about the relationship between twentieth century poetry and twentieth century social history is perfectly valid. Did you not know that "Prufrock," for example, or "The Waste Land," are about alienation, and that modern alienation is largely the result of rapid modernization? We can put these things in other terms to make them even clearer. In fact our poets have been talking about them all along. When I have spoken of the model of the web or the net to illustrate how far we have run that voluntarism which Alexis de Tocqueville first noticed, I might also have noted that the voluntaristic freedom produces a concomitant insecurity. As Emerson fully understood, in a simple tribal society one may be materially very poor, but one has the security of knowing where one is, and what are one's relationships to family, clan, tribe, moiety, or whatever. Well-run prisons are even more "secure." But to our way of thinking, the security isn't worth the price of freedom.

The societal results of being modern are complex enough so that they can be perceived in a multitude of different ways by different sensitive observers; if some feel naked without the certainties of orthodoxy or of rigid social structure, others, like Cummings, revel in the freedom, wear "the dangerous looseness of doom and find it becoming." Indeed, almost every major philosophical strain one can

see in our poetry may be understood as a response to the very forces which we have been discussing throughout this study. Much of our poetry records the reaction of the poet to the destruction of the underpinnings. Sentiment, Frost tells us, provides no answers. If you would understand the universe, if you were really versed in country things, and not in a sentimentalized version of them, you would know that phoebes don't weep.

We might begin with Poe's warnings against science and construct a record of the response to secularization which the growing faith in scientific objectivity brought to our poetry. Waggoner speaks, for example, of the imagists' attempt to be objective; he connects it to what he calls "scientism" (344). He argues incontrovertibly that Eliot in large part reacts to scientific naturalism, too, and that Wallace Stevens tried consistently to be the poet of the new "reality" (429). If there is no sense or order in the world, Stevens would raise a "fictive" order through the music of his verse. The import of Stevens' poetry in this mood is by no means identical with what one finds in Melville, Stephen Crane, or Ernest Hemingway, but there is a connection, an attempt to locate areas of human action, loyalty, craft, honesty in a world in which, because of the changes we associate with modernization, such human goals may be the only ones that matter.

But these are only isolated examples of the richness of the poetry for our concerns. If asked, "How can you do social history with (good) poetry?" it would make sense to respond, "Keeping in mind the aspects of social history we have been discussing, read Waggoner's *American Poets*." Practically every important conclusion in that sage and admirable book connects firmly to social history.<sup>20</sup>

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## Two Plays

Before us is the Salesman's house. We are aware of towering, angular shapes behind it, surrounding it on all sides. . . . As more light appears, we see a solid vault of apartment

houses around the small, fragile-seeming home.

—Stage directions, “Death of a Salesman”

What has been said about “expanding circles” and ethnicity can be shown nicely through examination of an honestly written Broadway play such as Elmer L. Rice’s “Street Scene” (1928, premiere 1929). “Street Scene” uses stereotypes—it has to, I think, in order *quickly* to represent the New York ethnic mix. There are Irish cops, tough-talking workmen, and a Jewish family named Kaplan, which consists of a kindly, politically radical father; a student son, a weakling who calls himself a coward; and daughter, Shirley, who is a homely but good-hearted schoolteacher. Similarly stereotyped is an Italian music-master named Filipo Fiorentino, who is shown as a lover of life, generous, humorous, and jealous of his wife. The play illustrates that American ethnic history moves in a steady direction and is dynamic in nature, first because it contains many comments by the more acculturated on the less; second, because, like other works we have discussed in this context, it is deliberately intended to promote brotherhood and fellow-feeling, but only manages to include ethnic diversity up to a point. Of the ethnic groups we see, the most discriminated against are the Jews. But we see no blacks, who were already present in large numbers in the city, though they would not at that time have lived on this street, or Puerto Ricans, who were yet to make their big move. The play, in other words, locates a point in this process of deciding which residents of our country are “real Americans.” It is part of a continuum; for the purposes of ethnic history, it should be compared with earlier works which treat the same subject, such as *Moby-Dick* or *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, or with later popular works also designed to promote brotherhood, such as the numerous Hollywood films of the 1940s and 50s which take this task upon themselves.

The power of Arthur Miller’s beautiful “Death of a Salesman” (1949) has less to do with the elements of tragedy (there is a critical debate on whether middle-class tragedy is possible) than it does with one’s respect, pity and love for people like Willy Loman. The family

name tells us that, like *Moby-Dick* and *Rabbit, Run*, this is meant to be the story of commoners, of American everymen. We feel for Willy because of his inability to see the difference between ideals which turn out to be hollow and those which we and the author feel are enduring. The business code in which Willy believed is shown inadequate; what moves us is the love his wife and sons feel for him and our empathy for all the characters, which is likely to be based on our own experience with people like them.

The play, then, is not an “attack on the system.” Like *The Rise of Silas Lapham* it contains an attack on the idea that business ethics should be isolated from broader human morality; like the novel, too, it involves us in its issues because we empathize with the people and hope that they see their way through to worthier values than those connected with profits. Those in the play who have learned the right rules prosper and are happy. “Death of a Salesman” can be understood as a morality play designed to exemplify those “sacred” values to which we have repeatedly referred. Values which are attacked in “Death of a Salesman” are those connected with putting on a big front, with glamor, aggression, the fighting spirit, advertising, personal influence, contacts, and “favors.” The hollowness of salesmanship for its own sake is apparent—though Willy is the central character and lives and dies through salesmanship, we never learn what it is that he sells. The Hastings refrigerator has the biggest magazine advertisements, but breaks down before it is paid for; Uncle Ben is the symbol of the spirit of go-gettiveness but seems to have no practical advice; the aggressiveness which Willy praises seems to lead a favorite son into snitching building supplies and stealing footballs.

As opposed to these hard things, a familiar range of values is warmly condoned. Most are represented by the career of Bernard, the unathletic and unglamorous son of Willy’s neighbor, Charley. Bernard embodies solid education, hard work, responsibility and performance. There is even an ironic note which has to do with athletics and glamor. For the Loman family, children of salesmanship who have undervalued expertise and knowledge and betrayed their natural talents, life really ended with Biff’s last high school football game. But as the adult Bernard goes off to Washington to argue a case before the Supreme Court, he takes along his tennis racket.

Pastoralism and craftsmanship are also condoned by contrast with the life of cities and salesmanship which Willie has tried to lead. We perhaps recognize in this strain a reaction to modernization, a nostalgia for a time when people lived closer to nature and products were tangible.<sup>21</sup> Thus Biff speaks rhapsodically of ranches and animals, and several characters connect craftsmanship with nostalgia: Willie is “handy,” and making things with one’s own hands is contrasted to salesmanship. One thinks again of Veblen, for the contrast is analogous to the contrast he felt between the manipulator of speculative economic paper and the productive engineer.

To an extent, the play’s wistfulness has to do with these things, for the Lomans look back to a time when they as a family pulled together, remembering fondly what a modernization theorist might regard as vestiges of the situation when the family was the basic economic unit. They liked making palpable things like the stoop, like household carpentry projects. Even the adjustments on the gas line with which Willy plans suicide remind us that he is handy. The play is also about modernization in that it deals with consumerism and the post-modern society. It is, if you wish, an early example of consumer protest, about oppressive payments, misleading advertising, and products that break down. The Lomans’ house stands amid apartment buildings: the old way is contrasted with the new. Personal influence, personal friendship are contrasted with the modernized notions in which advancements come, as Willy learns sadly from his employer, from accomplishments, not how you look or whom you know.

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*Rabbit, Run*

Soon after the Big Bang of Freud’s major discoveries . . . the historian of psychoanalysis notes a fork in the road. One path leads outward into the general culture, widening to become the grand boulevard of psychoanalytic influence—the multilane superhighway of psychoanalytic thought’s incursions into

psychiatry, social philosophy, anthropology, law, literature, education, and child-rearing. The other is the narrow, inward-turning path of psychoanalytic therapy: a hidden, almost secret byway travelled by few. . . .<sup>22</sup>

John Updike's *Rabbit, Run* walks solidly down the main street of American literary tradition. Were there space, we could use it to illustrate almost everything we have spoken of. I would like to use it here to emphasize both the interconnectedness of our concerns and their continuity, suggesting that what we have said of modernization overlaps what we have said about values, about the web or net model, about "expanding circles," about courtship, sex roles, family structure, and psychological models; suggesting, too, that the record in our literature illustrates movement toward a cohesive set of social and cultural characteristics which seem not only interrelated, but "contemporary" and "American."

If the theorists of modernization to whom we referred in an earlier chapter are correct, somewhere around 1920 the United States crossed into the "post-modern" era. They think that the transition meant in part a shift from emphasis on production to emphasis on consumption. In our country, they suppose that the influence of the automobile largely determined the shape and direction of development from about that date. Although convincing evidence exists that 1920 represents a sort of watershed, of course in many ways the transformation was but the continuation of ongoing processes. Hawthorne had long since noted that Salem in Hepzibah Pyncheon's day had only one remaining resident who still "produced" her own cloth; the rest of the town "consumed" manufactured stuff. One can argue that the changes in the few decades from Jefferson's age to Hawthorne's were greater than those in the much longer time between Hawthorne's and Updike's, and that artists of Hawthorne's era accurately foresaw their impact. Nevertheless, I am convinced that a major shift in direction occurred after the First World War, and that one can see much subsequent fiction in terms of the change.

Certainly the Updike novel, published in 1960, seems, in these terms, "post-modern." Rabbit Angstrom works demonstrating Mag-

iPeel kitchen gadgets; his father-in-law owns a used car lot. His father works at a print shop. We remember that print was the avatar of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, rationalization, scientific modes of thought, mass education, mass production. Earl Angstrom is a linotype operator; Rabbit will become one too in a future novel. Unlike the other occupations we see—flower-gardening, ministering, coaching, selling, demonstrating, advertising—that one is “productive.” But as the Angstroms know, the profession of the linotypist is doomed. The skilled linotype operator is being replaced by word processors operating in cold-type establishments. The novel’s lone producer faces obsolescence.

It may be that Brewer, Pennsylvania, is in some ways less modern than most places. Updike shows it as a town which would have struck most Americans in the fifties, I think, as a little old-fashioned: buildings seem older, buses still run with some frequency, parks are still fairly heavily used, and “downtown” does not yet seem menaced by shopping centers. Yet Brewer is nearly as automobile-influenced as was the central Long Island village where I grew up. To the boys playing half-court basketball in an alley at the very opening of the novel, Rabbit as a pedestrian seems odd: “Where’s his car?”<sup>23</sup> Any alien anthropologist would recognize that the automobile is used for functions served by other things—institutions and locales—in other societies. Neat and practical Rabbit himself would rather have his old Buick, but his prestige-conscious father-in-law has talked him into a newer car, because cars indicate status. Thus because Updike and his reader share an automotive language, personality traits can be expressed through a character’s attitude toward his auto. The car is central to courtship; it was in his father’s car that Rabbit made love to his high-school girlfriend Mary Ann. Even Rabbit’s frustrated attempt to escape from everything that seems second-rate to him, the trip which Updike makes, through imagery, into a kind of sticky Odyssey, is in the car, and on the trip, characteristically, Rabbit at one stage bumbles into a rural lovers’ lane, a place where couples go to “park.”

The familiar critical complaint that Updike is a gifted writer who wastes his gifts on trivial topics is relevant here. In quarrelling with critics who (in my view) underrate Updike, I am entering into a discus-

sion in which taste, opinion, aesthetics and other unscientific matters are involved. I do so deliberately, not because I expect to convince all readers that my opinion is correct, but to help make again the important point that different approaches to literature are not mutually exclusive, that critical sense is as likely to help us understand social issues as are counting, measuring or weighing. Moreover, literary evaluations are neither more nor less certain than those based upon other approaches. You can agree or disagree with my judgment that a major writer is dealing with major issues just as you could were my method statistical, anthropological or whatever: method determines neither certainty nor the relevance of subject matter.

Critics who think Updike trivial seem to me blind to major issues in American literary history. I think the issues, moreover, connect firmly to social history. *Rabbit, Run*, first, can be regarded in the tradition of books which test national values. Indeed, one could if one wanted make that more specific, and argue that the character Rabbit can be seen as testing out what amount to popularized transcendental values.<sup>24</sup> Rabbit believes in self-expression, in “to thine own self be true” and in other ideas he has picked up from Sunday School, from coach Tothero (tot-hero?) and other odd sources, notably mouse-eared Jimmy on the Mickey Mouse Club. And curiously, Rabbit tries to live by them regardless of the consequences. “If you have the guts to be yourself,” he says, “other people’ll pay your price.” Having heard Jimmy say that “God doesn’t want a tree to be a waterfall” (12), Rabbit asks Eccles, “Do you think God wants a waterfall to be a tree?” (90) I think that it is worth pushing the issue a little by forcing ourselves to think of the possibility that—admittedly in a special ironic sense—Rabbit is behaving like a romantic hero. One might be tempted to call him a sort of plebian Ahab, except that Ahab is already plebian; the tradition of the democratic hero is at least as old as that of the hero with the guts to be himself. In an important passage which functions like the invocation of a traditional epic, Melville tells us that Ahab, too, is a tar-handed sailor:

If, then, to meanest mariners, and renegades and  
castaways, I shall hereafter ascribe high qualitates,  
though dark; weave round them tragic graces; if even

the most mournful, perchance the most abased, among them all, shall at times lift himself to the exalted mounts; if I shall touch that workman's arm with some ethereal light; if I shall spread a rainbow over his disastrous set of sun; then against all mortal critics bear me out in it, thou just Spirit of Equality, which hast spread one royal mantle of humanity over all my kind! Bear me out in it, thou great democratic God! who didst not refuse to the swart convict, Bunyan, the pale, poetic pearl; Thou who didst clothe with doubly hammered leaves of finest gold, the stumped and paupered arm of old Cervantes; Thou who didst pick up Andrew Jackson from the pebbles; who didst hurl him upon a war-horse; who didst thunder him higher than a throne! Thou who, in all Thy mighty, earthly marchings, ever cullest Thy selectest champions from the kingly commons; bear me out in it, O God! (113-114)

Rabbit, then, fits into an old and important American literary tradition. His commonness does not demonstrate Updike's concern with trivia; it rather demonstrates the importance in a democracy of concern for the common man. Updike's intention is clear enough. Rabbit is named Angstrom; an angstrom is a minute unit of length,<sup>25</sup> used especially for measuring the wavelengths of light. As any sensitive critic notices, he is surrounded with imagery evocative of holy ones, illuminated prophets, and Messiahs, including Jesus, who, after all, spoke of "even the least of these." Rabbit is a "saint," a giver of truth, a source of faith, a bearer of the troubles of the world, a spiritual leader (the Dalai Lama, no less); he is somewhat passive, bathed in radiance; his mother is Mary. He is winged; he visits Hell; he is associated with the Word. And so on—the imagery of the novel treads a mighty pedal beneath the everyday figurations of Updike's facile right-hand.

Updike's concern with an ex-high school basketball star is a response to the old faith that there is vitality, drama, dignity, pathos and above all worth in the lives of "plain citizens." The call to use art to celebrate such folk is Melvillian and Whitmanesque; it was responded

to also by our best Realists and Naturalists. It would not be too strong to say that it is what much of William Dean Howells is all about. It is different from the concern of Frank Norris, who, however brilliant in observation, could only empathize with people of approximately his social class—he felt moved to portray “common people,” but regarded them with a discouragingly anti-democratic condescension. In Updike we have an author capable not only of recording the social texture of the lives of professionals, suburbanites, the poor, elderly, lower middle class, but of treating them with understanding and compassion. Thus I disagree with Alfred Kazin who feels that Updike is merely “a novelist of ‘society’ in the Fifties, the age of postwar plenty and unchallenged domesticity” and that “he lacks . . . that capacity for making you identify, for summoning up affection in the reader.”<sup>26</sup> We do not have to put aside our concern with social history to wonder at the accusations of authorities who insist that his concerns are trivial: he deals with love, truth, the human condition, with the meaning of life, faith, desire, the movement of history: I cannot imagine what else such critics could want, unless it were corrective lenses to get over their near-sightedness. Updike not only treats Great Subjects, he treats them in lives which ring to true our experience.

This matter of taste and critical opinion is relevant to our discussion of literature and American society because Updike’s willingness to look closely at people we tend to skip over, people who “don’t really count,” connects to that pattern of expanding circles we have discussed throughout the book. A common first response from bright women in my classes to *Rabbit, Run* is an impatient, “Oh, I knew ‘him’ [that is, boys like Rabbit] in school. Who wants to read about ‘him’?” Updike will have us read about him, and about people socially even less presentable. In one of the most moving sections of the book, Updike surprises us by shifting the point of view from somewhere over Rabbit Angstrom’s shoulder to somewhere behind Ruth Leonard. He pays attention, in other words, to the tubby girl who was the high school whore. My students tell me that every pretty-good-sized high school has at least one, though none of the students had thought to puzzle out her personality or her motivation. Updike shows us one kind of pattern that could account for them. It is believable, and presented in a way that leaves the character a

modicum of human dignity. If the book were longer one is sure that Updike would get us inside the mind even of Ruth's awful friend Margaret. We all knew her, too; perhaps we still know her, don't like her, and so fail to make the effort to understand or to love. Every generation of good novelists finds richer answers to that first question our self-conscious writers faced at the dawn of American *belles lettres*—no castles here, no neatly defined social classes—what can we write about? The circles expand; we see more and see better. Americans who never appeared before in our fiction became prominent, or they themselves write the novels. We “look” not only at previously ignored racial and ethnic groups, but at people of ignored classes, occupations or personalities. “Vivas,” wrote Whitman, “to those who have fail'd,” and many Americans agree that we should listen to losers as well as winners, to the prisoner who has written a novel, to Ruth Leonard.

We believe Updike's portrayals because they are very skillfully done, and because they are embodied in a psychological model which makes sense to us. This is that associational model of which we have spoken before. We come to understand Rabbit's reality, especially, through a complex web of association.

The sort of literary analyses we do to explain such factors in novels, the close reading and explanations of associations, the heritage of the New Criticism, myth criticism, Freudian criticism and their related successors, are in themselves artifacts of that underlying model. It was nicely illustrated by Henry Adams when he suggested the dynamo as an emblem for the coming century—electric connections, complex, nearly simultaneous, “occult”—but it was foreshadowed even earlier by Hawthorne, whose character Clifford, half-crazed by decades in prison, saw what engines and telegraphs would do to patterns of thought.

We can hardly escape these patterns; I have been using them myself in this study; we use them to approach diverse kinds of questions. We have noted, for instance, a kind of journalistic impulse in our fiction, an attempt on the part of a novelist to answer questions so familiar from pulp and tabloid as to seem trite. Dreiser's work provides good illustrations: How does a boy from a religious home—nay, a missionary home—come to be a murderer? Thus the query in

*An American Tragedy*. How is it, *Sister Carrie* asks, that a poor girl from a small town comes to be a famous Broadway star? In *Rabbit, Run* the question is, How does a woman come to drown her baby? The answer to each of these questions takes the form of a web.

When, purged by the rites of passage attendant on his beloved infant daughter's death, Rabbit at graveside says simply and truthfully, without rancor or accusation, "Don't look at *me*. . . . I didn't kill her" (244), he rejects one over-simple explanation. In a sense, of course, his actions did cause Rebecca's death, but the guilt—if there must be guilt—should properly be distributed among so many characters and finally forces, that we end not with guilt but with an expression of the weblike interconnectedness of American society.

"Don't look at *me*. . . . I didn't kill her," is the terrible and truthful response of a man purged of guilt and grief, but his reply would not satisfy our analytical appetites. Janice was drunk, and lost the baby in the bathtub. We tie that to Rabbit's departure. But Rabbit left her because she refused him a sexual service. But perhaps he should not have asked for that particular service at that particular time. And perhaps he should not have been back in the messy marriage; Eccle's ministry, his effort to reunite the Angstroms, is also involved in the death of the baby. Moreover, did not the Springers somehow do a poor job of bringing Janice up? And so on—in answering any such question we spin a complex web of responsibilities, a web or net analogous to the one which we have been using to describe the structure of society in recent times. It is also analogous to the model we use to account for the nature of human consciousness and experience. If the answer to the journalistic question, "Who killed the Angstrom baby?" comes to seem to be, "We did, the whole society did," that answer rings awfully like the slogan-answers to a later journalistic query, "Who is to blame for My Lai?" The validity of the answers is not especially interesting—guilt is rarely a creative response—but the shape of the answer, its presumption of a network, is very revealing. As I suggested in the discussion of *As I Lay Dying*, such connections bring to mind the speculations of the late Marshall McLuhan and other interesting students of the media, because these analogies are suggestive also of some of the characteristic productions of our age—the forms and explanations toward which sciences in various fields have tended to

move, the complex electronic circuit, and, of course, that most characteristic artifact of our era, the computer itself. Thus it seems to me that a literary matter as technical as the model of human nature on which the author builds his characterization can be related to broad and important aspects of intellectual, technological and social history.

It is characteristic of "the paranoid style" to see all phenomena as interconnected and as working together in a plot. In Thomas Pynchon's novel *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), paranoia and the interconnections become a main point. It is as though the mental interconnections which lay at the heart of the stream of consciousness fiction of the early century had spread out of the human mind and across the globe and perhaps the cosmos. Pynchon's complicated fantasy rests on a lot of fact. He is right, for instance, about the unholy attractiveness of occultism for fascists. The broader point is that I think that I have already named the interrelated reasons that so much of recent American fiction has been mystical or even occult. Updike, Salinger and Pynchon are not much alike, but they share this characteristic, and share it with a number of other writers whose roots in our literature go back, it seems to me, to writers of Emerson's and Poe's generation who first perceived whither we were bound.

Updike's deliberate democratic bias helps explain why he picks Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* to provide symbolic resonance for a later novel, *A Month of Sundays*. Hawthorne, too, faced consciously the problem of producing a fiction at once noble in theme and democratic in texture. Nor is it surprising that *Rabbit, Run*, like so many of Hawthorne's works, is devoted to trying out transcendental ideas. Melvillian, too, as I have suggested: the plot of *Rabbit, Run* is, in skeleton form, oddly similar to that of Melville's *Pierre*. The central character tries to be true to the drummer within, to behave, if you wish, as a transcendental saint. The commonness of Rabbit's actions brings to mind a slogan of a decade later than that we see in this novel, "If it feels good, do it," but it is probably true that the phrase is a not-too-distant echo and vulgarization of "To thine own self be true." For feckless Harry Angstrom as for Pierre Glendinning the result is disaster and misunderstanding. The heroes' truths and their behavior are intolerable to the world around them: people cannot stand truth in every social context.

Note, however, that neither character rebels against the sacred values of his society. On the contrary. Both try to live up to what they take to be its best ideals. Pierre has picked them up from certain Transcendental sources; Rabbit, from teachers, preachers, coaches and the tube. Rabbit Angstrom tries to do exactly what he has been taught. But to do exactly that in the real world is likely to get you called a “saint,” which is to say, a kind of deviant. Characters as different as Rabbit’s wife and the Minister Eccles call him a “saint” in contexts which are only partially ironic. Both Rabbit and the minister feel that there is an odd sense in which Rabbit is in contact with Truth; he is sometimes even a prophet. At moments, also, Harry ministers to Eccles as much as Eccles to him. We have already remarked the deliberate linking of Rabbit with the spiritual leader of a mystical religious community—during Rabbit’s flight he listens to news broadcasts on the car radio; it is the date, during the Chinese invasion of Tibet, on which the Dalai Lama fled, and Updike subsequently uses the network of associations in Rabbit’s mind to connect him to the Dalai Lama.

An easy conclusion from all of this, and one that has considerable truth, is that if Rabbit is a “saint,” we crucify our saints. When a plain man, that is, attempts literally to live the ideas and ideals of the society, watch out. Seen this way, Rabbit is a somewhat less simple-minded Billy Budd. Updike has succeeded in setting Melvillian drama within the context of the everyday American social network.

In Melville’s *Pierre*, the young hero reads part of a philosophical pamphlet on chronometricals and horologicals, the gist of which seems to be that absolute heavenly truths must be tempered by earthly realities.<sup>27</sup> One cannot live by uncompromising abstract principles. But every word in Melville implies that one ought to go on rebelling against sloppy temporizing. As we noted in our discussion of *Billy Budd*, we are not to accept the idea that what Captain Vere did was the correct human compromise. It was unjust, and we are to rage against it. I think there is a clue here to how we are to react to *Rabbit, Run*. We can dislike Rabbit for his irresponsibility, his proneness to self-gratification and his shallowness, but I believe that we are to like his desire for freedom, his capacity for love, his feeling for honesty. And thus paradoxically “society crucifies its saints” is not the whole story,

for it is also true that society produces its saints. There are affirmative overtones, as there are in the brighter chapters in Melville, or in much of Whitman. I think that Updike implies that there are some good things to be said about a society which produces common men with these ideals.

A considerable literary tradition, then, speaks in *Rabbit, Run*. Melville's condemnation was of the universe itself, of the unfairness of the way things are. He could write social criticism—"The Tartarus of Maids" deals with New England factories and their farm-girl employees, and his strange novel *The Confidence-Man* has as its target not only broad blotches in the social fabric but also the hypocrisy of specific admired American leaders<sup>28</sup>—but like Poe, Melville could be surprisingly patriotic, as when he imagines a broadside fired by a fleet of ships named after all the states, when he brags about American commercial achievements, or, more significantly, when, in that invocation to which we have referred, he announces to the world that when the issue is democracy, he and the nation both are in earnest. Look, he is saying, I am really doing it—the hero of my epic is just a sailor in a grubby and stinking enterprise, and we have already elected a President who comes from humble stock. Updike perhaps goes further; he shows us an irresponsible, selfish and sensuous MagiPeel vendor whose life has been touched by moments of great beauty, and who stubbornly insists both that the experience was real and that he has the right to seek more.

Sex is important in Updike's world. His sympathetic critics say that he employs it as an important metaphor for the human condition (putting it that way takes away half the fun, though). There are social lessons to be learned as well. Many of Updike's people lean to sex outside of marriage. Now, I don't really know whether people are "by nature" monogamous. As nearly as I can make out, in the societies with which I have any familiarity, societies in which something like our notion of marriage prevails, the ideal is monogamy, the behavior is something else, and the mechanisms for handling the contradictions are idiosyncratic to each culture. I recall reading the observations of a Polish man living in New York who said that he was startled to observe that American men of his social circle were faithful to their wives.

He went on to say that after a long residence in the United States, he discovered that the real difference was not in behavior—everyone was falling into bed with the best friend's spouse with the same kind of regularity that he was familiar with in Poland. The difference was that men kept such adventures to themselves here; in Poland, they talked about them among one another. Different cultures, different customs, different lore.

Rabbit Angstrom can love two women. We have no reason to doubt the sincerity of his attachment to Ruth and to Janice. Indeed, we learn (166) that he still loves his high school sweetheart, now married to someone else, the girl to whom he made love in the car following basketball games. The trouble is that the institution—marriage—does not match the facts of Rabbit's behavior, any more than the institution of courtship which we saw in nineteenth-century novels such as *The Rise of Silas Lapham* matched the social needs of that time. In the eyes of some observers, what prevails the United States amounts to condoned serial polygyny—the well-established routines of marriage, separation and divorce operate to allow many Americans to do more or less openly what people do in other cultures do surreptitiously, while still retaining the values connected with marriage. Call it “value-stretch,” if you wish (keeping in mind that in this study we generally have used “value” in a special sense different from this). If the problem were pushed to its logical conclusion, in that characteristic American process of applying rational criteria to areas which in most societies are handled by traditions, we would find ourselves in the position of the clergyman hero of Updike's *A Month of Sundays*, who glorifies adultery, finding in it God's will and an escape from hypocrisy.

As things stand in the world of Brewer and Mount Judge, however, inefficient courtship and bad marriages lead to messiness and widespread human hurt. We can tell that we are dealing with one of those social fault-lines of which we have spoken because of the wide variety of contradictory explanations that are offered of what has happened and what should be done. In the conversation between Mary Angstrom, Rabbit's mother, and the Episcopalian minister Eccles we get a good sampling of this variety. The multiplicity of analyses suggests something about American pluralism and perhaps

also voluntarism: Rabbit's mother is speaking of Rabbit's wife, Janice Angstrom:

"About as shy as a snake," she says, "That girl. These little women are poison. Mincing around with their sneaky eyes getting everybody's sympathy. Well she doesn't get mine; let the men weep. To hear her father-in-law talk she's the worst martyr since Joan of Arc."

He laughs again; but isn't she? "Well, uh, what does Mr. Angstrom think Harry should do?"

"Crawl back. What else? He will, too, poor boy. He's just like his father underneath. All soft heart. I suppose that's why men rule the world. They're all heart."

"That's an unusual view."

"Is it? It's what they keep telling you in church. Men are all heart and women are all body. I don't know who's supposed to have the brains. God, I suppose."

He smiles, wondering if the Lutheran church gives everyone such ideas. Luther himself was a little like this, perhaps—overstating half-truths in a kind of comic wrath. The whole black Protestant paradox-thumping maybe begins there. Deep fundamental hopelessness in such a mind. Hubris in shoving the particular aside. Maybe: he's forgotten much theology. It occurs to him that he should see Angstrom's pastor. (134-135)

A moment later Rabbit's father comes in and greets Eccles, "How do you do, Father," which leads Eccles to wonder whether he was raised as a Catholic. Americans apply voluntarism even to religion, a fact that stupefies visitors and observers from other civilizations.

Listen to Ruth Leonard speaking near the end of the book:

Now I'd like to marry you, I would. I mean whatever I said but if we're married it'll be all right. Now you work it out. You divorce that wife you feel so sorry for about once a month, you divorce her or forget me. If you can't work it out, I'm dead to you; I'm dead to you

and this baby of yours [Ruth is pregnant by Rabbit] is dead too. (253)

In other cultures, the dilemma of Ruth and Rabbit is handled in different ways. The common Mexican solution on certain social levels is the man with two families. We have a Mexican acquaintance, for example, who for many years spent Monday, Wednesday, and Friday with his family in one part of Mexico City, and Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays with his other family, functioning as father and “head of the household” in both places. The women “sort of” knew of one another’s existence, though the matter was never discussed until, just a few years ago, with the death of one “wife,” the second generously offered to take in the other’s children.

The issue of the children throws us back to Chopin’s *The Awakening*: it is the children who made Edna feel that her situation was intolerable; so too with Rabbit. If a reader leaves that novel with the feeling that “something ought to be done” about a situation which so confuses sympathetic and creative Edna Pontellier that she is driven to suicide—and such impatience for reform is a common reaction for feminist-minded readers—the reader shows allegiance both to Edna’s values of creativity, self-expression and naturalness on the one hand, and to the range of rational values and meliorism on the other. Such a reader finds allies in other authors we have discussed, Hawthorne and Howells most obviously. Ruth and Rabbit operate on what seems a humble plane. But like their predecessors, they feel a kind of pressure to rationalize, regularize, bring life into exact congruence with condoned values and forms. In most societies and in most social classes within them with which I have any familiarity, there would exist sloppy and illogical but humanly acceptable ways to handle Edna’s problem or Rabbit’s. Edna is not the first young mother to crave artistic expression, sexual excitement and independence; Ruth is not the first girlfriend of an unhappily married man to get pregnant. That these people do not simply slip into relatively comfortable “arrangements,” unofficial but widely-understood ways of living with their situations, says something about the persistence of our values. In Costa Rica, the unmarried girl brings the baby to grandma; the love of babies conquers all, and life goes on. Understand that I am

not proposing the Costa Rican or the Mexican solution as ones we ought to condone—indeed, they are not condoned in Costa Rica or Mexico. Just used. Nor am I arguing that many Americans who get themselves into like predicaments do not in fact find ways to live, sometimes even thrive, with them. What is important to us in terms of our discussion of larger tendencies in American social history is that it would occur to us to look for “more rational” approaches to problems of this sort, to assume that even in such private areas there might be “more perfect” solutions. Were there space, it is in this context that I would begin a discussion of a broad range of recent socially-conscious fiction. All one’s friends in New York or Boston are in therapy, trying to pour science on ancient fires. The inconsistencies which trouble them have always been there in human behavior; they cause special unhappiness only for people so modern they expect logical answers and rational patterns within what Hawthorne called the human heart. Like reformers who would rationalize social status, job opportunity, sex roles and other areas in which we Americans perceive inconsistencies and injustice, they want to blow the whistle, and fear not to blow it on themselves.

A little complicated, all this interrelating of approaches. That is the point, of course: our explanations are complex because they reflect the texture of our society and the way we think. The teacher in me thinks a few paragraphs of review are in order. A glance at the way that Rabbit and the other characters use institutions and other voluntaristic groups shows the individualistic nature of the net or web. It in turn makes plausible what we learn about the uneven way in which ideas and forces affect different Americans. One of these ideas, for example, is Freudian psychology. Lucy Eccles knows about it; Rabbit initially does not. I hope by this stage of our discussion the reader immediately visualizes “moving stairs.” Freudianism suggests also that the novel’s psychology, like that of virtually all twentieth century writing, is broadly associational. There is an internal web of connections and associations to match the external one which ties character to character and character to institution. The model which we use for explaining human nature is analogous to and seems even to overlap the model we use to explain how society works. That is,

if we ask the terrible question the novel poses—"How does a woman come to drown her baby?"—we respond with two kinds of answer. The first has to do with internal connections within Janice Angstrom's mind; these are related to her childhood, alcoholism and so forth. The second kind has to do with the external web which involves and implicates quite a wide range of people around her.

A list of the kinds of groups with which some of the central characters react expresses the web: teenagers at a drugstore, customers at Woolworth's, people at cafes or in the Chinese restaurant, swimmers at the pool, drinkers in the Club Castanet, Eccles' congregation, kids playing basketball on the street, Rabbit's high school team. The web which binds any individual to the society around him does not run on strictly predictable lines of "class," whether economic, religious, ethnic or even educational. Rather there are wonderful patterns of interweaving and interrelation, patterns which would be inexpressibly alien to people from a tribal society, or, for that matter, to people of peasant or village societies. There has been a hitherto unspoken corollary of my argument that our literature reveals the increasing voluntarism and complexity of the network: namely, that it also increasingly shows an individual's web transcending such older lines and divisions. The Corey dinner party in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* recorded an interpenetration of levels as the newly rich Laphams were invited to the home and society of the well-established Boston family. Talk at the table had to do with the relationship between the "classes." Social gradations and interpenetrations are so complex and subtle in *Rabbit, Run* that such talk would make little practical sense.

The sources of ideas and values and the ways in which they are transmitted show similar complexity. "Know Thyself" Rabbit acquires not from Ralph Waldo Emerson, but from Jimmy on the Mickey Mouse Show. From the high school basketball coach, Rabbit hears of "The sacredness of achievement" (54-55). Rabbit does not know about Freud, but from Lucy Eccles he begins to learn: "Freud is like God; you make it true." (9). Were Rabbit in high school today, he might already know: psychology courses are fairly common in the secondary school curriculum. Lucy Eccles' husband, Jack, is the Episcopalian minister. Being Episcopalian has some social overtones; we think of expanding circles, think also of the experience of the young

Methodist minister, Theron Ware, for whom contact with a socially different church also involved encounter with new science and new ideas.

For this reader, the great golf game (which reaches its peak on 110-111) is the central metaphor for interconnectedness. Sports, sexuality, religion, family and society all weave themselves in Rabbit's mind into the texture of a comic sports competition. Emerson, Clifford Pyncheon and Henry Adams were right; Rabbit's consciousness is different from Rip Van Winkle's; the new technology and electronic communication did produce new perceptions and new states of mind. It is reassuring that the result can sometimes be funny.

*Rabbit, Run*, finally, expresses the expanding of the circles in any number of ways, not the least of which has to do with its aesthetic quality. One of the reasons this is a very good novel is the compassion it shows and the attention it devotes to Americans in very humble walks of life. "Attention must be paid," cries Willy Loman's wife, Linda, to the lives of people who are not great, but nevertheless worthy, and here is another major literary work which pays attention.

A postscript, or perhaps a coda: We are too close to the work of a current group of "unrealistic" fiction writers for me to make good judgments of their worth, but their unrealism should not prove too puzzling to the student of the arts-as-social-history. Donald Barthelme, John Barth, Thomas Pynchon and others deliberately play fast and loose with the traditional illusions of fiction. Their works will not often allow the reader to settle into a satisfying imaginary ambience. Their fictive worlds are unsettlingly disjointed in space or discontinuous in time.

Specific works, of course, might be fertile to obvious limited, "factual" approaches. Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960), for instance, is in part built on "real" historical information about a colonial time, place and person. Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* is similarly "unreal" and unfair to historical fact, but it also extrudes its many-layered fable from a core of reality: there were V-bombs as surely as there were colonials growing tobacco. What the writer does with the real fact is not all distortion; indeed, Barth and Pynchon seem more conscious of the revisions and revelations of recent historians

than was the considerably more “realistic” Faulkner. (Odd to call Faulkner “realistic”: his novels, too, use “magic” and contradict their own reality.) I am not always sure where the latest interpretations or new data from the history journals leave off and the author’s fancy begins, but know that sometimes the fiction presses forward from facts in the direction not of fantasy, but of historical hypothesis. As *Gravity’s Rainbow* reminds us when it reviews the origins of organic chemistry, one had best not ignore the hypothesis which came not from the library or the laboratory, but from a dream.

The wretched excesses in *The Sot-Weed Factor* are at least as close to the realities of colonial Maryland as are the accounts one would find in an old history text. Similarly, the connections between the early British dye industry, organic chemistry, the German industrial machine in two wars, the American space effort and the multinational corporation over which the Pynchon book spins its hallucinatory events are real. Add a little paranoia, as Pynchon’s people suggest, and the plot might seem real, too. There are social insights to be had from these realities, then; also from the sensibilities which bent and twisted them into the novels. This means that we can utilize several of the general approaches we have already used in discussing earlier writers. Although, as several critics have noted, these authors mean to be very different from the stream-of-consciousness novelists of past decades, they are also their heirs; their fiction can be related to the network of interconnections of which we have spoken. Some writers call Pynchon, Barth and others “postmodern” because they mean to go beyond where we have been. Certainly that impulse to innovate, to pioneer (even to shock, upset or disorient the reader) is firmly based in values we have discussed: no problem of approach there!

A recent writer who likes their work better than I do (strangely, I like Latin American metafiction better than I do the work of these folks) writes perceptively that their fictions are neither formless nor absurd

as so many realist readers have charged; this [type of fiction] is the opposite—this is excess of form, excess of meaning, as in our daily lives. I believe that in this

paradox lies the truth of the reading experience. In the act of reading the text we replicate the meaning of the text.<sup>29</sup>

If modernist fiction and poetry, then, represented the interconnectedness of our social circuits, these postmodern works represent, if you will, the circuits overloaded.

One can learn then, from what the artist thinks about the feedback circuits in the rockets, from what his readers' reactions signify, or from what the artist himself represents. The same options are open to us for *Gravity's Rainbow* as were open for *Billy Budd*.

The works discussed in these last chapters were written within the past century, a period in which I believe our society became at once more complex and more cohesive: complex because of immense immigration and technological change, cohesive because modernization and its media spread information, attitudes and values to increasing proportions of our population. Our literature marks the change through country roads, doctors' waiting rooms and refrigerator advertisements.

To this third-and-a-half generation American, the popular notion that in the Good Old Times Americans were more unified seems wrong. What looks like a more homogeneous society in much of the nineteenth century appears that way only because Americans who were markedly different from the norm (whatever norm we imagine) were generally excluded from consideration when people thought of who "real" Americans were. As we move toward the present, Americans become ethnically much more diverse, but more closely tied together. The web of social interpenetration grows denser. That circle which represents "people we had better listen to" comes to expand to include more and more Americans who had previously seemed too alien or "inferior" to be considered. With access to national values, each underrated group in turn has been able to argue that it was being treated unfairly, and each group has been able to count, in its battle against bigotry, on more allies "within the circle," Americans who carry the values about which we heard around the Corey dinner table in our first pages.

Frustration and a sense of failure are what one hears about in the popular prints and electronic media. But these attitudes themselves

illustrate how widespread is the national notion that things could and should be better. Behind them is the meliorist's stubborn faith that in social and ethnic problems, economics and even the family, "we ought to be doing better."

We love literature for its beauty or because we enjoy the states of mind which literary absorption can produce. We do not turn to it because it teaches us social history. Let me show myself in true colors: I would never have written this book if the approaches which it suggests did not heighten my own enjoyment of the literature. They do. I am aware that many literature scholars and critics are suspicious of approaches which differ from their own. We should never be frightened of new knowledge. Some of what is in this essay I learned when I was a student; much I learned in middle age, from colleagues, students and the historical books and articles I have gone on reading. Now that I know about such things as the history of the family, modernization, values and so on—even if what I "know" turns out to be wrong—the literature I read resonates more deeply for me. I would imagine that when what we "know" does come to seem wrong, it will often be literature itself which provides the clue to the revisions we should make.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jean M. Yonke, "William Faulkner as a Cultural Critic and Moralist: A Comparison of His Views with Those of Historians and Social Scientists." Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, The University of Kansas, 1980.

<sup>2</sup> Yonke, *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> This literature is connected to Faulkner in Warren French, "The Background of Snopesism in Mississippi Politics," *American Studies*, V, 2 (Fall, 1964), 3-18.

<sup>4</sup> Yonke, *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Yonke, *Ibid.* I am indebted to Mrs. Yonke's work, which here rests upon a wide range of Faulkner's fiction and upon Jacqueline Bull, "The General Merchant in the Economic History of the New South," *Journal of Southern History*, 18 (1952), 37ff.; and a more general study, Thomas D. Clark and Albert D. Kirwan, *The South Since Appomattox: A Century of Regional Change* (New York, 1967).

<sup>6</sup> The best of his works I think is *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Second Edition (New York, 1964).

<sup>7</sup> This is not to imply that Norris was untouched by Emersonian ideas. Like many Naturalists, he had a (seemingly contradictory) interest in the mystic not unrelated to that much-popularized aspect of Emerson's thought. I doubt, however, that Emerson would have had much patience with such aspects of Norris' work as the psychic links between characters in *The Octopus*, links which Norris would apparently have us take seriously.

<sup>8</sup> *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying* (New York, 1946), 363. Subsequent citations are in parentheses in the text.

<sup>9</sup> It is liked both by black writers concerned with black culture—Addison Gayle, Jr. and Larry Neal speak well of it—and by writers less concerned with black identity than with aesthetic considerations. Many New Critics praised it from the time of its first publication. A summary of critical and ideological debate about the novel appears in Leonard J. Daitsch's entry on Ellison in *American Novelists Since World War II* (Detroit 1978), 136-141. I borrow the term "ecumenical" from Murray and Rosalie Wax, who use it to refer it to what is shared by Americans other than Indian people. See "Indian Education for What?" in Stuart Levine and Nancy O. Lurie, eds., *The American Indian Today* (Deland, Florida, 1968), 163-169.

<sup>10</sup> A good article on the meaning of the idea of black "naturalness" and "primitiveness" is Edward Margolies' "The Image of the Primitive in Black Letters," *American Studies* XI, 2 (1970), 67-77.

<sup>11</sup> David Katzman, in *Before the Ghetto: Black Detroit in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana, 1973) showed that in this community there were black leaders, a surprising number college-trained, in other lines of work or professions. The enormous black migration from the South following World War I, of course, altered the black community and its relations with white residents.

<sup>12</sup> Ronald G. Walters, "The Negro Press and the Image of Success: 1920-1939," *American Studies* XI, 2 (Fall, 1970), 36-55.

<sup>13</sup> An effective account of the increased militancy of younger black leaders, and of the ironies inherent in their stance, appears in Charles E. Silberman, *Crisis in Black and White* (New York, 1964), esp. Chapter VII, "Power, Personality, and Protest, 189ff.

<sup>14</sup> Claude McKay, *Home to Harlem* (New York, 1928; New York, 1965). This and subsequent citations in parentheses are to the 1965 edition. The present quotation appears on 154-155.

<sup>15</sup> *American Poetry / From the Puritans to the Present* (New York, 1968), 331. Subsequent references are treated in parentheses in the text.

<sup>16</sup> Stuart Levine, "Some Observations on the Concert Audience," in *The American Culture / Approaches to the Study of the United States*, edited by Hennig Cohen (Boston, 1968), 296-311.

<sup>17</sup> For this there is some evidence in a study done by an American Studies seminar which I directed at the University of Kansas some eight or ten years ago. We interviewed students enrolled for "elective" credit in introductory courses in the various arts—cinema, poetry, novel, short story, music

history, art history—and found 1) that few came from backgrounds which provided familiarity with whatever art they were learning 2) that most said they had not known how to “appreciate” the art in question 3) that almost all now reported pleasurable involvement in it 4) that *all* named some social consideration as an important reason for selecting the course 5) that all felt they were “bettering themselves” in learning about music, literature, painting or cinema.

<sup>18</sup> There are hints in Alfred Rosenberg’s essays on the art world that he perceived the art audience in this manner. See his *The Anxious Object / Art Today and its Audience* (New York, 1964), *The Tradition of the New* (New York, 1959), and the reviews he wrote for many years for *The New Yorker*.

<sup>19</sup> William Claire, “Contemporary American Poetry at the Crossroads,” *American Studies International* XVIII, 2 (Winter, 1980), 5-18; 9.

<sup>20</sup> Waggoner’s book connects to social history not because he is consciously writing social history or even because he believes one ought to draw connections between the arts and social history. His book has this richness because of the richness of his mind, because he has done his homework and is immensely well-read, and because he has continued to grow philosophically throughout his scholarly career. *American Poets* is an interdisciplinary book in the best sense: it blithely ignores the boundaries between literary history, literary criticism, and the histories of science and philosophy, using whatever is needed to tell its story, to make sense of a complex situation. His discovery of the quality, centrality and impact of Emerson is most impressive to me, because when I was his student years ago, he not only did not know that, but did not like Emerson. I would assume also that his years of administering and participating in an active American Civilization program might have had something to do with the enrichment of vision, but probably at the heart of it is the honesty and intelligence of this admirable writer.

<sup>21</sup> The best study of the persistence of pastoralism in the teeth of socio-economic change is Warren French, *The Social Novel at the End of an Era* (Carbondale, Illinois, 1966). It focuses directly on the era in which “Death of a Salesman” was written.

<sup>22</sup> Janet Malcom, “Profiles (Aaron Green—Part I),” *The New Yorker* (Nov. 24, 1980), 55-133, 73.

<sup>23</sup> Citations are to the Crest edition (New York, 1963); subsequent page citations are in parentheses in the text. The present quotation is from page 7.

<sup>24</sup> An intelligent and thoughtful discussion of this aspect of *Rabbit, Run* is included in Joseph Waldmeir, “It’s the Going That’s Important, Not the Getting There: Rabbit’s Questioning Non-Quest,” *Modern Fiction Studies*, 20, 1 (Spring, 1974), 13-27. This is an Updike number of *MFS* and contains a number of useful articles on JHU.

<sup>25</sup> It is also the name of a character in Ibsen’s “Ghosts,” a play not unrelated in texture to *Rabbit, Run*. Angstrom there is a carpenter whose “daughter” is really his employer’s; the play is concerned with marriage brought on by pregnancy, and with syphilis.

<sup>26</sup> Alfred Kazin, *Bright Book of Life/American Novelists and Storytellers from Hemingway to Mailer* (Boston, 1973), 120, 124.

<sup>27</sup> Its text appears in Book XIV of *Pierre*. In the CEAA edition (Evanston and Chicago, 1971), that is Volume Seven, 210-215. I write “seems to be” because the pamphlet which Pierre reads is a torn fragment; we are kept from knowing its conclusions.

<sup>28</sup> An article which reviews this aspect of *The Confidence Man* and identifies one further figure, Abbott Lawrence, among Melville’s fools is William Norris, “Abbott Lawrence in *The Confidence Man*,” *American Studies*, XVII, 1 (Spring, 1976), 25-38.

<sup>29</sup> Jeff Rackham, “John Barth’s Four-And-Twenty Golden Umbrellas,” *Midwest Quarterly* XXII, 2 (Winter, 1981), 163-175. 172.



## Appendix 1 An Explanation of the “Sacred Values”

The list of “sacred values” was generated by a study<sup>1</sup> of certain American “sacred” institutions. Loosely, these are institutions which do not produce “necessary” commodities, products or services, but which are felt to be beneficial, worthy of support, generally good for our society and our citizens. Their activities, indeed, are often regarded as a sort of “morality play” involving sacred values. The elite arts, higher education, organized athletics and “research” were the institutions studied.

Values associated with each were divided into several categories: “local,” those peculiar to the institution; “universal,” those apparently present in all human societies; and “cultural.” The list of cultural values was scrutinized for those which recurred in a wide range of institutions, which seemed, on the most condoned level, basically “good,” “true,” and immune to challenge. Such values were called “sacred.”

A full description of how the study proceeded is in the essay “Arts, Values, Institutions and Culture. . .,” from which the following explanation is adapted. The investigators were students working together as a team; several were involved with the project for extended periods of time. All felt that the arrangement on the chart was fairly arbitrary and that the “values” overlap. Note also that the list of values is only a report, as it were, of what was found. It is not a coherent philosophical system, though it is related to some.

Here are informal definitions of the “sacred values” together with some illustrations of how they seem to operate:

1) *Orderly universe.* The world is taken to be comprehensible in its structure. Although the investigators were well aware of the persistence in our culture of occult means for understanding the universe, they nowhere encountered, in the material examined, points of view contradictory to the idea that the world is put together through a series of comprehensible bonds and processes. Indeed, the student who produced the chart considers “process” synonymous as a value

with “orderly universe.” Some students put it differently; in the words of one, this is the belief that “rational thought works.” Faced with something we do not understand, we apply certain processes which we call collectively “rational thought,” and the procedure is supposed to work. It might be a fair critique of our entire study to say that our culture, on the sacred level, thinks of itself (if a culture can be said to think) as a rational entity, and that all we have done is to spell out the tenets of that rationality. Perhaps, unintentionally, we will end by deriving Descartes from the texture of our own artifacts.

2) *Truth*. If the process derived from (1) is applied properly, and adequate information is available, truth, confirmable reality, will result. We may be sure truth is real, replicable, susceptible of scientific testing and verification. It is also “good” and an end in itself. Moreover, the process by which it is found and confirmed seems to outrank all other processes in sacredness. Its sacredness is revealed in prototypical story patterns which could be said to serve the function of myth. If someone recounts the story, let us say, of how the Catholic Church reacted to the work of Copernicus and Galileo, we all respond by feeling that the Church was wrong to attempt to suppress “truth.” If we encounter someone who does not perceive the sacredness of truth or of the process on which its establishment rests, we assume that he is inadequately educated. The process itself will cure him.

3) *Objectivity*. The ideal attitude for those in quest of truth. It is also good, in the quest, to achieve

4) *The broadest view possible*. This means considering as much reliable data as can be gathered. A commentator on “Arts, Values, Institutions and Culture . . .” suggested that I devote further space to “demonstrating that each of the sacred institutions . . . does in fact manifest the values listed,” and asked, as an example of the sort of questions he had in mind, “just how does the ‘broadest view possible’ manifest itself in athletics?” I can think of any number of ways on any number of institutional levels in sports. A few examples will have to suffice: a.) It is “cutting time,” and the coaching staff in any team sport meets to decide which player must be dropped from the squad to meet league squad-size regulations. By which criteria should the staff attempt to make its difficult decisions? b.) It is late in a baseball game, men are on first and third with one out, a good left-handed

batter is due up, and the pitcher, who is most effective against right-handed batters, is clearly tiring. With the ace reliever complaining of a sore elbow, the pitching rotation skewed by a busy schedule and a 17-inning game yesterday, and with a crucial double-header scheduled tomorrow, by what criteria should the manager, with a one-run lead (one could, and indeed should, go on listing factors to be considered), make his decision on whether to pull his starter? Or how to position his infield? c.) You are seated in a greasy bridge-chair in the cluttered interior of a gas station and sundry shop in a small town waiting for a flat to be fixed, and the “old boys” in wool plaid jackets who use the place as a club are discussing the teams involved in recent and not-so-recent World Series with an eye to determining which showed the most overall strength. By what criteria do they press their cases?

Closely related to “the broadest view” is the belief that

5) *Knowledge is good in itself.* It “expands human horizons,” though in acquiring it, one may not immediately see its utility, and it may be dangerous if misapplied. The process of acquiring it, however, is good for one; it builds proper mental and even moral attitudes, and increases one’s personal worth. Moreover, one never can tell to what good uses any knowledge may be put by future investigation. Participating in the process is honorific and self-fulfilling. The process is at the heart of educational theory. Thus all open-minded and dedicatedly-supervised

6) *Education is good.* It puts students in touch with the great traditions of human learning, and enables them to feel it possible to play a role in expanding outward the “frontiers of knowledge,” or in improving the human condition (see 8, Meliorism). One’s sense of role here seem to be the equivalent of what other societies achieve through their basic religious myths. One can feel that one is playing a part in the process even if one’s life work is humble, for one can feel that one’s work supports the process, if only by making it possible for others to play loftier roles.

7) *Specialization, compartmentalization and intellectualism* are necessary. They accelerate the process, but they carry with them the dangers of narrowness and other-worldliness. The specialist’s education should be broad enough to counter these dangers, but even the comically narrow specialist may make a great contribution to “progress” or “human betterment.”

8) *Meliorism*. The most basic “radical” concept in the value system. It is assumed that it is within human power to alter and improve institutions, and that this alteration can favorably affect the quality of human life and even human personality. To me it seems that this value more than any other distinguishes our perception of the world from that of the other cultural complexes. A radical student who, a decade ago, lived in a commune told me that his decision to live there was an attempt to get outside “the whole rotten value system,” to live in an atmosphere of honesty, directness, simple “natural” emotional experience, recognition of individual worth and so on. To me it seemed, first, that the things he named as good were completely within the value system in its most “sacred” sense, and second, that the idea of changing and redesigning a social institution as basic as the family could only occur to someone who believed fervently in the idea of meliorism.

For clarity, it might be worth mentioning that meliorism is by no means exclusively an American idea—none of these values is. We share it, for example, with all communists; Marx is nothing if not a meliorist and a believer in “process.” So, by definition, are all socialists, political theorists and reformers. If there is a peculiar national flavor to our versions of the sacred values of western culture, it may be the result of the extremely broad base on which our national commitment to meliorism rests. One finds it in the literature of the near and far left, to be sure, but it is no less prevalent in the literature of the extreme right which I have examined. It is an issue on which a liberal and a conservative would agree: changes (of the right sort) would make things better.

9) *Fair play*. A parallel idea to objectivity. It is to human relationships what objectivity is to intellectual pursuits. Just as bias, prejudice or unequal manipulation of information are felt to impede the quest for truth, so “unfair” treatment of people is felt to impair the proper operation of society or human institutions. Violations of fair play are bad because

10) *Individual potential* must be allowed to express itself. Anyone, regardless of heredity or social status may possess

11) *Talent or Genius*. These are felt to be real, and society is at fault to the extent that it thwarts their maximum creative expression.

Indeed—and here we come to the reason that the arts and the other areas we have named are probably “sacred”—one ultimately judges the worth of a society on the number of great creative figures it produces and encourages. Much of our fiction, biography, autobiography and, on a humbler level, sports literature is based on a moral pattern which can be described very simply: the story is sad if talent or genius is thwarted; it is happy if genius thrives and creates. That pattern has the apparent force of myth in our culture.

Corollary to (11) are belief in (12-15).

12) *Self-Expression*. Since each man is unique, he should express his “real self” or fulfill his personal potential.

13) *Creativity*. This seems increasingly to be a sign not only of innate capacity but of mental health. It is taken to be almost a desired trait of personality, and is sanctioned as such. Institutions or people that thwart it are felt to be bad and in need of alteration or education.

14) *Innovation*. This is a corollary not only of the fair-play complex of values, but also of the values associated with “orderly universe” or “process.” Innovation is valued not only because each “contributor” is unique, and thus should do something different, but also because each field is understood as a process, which should progress.

Although, as I said, these values overlap to the extent that any attempt to name them is somewhat arbitrary, and an attempt to explain how they are felt to be related involves what looks like circular reasoning, a discussion of them is not simply an exercise in tautology. The values are not universal; they are cultural. Innovation is not universally valued. Within the African culture which produces it, the carved wooden object is not valued for the individual expression and innovation which the carver brings to it (though we may value it, or him, for such reasons). It is valued because it has the correct characteristics. He made it right, and it therefore performs the right religious function. When, earlier in the 20th century, a Hopi village lost the last old man with the proper clan membership, power and knowledge to create certain ritual objects and conduct an important ceremony, it delegated the job to a tribesman who endeavored with great conscientiousness to perform the tasks properly. He fasted, prayed, purified himself, made the objects and conducted the cer-

emony. It failed to work; the rains did not come, the crop failed, the people starved. We might praise him for his creativity and innovation; the objects he produced might seem very beautiful to us. But he knew with some bitterness that he had failed to do his task *correctly*; our values, innovation, personal expression and creativity, would seem irrelevant to him.

15) *Diversity*. If change (“process”) is felt to be normal, if innovation is sanctioned, and if each individual is felt to be unique, diversity will also be sanctioned, as I believe it is on the “sacred” level of our value system. Its social equivalent is that complex and individualistic “web” of which we have spoken. “To thine own self be true” or, “Do your own thing” exemplify its staying-power. Those would be incomprehensible slogans in a society which did not already carry the family of interrelated values (10-15) which might be lumped together under the heading “Individualism.”

16) *Indigenouness*. Perhaps this is too specialized an idea to merit a position in a list of values, but it is felt to be a corollary of the same family of values, and since it is important to our feelings about the arts, I want to include it. An art form is felt to have a certain intrinsic worth on purely aesthetic grounds, but it is looked upon with special favor if it seems to grow from the special characteristics of its creators. In numerous fields, elite critics at least since the Federal period have called for works which grow from the national experience. A “distinctively American” painter, composer or novelist is especially to be treasured. The call for regional arts was similarly based upon the value of indigenouness. Jazz is valued not merely for its quality, but because it is a form that developed here. It gains special sanction for being the creation of black Americans. If we examine the literature which deals with jazz, from scholarly articles by jazz historians to novels and films, we find clear evidence of the relationship between indigenouness, worth and value 9, fair play. It is felt to be unfair that jazz, created by black musicians “indigenounessly” out of the grim experiences of black life, has brought relatively little fortune to its creators. And, to anticipate a point, appreciation of jazz is taken as a sign that one has become in some sense “enlightened.”

17) *Naturalness*. I am not satisfied with “naturalness” as name for a value, but no other term I can think of is sufficiently broad.

The idea of course overlaps (12), self-expression, but also includes sanctioned traits of personality, frankness and openness. It includes as well an idea perhaps best stated negatively: anti-hypocrisy. And it can be used to justify anti-intellectualism, as a basis for an argument that an intellectual approach to a given issue is “artificial” or “phony.”

Intellectualism, however, is also sanctioned under the family of values which deal with the orderly approach to the world, with truth, objectivity and specialization. This is, perhaps, a good time to repeat the point that the sacred value system is not a philosophically reasoned, highly logical construct. It is rather a set of principles on which belief seems to be founded on the “sacred” level, a set of ideals toward which an “enlightened” member of our culture feels there should be movement. Its corollaries very often contradict one another when several apply to a given problem.

Consider the case, for example, of the next corollary of the idea of fair play.

18) *Humanitarianism*. This seems related to the idea of individual worth (10). One wants to help the unfortunate because all men are worthy. One knows that many people get less than an “equal break.” Humanitarianism might be defined as the effort to apply fair play to human relationships. It is related to another sanctioned personality trait, “sympathy for the underdog.” But there can be a conflict here, for (10), (11), (12), (13) and (14) all stress achievement. A football fan thus may feel a conflict when watching a game between a weak team and a strong one, loaded with “stars.” Assuming that neither is the fan’s favorite team, and that the outcome of the game does not affect *his* team’s standing, he may find himself hoping the stars will shine, while at the same time hoping that the weak team will somehow win.

Conflict of a more serious sort can develop when the subject is not a “morality play” such as athletics, but “real life.” Thus it is possible to argue on humanitarian grounds for government action to prevent racial injustice while still feeling the force of a state’s rights argument, let us say, for local determination of school integration policy. Both sides of the debate are rooted, ultimately, in the concept of fair play—evidence of the pervasiveness of the sacred value system. A liberal citizen’s feeling toward an adversary who used the state’s rights

argument in this instance would include the assumption that prejudice, or inadequate experience, or inadequate education prevent him from seeing that arguments based on human worth, underdog-sympathy and fair play outweigh those based on diversity, individualism and indigenouness, particularly when the diversity, individualism and indigenouness of only some citizens are in fact being protected.<sup>2</sup>

In the chart on page 17, these values are arranged in what is admittedly an arbitrary way, with Process or Orderly Universe at the top as being as near a key to the others as could be devised, with those values related to individuals or groups of people set to the right, and those related to knowledge to the left.<sup>3</sup> Meliorism is accorded a central position because it seems almost as much a “given” as “Process”—indeed, process and “progress” come close to merging in many of the sources we examined—and because it seem to link the two larger groups.

19) *The sanctity of human life* also had the quality of being a “given,” and also seemed best in a central position because of its relationship with the two larger groups. It means something special in our culture, and does not appear, at least in this special form, in all cultures.

Herman Melville locates the difficulty for us with terrible precision in *Moby-Dick* when he points out that if we really believed in an afterlife, we would not feel so grief-stricken at the loss of loved ones who should be going to their eternal rewards. That we are inconsolable shows that we really do not believe. Melville, characteristically, follows this passage with one in which he mockingly reassures us that faith, like a jackal, preys amid the tombs and will ultimately overcome even this grief. What he is implying, for our purposes, is that belief in the importance of the sanctity of human life is corollary to an essentially rational and secular view of the universe.

Since the majority of Americans were trained in a religious world view which we can loosely label “Christian,” it is difficult for them to see that Christianity’s enormous emphasis on personal salvation is peculiar when compared to the position of other world religions. Judaism places relatively little emphasis on salvation, and the mystical religions which still occupy a majority position among the world’s population do not draw nearly as strong a line between

life and death as does Christianity. This is not to say that Christian churches may not be functioning for many people in our culture as sacred institutions. I believe that for many people they do. It does seem to imply, however, that from the point of view of the Christian, the sacred values of our culture seem to exert a secularizing influence. I do not believe that the game of applying rational and logical criteria to the heart of Christian belief has been played in our culture only by gifted skeptics like Melville or Mark Twain. It is also a popular sport among those of my friends who are ministers, priests, and nuns.

And, interestingly, even those who attack the secularizing tendencies, fundamentalist Protestant clergy, for example, make use of precisely the same procedures which are corollary to the values listed on the left-hand side. We have once again a good example of how conflict within a cultural unit can be understood in terms of the corollaries of basic values. How such values and tendencies connect to modernization should be clear as well: secularization is recognized by all writers on modernization as a hallmark of the process.

The relationship between secularity and belief in the sanctity of human life shows very clearly in an anecdote I read or heard somewhere, and which I am perhaps retelling inaccurately—I simply can't remember where I encountered it. I am sure that I have the basic outline right: In a period of grave drought and food shortage in India, an American attached to AID or some comparable agency is working in India with an Indian government official to expedite the rapid distribution of American grain and other foodstuffs. Time is desperately important; enough data are available to make it clear that unless the food reaches its destination very quickly, millions of people will die of starvation. The American is at his desk night and day, organizing, arguing, pleading, cajoling. His Indian counterpart, highly educated, personally agreeable and a good friend of the American, in contrast puts in a normal workday and enjoys his leisure time in his customary pursuits. The American endures this sort of behavior as long as he can, but finally feels that he must light a fire under his friend. He yells at him and tells him that he can't understand how he can go about his normal routine in a time of crisis when the lives of millions of people depend upon the extra effort he is unwilling to expend. "Don't you realize that if we don't get this done in time,

two and a half million people are going to die?” “Yes,” replies the Indian, “people die. Didn’t you know that?” Death is simply not as tragic in many other cultures as it is in ours, and the reasons behind our special feelings about death are rooted in our sacred values.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Stuart Levine, “Art, Values, Institutions and Culture: An Essay in American Studies Methodology and Relevance,” *American Quarterly* (May, 1972), 131-165.

<sup>2</sup> Such conflict, obviously, does not have to be so strong as to produce anomie or social disorganization (though it can). Ralph H. Turner writes, “*Only when social values may be called upon to support contradictory patterns of behavior in actual situations can we speak of social disorganization,*” “Value-Conflict in Social Disorganization,” *Sociology and Social Research*, 38 (May-June 1954), 201-8. I think he assumes that value systems “ought to be” a little more consistent than they ever are. It is difficult to conceive of a society in which values would not be available to justify both sides of a dispute.

<sup>3</sup> An editorial commentator astutely noted, “This list is . . . very close to the longer lists developed by Robin Williams in his chapter on values [“Values and Beliefs in American Society,” esp. 469-70] and *American Society* (New York: Knopf, 1961) and by John Gillin in his article “National and Regional Cultural Values,” *Social Forces*, 34 [Dec. 1955], 107-13. If Levine’s list was developed independently of such attempts this would be of interest.” The list was developed independently. Indeed, I made a conscious attempt to protect my ignorance of studies of values developed from other methods, not from hostility to such methods or to the social sciences (“Some of my best friends are social scientists”), but in order to avoid prejudicing my thinking and that of my students. We wanted to develop our own list; awareness of pre-existing lists would probably have influenced our work in that we would have had given values in mind before studying our evidence.

## **Appendix 2** **The Dog Ate My Flash-Drive** **or** **A Back-story for *Annihilated Space***

An odd history lies behind this book. The label “Lost and Found” comes to mind. *Annihilated Space* was written in the late 1970s and early 1980s at a time when I was involved in a great many rewarding—but absorbing—projects, programs and responsibilities. I meant for it to be an unconventional and somewhat personal scholarly work, but I did not mean for it to go underground for three decades.

I wanted to introduce readers to a number of ways to “do” social history through our literature. That some of my approaches apparently seemed new and useful to other scholars gave me a certain confidence, for parts of this study had been published in good peer-reviewed publications such as *American Quarterly*, *Harvard Studies in English*, *The Canadian Review of American Studies*, and Vineta Colby’s *American Culture in the Sixties*. The National Endowment for the Humanities had endorsed my approaches—they had given me an award to teach them to a seminar for college professors in 1978. I had conducted the seminar; my student/colleagues in it had said nice things about it, and had produced good scholarship that grew from our work together.

The seminar subject was American literature as social history. I had served on a number of boards for the NEH and for the National Endowment for the Arts, and so knew about the care given to proposals. These panels evaluate and discuss detailed proposals, and finally award their grants to just a handful of winners from intimidating piles of generally very worthy applications. The NEH board selected my seminar. Its members must have found good in my project.

Then I had to select my students, who were to be more like colleagues, from another intimidating mound of applications. These were from sharp, learned and thoughtful folks, whose contributions to my thinking you will find acknowledged in footnotes and text. I learned from them as I taught. Certainly they did not let me get away with

anything! Thus I have the sense that what is in *Annihilated Space / American Literature and American Society* is, so to speak, pre-judged and pre-tested, once by publication referees, second by an NEH panel, third by a classroom full of bright and feisty colleagues.

In writing this book, I felt an Emersonian impulse to check hypotheses and conclusions now and again against my own experience. Emerson urges us to do so. His townsman Thoreau, when he wrote that he had “travelled a good deal in Concord,” meant the same thing. Well, I thought, I must use the Concord of my life. A part of my motivation also was that I had become convinced that these Transcendentalists were much less fuzzy-minded than many scholars of my generation had been led to believe.

In the 1980s some scholarly projects emerged to engulf me and my wife, Susan Fleming Levine. She and I worked hard at establishing and annotating Poe texts. Deadlines pressed on *American Studies*, the scholarly journal I had founded and edited for its first thirty years. I love to teach, and always taught voluntary overloads of courses in several different departments. I taught American Studies, I taught English, art history, music history, history of architecture, Western Civilization, Humanities, even a class in concert reviewing for the William Allen White School of Journalism. And I taught American history on some of my Fulbright professorships. I worked intensely with my doctoral students, too, and when their degree requirements were met, pressed hard to help place them in good jobs. I was also involved in musical performances, many of them. I had been a professional French hornist in the 1950s. The horn no longer provided my livelihood in the 1970s and '80s, but I was principal horn of both the Lawrence City Band and the Lawrence Symphony Orchestra, as well as hornist of the Lawrence Woodwind Quintet and the CottonWood Winds. At their peak, these two wind quintets alone were performing around forty gigs a year. To play well you have to practice, a lot.

All these things were rewarding, but also very absorbing. Professors are supposed to be absent-minded. For extra-busy professors, it's practically a requirement.

Then in 1985 came my wife Susan's Fulbright professorship in Paraguay. In our home in Asunción I worked on a scholarly edition

of Poe texts for the University of Illinois Press. And I forgot that I had written *this* book!

A few weeks ago (I'm writing this in 2013, after completing our twenty-first year of retirement) Susan found *Annihilated Space* in a filing cabinet. It was in typescript, produced by word-processors and printers of the early 80s, not by a flash-drive—I don't think those had been invented yet. (I just couldn't resist making a cheap gag in the title about student excuses for late papers. It's the teacher in me, I suppose. But dogs do eat things, you know. Our old dog used to eat music checked out of our music library—it cost me big money to replace parts and scores!) I made time to read my book through. I liked it. Its date, it is true, was writ large upon it—the scholarship on which it is built ends in the early 1980s—but I thought that much of it might still be useful to others. Unwilling to put in the work it would take to add alterations in the light of the contributions of scholars whose studies appeared after 1983 or so, I decided to make it available in its present format because I feel—immodestly—that much in it hasn't been said elsewhere, and that it might be useful to later generations of Americanists.

Something I confess to liking a lot is that the book points to some really good and useful scholarship that isn't paid much attention today. My footnotes, in other words, please me, reminding me of the pleasure of learning from the work of honest scholars, many of whom I had the honor of editing, some of whom were my students, all of whom were in one sense or another my teachers.

Although I wince now and then at things I said in the late '70s and early '80s, I'm surprised at how much in this book I still believe. Some of my arguments do not seem to require updates. Discussing the connection between what I call "sacred values"—"sacred" does not refer to religion in this case—and the way we give structure to narratives we like to tell, I explain the familiar story line about the artist-thwarted-by-a-society-that-doesn't-understand. In 1979 I used the life of Herman Melville, as it was generally recounted, to exemplify that plot pattern; in 2013 I heard the same story told one morning on a National Public Radio program. The subject was the career of a rap artist. The same values were involved as those discussed in Chapter 8 in the section on *Billy Budd*.

What I said about Emerson and the “web” or “net” seems even “righter” in this era of the internet. When, for example, I acknowledge the different “feel” and emotional effect of the successive waves of electronic communication, I would today of course add the internet (see note 12 to Chapter 5). The point I was making, however, is still true—the change from no electric communication to the telegraph was more radical than the change from wire to wireless, to the telephone, to radio, to television, to interlinked computers, to smartphones and so on. These later innovations are large and do radically alter the texture of our lives, but not nearly as dramatically as did the first change, from a time when horse or sailing ship were the fastest means of communication available, to the telegraph. Its dots and dashes flew at the same 186,000 miles per second as the latest text-message you (or your child) received this morning. Poe, Melville, Emerson, Hawthorne went through a more radical annihilation of space than did my father or my great-granddaughter. Photography, powered transportation, mass literacy, any number of basic sciences all come to be firmly established in the lifetimes of Americans born from, say, the 1790s to 1820. It’s good to see that I recognized the computer as the next manifestation of what I was calling the “web” or “net,” though plainly the internet was not yet in the picture.

“Legacy,” my younger son said the other day, urging me to collect some of my earlier writings, “Think of your legacy.” I hadn’t ever thought that way. He had in mind mainly the fiction I’ve been writing and publishing in little magazines since around 1990 and the novel I published late last year. He’s got me thinking now about my scholarly legacy. Until I reread this book in 2013, I did not realize how interconnected my own scholarly work had been. Because I had worked in so many different fields, I thought that I had hurt myself professionally. Colleagues had told me that the big rewards for academics in general go to those who come to be thought of as leading authorities on a single subject or area. I had decided that I didn’t care. Figuring out how different fields worked, how different questions might be answered, was much more rewarding to me. More fun, if that’s not too informal a way to put it. Edmund Sears Morgan, one of my favorite graduate school professors, had said that we should

do scholarly research because we were curious, not because it would lead to some career goal. He got it right, I think.

But this old book of mine makes use of my studies begun in the '50s of the concert audience and the relationship between taste and perceived social class. It owes a debt to an essay I wrote for *American Quarterly* in 1965 on "Scholarly Strategy," the structure, that is, of humanistic scholarship. It uses what a gang of anthropologists taught me about tribal peoples, the project that resulted in the book I did with Nancy O. Lurie, *The American Indian Today*. What I learned from the hundreds of contributors to *American Studies*, the journal I founded and edited, is evident in my discussions of almost every book I treat.

That my work on Edgar Poe connects to this book I already knew, because I had begun writing about tying Uncle Eddie to our national experience in 1951. I was a nervy sophomore at Harvard who wrote an essay responding to a strange lecture by Perry Miller that saw Poe as incomprehensible, isolated from his own times and society. Miller apparently was not offended by my corrections, for he remembered my paper. He turned up as the speaker at my doctoral ceremony in 1958 at Brown. I had the flu that hot June day, and during a long wait in the academic procession, in my newly hooded cap and gown, sat down to rest on the steps of Manning Hall. Miller was also under the weather, and plunked down beside me. "You're Levine, aren't you? You wrote that paper on Poe." He asked me whether I had done anything more on Poe. I confessed that I had; my thesis was on Poe. He asked to see it.

"You don't really want to read it, sir?"

"Yes I do. I rewrote my silly Poe lecture after reading your paper." My doctoral thesis was about understanding Poe in terms of his American environment. Miller read it and wrote me a warm note.

I won a share of the Anisfield-Wolfe Award in Race Relations for the book on Native Americans (the judges were Pearl Buck, Ashley Montagu and Oscar Handlin). John Henry Raleigh of Berkeley said that I was "the leading Poe scholar of [my] generation"; my study of the concert audience was reprinted in *American Culture in the Sixties* (along with pieces by John F. Kennedy, D. W. Brogan, Henri Peyre, John Canady, Roy Harvey Pearce, Newton Minnow, Stanley

Kunitz and other Big Gunners). The editor, Vineta Colby, said it was “certainly the best thing on music” written in that period. So I had earned reputations in seemingly disparate fields. Somebody showed me a *New York Times* feature article on folks named “Levine” who had done important things in this or that field. I was on it twice—its author hadn’t realized that one of the Levines had worked in different areas.

But until 2013, when I reread what I wrote in the ’70s and early ’80s, I had not realized how much my work in diverse fields was really part of a coherent whole. The anthropologists had taught me about cultures whose people perceive the world differently than we do. My years abroad introduced me to western civilizations that showed features ours had exhibited a century and more before. Hundreds of concertgoers in my surveys had talked—eagerly—about how changes in their tastes had altered their perceptions of where they stood in our society. Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd” opened a window on urban life in 1840, and in some ways what appeared outside that window was closer to our Colonia Nápoles neighborhood in Mexico City in the 1970s than to the Midwestern college burg where I have spent most of my life. And certainly the special issues of *American Studies* that I edited—I think especially of *Perceptions of Black America* (1970) and *Urban Issues* (1973)—taught me things I leaned upon in writing about literature as social history.

My hopeful feelings in this book about individual Americans’ increasing ability to accept folks different from themselves assumed a kind of continuing social mobility. Our circles of acceptance, I hoped, would continue to expand. In 2013, national concerns about frontiers have to do first with a lessened economic mobility, second with illegal immigrants, and third with the rights of our citizens whose gender roles have previously kept them in the closet or made them outcasts.

Hawthorne’s character Holgrave had shown us how to change professions: become competent in the new trade, and go for it. He had changed roles as easily in his life as I have. (I have worked behind the counter in a fast-food restaurant, waited on customers in a retail store, driven an ice cream truck, been a professional musician, a network radio commentator, an artist, a university professor, administrator,

editor.) But Harold Frederic's young minister has some difficulties in meeting new situations or new ideas, and especially in accepting people he had been brought up to fear. The poor guy lacks Holgrave's cool and my dumb luck, but his wife and a pair of "good frauds," the Soulsbys, see to his welfare. There's a continuity in all this.

In 2013 thoughtful Americans worry that our nation is losing its social suppleness, that social mobility is lessening. I hope not, though like everyone else I am concerned about extremes of poverty and wealth. My old essay on the social structure of the concert audience dealt with a very different musical world, but my work, based, again, on studies I had directed in the late 1950s and early '60s, suggested that economics—size of income—was not a very good predictor of one's perceived social location. Tastes and patterns of friendship and association were at least as important.

Perhaps that's still true. Perhaps you are what you and your circle share, and your circle may include folks with very different income, backgrounds, and personal histories.

Reactions to other matters that struck me in revisiting *Annihilated Space* follow.

A couple of times I reference the "Virginia Edition" of Poe's works. I knew its limitations when I wrote the book, but it was for much of what Poe wrote the fullest thing we had. That later and much better texts and explications are not available in one standard edition is a shame (but not a scandal). For those texts we were able to establish and explicate, readers would do better consulting the editions done by Thomas Ollive Mabbott, by Burton Pollin and by my wife and me, though we never got to everything in Poe or even to everything in that incomplete "Virginia Edition."

I notice from my prose that in the 1970s one usually said "black" rather than "Afro," "sex roles" rather than "gender roles," and that the neutral pronoun choice was "he," not "she or he" or "they." Yet I'm pleased to see how strongly my old book reflects feminist ideals. I suppose that has been a continuing theme in my career. It began very early. When I was a seventh grade schoolkid, an eighth grade girl ran to catch up with me as I started the walk home. I was surprised—you

usually expected little contact from children a grade ahead of you. I knew her only as a good musician—we played together in grade school orchestra and band—and remember only some characteristics: she was smart, wiry-strong, self-confident. She wanted to talk. She had tried to get a job delivering *Newsday*, and the paper wouldn't give her one because she was a girl. Who ever heard of a girl newsboy? She wanted to know if I didn't think that was unfair.

I had never thought of such a thing. But now that she laid it out for me, I could see that she was right. It wasn't fair. She could certainly ride her bike carrying the big handlebar-bag of rolled newspapers and heave them at porches as capably as any boy, and probably with better aim than most. Of course I didn't know what she could do about the unfairness. She had already asked her mother to speak to "them." Nothing doing; it did no good.

When I got home, I tried to figure out why she had chosen me to speak to. Took a while to come up with a likely reason. I was one of the few Jewish kids in the school. I had in fact gotten beaten up with some regularity for that reason. She probably knew that. I was also supposed to be a smart student. Maybe she thought that I was the one to talk to because I understood discrimination.

A few notes on developments since I wrote this on people and matters mentioned herein: The rural Jefferson County Kansas family I use as an informal reference point in Chapter Nine has lost the capable grandmother, both parents and the "spread." Their house is gone. The daughter whom I knew as the most promising child is married and living in California, doing well, so far as the former neighbors, my current informants, can tell. One of the twins—I had barely known them—has returned to this area after time in Oregon. He has a criminal record, but was warm and personable when I ran into him at a book-signing. His twin sister is an alcoholic. The girl whom I knew as an overweight teenager owns some property locally; deserted by their father, she has lost two of her three children.

The family I used as an example of Americans' exotic application of values connected with free choice to areas generally left untouched in other nations currently includes among siblings a Vatican official, the president of a synagogue and a Trotskyite labor organizer.

Readers old enough to remember the terrific impact of the oil embargo will feel its influence in my discussion of auto travel in the section on Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. Before the embargo, gas cost around 25 cents a gallon; during price wars in Lawrence, it would dip as low as 16.7 cents at off-brand stations. When gas prices leaped up, prices of everything else did, too, often to levels above what could be blamed on increased production and transportation costs. I find that even students who have a pretty good feel for the history of the past half-century generally are not aware of the shock caused by this big bump-up of inflation.

My discussion of "relative deprivation" and the capacity for forceful, even violent protest (it's in the section on *Home to Harlem*) ignores the power of non-violent protest. I certainly knew about that, having taught the direct line of influence from Henry David Thoreau to Mahatma Gandhi and to the civil rights movement every time I gave a course that covered the Transcendentalists.

And this exhausts my list of aspects of *Annihilated Space* that I feel need some extra explanation. I think of an old slogan: "You've seen the movie. Now read the book!"



## Index

To make this index as useful and easy to use as possible, I've incorporated in a single list the names of authors and of scholars cited, fictional characters, titles of books, plays, stories, poems, essays and articles as well as a number of terms and concepts. Computer-generated, the first print-out of the index was riddled with errors, omissions and absurdities. I have tried to fix matters so that the thing will be user-friendly, leaning in the direction of over-inclusiveness when choices had to be made. If mistakes remain, I apologize.

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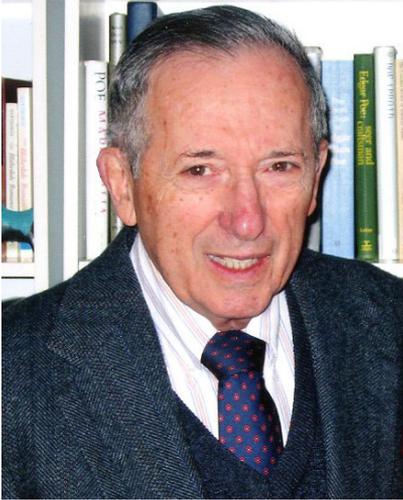
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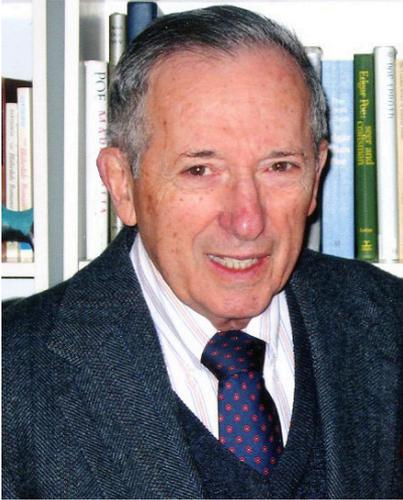




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