

LECTURES ON AMERICAN LITERATURE

SECOND EDITION

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NOTE ON SECOND EDITION

Justin Quinn

The first edition of this book, published in 2002, was intended to supplement our students' study of American literature. It soon became apparent that it was being used as a reference guide and introduction by other students in the Czech Republic. Although there are many textbooks that cover this material published in the US and the UK, it was clear that there was a need for a survey of this area that was inflected by the specificities of the Czech context.

This second edition aims to amplify that work, while also expanding and improving the general coverage. Readers will see significant changes in the way that the twentieth century is dealt with. Much material has been added (especially on drama, popular culture, and the contemporary period), old material has been updated, and individual chapters are less numerous and more capacious, in order to accommodate the multiple authorship of the text.

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The majority of the material up in 'Beginnings to 1914' was written by Martin Procházka with additions by David Robbins.

Justin Quinn edited the twentieth-century section, and wrote the material on twentieth-century poetry, Zora Neale Hurston, Willa Cather, John Updike, Jonathan Franzen, Don DeLillo, and Dirty Realism; the introductions to periods 1945-1970 (with contributions by Hana Ulmanová) and 1910-1930, and part of the section on Ralph Ellison.

Erik Roraback wrote the introduction to the period 1970-2000, the sections on Thomas Pynchon, Norman Mailer, Kurt Vonnegut, David Foster Wallace, Lydia Davis, and Gertrude Stein, part of the sections on Toni Morrison and Ralph Ellison.

Hana Ulmanová wrote the material on twentieth-century prose (with the exceptions of those passages noted here as written by other authors).

Pavla Veselá wrote the Introduction to the period 1930-1945, all the sections on Popular Culture, and the section on Marilynne Robinson 

Clare Wallace wrote the material on twentieth-century drama, and contributed to the Introduction to the period 1945-1970.

INTRODUCTION

Martin Procházka

One of the key problems of American literary histories is that of the unity of writing on the territory of the United States. To establish this unity simply on territorial principles is insufficient. To confine it within the boundaries of authoritative ‘American traditions’ delineated by critics and editors of anthologies is risky. An example of such an approach is Leon Howard’s *Literature and the American Tradition*. In the conclusion of his book Howard gives a surprisingly vague definition of this tradition: ‘a sort of intangible national quality in American literature and an under-the-surface source of that power which contemporary literature--and perhaps America itself--derives from the past’ (1960: 329). It does not help much either to see American literature as a product of ‘numerous individual imaginings’ as Malcolm Bradbury and Richard Ruland do in their literary history *From Puritanism to Postmodernism* (1991: 9). To organize and explain these ‘imaginings’ one must establish mostly fictional narratives which necessarily enhance some and suppress others. For instance, Bradbury and Ruland quote Hugh Kenner who sees in American literature a conjunction of modernism in art and of the revolutionary development in modern technology (1991:3).

A more productive approach has been pointed out by Sacvan Bercovitch in the introduction to yet unfinished *Cambridge History of American Literature*: to view American literature as a set of ‘meanings and possibilities generated by competing ideologies, shifting realities and the confrontation of cultures’ (1994: 6). In other words, we must accept that American literature is never homogeneous (in the twentieth century there are distinct traditions of Southern, Jewish, African American, Native American, and Latino literatures), that it develops from different cultural centers (see the following chapter) and that it is

affected by changes unprecedented in Europe (the existence of the 'frontier,' the expansion to the West, but also the issue of slavery).

Though the authors of these lectures accept that 'American literary history is no longer the history of a certain, agreed-upon group of American masterworks' (Bercovitch, 1994: 2), they have selected literary texts which illustrate some most important features of the literary--and, in some cases, also broader, cultural--developments on the territory of the United States from the foundation of the first English colonies to the first decade of the twentieth-first century. While the older literature is discussed by Martin Procházka and David Robbins in the form of a selective and interpretive historical survey, twentieth-century writing is viewed from different angles, according to its main genres, cultural and ethnic differences. This also determines the structure of this book: after the first part, dealing with the major literary and cultural developments before 1914, sections on twentieth-century poetry, prose, and drama, and on major developments in post-1950 fiction follow.

AMERICAN LITERATURE:
BEGINNINGS TO 1914

Martin Procházka and David Robbins

1. HISTORICAL INFLUENCES & DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

American literature did not grow peacefully and unproblematically from English roots, although many colonists who settled along the northeastern Atlantic coast were of English origin. Their writing was shaped by many influences, especially by the encounter with the alien reality of the American continent and by religious dissent.

ALIEN REALITY OF THE NEW WORLD

For the first settlers, this reality was Janus-faced--both an earthly paradise and a hell full of terrible creatures. They were exposed to the severity of the climate, to famine and to diseases. As intruders seizing the lands of Native Americans (Indians), they were involved in cruel fights and even wars. The extreme conditions suffered by the first colonists and the hardships endured by frontiersmen, backwoodsmen, and settlers in the Midwest and the Far West gave birth to a set of cultural values based chiefly on individualism and self-reliance. These values shaped the heroes (especially of popular literature) and themes of the search for freedom, justice, prosperity, and adventure.

Another result of the encounter with this alien reality was the emphasis on nature in early American notions of culture and society. While the natural environment represented an alternative, it was often also represented as a counterpart to European civilization, laws, customs, and traditions, and it was believed that human beings were free to pursue happiness even beyond the boundaries of the civilized world and its laws. These are the important aspects of the American myth of the frontier. As many critics agree, some early American political leaders, as well as many writers, accepted the 'frontier [...] as the only definition of American utopia' (Williams 1969: 68).

RELIGIOUS DISSENT

The appearance of dissenting groups (soon called the Puritans) that either separated themselves entirely from the Church of England or strove to reform it from within was an indication of profound changes in religious consciousness as well as in the overall spiritual climate of the age. The traditional (i.e., Catholic) foundations of spiritual authority (hierarchy of prelates and fixed rituals codified for instance in the Book of Common Prayer), which the half-reformed Church of England had to reinforce, were disputed by the adherents of Martin Luther and, more frequently, by the followers of the Swiss reformer, John Calvin.

During the reign of Elizabeth I (1558-1603), religious persecution had been directed mainly against the Catholics as potential political enemies of the Crown (adherents of Spain and France). But the situation changed with the ascension of James Stuart to the English throne (1603). The Catholics, defeated after the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot in 1605, ceased to be the chief enemy of the state. Later in his reign, James I started to negotiate with Spain, the leading power of the Catholic world, and his son Charles I even harbored Catholic sympathies. After 1605, the rage of the religious as well as secular authorities was aimed against the Puritans. This persecution (led mainly by episcopal courts) caused some groups--for instance the Pilgrim Fathers--to seek spiritual freedom in the New World. Because of their efforts to leave the Church of England these radical Puritans were called Separatists.

In the Puritan colony established in 1630 on the shores of Massachusetts Bay, one of the most influential streams of thought--both in its own time and subsequently--was that of the followers of Boston's most influential preacher, John Cotton. These 'antinomians' rejected, even more strongly than most Puritans, the authority of tradition, ritual, canonical text, and institutional authority in favor of the potential for sudden and spontaneous redemption through the personal authority and judgment of each believer, in his personal and

intimate experience with the divine. They, therefore, did not feel bound by conventional moral or social regulations and limits, if their authentic personal experience guided them beyond those boundaries. They even argued that the Hebraic covenant for collective communal responsibility for its righteousness could be authentically upheld in this way only, and not through the imposition of religious or moral imperatives by ecclesiastical authorities. One should not exaggerate the influence of such Puritan antinomianism, since, even in Massachusetts Bay, non-Puritan settlers outnumbered Puritans roughly two to one; but it would be a significant oversight to underemphasize that influence over the long term.

Many Puritans regarded America as the Promised Land, the land of Canaan, to which God once led Moses and the Jews from their Egyptian captivity. They also referred to it as the New Jerusalem or 'the City on the Hill,' that is, a city created by God for the redeemed Christians after the Last Judgement, or the new church announced by Christ in his first sermon. Thus, America (originally just New England), became a synonym for a community of spiritually regenerated people whose mission was the spreading of salvation, and later of freedom throughout the entire world.

Events, beliefs, and figures of speech connected with religious dissent mark the origins of important features of American literature: along with resistance to European traditions, the Puritan 'read' the events of life and phenomena of nature as signs (symbols) of the sacred (Biblical) history, or saw them as promises of a utopia to come. The best known modern expression for these utopias is the 'American dream,' which is used to describe the most diverse expectations of the settlers seeking a new life, and of the poor striving for riches and social status. The roots of this transformation of the religious utopias in eighteenth-century American have been traced by Sacvan Bercovitch (1993: 162ff).

In addition to these features, which, along with a multiculturalism that was limited but, compared with Europe, unusually comprehensive, appeared even in the early history of

American culture, there are further traits, namely polycentrism and, later on (with the growing number of immigrants from Europe, Latin America and Asia, and changing attitudes to other races), multiculturalism and ethnicity.

POLYCENTRISM

In contrast to England where nearly all literary life has been concentrated in London since the Elizabethan age, literature in the North American colonies and the US originated and developed in a number of cultural centers. Many of them, such as New York, New Orleans, Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, became crossroads of diverse cultural traditions: British, North American, African-American, Jewish, Caribbean, Creole, Latin American (Latino), Mexican (Chicano) and East and South Asian.

The earliest and most important literary center was the Boston area, where the oldest institution of higher education in the US, Harvard College, was founded in 1636. The literature of New England is known for its Puritan origins and heritage, and, since the 1830s, also for Transcendentalism, a specific form of American Romanticism. New England culture originated in Massachusetts: apart from the Boston area (where the first settlement of the Pilgrim Fathers, Plymouth Plantation was founded in 1620) literature was also cultivated (from the mid-eighteenth century) in the western part of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, in the valley of the Connecticut River, around Springfield. Other early literary centers were the so-called Providence Plantations (later Rhode Island) established in the 1630s by the settlers who had been exiled from Massachusetts Bay. In the beginning of the eighteenth century, we also see literary history starting up in Connecticut: first in New Haven, where another widely known college, Yale, was founded at that time, and later in Hartford, which at the end of the eighteenth century became the home of a group of writers called Connecticut Wits.

During the eighteenth century the originally Dutch colony of New Amsterdam was transformed into New York by dynamic British settlers. From the latter half of the century New York was an important center of theater and publishing. Literary life in New York was given a boost in the 1810s and 1820s by the Knickerbocker Group of writers around Washington Irving, and by James Fenimore Cooper. At that time New York became the most important literary city in the US connected with the life and works of Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, and many later writers. From the 1890s, Greenwich Village, a district of lower Manhattan (close to New York University), has been famous for its bohemian life and unconventional literary magazines. About two decades later, modern African-American literature originated in Harlem in the movement called the 'Harlem Renaissance.'

Before New York, the cultural capital of the US was Philadelphia in Pennsylvania, which, since its foundation in 1682 by the Quaker William Penn, became a refuge for diverse religious sects persecuted by the Puritans. In the latter half of the eighteenth century Philadelphia became a center of the American Enlightenment (mainly thanks to the influence of Benjamin Franklin) and also a political center where two Continental Congresses convened in the Independence Hall and where the Declaration of Independence was adopted. At that time, Philadelphia was a more important publishing center than New York, attracting many writers, for instance Thomas Paine, Philip Freneau, Charles Brockden Brown, Hugh Henry Brackenridge, and later Edgar Allan Poe and Walt Whitman.

Literature in the colonial South was mostly cultivated in small societies such as the Tuesday Club (1754-56) in Annapolis, Maryland. Similar clubs, such as the Russell's Bookstore Group in Charleston, South Carolina (1850-60), were also established in the nineteenth century before the Civil War. But these were rather isolated activities. Literature in the old South, like education, was a matter of gentlemanly leisure, and had a little or nothing in common with public life. Thomas Jefferson, a Virginian who championed public education

and the leading role of intellectuals ('natural aristocrats') in the post-revolutionary society, was an exception.

Before the Civil War the only literary centers in the South were Charleston, South Carolina, and Richmond, Virginia. In the former city, *The Southern Review* (1828-32; another journal of the same name appeared in Baltimore, Maryland between 1867-79, and, in the twentieth century in Baton Rouge, Louisiana) was published by Hugh S. Legaré, and *The Southern Literary Journal and Monthly Magazine* (1835-38) printed contributions by the leading antebellum Southern author, William Gilmore Simms. Richmond, where *Southern Literary Messenger* (1834-64; renewed between 1939-44) was published, became important mainly because of Edgar Allan Poe. The postbellum (post-Civil War) period of the South saw the development of the specific regionalist, 'local color' school in an ethnically diverse New Orleans, Louisiana, a city which had an antebellum tradition of romantic French literature influenced by Chateaubriand. As early as 1837, a local paper in English, the *New Orleans Picayune* (a local word for a penny-coin) was founded. Toward the end of the nineteenth century it was printing the fiction of George Washington Cable, the leader of the local color movement concerned with the life and culture of local Creoles. The most important author of this movement became Kate Chopin. Other local color literature dealing mainly with African-American folklore was produced in Atlanta, Georgia, where Joel Chandler Harris, the author of famous *Uncle Remus* collections (1881-1906) and novels from the South in the time of Reconstruction, joined the staff of the newspaper the *Atlanta Constitution* (1868-).

Modern Southern literature was created by William Faulkner who transformed his birthplace of Oxford, Mississippi, into Jefferson, the center of the imaginary Yoknapatawpha [yoknapa'to:fa] County, where the stories of many of his novels take place. An important local center was Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, where a group of authors and

critics including Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and John Crowe Ransom gathered in the 1920s around *The Fugitive*, a bimonthly literary magazine.

Toward the end of nineteenth century life in the Midwest, especially in the Prairie region (nowadays the eastern part of the Dakotas, and the states of Illinois, Wisconsin, Missouri, Michigan, Indiana, Kansas, Nebraska, and Ohio) started to attract the attention of many authors, among them the novelists Edward Eggleston, Booth Tarkington, Hamlin Garland, Zona Gale, Willa Cather, and the poet James Whitcomb Riley. At the beginning of the twentieth century the so-called Chicago School emerged, including Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, and Sherwood Anderson. Chicago also became the scene of a poetic movement in the 1910s and 1920s sometimes named the Chicago Renaissance, including Edgar Lee Masters, Carl Sandburg, and Vachel Lindsay.

After 1848 when California became part of the US, and the Gold Rush attracted a great number of people from the east, San Francisco emerged as the first and most important literary center on the Pacific coast. It saw the literary beginnings of Samuel Langhorne Clemens (who later started to write under the pseudonym 'Mark Twain') and other authors (e.g., the short story writer Bret Harte, the fiction writer and poet Ambrose Bierce, and the poet Joaquin Miller) connected with the tradition of a 'tall tale,' a folk narrative of the settlers and gold miners in the Far West. San Francisco authors also include the Scotsman Robert Louis Stevenson and especially Frank Norris, the author of naturalist fiction. Jack London, another writer connected with naturalism, became known not only because of his animal stories from the Klondike, but also for many works of fiction inspired by his childhood, youth, and mature life in the San Francisco Bay Area. Most earlier authors from San Francisco contributed to two local periodicals *The Golden Era* and *Overland Monthly* (established 1852 and 1868, respectively).

Since its foundation in 1868 the University of California at Berkeley has influenced intellectual life in the Bay Area. However, the most important literary development in the twentieth century, which brought San Francisco worldwide fame was the emergence of the Beat Movement in the 1950s. The center of the movement was a bookstore named City Lights run by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, a major beat poet, and the publisher of the manifesto of the Beat generation, the poem *Howl* by Allen Ginsberg. Other important beat authors were Gregory Corso, and the novelist Jack Kerouac; close to them were William Burroughs, Kenneth Rexroth, and Henry Miller. Due to the last mentioned author and the Nietzschean poet Robinson Jeffers, another place, Big Sur, a mountainous stretch of rugged Pacific coast south of Carmel, became famous as a literary setting, and also a small but highly interesting center of cultural life.

In the 1920s Hollywood emerged as the largest center of movie production in the world, attracting numerous novelists and dramatists who wrote for film, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Theodore Dreiser, Maxwell Anderson, Nathanael West, and many others. Some of them, for instance Fitzgerald and West, made Hollywood the scene of their writings.

MULTICULTURALISM AND ETHNICITY

In contrast to polycentrism, which was one of the oldest features of American literature, multiculturalism, beyond the white protestant community, has developed rather slowly. The pluralistic notion of the equality and coexistence of many different cultures was accepted (but by no means generally and without tensions or frictions) only during the last three decades of the twentieth century.

Nonetheless, since the very beginning, the settlement of America was multiethnic. Even the first colonists were a 'mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, German, and Swedes. From this promiscuous breed, that race now called Americans have arisen'

(Crèvecoeur 1994: 474). These ethnicities, however, did not simply live separately next to each other; instead they mixed their customs, national identities, and linguistic heritages in a 'strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country.' Not unusual was 'a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations. 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' (Crèvecoeur 1994: 476). Under these circumstances, the general condition of accommodation was common renunciation of cultural authority sites and of (the possibility of) cultural valorization.

Such fluidity of identity grew partly out of the kind of frontier utilitarianism necessitated by conditions in the American colonies. Potential marriage partners were lacking, as were the skills of almost all trades and professions. As Benjamin Franklin notes: '[In] America, [...] people do not inquire concerning a Stranger, What is he? but, What can he do?' (Franklin 1994: 357).

J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur (actually Michel-Guillaume Jean de C., 1735-1813) was the first writer to deal with the question of multiculturalism in the third letter of his *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782). According to him, any European 'becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our *Alma Mater* [literally 'feeding, nurturing mother']. Here the individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men whose labors and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world' (Crèvecoeur 1994: 374).

Crèvecoeur believed that America was a fertile land capable of providing sufficient food for all immigrants. In addition, he emphasized the transformative function of the new society where European hierarchies and subservience were replaced by freedom and equality. Therefore he envisioned the fertile land and the free society of the New World functioning as

a melting pot in which a new human race, the Americans, would be produced: people acting ‘on new principles,’ having ‘new ideas’ and ‘new opinions’ (Crèvecoeur 1994: 374). This transformation would be accompanied, Crèvecoeur imagined, by the gradual disappearance of religious sectarianism and growing ‘indifference’ (376) among believers and their churches. In this way, Crèvecoeur thought, a uniform nation could be molded.

It must be added that, despite his utopian expectations, Crèvecoeur was very sensitive to the imperfections of the new society: to class differences recreated by the republican government, to slavery and to the cruel treatment of African Americans, and even to the cultural decay of the frontiersmen. In the conclusion of the *Letters*, Crèvecoeur envisions a solution to contemporary conflicts and tensions in a retreat from the allegedly free society: his farmer-hero seeks safety among the Indians and makes all efforts to live according to the rhythms of nature. Consequently, the notion of America as melting pot was replaced by the desire for harmony between nature and culture, which is best characterized by the life of Native Americans. This orientation of Crèvecoeur’s thought moves it even farther from specific problems of multiculturalism in America.

Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer* were influential mainly in Europe. They created a demand for things American, and increased the immigration to the US. (In the US, Crèvecoeur’s notion of America as a melting pot of cultures was revisited, revived, and reconstructed, in various ways, in the mid-nineteenth century by Ralph Waldo Emerson and other thinkers.) Of course, much greater numbers of emigrants were driven across the Atlantic by the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, and the Irish Potato Famine of the 1840s. Because of this influx, xenophobia against poor settlers from abroad culminated between the 1830s and the 1850s, and it has often reappeared. One of the chief causes of the anti-immigrant sentiments were fears of Irish Catholicism, and later also resistance toward non-Anglophone emigrants from Italy, Scandinavia, Central and Eastern Europe. As a result, the

culture of European immigrants was ostracized for a long period, and conformity with the ethnic type of White Anglo-Saxon Protestant was the necessary condition for acceptance. Since this time, however, the abbreviation for the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) has become a term of abuse. In their efforts between 1850 and 1920 to cultivate economic advantage and cultural acceptance by the dominant protestant ethnicities of themselves and of later-arriving non-protestant ethnic groups, politically savvy elements of the Catholic Irish community introduced new forms of 'northern' racism against African-American refugees from the American South.

It was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that there were signs of interest in immigrant life in American literature (i.e., in the novels of Willa Cather). From the 1920s on the works of immigrants written in other languages than English, for instance the novel trilogy *Giants in the Earth*, *Peder Victorious*, *Their Fathers' God* (1927-31) by a Norwegian settler in Minnesota, Ole Edvart Rølvaag (1876-1931), have been discovered and translated into English. Yiddish literature, pioneered by émigrés from the Ukraine, Poland, and Russia, developed from the beginning of the last century, but its leading authors, such as Sholom Aleichem (Solomon Rabinowicz, 1859-1916), and later Isaac Bashevis Singer (1981 Nobel Prize winner), became popular only after World War II, together with the birth of a specific American Jewish literature, initiated by Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and others. Building on the stylistic and rhetorical strategies pioneered by Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and W. E. B. DuBois, the Harlem Renaissance writers of the 1920s transformed the awareness of African American literature. By some, the ethnic and cultural autonomy of African Americans was affirmed, along with their acceptance of modern civilization, and the influences of the French avant-garde.

After 1945, new developments in American society, especially the effects of the immigration from East and South Asia, Mexico, and other Latin American countries, and the

cultural emancipation of Indians, marked the appearance of Asian, Chicano, Latino, and Native-American writing.

Since the 1970s, American multiculturalism has been an important force of transformation in American literature. Apart from cultural specificity, individual identity and the problems of gender and sex have become increasingly important literary themes. Now, American notions of multiculturalism have also incorporated women, gay and lesbian literature, and various forms of ethnicity. In other words, increasing attention is being paid to groups which were marginal or marginalized in traditional, patriarchal, authoritarian and white society.

However, ethnicity still remains a problematic term in American culture. As Werner Sollors shows, the word *ethnic* originally meant 'heathen,' 'non-Israelite,' 'non-Christian.' So was it used and understood at the dawn of modern European and American culture. For instance, the American Indians were referred to as 'ethnics,' because their customs were not in keeping with the Puritan notions of Christian morals (Sollors 1986: 25-26). The other usage of the word was established only in the mid-nineteenth century when *ethnic* started to be understood as 'peculiar to race and nation' (25).

While most European states had developed mainly *ethnocentric* systems of government, US notions of ethnicity and nationality are distinctly *polycentric*, based on the belief that 'every discrete people is entitled to be free from foreign domination' (Millican 1990: 42). This has not only been practiced in foreign policy, but has also influenced twentieth-century US notions of ethnicity.

But ethnicity is hardly of the same nature as nationhood or political representation. Since the 1940s, ethnic tension and struggle in the US have been changing the meaning of the word. One of the first attempts to define ethnicity in this new setting emphasizes belonging to the ethnic group against 'foreign birth.' It also adds that a person may be considered a

member of such a group even against her or his own will. Later American theories of ethnicity, for instance that of the Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth (b. 1928), are concerned with ethnic boundaries (which are ‘mental, cultural, social, moral, aesthetic, but not necessarily territorial’ [Sollors 1986: 27]) and with markers of these boundaries. These boundaries are not territorial, but they are coincident with the criteria of membership in the group and exclusion from it. The identity of an ethnic group does not, at least primarily, have cultural, let alone historical, basis.

Recently, opinions were voiced that ethnicity cannot be distinguished by its contents at all but that it is mainly ‘a matter of the importance that individuals ascribe to it, including, of course, scholars and intellectuals.’ In contrast to achieved or inscribed ethnicity (i.e., the ethnic label given to the individual in society), ascribed ethnicity became a factor of forming specific cultural, ethnic and religious groups. It made many originally conformist individuals re-define their own identity and join a specific group (i.e., Black Muslim, Black Feminists, etc.). This development caused some anthropologists to claim that ‘marks of [ethnic] identity’ were ‘in a very important sense empty symbols’ (Sollors 1986: 35). On the other hand, liberalist approaches to ethnicity are often problematized by the presence of the often unmentionable category of race. Sometimes, the term ‘ethnic’ is used as a euphemism for the heavily charged word ‘racial.’ But it is also true that race can be looked upon as ‘one aspect of ethnicity’ (39). Despite the muddled meaning of the term, themes of ethnicity and race have become prominent features of American literature after 1945. This can be illustrated by numerous texts including *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, the poetry of Amiri Baraka, the novels of Toni Morrison, *Sophie’s Choice* by William Styron, and many others.

2. PERIODIZATION OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

The encounter with the New World and religious dissent shaped the first works of colonial literature (1588-1776). The former date refers to the publication of *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* by Thomas Hariot (c. 1560-1621) describing the first English colony in North America called Roanoke according to its site, an island off the coast of North Carolina. The latter date marks the beginning of the American War of Independence. Most works of this period prove that writing in American settlements had already its own specificity different from the first literary attempts in other British colonies, such as Canada or Australia.

The 'declarations of independence' from Britain, its government, religion, and cultural traditions, as well as the first efforts to express American cultural identity characterize the literature of the American Revolution and the Early Republic (1776-1823). In the first half of this period Americans demonstrated the political, more precisely democratic, meaning of literature: it was the time of The Republic of Letters. The most important text of this period was the series of essays entitled *The Federalist* (1787), which greatly facilitated the adoption of the US Constitution. In the latter half of this period, the first genuinely American novels were published--by Hugh Henry Brackenridge (1748-1816) and Charles Brockden Brown (1770-1810). The latter author also became the first professional American writer to make his living by writing novels. The end of the Early Republic saw the rise of the international reputation of Washington Irving (1783-1859), the first widely translated American writer. Apart from the traditional cultural and literary centers that had been developing since colonial times, such as Boston and New England, New York, Philadelphia, Annapolis, Maryland, and Richmond, Virginia, literary life also started to flourish in the western territories. The first

center of journalism and literature in the newly settled territories was Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

The following period of American Romanticism (1820s-1860s) was not only a time when American Literature received formative impulses from Europe (from English and German literature, philosophy and aesthetic thought--Scott, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Carlyle, Kant, Goethe, German Classical Philosophy and German Romantics, for instance Ludwig Tieck), it was also the period of the emergence of a genuinely American literature: the essays, prose, and poetry of the Transcendentalists (Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller), the tales and novels of Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864), which dealt with the colonial past, and the late Romantic novels of Herman Melville (1819-1891), which significantly modified several basic American themes. In this period we also mark the beginnings of Southern literature in the works of William Gilmore Simms (1806-1870) and Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849). The latter author greatly influenced French Symbolism and Surrealism. The Abolitionist movement drew attention to the problem of slavery, and the first African American authors appeared, for instance Frederick Douglass (c. 1818-1895). Interaction, positive and negative, with the Abolitionist movement also motivated the first organized efforts of an American women's rights movement, two of whose most influential writers were Margaret Fuller (1810-1850) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902). The works of Walt Whitman (1819-1892) and Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) were written at the close of this period and are often presented as anticipating literary Modernism.

The period after the Civil War was marked by enormous demographic, social, and economic changes. The rapid development of capitalism in the north, the settlement of the Far West and what was referred to as the Reconstruction of the South (the slow and painful changes of its political and economic structure) were the prelude to the fast economic growth and the deepening of social differences. This period (1865 to the turn of the century) received

its sobriquet from the novel by Mark Twain (1835-1910) and Charles Dudley Warner (1829-1900), *The Gilded Age* (1873) because of the central importance of gold and new standards of luxury introduced by the *nouveaux riches*). It saw the rise of new fiction and satire based on the popular literary forms of the tall tale (Mark Twain, Bret Harte), the social novel of William Dean Howells (1837-1920), the psychological fiction of Henry James (1843-1916) with the international theme of the encounter of Americans with European traditions and cultures and Europeans with American reality, and the literature of American Naturalism (Norris, Crane, Dreiser). This period was also marked by the boom of regionalist writing, called *local color*, which produced not only works focused on a specific region and its local life, but also marked the beginnings of independent women fiction in the works of Kate Chopin (1850-1904), Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935), Willa Cather (1873-1947), and Edith Wharton (1862-1937). While at least one of the principal black voices (Booker T. Washington, 1856-1915) continued to be characterized by rhetoric that valorized the values of American 'white' society, the post-Civil War period also brought new influences--especially folklore--into African American literature. With the development of the local color school, new literary centers sprang up, especially on the Pacific Coast (San Francisco) and also in the South (New Orleans, Atlanta).

The tumultuous period from the turn of the century to the early 1920s was dominated by the growth of Modernism. In the poetry of Ezra Pound (1885-1972) and T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), American Modernism became firmly linked with European developments in France and Britain. It also absorbed oriental influences from Chinese and Japanese literature. Imagism, launched by Ezra Pound, became an international Anglo-American movement, complemented by Vorticism in Britain. Also other developments, the so-called Chicago Renaissance (Sandburg, Masters, Lindsay) and the modern short story of Sherwood Anderson (1876-1941) were influenced by modernist poetics. The impulses of Modernism also shaped

the most significant movement in African American literature, the Harlem Renaissance led by the poet and prose writer Langston Hughes (1902-1967). The period of Modernism saw also the rise of modern American drama (Eugene O'Neill [1888-1953]) which soon won international acclaim.

Modernist literature was a great inspiration for the authors of the next stage of American literary history between the wars. The most significant group, which was in close contact with European cultural development, were the Expatriates (or, the Lost Generation of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Stein). Another important development in the '20s was the fiction of William Faulkner (1897-1962), which laid the foundations for modern Southern literature. Also Faulkner's beginnings were influenced by Modernism (Joyce, T. S. Eliot). Another important development was the transformation of a social novel, into polyphonic fiction dealing with a great number of varieties of social life and merging numerous genres and styles. These features are significant in the monumental trilogy of the novels of John Dos Passos (1896-1970), *USA* (1930-1936). The '30s were the time of economic depression and of the development of Marxist and left-wing literature, the best novel of social protest being *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck.

Literature after World War II is marked not only by regional diversity, but by growing ethnic differences (the most important ethnic development is Jewish literature). There are new developments in African American literature (black Muslim, black lesbian writers) and in other ethnic literatures (Chicano and Latino, East Asian, Native American, etc.). In addition, one should not overlook the persistent production of Hawthornian romances, by both Modernist writers like Scott Fitzgerald and 'postmodernists' such as Thomas Pynchon and Tom Robbins.

3. EARLIEST MONUMENTS OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION

Before the arrival of the English-speaking colonists, the indigenous inhabitants of North America had a rich oral tradition. Their tales were closely related to images and symbols in the form of petroglyphs (rock or stone carvings) and other graphic traces. However, there are no records of these stories before 1623, when Gabriel Sagard, a French Franciscan missionary, took down the first of the twenty-five versions of the Iroquois myth of the creation of the world. In 1694, a Spanish colonel Juan Manje recorded the creation story of the Akimel O'odham (or Pima) Indians in Arizona. The first transcript and translation of the Iroquois myth (*Norton 5: 54ff*) was published in 1827 by a Tuscarora, named David Cusick (before 1800-1840). The *Walam Olum* (Red Record, Red Score) an alleged pictographic record of Delaware (or Lenape) creation and deluge myths and migration narratives dated before 1600 BCE, is most probably a forgery made by Constantine Samuel Rafinesque (1783-1840), a botanist, antiquarian and polymath, and based on his study of Egyptian hieroglyphs, Mayan script and Chinese characters. Today, Native Americans are divided about the authenticity of this document: while it is no longer endorsed by the Delaware Indians, the Lenape Nation of Pennsylvania believes it to be authentic.

The beginnings of the literature of the English-speaking colonists can be traced to the English settlement of two areas on the East coast of North America, now called Virginia and Massachusetts. The first printed account by Thomas Hariot (c. 1560-1621), an important Elizabethan astronomer, mathematician, and translator, appeared in 1588 as *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*. Hariot tried to make up for all the failures of the first English colony of Roanoke (situated on the eponymous island south of Chesapeake Bay). The disastrous moments of the colonization, including the disappearance of 114 settlers from

the second Roanoke colony between 1587 and 1589, had been described in earlier reports, letters and journals¹ by Arthur Barlowe (1584), Ralph Lane (1586), and especially John White (c. 1540-c. 1593), the governor of the second Roanoke colony. In contrast to these writers, Hariot emphasized the extraordinary fertility of the land and the technological advantage of Europeans over Native Americans. To conquer this earthly paradise the colonists should only persuade the natives by their technology and reasoning that the Christian God was omnipotent and that they were his chosen people sharing his divine power.

The main purpose of Hariot's report is to promote colonization. Therefore its first part contains a description of all commodities that the new land can yield and the second part catalogues all agricultural plants grown by the Native Americans and discusses their possible uses. The last part deals with the life of the natives and their culture, including religion. All this is accompanied by Theodore de Bry's (1528-1598) engravings made according to [the] colored drawings by John White. While these drawings are precise in details, the general shapes and postures of the Native Americans are highly stylized. A comparative study of White's drawings and paintings has shown that he made no considerable difference between the postures of imaginary characters like Ancient Britons or Picts and those of the Indians. Although Hariot's account is full of humanistic respect in his relation to the Native Americans and even shows admiration for some of their technological skills ('The way they build boats in Virginia is very wonderful. For although they completely lack any iron tools, they can make boats as good as ours' Lorant 1965: 249), his whole report is a typical early modern colonial text in which the discourse of representation is firmly tied to those of appropriation and exchange of commodities.

Other historians trace the origin of colonial literature to a later report, *A True Relation*, written in 1608 by one of the founders of the colony at Jamestown in Chesapeake Bay,

¹ All these accounts were published by Richard Hakluyt (c. 1552-1616) in the first edition of his comprehensive work *The Principal Navigations, Voyages and Discoveries of the English Nation* (1589).

Virginia, Captain John Smith (1580-1631). His writings became a principal source of information for the later settlers in the area to the north of Virginia, called the New England (today's states of Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine). In 1620, anti-Anglican Calvinist religious Separatists, who called themselves Pilgrims and were later designated as the 'Pilgrim Fathers,' established the Plymouth Plantation in southeastern Massachusetts. The colony of Massachusetts Bay (nowadays the Boston area) was founded in 1630 by another, much larger, group of Puritans led by John Winthrop (1588-1649). The latter venture was not motivated by purely religious concerns as was that of the Pilgrims. Commercial involvement of the Massachusetts Bay Company played a strong role in it.

The utopian features of the first New England religious settlements underwent an acid test in the clash with other ways of life and beliefs. Apart from occasional skirmishes with the Indians, the first settlers quarreled mainly among themselves. Discord and tension is to be found widely in the *General History of Virginia* (1624) by John Smith, but a major conflict arose in 1628 between the Pilgrims and the inhabitants of the Merrymount (or Ma-re Mount) settlement, which, at 35 kilometers' distance, was perhaps too close to Plymouth Plantation. More than a clash of territorial ambitions or economic interests, however, this confrontation manifested a conflict of two cultures, the light-hearted, witty and potentially pagan Cavaliers, represented by the owner of Merrymount Thomas Morton (c. 1579-1647), and the serious, spiritual, but also greatly intolerant Pilgrims.² Pilgrim and Puritan hostility to the first settlers of different moral and religious persuasions, as well as to the Indians, is often mentioned in the writings of Roger Williams (c. 1603-1683), the founder of the Rhode Island colony

² If William Bradford's history is to be believed, the use of military power against Morton and his subsequent deportation to England had different reasons. The main source of Morton's profit was the fur trade, namely the exchange of beaver skins for guns. According to Bradford, Morton even taught the Indians to shoot and handle gunpowder. No doubt this caused the fears of the Puritans who tried to keep the guns away from the Indians in order to control them better.

(originally known as Providence Plantations), which became a model of religious tolerance not only among Christians, but also between them and the Jews or the Indians.

GENERAL HISTORY OF VIRGINIA

John Smith's narrative remains one of the most important sources on the early English settlement of North America. Its author was originally a mercenary who fought the Turks in the ranks of the Austrian army. He was captured and enslaved, but managed to escape. On his way home via Russia and Eastern Europe, he befriended the King of Poland. In 1606 Smith became interested in the scheme of the London Trading Company to establish a permanent colony in America. The purpose of this project was financial profit, rather than the professed aim of spreading Christianity among the Indians.

After a stop at the Canary Islands, Smith was accused of mutiny and imprisoned during the latter half of the voyage. Only later when the settlers found him an indispensable food provider, organizer and a stalwart soldier well acquainted with strategies of survival, was he cleared of all accusations and received financial compensation. In 1608 Smith became the president of the council governing the Jamestown colony and later he was elected a governor. The colonists' trust in him might have been due to his aggressive treatment of the Indians, whom he managed to bring 'in such fear and obedience, as his very name would sufficiently frighten them.' (Smith was an admirer of Cortés, the Spanish conquistador who uprooted the Aztec state and brutally massacred the inhabitants of its capital Tenochtitlan.) In spite of his important position in the colony, Smith had to return to England for medical treatment of a wound caused by a gunpowder explosion.

In 1614 Smith explored the northern part of the Atlantic coast of what is today Massachusetts and Maine. His maps and *A Description of New England* (1616) did a good service to the Puritan settlers of Massachusetts in 1620 and 1630, but the Pilgrims refused

Smith's offer to lead their group. Nevertheless, Smith did not give up and started to plan his own expedition which would be better prepared and organized than the Jamestown colony. In view of this he published *Advertisements for the Unexperienced Planters of New England* (1631), but death prevented him from realizing his plans.

The General History of Virginia is a remarkable work beyond being an early source of colonial history. Firstly, because the foregoing gives a trustworthy description of the predicament of the first settlers who brought their own bad habits into the New World. Smith speaks of the 'sins' the colonists committed even when the scarcity of supplies had made their drinking or gluttony impossible. On arrival in the Promised Land the colonists were exposed to the severity of climate, infectious diseases and the resistance of the Indians. Smith's account amply demonstrates the general feature of early American colonies, namely that the survival of settlers largely depended on the foods produced by mostly hostile Indians, and not on their own agricultural produce. To survive meant to cheat or rob the Indians, who then became a permanent menace.

The second important feature of Smith's account is a permanent misunderstanding between the Indians and the colonists. Both the Algonquin tribes led by the great chief, Powhatan (the name given by Smith to the chief is actually the name of the whole confederacy of these tribes living on the territory of the states of Virginia and Maryland), and the colonists, interpreted the events during their encounters differently and their misunderstandings led to a permanent crisis. One example was the robbery of the Indian 'idol' called Okee. The seeming friendliness of the Indians after this incident ('singing and dancing in sign of friendship') is interpreted as the transformation of the savages caused by the power of Christian God. Another instance of misunderstanding occurs when Smith is captured by the Indians during one of his exploratory trips. Hoping to ransom himself, Smith

gives 'a round ivory double compass' to one of the chiefs (whom he significantly calls a 'king'). He then thinks to have impressed the Indians by his knowledge of the universe:

But when he demonstrated by the globe-like jewel the roundness of the earth and skies, the sphere [i.e., orbit] of the sun, moon and stars, and how the sun did chase the night round about the world continually, the greatness of the land and sea, the diversity of nations, variety of complexions and how we were to them antipodes and many other such like matters, they all stood as amazed with admiration.

Notwithstanding, within a hour after, they tied him to a tree, and as many as could stand about him prepared to shoot him, but the King holding up the compass in this hand, they all laid down their bows and arrows and in triumphant manner led him to Orapaks [i.e., to the village of Chief Powhatan, called 'the Emperor' by Smith]... (*Norton 3 1: 17*)

Though Smith is first treated well by Powhatan, he is soon in danger again. His superior technology and knowledge (representative of Western civilization) does not impress the Indians as much as he expected.

What really saved Smith from execution in Powhatan's village can hardly be inferred from his texts. However, the important fact is that his account of the intervention of Powhatan's daughter Pocahontas (c. 1595-1617, real name Matoaka) does not appear in his earlier works (mainly *The True Relation*) written immediately after the incident. The dramatic scene of the execution interrupted by the intervention of Pocahontas may easily be an apocryphal or fictionalized account. Powerful enough, it originated the first American love romance:

two great stones were brought before Powhatan; then as many as could, laid hands on him, dragged him to them, and thereon laid his head and being ready with their clubs to beat out brains, Pocahontas, the King's dearest daughter, when no entreaty could prevail, got his head in her arms and laid her own upon his to save him from death [...] (*Norton* 1: 20)

Up to this, the narrative is quite chaotic and filled with descriptions of hardships of the colonists, their skirmishes with the Indians and the 'devilish' Indian rituals. But here it gains some order and clarity with the appearance of Pocahontas, who becomes the first American heroine. Rather than a character, she is a personification not only of Indian submissiveness,³ but also of the fertility of the land, and of divine mercy when she brings a great quantity of corn to Jamestown and saves the colonists from starvation. Significantly, Smith connects her with the good Christian God: 'Thus from numb death our good God sent relief / The sweet assuager of all other grief' (*Norton* 3 1: 21). However, Pocahontas' further fate differed greatly from the role ascribed to her by Smith. She was captured by the colonists, kept as a hostage, converted to Christianity and sent to England as the wife of John Rolfe, the first importer of tobacco to Europe. She died in England several years later in religious ecstasy. Notwithstanding her end, she became an inspiration for many American novelists, poets, and dramatists (for instance, for Hart Crane in his long poem *The Bridge* [1930]). Her story points to the third important feature of early American writing: the interpenetration of history and fiction.

Last but not least, Smith's history and other first accounts of American colonization are remarkable for their narrative strategies. Though varied, some of them are narrated in the

³ This important allegorical dimension of Pocahontas has been demonstrated by Myra Jehlen: 'In the modern Western tradition emerging in Smith's time, the romantic love of a woman for a man [...] entails the woman's self-abandonment; in the legend of Pocahontas, the Indian, *cast as a woman*, abandons herself *and himself* to white manhood. Powhatan's humiliation is more than military' (Bercovitch 1994: 70; my emphasis).

third person (as the *General History*), making the author the hero of his narratives. Other accounts are in the first person, but they refer to the author in an oblique way, for instance, as to 'mine host' (in Thomas Morton's *New English Canaan*, 1624). The pure first-person narrative can be found only in the narratives written by the Calvinist Separatists and Puritans, as in William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation*, but even here the focus is on the pronoun *they*, which designates the Calvinist religious community.

OF PLYMOUTH PLANTATION

Whereas Smith's *General History* now appears as an attempt to give a *semblance of objectivity* to subjective experience and justification to the acts of an adventurer, William Bradford's (1590-1657) account of the first Puritan settlement, *Of Plymouth Plantation* (1630-46), constructs the collective experience of a dissenting group and transforms it into a general myth which gives a clear religious purpose to the colonization of America.

The reasons of Bradford's mythmaking are evident from his experiences with the trials and tribulations of the small Calvinist Separatist community which used to meet in the house of William Brewster in Scrooby, Nottinghamshire. Like other similar groups (one of them, led by the preacher John Smith, is mentioned in Bradford's history), this congregation refused to attend the services of the Church of England and to use the Book of Common Prayer. Most important, however, was their repudiation of church hierarchy. They believed that no ordained priests, rectors, or even bishops were necessary to mediate between them and their God. According to them, the relationship between the Christian and his God was established in the form of a *covenant* (that is, the contract made by God first with Adam and then renewed with Moses and by Christ's sacrifice). Because of the individual nature of the covenant, the congregation was understood as a community of individuals who were free to choose their elders (the most virtuous, zealous, learned, and authoritative members of the

group) and elect their ministers (clergymen of Calvinist and reformist inclination). This belief, which subverted the foundations of the state (or 'established') church, became the main cause of the persecution of both Separatists and Puritans (the latter determined to reform the Church of England from within) during the reign of James I.

In 1607, a year after Bradford at the age of sixteen joined the group, the members decided to emigrate to Holland to avoid relentless and increasing persecution. (For a detailed account of this period see Vančura 1965: 28-58.) Here they found themselves in isolation, with limited means to make a living, forced to work hard and burden their children with toil, some of whom became crippled or even died. Other children fled from their parents and accepted the 'loose manners' of the place, to which the Separatists strongly objected. Bradford complains of the secular way of the life of the Dutch, for instance of their failure 'to keep the Sabbath Day,' that is, to take part in all religious ceremonies, and to refrain from drinking and sex on Sundays.

Economic difficulties, fears that the community would disperse or lose religious zeal and anxious expectations of another war with Catholic Spain (the truce between the Dutch Republic and Spain came to an end in 1620) made the Pilgrims search for a permanent solution to their predicament: the New World offered them hope of this. Although they obtained a royal 'patent' for lands in Virginia, their ship, the Mayflower, landed after a long and tempestuous voyage much more to the north, at Cape Cod on the coast of the territory which later became Massachusetts. Because the ship was in a bad state and because of impending winter storms the Pilgrims decided, after an abortive attempt to sail to the south, to stay at this place, and on 11 November 1620 (21 November, according to our calendar), 41 representatives of 101 settlers signed a document called The Mayflower Compact whereby they declared themselves 'a Civil Body Politic,' that is, a self-governing entity, able to 'enact, constitute and frame such just and equal Laws, Ordinances, Acts, Constitutions, and Offices

[...], as shall be thought most meet [i.e., proper, suitable] and convenient for the general good of the Colony' (*Norton 3 1: 67*). The political autonomy of the new colony, which, according to the Compact, could elect governors (Bradford became the second governor), was reluctantly accepted by the English authorities and served as a model for other colonies until 1691 when Plymouth Plantation was integrated into the colony of Massachusetts (from 1641 it had been connected with other colonies by a multilateral treaty). The most important feature of the Mayflower Compact was that it was not a formal political constitution but an agreement made by the members of a religious community. This explains the virtual identity of the religious and secular government in the seventeenth-century Calvinist Separatist and Puritan colonies which became later known as theocracy (religious government).

Although the Pilgrims had laid the foundations of their political autonomy, their struggle was not yet over. They were exposed to severe winters and attacks of Indians. Despite the availability of food and water, half of the group died of scurvy and contagious diseases during the first winter. Their condition also deteriorated because most of them were not able to build houses. Only during the following summer (of 1621) did they start to cultivate land, build a village, and gather a good stock of meat for the winter. Their harvest was celebrated by the First Thanksgiving. News of their success soon spread to England. The first source was the so-called *Mourt's Relation* (1622), an anonymous pamphlet describing the events since the arrival of the Mayflower to Cape Cod 'in a mostly matter-of-fact tone and with a good deal of concrete detail' (Bercovitch 1994: 84).⁴ Together with a more optimistic account which appeared in 1624 under the title *Good News from New England* (the authorship of John Winslow is now doubted), this pamphlet could well have been the reason for the

⁴ Although the editors of *The Norton Anthology* maintain that George Mourt was 'Bradford's brother-in-law,' more recent sources, e.g., *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, vol. 1, point out that the pamphlet was called after 'George Morton, who saw it through the press' (Bercovitch 1994: 84). Vančura (1965: 64, 68) who is influenced by older approaches, attributes *Mourt's Relation* directly to Bradford and Edward Winslow, who alternated with Bradford as governor of the colony.

arrival of many more people in Massachusetts, so that the total number of inhabitants of the English colonies in America reached two thousand in 1625.

Even a brief survey of the first part of the Pilgrims' story reveals the strong literary and mythopœic potential that was developed in the retrospective narrative which Bradford started to write ten years after his arrival in America. For the period of the earliest days of the settlement he employed *Mourt's Relation*, which he significantly adapted. What were the major changes leading to the creation of the Pilgrim (and later Puritan) myth of the New World?

First, many concrete details given in Bradford's sources, mainly descriptions of landscape and vegetation as well as of the behavior, settlements and culture of the Indians, do not appear in his own account. Bradford's narrative gives only stylized descriptions of American scenes. (Even Chapter 10 of Book 1, 'Showing How They Sought Out a Place of Habitation' gives only those details necessary for the reader to imagine the action of the Pilgrims; for instance, Bradford dismisses descriptive details of the first Indian attack.) Their primary purpose is to focus the attention of the reader on the fate of the Calvinist Separatist settlers.

Second, America is described as a 'hideous and desolate wilderness' that is savage and uninhabitable. This representation greatly differs from other contemporary accounts of the New World, stressing the fertility and richness of the newly discovered lands. It is true that Bradford did not need to overstate, as did Columbus to justify the costs of his expedition. Even though the narrative of the hardships the Pilgrims underwent during the first winter is detailed and trustworthy, the reader of Bradford's history cannot escape the impression that the American wilderness is depicted in a general and very somber way. There is at least one reason for this: Bradford's text underlines the resemblance between the Old Testament

narrative of the wandering of the Jews from Egypt through the inhospitable deserts to the land of Canaan.

Third, Bradford is the first writer to stress the otherness of America, its absolute difference from Europe. He does not point out any resemblances between the climate, fauna and flora, but rather dwells on the idea of the Pilgrims' arrival in an entirely different country. In addition, he emphasizes the meaning of the ocean as a divide between Wilderness and Civilization, between the New and the Old Worlds, 'a main bar and gulf to separate them [i.e., the Pilgrims] from all the civil parts of the world.' Bradford's first readers, the children of the Pilgrims, are taught not only about the American otherness, but also about the hardships of their fathers which established their new identity. In this way, a specific statement of Americanness is made.

Fourth, Bradford is absolutely convinced of the right of the Pilgrims to the new land. Therefore all Indian resistance is qualified as aggression and treason and the cruel revenge of the Calvinist settlers is described as an act of justice. This is true especially of the massacre of the majority of the Pequot tribe (from whose name Herman Melville derived the name of the ship of the grim Captain Ahab in his *Moby-Dick*). The violent slaughter is described ruthlessly, in detail, and without any feeling of shame or guilt, although some of the Plymouth colony's ministers condemned Bradford for this act. In this way, Bradford's history establishes the image of America as no man's land to which the Indians have no claim, and which exists for the sole purpose of the providential mission of the Pilgrims.

Fifth, the otherness of America does not imply its inferiority to Europe and its civilization. The new colony is not represented as a new settlement on the verge of the civilized world, but as an autonomous community which has the potential to become the new global center. On the other hand, European civilization appears, in Myra Jehlen's words, 'for the first time in American writing as a foreign and unwholesome creature' (Bercovitch 1994:

87). In fact, Bradford finds no difference whatsoever between the Spanish invaders of the Calvinist Dutch Republic and the Indians, and between wartime horrors and the hardships of the wilderness: 'The Spaniard might prove as cruel as the savages of America, and the famine and pestilence as sore here as there [...]' (*Norton 3 1: 55*).

Lastly, the main device responsible for the mythical quality of Bradford's narrative is the emphasis on similarities between some of the adventures of the Pilgrims and the events recorded in the Scripture. This approach was then currently used for the interpretation of the Bible. The events of the New Testament were thought to be foreshadowed in the Old Testament. For instance, as the three days spent by Jonah in the entrails of a whale corresponded to the three days Christ's body remained in the grave, Jonah's fate was explained as the foreshadowing of the death and resurrection of Christ. Being thus mutually related, the event from Jonah's story was called the *type*, and the account of Christ's burial in the Gospels was referred to as the *antitype*. This term does not indicate any negative qualities, but a relationship of antithesis and/or parallel: Jonah, originally a sinner, was rescued to become a holy prophet, whereas Christ came to the world cleansed of sin and died to become a redeemer. There was yet another important dimension of this typological hermeneutics (i.e., explication, interpretation). Like many Christians in that age, the Pilgrims (like the Puritans) believed that their own acts had been forecast, or, to use their own word, 'prefigured,' in the Bible. In other words their acts, experiences, and even natural phenomena had been related by them to the events described in Scripture. In this relationship, the words 'type' and 'antitype' were often substituted by the term 'figure.' When Bradford, for instance, first refers to his group as the Pilgrims, he employs the biblical figure of the Christian as a pilgrim to heaven (the Epistle of St Paul to the Hebrews 11:11-16 speaks of the early Christians who 'died in faith' as of 'strangers and pilgrims on the earth'): 'they were pilgrims and[...]lift up their eyes to the heavens, their dearest country' (*Norton 3 1: 55*). Later, describing their condition after

the landing at Cape Cod, Bradford refers to the Old Testament figure of the wandering of the Jews led by Moses to the Promised Land ('neither could they, as it were, go up to the top of Pisgah [i.e., the mountaintop from which Moses had seen the Promised Land before he died] to view from this wilderness a more godly country,' 1: 61). In general, the situation of the Pilgrims is prefigured by the story of the Jews wandering a long time through wilderness to the land of Canaan, but the particular details are different: contrary to the Jews, the Pilgrims are in a flat landscape, and unlike Moses, their leaders are not dying. This way of constructing the literary text all the more confirms the emphasis on generalization. The reader is encouraged to abstract from the particular differences between the biblical narrative and Bradford's account and concentrate on the main figure of the pilgrimage of the chosen people to the promised land.

This parallel is further developed in American Puritan rhetoric and writing. It was John Winthrop, the leader of the Puritan Massachusetts Bay colony, who in his sermon 'A Model of Christian Charity,' preached on board of the ship *Arbella* just before arrival in America in 1630, made a direct comparison between the Jews led by Moses and Joshua to the Land of Canaan and the Puritans. At the same time, however, he pointed out the imitation of Christ as the basis of the new community: 'The God of Israel [...] has set up this people that we shall be as the city on the hill [i.e., as the community of Christ's disciples and followers, according to the Gospel of St. Matthew].' Winthrop is also the first to point out the universal meaning of Puritan colonization: 'The eyes of all people are upon us' (*Norton 3* 1: 41). Thus began the American Dream.

4. THE SHAPING OF THE PURITAN SELF

INTRODUCTION

Comparing the styles of the earliest texts of American colonists, one sees that the Puritans were the only writers who used the first-person narrative. Puritanism certainly placed emphasis on the individual self, but that self was never free. Though its uniqueness was stressed--for instance, in the form of an account of an exemplary life (of Edward Brewster in William Bradford's history of the first Puritan settlement, or of John Winthrop in Cotton Mather's history *Magnalia Christi Americana*)--it was always closely related to universally known examples of human worth and divine perfection--from the heroes of antiquity to the Old Testament patriarchs. Moreover, the character of exemplary Puritans was evaluated according to their main duty and worth: how closely they imitated Christ.

Because of all this, individuals constantly found themselves making the smallest of choices with great deliberation. They understood their daily life as an ongoing allegory of universal spiritual events like salvation, purification, original sin, and damnation. In this way the individual and her or his reactions to the events of life were determined by Scripture and the church, which was almost indistinguishable from civil government (theocracy).

Freedom and determinism were important, though sometimes murky, issues. Centrally problematical is the issue of Predestination. Far from being a guarantee of determinism, it was, in fact, quite the opposite. John Calvin (1509-1564), its principal architect, was a lawyer, and one of his central goals in writing the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536) was to demonstrate rationally to all readers God's Reason as well as God's Power. In that context, the concept of Predestination is deployed mainly to demonstrate God's omniscience--not his omnipotence, which was demonstrated in other ways. Predestination, as Calvin conceived and expressed it, affirmed that God, being omniscient, would know all of the outcomes in the

universe he designed from the time of its creation. This meant that he would know whether each individual would be saved or damned; but, because he chose to create a universe in which all individuals were left free to determine their own fates, he would not have a hand in that salvation or damnation.

JOHN COTTON AND ANTINOMIANISM⁵

Ministers have rightly been characterized as ‘America’s first public intellectuals,’ and their audiences as ‘sermon-drunk’ (Delbanco 1999: 33-34; 1989: 124). In their counsels to individual believers to scrutinize their souls constantly to ascertain their authentic personal relation with the deity, these clergymen were in the business of training Americans from earliest days to become ‘connoisseurs of their own feelings’ (Delbanco 1999: 33-34); and sermons, from colonial days until well into the second half of the nineteenth century, were America’s most popular published reading matter.

Sermons were the Puritans’ principal intellectual and spiritual currency. According to Andrew Delbanco, ‘intoxication with preaching’ provides ‘perhaps the closest thing to a usable definition’ of the Puritan movement in the opening years of the seventeenth century. (Delbanco, 1989, 124)

Their passion for sermons--fleeting, unrecorded utterances, ‘sermons without book, sermons which spend their life in their birth and have public audience but once’-- involves a refusal to submit to the documented authority of the past, a rejection of institutional structures as the tested products of time, and a sanctioning of every moment as a potential repository of grace. It regards experience itself not as an

⁵ Antinomianism is a Christian belief that salvation can be safeguarded only by faith and not by the obedience of the religious law. The term appeared during the Protestant Reformation (it was first used by Martin Luther, 1483-1546). In New England theocracies, Antinomianism was usually interpreted as the refusal of the administrative structure of churches and sometimes also of secular law.

accumulation toward wisdom, but as an ungraduated assemblage of discrete moments, any one of which may deliver grace with sudden power [‘the Pauline spirit within Puritanism’]. (Delbanco 1989: 124)

John Cotton (1585-1652) was the best known and most beloved of Puritan preachers. In hopes that he would be early attracted to the new Massachusetts Bay Colony, its principal municipality was named after the Lincolnshire town of Boston (St. Botolph’s town), where Cotton was the vicar of St. Botolph’s parish. In 1633, this most eminent Puritan divine relocated to Massachusetts, where the physical prominence on which his residence was constructed became immediately known as ‘Cotton Hill.’

Cotton’s sermons were among the most powerful and admired of the genre. As a characteristic feature of them,

[O]ppositional structures were built in, not merely appended to his speech [...] and [were] deployed not to confirm habits of mental evasion, but to drive the listener from surface contradictions to a deeper harmony. They constituted an intellectual strategy for dealing with a series of almost unbearable contradictions [...]. For Cotton it was a strategy that became a thoroughgoing way of looking at the world [...] not a frivolous delight in paradox [...but...] metaphor, which, in its melding of disparate ideas, is a form of paradox...a way of circling the unsayable [...]. [T]he mark of sainthood [Cotton implied, was] the capacity to live with unresolved contradiction [...] the possibility of contraries existing in transcendent balance [...] metaphor itself. (Delbanco 1989: 126-27, 129, 147-48)

Thus, for Cotton and the Antinomians, ‘the experience of conversion [...] involves a totally reorganized perception of the world, which in turn requires a new mode of expression,’ the constant deployment of new metaphors. According to Delbanco, in Cotton’s construction, the ardent believer ‘has been transformed into a being of manifold imaginative capacity--the capacity to hold oppositions in his head.’ He was ‘no longer a compromiser, but a paradoxist,’ taking ‘delight in God’s power to contravene the logic of nature’ (Delbanco 1989: 127).

An iconoclast like most Puritans, Cotton rejected ‘lingering sacerdotalism’ in the Anglican Church because it tended to confine the communicants’ spiritual experience to ritual and ceremonial occasions, provided by authoritative texts and personnel, while the Puritans (and particularly the Antinomians) believed that it should pervade each individual’s every moment and activity. To experience the divine in new, multiform, and unanticipated ways was, for them, much preferable to abiding by the venerable and valorized. The Puritan religious ‘aesthetic’ or ‘style’ viewed such regulatory (‘Catholic’) practice as inhibiting the individual imagination as a vehicle for giving authentic, personal and unique expression to one’s experience with the divine. As Delbanco explains,

To conceive wine and bread literally as blood and body is not an imaginative triumph, but a failure [...]. To be a Christian is to grasp the essence of metaphor [...]. It is to avoid confusing figurative with denotative language, to escape what has been called the encroaching ‘empirical temper’ of Stuart Puritanism [...]. The meaning of any act, the ‘antinomians’ were saying--acts of interpretation, of obedience, of commerce--derives only from the spirit in which it is performed. (Delbanco 1989: 128-29, 138)

The immediate ‘resolution’ of the antinomian crisis came, in 1637, through the Puritan authorities’ condemnation and suppression of the antinomian ‘dissenters’ (including Anne

Hutchinson)--but not of their spiritual leader, John Cotton. According to Delbanco, this coercion was only temporarily and locally effective, and, more than anything, left New Englanders suspecting that perhaps one 'mark of sainthood' might actually be the capacity, valorized by Cotton and the antinomians, to 'live with unresolved contradiction [...with] the possibility of contraries existing in transcendent balance--[with] metaphor itself.' External and internal forces pressuring Americans to inactivate this capacity in themselves has produced such a reaction that, as Delbanco observes, it is this 'relinquishing experience that American writers have chronicled in one way or another ever since' (Delbanco 1989: 147-48).

Both Cotton's influence and the antinomian impulse, of course, survived the 'resolution.' 'Of all New England's ministers,' says Delbanco, it was certainly Cotton who had most broadened---beyond the sanction of appointed human 'authorities'--the terms in which personal experience with the divine could be recognized as authentic. He insisted,

as Jonathan Edwards was to do a century later at the height of the [First] Great Awakening, that the liberty of God to work wonders in the soul was being abridged by those whose doubt about some kinds of religious excitement was becoming a constitutional skepticism about all. (Delbanco 1989: 144)

In this way, Delbanco observes, Cotton anticipated the principal features of American Romanticism represented by the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson (Delbanco 1989: 144).

The shared position of the seventeenth-century minister and nineteenth-century philosopher is that

[T]he quality of the imagination is to flow, and not to freeze. The poet did not stop at the color, or the form, but read their meaning; neither may he rest in this meaning, but

he makes the same objects exponents of his new thought. Here is the difference betwixt the poet and the mystic that the last nails a symbol to one sense, which was a true sense for a moment, but soon becomes old and false. (Emerson 1992: 211)

And here, Delbanco continues,

[W]e come to the heart of early American religious culture--and to the roots of a tradition that begins with Cotton and Edwards, runs through Emerson and William James to John Dewey, and, in our own time, finds expression in the work of Richard Rorty and others. This tradition is generally called pragmatism, though I sometimes think it might as well be called Protestantism in the stringent Puritan sense of the word. (Delbanco 1999: 34)

The nineteenth-century philosopher William James (1841-1910) characterized Pragmatism as ‘philosophic Protestantism, an alteration in “the seat of authority” that reminds one almost of the protestant reformation’ (James 1987: 540), pointing out essential links between radical trends in Puritan culture and traditions of modern American thought.

POETRY AND PRIVATE LIFE: ANNE BRADSTREET

The private lives of Puritans were also full of fears and dramatic crises that were not necessarily caused by external forces, such as natural disasters or Indian raids and wars. The record of such a drama can be found in the poems of Anne Bradstreet (c. 1612-72). She came to America in 1630, two years after her marriage to Simon Bradstreet, a Cambridge graduate who was, like her father Thomas Dudley, employed to manage the estate of the Puritan nobleman, the Earl of Lincoln. Both her father and her husband held important positions in

the Massachusetts Bay Company. Her father became one of the first governors of the colony, her husband was first Secretary of the Company and then later was twice the governor of the colony. His duty was to negotiate important contracts and to renegotiate the royal charter of the colony after the ascension of Charles II. Due to his obligations he was often absent from home. His wife had to struggle not only with sadness and fear, but also with her weak health and nervous instability (rheumatic fever, fits of fatigue, respiratory problems). Her love for her husband found its expression in the exemplary fulfillment of her wifely duties, risking her life eight times in childbirth. In spite of all this she still managed to keep her own private world by means of writing poems. These were published for the first time without her knowledge or consent by her brother-in-law, who admired her. The collection which appeared in London in 1650 under the title *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America* was popular because it contained the first poetry written by the English colonists in the New World. The only person displeased by the publication was Anne Bradstreet herself. She decided to revise her poems and to prepare them for a new edition. They were published posthumously in Boston in 1678.

Bradstreet's poems are the chronicle of her spiritual life affected by the increasing pressures of Puritan religion and morals. Though she had been very religious and given to introspection since her early childhood, she could not easily get used to the 'new manners' of the Puritan community and to the different conditions of life. But, as she gently puts it in her short autobiographical letter 'To My Dear Children,' although her 'heart rose,' she submitted to God's will and 'joined to the church at Boston' (*Norton 3 1: 119*). In spite of this late account, the first poems show a greater degree of independence. In the 'Prologue' to the 1650 edition of the poems she calls the defects of her poetry 'irreparable.' Though she is very critical of her own writing, she maintains that its faults are not caused by the lack of art but by 'nature,' that is, her own sex and innate shortcomings. In spite of these she argues her claim to

write in her own way, not according to the Greek or contemporary models (Huguenot--French Protestant--poet Guillaume Salluste du Bartas  whose work she nevertheless admired). She also criticizes the attitude of contemporary readers to women authors: if women have literary success, it is either attributed to plagiarism or to chance. In Renaissance fashion she thinks the Greeks (who invented the Muses) much kinder to women than the present-time readers and appeals at least for some tolerance and 'small acknowledgement' of women writers.

The two poems dedicated to Anne Bradstreet's father demonstrate her relationship to the world of men, to authority, but also to death and to money. In her elegy she celebrates her father as a 'patriot,' 'pilgrim,' founder, and a man of many virtues. But his greatest worth is proved in the instant of his death. He became 'death's best harvest' and his soul a crop 'housed [...] high [...] in celestial barn' (*Norton 3 1: 95*). The value of life is shown in the manner of his death, and one of the important tasks of human life is the preparation for this event. For Anne Bradstreet's father, this preparation was dominated by his hopes for the safety and glory of celestial life. In contrast to her father's life and death, Bradstreet sees her own life as deficient in many respects. In the second poem 'To Her Father with Some Verses' she compares her own life to a mismanaged fortune (she expressly mentions capital--or 'principal' as it was called these days). Her way of life brought to her father nothing but losses. She made a debt she will not be able to repay. With respect both to the spiritual and to the financial world of the Puritans, the self of Bradstreet's poems is marked by tragic insufficiency.

This insufficiency is discussed in one of the longest reflective poems called 'Contemplations.' The poem shows the ongoing spiritual transformation of Bradstreet's poetry caused by the pressure of Puritan beliefs. The poem begins with the description of the beauty of an autumnal landscape filled with sunshine. The sensuous impression of this beauty speaks of the imperceptible and unimaginable glory of God. The strength of nature surpasses

human powers, and this makes it also foreshadow the splendor of God. To celebrate His greatness, as it appears in nature, is for the speaker impossible, since she is weak in her own body and soul. Nor can she join the endless songs of the crickets since she belongs to the human species with its specific history.

This history is a tale of corruption (of Adam's sin and Cain's murder of Abel), of decay without hope of renewal by a natural power and energy of the kind which we see in spring. In spite of the dreadful prospect of human existence, people do not realize the value of salvation which was made possible through Christ. They do not live as Jesus did, although this is the only way to redemption. The function of nature in this poem becomes distinctly allegorical. It makes us think of the divine glory and imagine life unburdened with sin and free from corruption. At the end of the poem the speaker seems to have accepted the Puritan view of life. This can be confirmed by such poems as 'The Flesh and the Spirit.'

But the Puritan attitude to life is not entirely confirmed in other poems. In the short piece 'The Author to Her Book,' written later in her life during the preparations of the second edition of her poetry (which appeared posthumously in 1678 under the title *Several Poems*), Bradstreet compares her book to a deformed and stolen fatherless child who can bring her only shame and will never be reformed. She reveals the difficulty of her subject-position as an author. She cannot be called 'a father' of her book, and as a mother she had failed when she had to turn her 'child' out of home because of her poverty.

This difficult position is related to Puritan notions of life and death in an earlier poem called 'Before the Birth of One of Her Children.' Here, a mother's love for her child is threatened by the imminent danger of death during childbirth. The parting with the child at the birth may amount to its loss, which is not compensated by anything, not even, as was common, by the hope of eternal life. The natural bond between mother and child is broken at the moment of birth ('I may seem thine, who in effect am none'). The further fate of the child

is decided only by its father. Bradstreet knows the dangers of her situation, and desperately calls for acknowledgement, pity and the protection of her children against a stepmother after her death.

In contrast to this moving poem, Bradstreet's lines dedicated to her husband are full of love, submission, and clarity. Marital love is viewed as preparation for eternal life. In the first poem, 'Letter to Her Husband,' the speaker allegorizes herself (in a way slightly resembling John Donne) as the Earth mourning when the sun does not heat her Tropic of Cancer, and reviving with the return of her sun-husband. The unity of a husband and a wife is sacred because it was established by God's creation. But it does not seem that this husband-worship solves Bradstreet's predicament.

Compared with the Mannerist lightness of the poems dedicated to her husband (this is mainly evident in the second 'Letter' in which she uses puns based on homonymy and called paronomasia--*dear-deer*, *heart-hart*--in extensive heroic similes), the tone of Bradstreet's poems bewailing the deaths of her grandchildren is tragic and Baroque. Here, nature (earlier conceived as the sign and proof of God's greatness and omnipotence) stands against the inscrutable will of God, against *Predestination*.

By nature trees do not rot when they are grown
And plums and apples thoroughly ripe do fall,
And corn and grass are in the season mown,
And time brings down what is both strong and tall.
But plants new set to be eradicate,
And buds new blown to have so short a date,
Is by His hand that guides nature and fate.

(‘In Memory of My Dear Grandchild Elizabeth [...],’ *Norton 3 1*: 111)

People should not dare to ask about the cause or reason of these tragic events:

With dreadful awe before Him let's be mute,
Such was His will, but why, let's not dispute,
With humble hearts and mouths put in the dust,
Let's say He's merciful as well as just.

(‘On My Dear Grandchild Simon Bradstreet [...],’ *Norton 3 1*: 112)

In a typical Baroque manner, death becomes not only a sign of God's greatness and a manifestation of the inscrutable way He rules the world, but also a promise of ‘the endless bliss’ of eternal life. This approach is even more developed in the second poem (‘In Memory of My Dear Grandchild Anne Bradstreet’). Here, like another poem ‘Some Verses upon Burning of Our House,’ the common human desire to own a beloved person as one does property is disputed. As Bradstreet's house is in fact not her and her husband's property (‘I blessed his name that gave and took, / That laid my goods now in the dust [...] / It was his own, it was not mine,’ *Norton 3 1*: 113-14), so it is with her granddaughter. She was not hers, but only a loan from God: ‘More fool then I to look on what was lent / As if mine own, when thus impermanent’ (*Norton 3 1*: 112). The death of the child again becomes a sign of the transitory nature of all human values and the superiority of divine grace. The development of a baroque sensibility is evident also of other late poems by Bradstreet, one of which introduces the figure of the ‘weary pilgrim’ and images familiar to us in European baroque poetry.

The infallible belief of the Puritans is demonstrated in Bradstreet's religious prose, especially in her *Meditations Divine and Moral* (1664) addressed to her son Simon. In the

first maxim the relationship between introspection and Puritan understanding of any event as a sign of divine will (predestination) becomes evident. Reading of these signs is education in wisdom and piety.

There is not an object that we see, no action that we do, no good that we enjoy, no evil that we feel or fear, but we may make some spiritual advantage of all; and he that makes such improvement is wise as well as pious. (*Norton 3 1: 116*)

But what is the *correct* reading of divine signs? This is clarified in maxims 13, 38, 48 and 62. We should not trust our senses which give us a false feeling of the fullness of the world. The only perfection and fullness that gives meaning to the 'little world' of man is in God. In spite of this many people cling to the pleasures of their senses, like babies who resist their mother's attempts at their weaning and desire her breast even though it is rubbed with wormwood or mustard. In other words, these people are unconscious of the spiritual value of life which becomes evident through human suffering.

In 'Maxim 67,' another important Puritan doctrine, that of election, is discussed. Election of a person for salvation is seen as a manifestation of the sovereignty of God unlimited by place or time, and unrestricted to specific persons or families. Therefore godly parents may bear evil children, and similarly, the children of bad people may find their way to Christ and be saved. In both cases, introspection and divine grace are stressed as the main agents on the way to salvation.

The foundations of Bradstreet's Puritan creed are explained in her letter 'To My Dear Children.' The Puritan self never exists alone, but always realizes its individuality with respect to the absolute greatness and absolute subjectivity of God (God's will). The purpose of human life is to illustrate the Glory of God and to accomplish a spiritual rebirth

(regeneration) in oneself and the persons one educates. Therefore Bradstreet writes to her children: 'I now travail in birth again of you till Christ be formed in you' (*Norton 3 1: 119*). This Christian rebirth amounts to abandoning the former self and finding a new one which depends fully on God and the individual persons of the Trinity. The difficult way to this goal is accomplished not only by the daily search of one's conscience (through which God admonishes us), but also by thoughtful reading of the Scripture which gives us hints of how to interpret our everyday life. Viewed in this manner, any individual life may become the repetition of the way of God's saints to salvation.

SURVIVAL AND DAMNATION: ROWLANDSON AND WIGGLESWORTH

The integrity of the Puritan self is derived from the absolute greatness of God and is firmly based on introspection and daily reading of the Bible, which gives the Puritans the key not only to understanding reality, but also to bearing the afflictions of their lives.

This attitude is amply illustrated by an interesting document from the wars with the Indians in the latter half of the 1670s. (This conflict became known as King Philip's War after the nickname given to a chief of the Wampanoag tribe.) *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (1682) surprises us not only with dramatic adventures of the wife of a Lancaster minister among the Indians, but also with the way the narrator bears the extreme terrors and afflictions. When she and her fatally wounded child are dragged into the wilderness where they have to sleep on bare earth, the narrator remembers the verse of Psalm 38: 'My wounds stink and are corrupt, I am troubled, I am bowed down greatly, I go mourning all day long.' After the death of her child she recalls Jacob's lamentation in Genesis 42:36. Reading the Bible she received from the Indian spoils, she constructs her adventures as a great trial by which God tests her integrity. Her survival is made possible mainly by her daily reading of the Scripture, by interpreting all events according to biblical stories, and by

her identification with the afflicted lives of the prophets and of other Old Testament heroes, especially of Job.

In Mary Rowlandson's narrative Puritan religion almost seems to lose its sternness  becoming both a necessary strategy of survival in extreme conditions and a powerful succor to a woman exposed to the ruthless and unpredictable behavior of hostile people whose ways are unknown to her. But in other Puritan works of that time the severity of Puritanism is much more evident. This is mainly true of Michael Wigglesworth's (1631-1705) poem in eight-line balladic stanzas, entitled *The Day of Doom* (1662), which became the most widely read literary work in the English colonies in the latter half of the seventeenth century. The most important feature of the poem is the resemblance of its initial and final sections. The present life of sinners wallowing in their filth resembles, or, to use Puritan terminology, prefigures the eternal doom of the damned. Another important feature is the wonderful, incomprehensible nature of divine grace. However, the dispensation of this grace has a strict limit--the hour of judgment. Only God can give grace which 'transcends men's thought' and the people who have not realized the meaning of his mercy in time, will certainly be damned.

It was free grace that any space
was given you at all
To turn from evil, defy the devil,
and upon God to call. (*Norton 3 1: 133*)

TRIUMPHS AND TRAPS OF BAROQUE SENSIBILITY:
TAYLOR AND COTTON MATHER

The poetry of Edward Taylor (c. 1642-1729), an English-born Puritan who refused to sign an oath of loyalty to the Church of England and emigrated to Massachusetts in 1668, is much more sophisticated and artistic than Wigglesworth's simple lines. After his late and short studies at Harvard (he was twenty-nine when he entered the College and stayed there only for three years), Taylor responded to the call of the citizens of the frontier town of Westfield who had chosen him for a minister. He also served this community for almost sixty years as a physician and office holder. In spite of his extensive education he remained an exponent of conservative trends defending Puritan theocracy against the increasing tendencies toward secularization. In this respect he resembled his Harvard roommate and prosperous merchant Samuel Sewall, who as a justice had to take part in the witch trials but later publicly confessed his fault in condemning innocent people to death (see extracts from *The Diary of Samuel Sewall* [Norton 3 1: 200-16], a unique document of New England life at the close of the Puritan era).

Edward Taylor's most important poetry is contained in his *Preparatory Meditations*, two series of religious poems written between 1682 and 1725, and discovered only in the 1930s. These poems are more than mere spiritual exercises carried out before the main service on Sunday, which included preaching a sermon and administering communion. They accentuate both the playfulness and the grandeur of Baroque style, and they also firmly rest on the principles of Puritan theology. Thus, in the 'Prologue' the poet's self dwindles into a 'crumb of dust,' which however can bring evidence of the greatness of God's 'design' (predestination) and become God's 'pen,' which will praise him. The only reason for the existence of the author's self is the manifestation of the greatness of the absolute self (God).

In 'Meditation 8' from the first series, the 'crumb' of the author's self is again compared to God: now in relation to the host which is believed to be transubstantiated during the Eucharist and to become Christ's spiritual body. In Taylor's poem the whole universe is

transformed into a kneading bowl, in which the precious spiritual bread, the manna of eternal life (symbolic of Christ's transfigured body), is made of the 'streams of grace' running out of God's bowels. This metaphorical structure boldly combines spiritual and scatological meanings (bowels as a seat of compassion, but also as a place where excrement is formed) typical of Baroque figurative language, which creates 'reversible' metaphors pointing to 'high' and 'low' things at the same time.

The daring play with metaphors is even more evident in 'Meditation 16' where divine grace transforms the source of cold and the symbol of children's winter games ('the snowball') into a source of light 'a sunball,' which gives glory to the 'eyeball,' the vision of the poet. But in further meditations playfulness and joy are severely checked first by the realization that the poet fails to understand God's glory, and later by the recognition of the sternness of God's law and justice on Doomsday and also of the corruption of the body and emptiness of soul. In 'Meditation 42,' the poet compares himself to an empty casket with a rusty lock. He wishes his body to be converted into God's wardrobe containing wedding garments for his soul, hopefully a future bride and a 'housewife' of Christ. This meditation also in many ways corresponds to Sermon VI of Taylor's *Treatise Concerning the Lord's Supper*, which develops the metaphor of wedding garment as a symbol of the preparation of the soul for the communion.

The exalted emotionality of other poems is only more understandable when we become aware of the ecstatic and apocalyptic features of Taylor's writings. The neurotic spirituality that manifested itself in the hysteria of many accused and witnesses during the witch trials is certainly evident in the two poems telling of the soul's fear of devil and damnation, and speaking also of Christ's consolation. Here the elaborate metaphorical structure of earlier poems is reduced and gives way to a childish emotionality: the soul is

afraid of the barking and the teeth of a big dog--the Devil, whom Christ keeps to guard the flock of his sheep.

The hysterical features of Baroque sensibility were fully demonstrated in the witch trials of 1692 (the most important trials took place in Salem, Massachusetts). In the same year, a brilliant theologian, scholar and historian Cotton Mather (1663-1728) published a treatise called *The Wonders of the Invisible World* in which he defended the trials as a necessary fight against the snares of the Devil, who decided to mar the spiritual rebirth of Christianity in the New World. This rebirth, he argued elsewhere, in his most famous 'ecclesiastical history of New England,' *Magnalia Christi Americana*, was accomplished by the work of Christ through many of his 'saints'--Puritan leaders like William Bradford and John Winthrop. The portrait of John Winthrop (named 'Nehemias Americanus,' according to the governor of Judea who once rebuilt Jerusalem) is interesting for its universality.

5. THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY: THE GREAT AWAKENINGS & THE ENLIGHTENMENT

INTRODUCTION

During the eighteenth century growing immigration changed the face of the American colonies. Their population grew fifteen times from 1670 to 1760, and the newcomers could neither understand nor adopt the stern religion of the Puritans. The original Puritan communities, whose coherence had been based on the authority of spiritual leaders and religious rules in all areas of life, were overwhelmed by heterogeneous groups of immigrants with different religious beliefs, whose major interests were material: to get richer than they could in Europe. Crafts, especially shipbuilding in the North, agriculture on the Southern plantations (the production of tobacco, rice, and indigo), and financial operations became the chief source of income for well-to-do colonists while the backwoodsmen were still struggling with the forces of nature, extremes of climate, and the hostility of Indians.

The materialistic concerns of the colonists and the social differences among them were not the only causes of the decay of what was called First Church, founded by the New England Puritans. Another important influence was Enlightenment thought which explained society as a contract made between individuals (not as a religious ‘covenant,’ reminiscent of the first contract between the Jews led by Moses and their God, Jehovah) and doubted the existence of a personal God and the Trinity. Their ideal was God as the creator of a rational system, a clockmaker, whose perfection is proved by the smooth running of His world. The belief that God, having created the world in perfection, no longer interferes with its laws, was called Deism, and the English philosopher John Locke was one of its founders. Locke’s Deism was complemented by Newtonian physics, and also by an ethics which no longer

stressed God's anger, Original Sin, Predestination, or Incarnation, but saw the cause of religious faith in human feeling and in the natural goodness of the soul. In other words, God was slowly ceasing to be the center of universe, having been replaced by Man, an abstract term signifying the uniform features and qualities of mankind. Evidence of the senses and conclusions of reason threatened to overthrow God's sovereignty and the authority of Puritan ministers.

JONATHAN EDWARDS

Such was the situation when Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) started a great series of religious conversions that occurred between 1734 and 1750 along the East Coast and became known as the First Great Awakening. Edwards's maternal grandfather Solomon Stoddard was a very influential Puritan minister nicknamed 'the Pope of the Connecticut Valley.' His father was also a minister and gave the son a good education, first at home (where the boy's mother had a more formative influence) and then at the newly founded Yale College (later Yale University) which was moved to New Haven in 1716, the year when thirteen-year old Edwards was admitted there to study theology. He stayed on after his graduation in 1720, and later, after a short sojourn in New York, he came to Northampton, Massachusetts, to help his grandfather in pastoral work.

In 1727 Edwards married Sarah Pierrepont, who at the age of thirteen claimed that 'God has manifested Himself to her mind,' and was, according to Edwards, distinguished by 'the strange sweetness in her mind and singular purity of her affections.' Edwards's erotic imagination is characterized by the attempt to blend a modern view of God (referred to as the Great Being) with Baroque mysticism. Evidence of this can be found in his manuscript tribute to Sarah:

They say that there is a young lady in [New Haven] who is beloved of that great Being, who made and rules the world, and that there are certain seasons in which this Great Being, in some way or other invisible comes to her and fills her mind with exceeding sweet delight, and that she hardly cares for anything except to meditate on Him--that she expects after a while to be received up where He is [...]. There she is to dwell with him and to be ravished with his love and delight forever. (*Norton 3 1: 310*)

This short piece does not yet testify of Edwards's effort to combine religious fervor with the cold reasoning of the new sciences. But one of his first significant sermons delivered to the Northampton congregation (where he became minister after the death of his grandfather in 1729) demonstrates the influence of Locke's empiricism and sensualism. Edwards certainly agreed with the empiricist maxim *Nihil est in intellectu quod non fuerit in sensu* (There is nothing in the intellect that has not been earlier in the senses), but he saw the senses and reason only as mediators of human knowledge, not of divine revelation. For his theory he drew support from the Bible (the text on which the sermon is based is from Matthew 16:17, where Christ says to Peter 'flesh and blood have not revealed it [my divinity] unto thee, but my Father which is in Heaven'), as well as from Locke's essay *Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), in which the English philosopher argued that since our understanding is not commensurate with reality, our knowledge must be supplemented by religious faith nourished by our feelings. In his sermon later published under the title *Divine and Supernatural Light* (1734) Edwards wrote:

God is the author of such knowledge [i.e., arts, sciences and human skills]; yet so that flesh and blood reveals it. Mortal men are capable of imparting the knowledge of human arts and sciences, and skill in temporal affairs. God is the author of such knowledge by those

means: flesh and blood is employed as the mediate or second cause of it. He conveys it by the power and influence of natural means. But this spiritual knowledge, spoken of in the text, is what God is the author of and none else. He reveals it, and flesh and blood reveals it not. He imparts this knowledge immediately, not making use of any intermediate natural causes, as He does with other knowledge. (*Norton 3 1: 312*)

In this context, Edwards can reinstate the authority of the angry God of the Puritans. The power of God consists in revealing to us his divinity in a wondrous or supernatural experience. Though this experience is deeply sensuous, our senses are mere passive instruments of divine power (called ‘spiritual light’ in Edwards’ sermon), bringing the soul into immediate contact with God. The beauty and horror of this contact is eloquently expressed in Edwards’s rhetorical prose which evokes the feeling of the presence of the divine in human heart.

Men have a great deal of pleasure in human knowledge, in study of natural things; but this is nothing to that joy which arises from the divine light shining into the soul. This light gives a view of those things that are immensely the most exquisitely beautiful and capable of delighting the eye of the understanding. The spiritual light is the dawning of the light of glory in the heart. There is nothing so powerful as this to support persons in affliction, and to give mind the peace and brightness in this stormy and dark world. (*Norton 3 1: 323*)

The power of the divine is mediated by Edwards’s rhetoric: see for instance the last sentence, which is built on antitheses (peace and brightness vs. stormy and dark), syntactic parallelisms (to support [...] and to give), alliteration (powerful--support). Sometimes these regular figures give way to deliberate irregularities, such as asyndeton (linking words or sentences without

conjunctions) and ellipsis (leaving out one or more words or a clause) in the previous sentence ('immensely the most exquisitely beautiful'), suggesting emotional excitement.

But the emotional power of Edwards's style is strongest when he depicts the wrath of God. Here the evocative force of his prose does not construct marvelous God's universe delightful to the senses: on the contrary it shatters all certainties of human life, and opens a yawning hell directly under our feet. This was certainly the impression Edwards's congregation had when he preached his famous sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* at Enfield, Connecticut (a village close to Northampton), in 1741. Passages such as that below caused emotional outbursts, lots of crying, weeping, and even hysteria in Edwards's audience.

Your wickedness makes you as it were heavy as lead, and to tend downwards with great weight and pressure towards hell; and if God should let you go, you would immediately sink and swiftly descend and plunge into the bottomless gulf, and your healthy constitution, and your own care and prudence [...], and all your righteousness, would have no more influence to uphold you and to keep you out of hell, than the spider's web would have to stop a fallen rock. Were it not for the sovereign pleasure of God, the earth would not bear you for one moment [...]. There are black clouds of God's wrath now hanging directly over your heads, full of the dreadful storm, and big with thunder; and were it not for the restraining hand of God, it would immediately burst upon you. The sovereign pleasure of God, for the present, stays the rough wind; otherwise it would come with fury, and your destruction would come like a whirlwind, and you would be like the chaff on the summer threshing floor. (*Norton 3 1: 336-37*)

No wonder Edwards's sermons caused a change in the sentiments of many people. Nonetheless, Edwards did not rely too greatly on threats and horrific images. He preferred to

show the beneficent working of Divine Will, and placed emphasis on the sensuous beauty of Divine Creation. It is reported that his sermon on 'the angry God' was read monotonously as if the preacher was not really intent on inculcating the horrors into the minds of his listeners.

During the first wave of conversions (to spiritual life, strictly regulated by the church, nourished by constant reading of the Bible, and including the Puritan regeneration, or spiritual rebirth) in Northampton more than six hundred people joined his church (an account of these events is given in Edwards's letter to an influential Boston minister, Rev. Dr. Benjamin Colman, dated 30 May 1735). Though Edwards explains the effects of his rhetoric as 'the work of Providence' we can be certain that many people were moved by his eloquence. But eloquence was not the whole secret of Edwards' power. Since a majority of the converted were men, the First Great Awakening seems to have been, at least in part, an attempt to reinforce the weakening patriarchal authority in Puritan families. This authority was reestablished on the religious principles evident, among others, from Bradstreet's and Taylor's poems.

Although Edwards was later dismissed from his church and silenced by his own congregation (this happened when he intended to complete the return to earlier Puritanism by introducing the public declaration of the believers that they had undergone their spiritual regeneration and rebirth as the condition for their taking the Sacrament), he showed the principal way of the development of religious worship in America. To make any church popular, well-attended and prosperous, a charismatic minister in full control of his audience was necessary. And this control is not achieved by rational means or by the performance of well-known rituals--it can only result from emotional excitement. Edwards was a divine who could combine this excitement with the subtle rationalism of theological argument, refashioning Locke's empiricism into a modern theology that inevitably takes into account the emotional aspects of human life and the sensuous perception of reality.

Despite all these features, Edwards was not the most influential leader of the First Great Awakening. His influence was mostly restricted to New England, whereas in other parts of America, especially in the Southern states, it was Methodism that, among the organized denominations, contributed most to the religious revival. Methodism, which originated in Oxford, England, was a revival of personal religion (the belief in the personal nature of God) based on the immediacy of the Holy Spirit (providing evidence of the divine nature of Christ). In contrast to Edwards's Puritanism, Methodism used the rituals of the Church of England and drew from the religious traditions of the Moravian Brethren who considered Scripture the sole guide of their religious life. The  church, originally following the doctrines of Jan Hus and the Czech Brethren, was instituted in Pennsylvania by Count Nicolaus Ludwig Zinzendorf (1700-60), who brought it from Saxony and founded a colony at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. The most important representative of Methodism who visited America many times and agreed to some extent with Edwards' doctrines was George Whitefield (1714-1770).

In contrast to the Methodists, Edwards found his major inspiration in the Puritan tradition, especially in their view of reality as signs (types, emblems) of Divine Providence, i.e., the foreshadowing of what will be fulfilled by means of God's law. This is well demonstrated in the following abstract from Edwards' manuscript (212 notebook entries found in the Yale University Library and published in 1948 by Perry Miller, an authority on Puritanism and Transcendentalism, under the title *Images and Shadows of Divine Things*).

Hills and mountains are types of heaven and often made use of as such in Scripture. These are with difficulty ascended. To ascend them one must go against the natural tendency of the flesh; this must be contradicted in all the ascent, in every step of it, and the ascent is attended with labor, sweat and hardship. There are commonly many hideous rocks in the

way. [...] This is a representation of the difficulty, labor and self denial on the way to heaven [...]. (*Norton 3 1: 356*)

This spiritual interpretation of physical phenomena leads Edwards to the conclusion that ‘the book of Scripture is the interpreter of the book of nature in two ways [...], by declaring to us those spiritual mysteries that are indeed signified and typified in the constitution of the natural world; and secondly, in actually making application of signs and types in the book of nature as representations of those spiritual mysteries’ (359). In other words, Scripture teaches us how to find spiritual meaning (the revelation of mysteries) foreshadowed in the phenomenal world, thus giving us the possibility to make an analogy between the book of nature and Scripture. The entire world can be read as an allegory of a divine work. The second implication is of vital importance for Ralph Waldo Emerson in whose essays nature and its phenomena lead us to a recognition of the divine essence beyond the perceptible world--the Over-Soul. The romantic vision of beauty in nature and human life typical of Transcendentalism is foreshadowed in many of Edwards’s writings.

FIRST AND SECOND GREAT AWAKENINGS

The imperative to prioritize one’s own judgment, reason, choice, or freedom, as much in mundane affairs as in the ultimate matters of personal salvation, was energetically proselytized and widely spread on the American continent during the First (1734-1750) and Second (1800-1850) Great Awakenings. During these movements of religious and cultural transformation, inspired, itinerant ‘missionary’ preachers advocated radical Protestant ‘habits’ of the Puritan or Antinomian sort from the Piedmont (the eastern foothills of the Appalachian Mountains) to the Mississippi River. Frequently unauthorized, unappointed, and even unordained by traditional Puritan congregations--and whether operatives of non-Puritan

religious sects (e.g., Methodists, Baptists, Quakers, and many others) or autonomous, foliate, or secessionist self-appointed lay proselytizers--these independent agents of rekindled religious consciousness embodied, valorized, and spread anti-institutional habits of religious organization. Attenuating or even rejecting Puritan congregational discipline, the religious and cultural impact of these 'awakeners' contributed to a growing predominance, in American religious theory and practice, of one logical outcome of the Antinomian strain in Puritanism (individual 'self-reliance' based on experienced personal intimacy with the deity) about which Puritan authorities had been concerned from the outset.

As the Great Awakenings proceeded and radical Protestantism spread ever more widely in adherence and influence, its Antinomianism, anti-institutionalism, anti-authoritarianism, multiplication of sects and personal approaches to religion and to salvation logically implied substantial renunciation of cultural authority--or even of aspiration to cultural authority. Under these circumstances, as President George Washington insightfully observed in 1790: 'It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights.' Or, in Thomas Pynchon's later, but apposite, phrasing: "'Heresy" loses its Force in these Provinces, this far West, with Sects nearly as numerous as Settlers' (Pynchon 1997: 522).

As, prior to and during the American Revolution, claims of any individual or group to religious--and then political--authority were explicitly called into question, the general notion of cultural authority (from the beginning a bugbear in the multiethnic, geographically, and sociopolitically diverse American environment) was eroded and discredited to the point where skepticism about cultural authority of any kind came effectively to be valorized. This skepticism is clearly articulated, for example, both in the rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and in the structure of the US Constitution of 1787. The prosperity and

indispensability of the southern colonies had their undoubted influence on the sweeping restrictions on the authority of the 'general' (or 'federal') government at the Constitutional Convention. Ironically, that the issue of slavery was inextricably intertwined in those considerations also provides a crucial example of the emerging consensus, north and south, on the need for the renunciation of cultural authority and, specifically in the political sphere, of the authority of the federal government to legislate on how people in the different cultural spheres of the states were to live.

Paradoxically, this environment of intimate relationship with the deity, through which the choices made by each individual are equally valorized, also produces unsettling consequences for many individuals--and disruptive effects in the society as a whole. The anti-institutional radical Protestantism spread by the First and Second Great Awakenings to much of the US population--with its emphasis on one's personal relationship with God and on personal responsibility for one's own salvation--has influenced and continues to influence the decision-making styles of individual Americans. For many among them, decision-making criteria are not simply utilitarian; the utilitarianism and/or pragmatism of those individuals is frequently tempered, reoriented, or replaced by religious introspection, meditation, and/or scrutiny of the soul to ascertain they are doing what God wants of them.

The Antinomian tendencies, as well as the ecumenical style and loose organizational and disciplinary practices of the Great Awakenings established widespread American religious 'habits' of non-institutional (even anti-institutional) and personally intimate relations to the deity that in many ways provided a template for this antinomian 'religion' identified by Harold Bloom as the characteristic American religion. These practices tended to penetrate into other, more 'secular' aspects and activities of the settlers' lives. Religious pragmatism thus predates, and subsequently reinforces, the secular frontier utilitarianism described and personified by Benjamin Franklin. It may well be, and often has been, disputed whether

‘utilitarianism was stepfather to pragmatism and to its concern with results, with “fruits and roots”’ (Richardson 2007: 158) or whether it was, in fact, the other way around. In any case, many of the attitudes of this ‘frontier’ pragmatism/utilitarianism were valorized during the nineteenth century, as the literal frontier was vanishing, in interesting, puzzling, problematical, and revealing ways. That they continue to be valorized even in the twenty-first century might provide the thoughtful observer with matter for reflection.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

In contrast to Edwards’s passionate spiritualism and subtle speculative reasoning, the work of Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) is fully immersed in the everydayness of life in the rising American middle class. This prosaic and highly practical thinker was acknowledged by the European intellectual elite of the Enlightenment and became, especially by virtue of his scientific work (e.g., *Experiments and Observations on Electricity* [1751]), letter-writing and diplomatic activities (he was the first US ambassador--or minister, as his office was then called--to France), a member of a prestigious international group of thinkers.

What connects Franklin with Edwards is the book metaphor. Franklin’s most famous work, *The Autobiography*, speaks of his life as a book. He would not object to living his life again as it would give him the chance to ‘edit’ properly his ‘life-book’ and to correct his errors. As this is impossible, he can only read the ‘first edition’ (that is, recollect his life from his memory), adding some ‘errata’ (a list and corrections of misprints and errors) in the book to the text. These ‘errata’--a favorite term of Franklin’s--are mostly moral comments on his bad decisions and lack of prudence (for instance, his credulousness towards an impostor calling himself Governor Keith).

On the whole, it can be said that Franklin represents himself as the author of his own life, thus assuming the position of God. God is removed from everyday reality by the Deistic

turn of Franklin's thought, and the personality of an author who is governed by practical reason (which, according to Franklin finds 'reason for everything one has in mind to do,' *Norton 3 1:430*) becomes the center of the world. *The Autobiography* can then function as a secular Scripture. It replaces the sovereignty of Divine will with the authority of the exemplary individual created and vested in his writing.

This model function of the book no longer consists merely in its practical orientation (as in Franklin's previous work, collection of advice for the poor entitled *Poor Richard's Almanack* and published annually from 1733 to 1758). The difference from Franklin's earlier writing is emphasized in two letters written by readers and prefixed to the second part of *Autobiography*. In one of them, the author is believed 'to promote a greater spirit of industry and early attention to Business, Frugality and Temperance in American Youth' (*Norton 3 1: 454*); in the other he is supposed to give 'a noble rule and example of *self-education*' as well as of the '*Art of Virtue*,' and become the model of a '*wise man*' who can not only apply the '*rules of prudence in ordinary affairs*,' but also 'arrange his conduct so as to suit the *whole of life*' (454). Here the analogy between life and a well-structured book offers itself again. This parallel has also a thematic and autobiographical resonance, since most of the first part of *The Autobiography* deals with Franklin's efforts to establish himself in the printer's trade and also to found the first circulating library. The good book thus becomes a model of an exemplary man, and, after the Revolution, this man is transformed into a model American.

This is the account of the birth of the first success story that extends its long roots to the fertile soil of Puritan thought. It is certainly fair to suggest, if not conclude, that Franklin secularized Puritanism and transformed it into Americanism with the help of the Enlightenment emphasis on practical reason, on morals and on common sense. Thanks to Franklin, reason was no longer regarded as a divine or spiritual power of mankind, but as the source of pragmatic strategy, a guide to our action in everyday life. In one debate Franklin

asks a typical question: ‘What do you mean to infer from that?’ instead of asking simply ‘What does it mean?’ or ‘What will you do with this knowledge?’ Interpretations of reality are no longer evidence of Divine greatness, but must serve us in everyday life. This orientation somewhat anticipates Pragmatism, a trend in American philosophy (whose exponents were William James, John Dewey, and others) of the late nineteenth and of the first half of the twentieth century. The pragmatic bias of Franklin’s *Autobiography* is also the cause of its divergence from its English stylistic models: essays written by Joseph Addison for his periodical *The Spectator*.

The Autobiography was never completed. It covers the span of time from Franklin’s birth to 1757 (with a few comments on the events during the next two years). The first part, written during Franklin’s sojourn in England in 1771, was dedicated to his son William. The second part originated between 1784 and 1785 in Paris where Franklin was staying to negotiate the end of the War of Independence with France. The third and the unfinished fourth part were written at the close of Franklin’s life, between 1788 and 1790. The complete edition appeared quite late--in 1868--after the recovery of the third part. But the first three parts published in 1818⁶ established the book’s reputation as a model success story. In the first part, the story of Franklin’s youth is given, while the second part demonstrates how methodically (using tables) Franklin managed his private and public life. It may be surprising that Franklin still relies on the Puritan classification of virtues, but he uses it for entirely practical purposes: for him moral edification is synonymous with the attainment of social influence and prosperity. God as the origin of moral values is no longer important and is replaced by the technological problem of the management of one’s time and ‘moral arithmetic,’ making daily balances of one’s good and bad deeds.

⁶ The previous English editions of Parts I and II (1793, 1794, 1798, 1801, 1806, and 1813) had been re-translated from the French translations of 1791 and 1798 based on flawed transcripts of Franklin’s manuscripts.

6. REVOLUTION & THE EARLY REPUBLIC

INTRODUCTION

The literary discourse of this period (1776-1823) moulds a new society and nation--or, in a recent phrase, 'invents America.' It also opens a new public space of the kind that can exist only in a democratic society, where the relationship between fact and fiction is usually negotiated freely without the interference of political or religious authorities. In the years of the revolutionary war and Early Republic, the birth of modern political literature in America is accompanied by the shaping of modern fiction. What are the major features of revolutionary and post-revolutionary writing?

DECLARATIONS OF INDEPENDENCE

The Declaration of Independence, drafted by Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) for a special committee of the Second Continental Congress, and adopted by this assembly in Philadelphia on 4 July 1776, became a model for many other writings of the revolutionary period and of the Early Republic. These texts repudiate the authority of Britain, along with its culture, history, economy, and traditions, and establish the sovereignty of a vaguely defined new nation in the new environment generally identified with natural landscape of North America. These features are typical of the early American journalism of Thomas Paine (1738-1809), especially of his pamphlet *Common Sense* (January 1776), which persuaded many colonists to support separation from Britain and thus prepared the ground for the adoption of the Declaration. The most important source of authority in Paine's text was the identification of God's power with the power of Law. The proposed government should derive its legitimacy directly from God-Law, while the corrupt power of hereditary European monarchs is identified with original sin. In this way, the Revolution becomes another revelation of Divine

Providence. Like Franklin, Paine manages to secularize a key tenet of Puritan faith. The inscrutable will of an Angry God was replaced by rational Law designed for the benefit of the new nation.

After the Revolution, many works, such as *The American Universal Geography* (1789-1793) by Jedediah Morse  (1761-1826), the Preface to *A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language* (1806) by Noah Webster (1758-1843), and an economic pamphlet by Tench Coxe (1755-1824), entitled *A View of the United States of America* (1794), adopt the rhetorical and structural model of the Declaration. All these works rehearse discourses of harmonization, consolidation, and unification that invent the forces molding the new nation: nature as an environment, the collective nature of the people, language as a natural and divine authority, and the economy as a new communal bond that substitutes religion.

The Declaration of Independence represents a discourse that may be described, in Garry Wills's phrase, as the invention of America. The performative status of this discourse consists in naming the nation not as 'a found object, but as a contrived thing,' a 'product of the mind' (Wills 1978: 364).⁷ The Declaration represents nature as the agent legitimizing the new political power: 'it becomes necessary for one people [...] to assume among the powers of the earth the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and nature's God entitle them' (Jefferson 1984: 19). This power consists in the identity, in the sovereignty ('the separate and equal station' assumed 'among the powers of the earth' [Jefferson 1984: 19]) and in the providential mission of the new nation (the Declaration was signed 'with a firm reliance on the protection of divine providence' [24]).

Though the new American identity seems derived from *the Same*, namely from the *laws of human nature* (one of the universal categories of the Enlightenment thought, implying *uniformity*, or sameness everywhere), the performative status of the Declaration consists in

⁷ The utterance constitutes an act, and does not merely make a statement. For a more detailed explanation of the term 'performative' see Austin (1962: 8-19). The performative status of the Declaration of Independence as an *act* which creates a new state has been discussed by Wills (1978: 336-341).

converting the sameness of laws into the otherness of the new nation. The uniformity of Enlightenment 'nature' does not account for 'the history of the present king of Great Britain [...] a history of repeated injuries & usurpations' (Jefferson 1984: 19). Whereas the 'laws of nature' seem to be given, the traditional virtues (the 'native justice and magnanimity' of the British [23]) and bonds ('the ties of our common kindred [...] the voice [...] of consanguinity' [22-23]) have been appealed to in vain and must finally be abandoned. Thus, the Enlightenment use of nature as the engine for attacking the authority of tradition is transformed into a specific US ideological use of nature as an authority against the 'traditions of Europe,' which had so far seemed 'natural' to many colonists.

Though, in Jefferson's description, the 'history of the present king of Great Britain [...] a history of repeated injuries & usurpations' seems to correspond with tradition ('the ties of our common kindred') and thus to represent older, tribal and feudal, notions of unity and sameness of the people, it can be interpreted in a radically different sense. According to Jefferson's draft of the Declaration, the previous unity of the British people and the American colonists was not based on custom or tradition, but on the *voluntary acceptance* of the traditional political authority, the 'common king,' by the latter: 'that in constituting indeed our several forms of government, we had adopted one common king, thereby laying a foundation for perpetual league & amity with them' (Jefferson 1984: 23). But the King, adopted as a sign of common identity, soon became a symbol of the ruthless policy of the British against their own people in America. Therefore also, 'the history of the present king of Great Britain' becomes an account of the policy that had repeatedly oppressed the colonists and thus transgressed the laws of human nature (in Jefferson's draft it was phrased as follows: [the king of Great Britain] 'has waged cruel war against *human nature itself*, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty' [my emphasis, 1984: 22]).

In privileging America as the political space in which the demands of suffering 'human nature' can be satisfied, the Declaration also defines the nascent nation as standing outside history. Therefore the opening words of the document--'when in the course of human events it becomes necessary' (Jefferson 1984: 19)--do not imply any universal historical necessity. Rather, they indicate, according to Garry Wills, the agency of nature ('general course of nature in human actions') and even the expectations connected with such a power ('a desired outcome of something,' i.e., of a 'process or an experiment' [Wills 1978: 94]; the quotations are from Hume and Hutcheson). In this way, the Declaration can be said to lay the foundation for the value structure of US nationality on the nature's otherness conceived and explained as something more powerful and desirable than historical necessity, more universal than historical narratives, and more just and moral than the authority of tradition and kinship.

Another way to define the specificity of 'nature' in the Declaration is not directly evident from the text. It becomes clear from political and ideological contexts establishing the performative status of the document. In these contexts, the Declaration was drafted with the intention of being 'an expression of the American mind' and 'to place before mankind the common sense of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent, and to justify us in the independent stand we are compelled to take' (Jefferson's letter to Henry Lee, 1 May 1825, 1984: 1501). This performative status of the *Declaration* was not based on the 'universal nature' of the eighteenth-century sciences but, if we are to trust Jefferson's later statement, on the contemporary political discourse 'harmonizing sentiments of the day, whether expressed in conversation, in letters, printed essays, or in the elementary books of public right' (1984: 1501). In this discourse, it was necessary to achieve consent not only about 'the right of the people to alter or abolish' an unjust government (Jefferson 1984: 19) but also concerning the 'natural right' of expatriation that was another implication of the ambiguous phrase 'the pursuit of happiness':

[If God] has made the law in the nature of man to pursue his own happiness, he has left him free in the choice of the place as well as mode; and we may safely call on the whole body of English jurists to produce *a map on which Nature has traced the geographical line which she forbids him to cross in pursuit of happiness.* (qtd. in Chinard 1957: 72-73; my emphasis)

Here, the authority of nature ('Nature') is distinctly opposed to the authority of English law, in its customary and traditional form.

This discourse does not only provide arguments for expatriation and against the law that prevents it. It also opens up American nature as a privileged space for the acquisition of land and property and for the establishment of a new, 'civil' society:

Our forefathers [...] left their native land to seek on these shores a residence for civil and religious freedom. At the expense of their blood [...] they effected settlements in the inhospitable wilds of America and there established civil societies with various forms of constitution. (Chinard 1957: 59)⁸

The otherness of this specific nature, the 'inhospitable wilds of America,' may thus be said to exist at the roots of the general references to nature, to nature's God, to human nature, to natural laws and to rights. And the utopian dream inherent in the Declaration consists in the superimposition of the general 'natural right'--the 'pursuit of happiness' unrestricted by any geographical limits--on the otherness of American nature. It also includes a belief in the unlimited possibilities of the appropriation of land and wealth.

⁸ The quotation comes from Jefferson's drafts to the Declaration and is, according to Chinard, the expression of 'the creed of Americanism' (1957: 62).

In this way, the *frontier* as the limit of ‘civil society’ and the boundary between nature, ‘the virgin land,’ and civilization becomes a privileged locus of American utopias. Its special status does not only depend on the structural and value patterns of the utopian world (the periphery of the civilized world converted into the center of a new world power, and the ‘eternal city’ of St. Augustine substituted by the ‘earthly city’), but also, and principally, on the political strategies and rhetoric of Jefferson’s time. Jefferson entered politics ‘as a lieutenant of Patrick Henry,’ the founder of a party of small landholders, up-country people and backwoodsmen. The opinions of this social group have certainly shaped his early visions of democracy. In contrast to Patrick Henry (1736-1799), who was a Calvinist and believed in predestination, Jefferson emphasized the coexistence of self-government based on majority rule with creativity in art, in politics and in the cultivation of the frontier land.

This view is also reflected in the ideas of government that Jefferson discussed with John Adams (1735-1826). Both statesmen have agreed that virtue was the spirit of the Republic. But while Adams insisted that the Republic was the ‘empire of laws’ and that the main purpose of its power was to restore order, Jefferson maintained that the innate moral sense, rather than laws, was the source of virtue and that man was *naturally* made for society. In view of this, the authority of ‘the laws of nature and nature’s God’ in the Declaration is complementary to the utopia of frontier as the privileged space of human self-government, democracy, freedom and creativity born from the innate impulses of virtue.

However, this utopian space seems to have been opened up only in order to be controlled and integrated into the ‘empire of laws.’ In the Declaration, there is no mention at all of the frontier and creativity. Instead, all the inhabitants of the colonies are referred to as ‘one people.’ This emphasis on unity may imply features of *totalitarianism* in Jefferson’s utopian notions. The ‘oneness’ of the people could be achieved only at the expense of the exclusion of the African Americans (who, according to Jefferson’s project, were to be shipped

back to Africa) and of the expropriation of the Indians. In de Crèvecoeur's words, the frontier farmer, and not the Indian, was the bearer of the utopian ideal.

Even Jefferson's desire for creativity was doomed to be gradually suppressed by his own political measures, namely by the division of the new land based on the national geographical survey. In the 'Report of the ommittee to Establish a Land Office' of 1784 Jefferson proposed a new rectangular system (ten by ten square miles) derived from geographical latitude and longitude. The lots of land purchased by the settlers from the state had been demarcated according to the new survey. Instead of the furrows of the plough, the 'waving lines and rows winding along the hills and valleys,' which for Jefferson were emblematic of the creative, aesthetic and even magical transformation of the 'virgin land,' the lines that actually divided the country were drawn by the government office. Thus, a discourse of consolidation in the form of the rational division of the land became an integral part of the utopian discourse of American nature.

Yet creativity was not only to be regulated and confined by the uniform, rectangular boundaries. It had to be ruled out altogether and supplanted by the *political technology of individuals*. According to Michel Foucault, any technology begins as 'a dream, or better, as a utopia' (Foucault 1997: 410). In contrast to the political rationality typical of the French or German Enlightenment, which inevitably tends to privilege the police as the universal technology of power, the Americans invent a new and more versatile state machine. As Jefferson's notes on Cesare Beccaria's legal treatise *De elitti e delle Pene* (On Crimes and Punishments [1764]) show, the notion of individual freedom may be constructed in the same way as Beccaria's concept of punishment. Both are compared to payment made to the state. In Jefferson's theory, the technology of power is modeled on the mechanism of the bank. The deposits made by individuals establish the power of the institution. Freedom can be

banked, drawn on, stolen, recovered, etc. This technological mechanism of value circulation as a source of power is a supplement to the utopias of American nature and creativity.

REVOLUTION AND RELIGION

In the United States, an alliance has existed, since the time of the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence, between politically progressive forces and religious authorities. In this alliance, religion has been adduced in the US in support of democracy, in its various applications and incarnations, and in locating authority in individual consciousness--not, as in Europe, in various socio-political-religious institutions generally associated with the 'better sort' of people. In most European nations in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and even twentieth centuries, religion and institutionally sited religious authority was, even in Protestant countries, deployed in support of traditional elites and power structures ('*ancien régime*'). In many cases, this was understandable, given that, under this regime, those individuals most influential in authoritative religious sites were, literally and genetically, *related* (as sons, brothers, nephews, and cousins) to the leaders of traditional elite groups. Whereas the American juxtaposition of religion and traditional authority tended to promote and valorize the on-going emergence of new leadership, the European juxtaposition tended to position religion and religious authority in support of established elites. Not surprisingly, then, European progressive political forces (republicans, democrats, socialists, anarchists) tended toward boisterous anticlericalism and frequently toward the denunciation of religion itself as an imposture devised by those in positions of hegemony to neutralize any who aspired to rearrange the distribution of political, economic, or social power. In the US, no such religious split developed or existed between political conservatives and political progressives. Broad acceptance of a need for religious valorization of American institutions, attitudes, and procedures is found in all sectors of the US political spectrum.

Political authorities in the US have traditionally not grounded American freedoms and democracy on the current pragmatic advantages. Rather, they have been grounded on their having constituted a special gift of the deity to American citizens--accompanied with covenantal responsibilities--as unalienable privileges and obligations. This has led, or at least contributed, to American political rhetoric. Since 1789, American political culture has manifested an unabashedly theistic and pro-religious character, with frequent references to the significance of the deity as the guarantor of American liberties ('In God We Trust,' 'One Nation Under God,' etc.) , to the obligation of the American political formation to maintain a 'righteousness' appropriate to a covenanted people, and to the importance to each individual's intimate personal experience with the deity to demonstrate to each the importance of God to her or his existence and to choices and to provide each with a powerful sense of the personal (as well as communal) moral responsibility expected of him or her by the deity. In Emerson's lapidary phrase, 'the greatest of calamities is moral dereliction' (Emerson 2005: 133). Thus, in the American cultural context, cultural and governmental valorization of religion provides a spiritual guarantee of those freedoms in individual behavior and adherence to religious values. The internal behavioral results of religious sensibilities and habits provide a guarantee of adherence to the responsible and imperative awareness and use of that freedom, as well as of the external righteousness, required by the covenant.

Twenty-five years after arguing in the Declaration of Independence that Americans had been 'endowed by their Creator with inherent and unalienable rights,' Thomas Jefferson reaffirmed and clarified his line of reasoning in 1801 in his first Inaugural Address as President, where he inquires, rhetorically: 'Can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God?' (Jefferson 1967: 18). Even in endorsing his theistic grounding for the specially-privileged American relationship to God (and liberty), however,

Jefferson betrays a characteristically American insecurity about his conclusion, and an accompanying tendency toward arrogant-sounding over-assertiveness, which he exhibits during the Constitutional debates of 1787 when he writes: ‘Our experiment will be that men may be trusted to govern themselves without a master. Could the contrary of this be proved, I should conclude, either that there is no God, or that he is a malevolent being’ (Jefferson 1990: 19).

THE REPUBLIC OF LETTERS

According to Michael Warner, during the eighteenth century in American colonies the printed word, and a new way of perceiving it, succeeded in transforming the public sphere and generated an entirely new political language of republicanism. It became possible for any individual reader ‘to imagine oneself, in the act of reading, becoming part of an arena of the national people’--namely other readers (Warner 1990: xiii). These circumstances gave more weight to Thomas Paine’s arguments in his sixteen *Crisis* pamphlets, which marshaled American patriots in the most difficult time of the War of Independence (in the winter of 1776-77). They transformed the meaning of common words such as ‘we’ or ‘America,’ which ceased to signify a group of colonists or a geographic space, and were becoming to mean a nascent nation forged in the hardships of war. Ten years later, a series of eighty-five pamphlets entitled *The Federalist*, and written by James Madison (1751-1836), Alexander Hamilton (1757-1804) and John Jay (1745-1829), under the shared pseudonym ‘Publius,’ persuaded the citizens of the state of New York to adopt the Constitution that was based on federal principles.

In one of the most important contributions to the series, Essay # 10, James Madison argued two important issues. First, that government cannot regulate the human inclination toward political difference and struggle (‘faction’) by destroying liberty. It cannot even

eliminate political differences among citizens, since these are caused by the differences in capabilities, property, and by the natural tendency of individuals to associate according to their material and economic interests. These differences, says Madison, are not taken into account by 'theoretic politicians' who speak of 'pure democracy,' and who would like to reduce 'mankind to the perfect equality in their political rights.' Yet to achieve this, they would also have to equalize and to assimilate 'their possessions, their opinions and their passions' (*Norton 3 1: 673*).

What Madison suggests is control not of the causes but of the effects of 'factions.' This control consists in preventing any majority in a political party 'to carry into effect the schemes of oppression.' This can be done by regular election delegating the government to a small number of people who will have to obtain a great number of votes during the campaign, thus gaining the trust of the greatest number of people. To prevent corruption, the number of representatives must be larger than that which would allow conspiracies but smaller than that which would bring confusion and chaos to political decisions. The optimum size of the House of Representatives (59 representatives in 1789 and 435 representatives since 1911) is thus determined as one would solve a mathematical problem. Another regulative principle of the political system proposed by Madison consists in restricting the struggle between parties to the limits of the representative assembly where it is under the public control of voters. A further principle, referred to directly in the Constitution, is inherent in the structure of American government which consists of three independent forms of power--executive, legislative and judiciary--and the mutual control exercised by them.

The second issue mentioned by Madison follows from the first. The new system of government makes liberty possible on a larger scale, negotiating between 'great and aggregate interests' of individual states or large parties and the local or particular concerns. The small size of traditional democracies allows the majority to usurp power much more easily than in a

large republic. Therefore Madison recommends a large republic, based on federal, as well as unitary principles. The representatives elected in such a large state will, according to Madison, be 'superior to local prejudices and to the schemes of injustice.' The Union will also provide 'a greater variety of parties' which will prevent one party from outnumbering and oppressing the rest. Lastly, it will prevent the rise of illegal power structures on a large scale. The Federalist political satires, e.g., *The Anarchiad* (1787), written by the group of authors nicknamed The Connecticut Wits (which included John Trumbull, Lemuel Hopkins, David Humphreys, Joel Barlow, Timothy Dwight, and others) had a similar mission but hardly the same resonance as *The Federalist*.

A better treatment of the momentous political issues of the day can be found in some early American novels and other works of fiction which do not subscribe to Federalist political propaganda. The dangers of unification and equalization as well as the Federalist unwillingness to address the issues of the rights of women are discussed in Charles Brockden Brown's (1771-1810) utopian dialogue *Alcuin* (1798). A vivid picture of the political situation in the 1790s is sketched in the picaresque novel *Modern Chivalry* written between 1792 and 1797 (revised in 1805 and enlarged in 1815) by Hugh Henry Brackenridge (1748-1816). It presents an American equivalent of Don Quixote, partly Jeffersonian, and partly independent democrat Captain Farrago, for whom the fight for democracy becomes a series of embarrassments and humiliations which can only be compared to the famous combat of his Spanish precursor with windmills. Unlike Sancho Panza, Farrago's servant Teague O'Regan, an ignorant yet self-assured fool and knave, enjoys great political success. He meets politicians, talks with the President, and is granted a government office of the excise man of the whiskey tax. Even after he is tarred and feathered by a mob on the eve of the Whiskey Rebellion (1794), he eludes misfortune. Sent to France as a strange animal to be studied by naturalists, he is celebrated as a *sans-culotte* (a revolutionary of the lowest social level) when

the tar and feathers wear off. Brackenridge's satire points out the deep insecurity not only of individuals but of the political system itself which was far from the perfection advertised in *The Federalist*.

AMERICAN UTOPIAS

The separation from Britain leads to the emphasis on the historical or even sacred mission of the new nation in the world. This theme dominates one of the first attempts at American epic, *The Columbiad* (1807, originally *The Vision of Columbus*, 1787) by Joel Barlow (1754-1812), in which the discoverer of America, dying in prison, is consoled by an angel who reveals to him a vision of the brilliant future of the new nation leading other states to 'establish the political harmony of mankind.' The rewritten and expanded version of Barlow's poem puts more emphasis on the vision of the bright future. The plan of progress is no longer of God's but of Nature's making. In the Old World people are enslaved by superstition, which is the source of 'false morals' and 'subjection.' This enslavement ultimately leads to the loss of the true perception of the world and to heavy distortions of human relationships in feudal society. Despite this, humanity is still in its infancy, and its true progress is effected by the growth of human knowledge, initiated by Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Newton, but, first and foremost, by Francis Bacon, who had demonstrated that physical science must necessarily develop until it becomes moral science. In future, moral science will replace religion and will lead to a restructuring of human relationships based no longer on hierarchical, feudal principles, but on the democratic political foundations of the new nation: 'the federal union' linked by 'commerce' exchange of goods as well as ideas. In this way, the United States are seen as the endpoint of human government as well as the secular version of the New Jerusalem. The history of the world does not end by the general conflagration and the Last Judgment, but in the American 'Hall of Nations' where

all destructive things,
 The mask of priesthood and the mace of kings,
 Lie trampled to the dust; for here at last
 Fraud, folly, error all their emblems cast,
 Each envoy here unloads his wearied hand
 Of some old idol from his native land;

 Swords, scepters, mitres, crowns and globes and stars,
 Codes of false fame and stimulants of wars
 Sink in the settling mass [...] (qtd. in Howard 1943: 319)

The past is discarded as a heap of useless theatrical paraphernalia, and this destruction, replacing the general conflagration (but still following the biblical model of the holocaust), opens the way for the final legislative session, a secular version of the Last Judgment. The progress from the infancy of mankind is seen as a boundless leap into the Eternity of the New World, ruled by the new secularized Holy Trinity: 'EQUALITY [...] FREE ELECTION [...] FEDERAL BAND' (qtd. in Howard 1943: 319), supplanting God the Father, God the Son and the Holy Ghost.

Another epic poem, *The Conquest of Canaan* (1786) by a grandson of Jonathan Edwards, Timothy Dwight (1752-1817) was written before the revolution (between 1771 and 1773) and used the biblical story of the Jews, led by Joshua, who attained the promised land of Canaan. Later, the mythical narrative was refashioned into an allegorical story of General Washington's fight against the British. In this way, historical events were given a utopian

dimension of sacred history, where Washington became the lawful successor of the Pilgrim Fathers.

The fullest expression of American utopianism can be found in the ode, *The Rising Glory of America*, composed by Hugh Henry Brackenridge along with the best lyrical, political and satirical poet of the time, Philip Freneau (1752-1832), and read by the former at the graduation exercises of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton University) in 1771. Here, America is described as a second paradise, regained not by Christ but by humankind, and secured not by God but by the everlasting harmony of nature:

Paradise anew

Shall flourish, by no second Adam lost,
No dangerous tree with deadly fruits shall grow,
No tempting serpent to allure the soul
From native innocence. [...] The lion and the lamb
In mutual friendship linked, shall browse the shrub,
And timorous deer with softened tigers stray
O'er mead, or lofty hill, or grassy plain [...] (*Norton 3 1: 710*)

AMERICAN UTOPIAS AND VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATION

One may also usefully consider that American utopianism has historically been and remains an outgrowth and concomitant of voluntary association, which itself was a direct product of the application of American religious pragmatism and frontier utilitarianism (with their emphasis on flexibility, opportunity, possibility, and hope) to the conditions in which many found themselves in the Early Republic. Such an interpretation emphasizes the influence on

American utopianism of four unsettling and dynamic currents within American society and the American cultural paradigm: secession, association, vagueness, possibility and hope.

In regarding American utopianism from this perspective, it is valuable to remember the following three points.

First, the cultural entity that embodies the United States was a product of secession, personally and politically, and, like the other components and products of that society, utopianism in America reflects the cultural paradigm's valorization. The individuals who came to America had to make as dramatic and emotional a break with their former societies as the new nation chose to make in its secession from the British Empire. The tradition of secession, the 'revolutionary' tradition, has remained a foundational ethos in American society; political secession from the federal union was repeatedly advocated until 1860 by as canonical American figures as Jefferson and Emerson. Creation of alternative institutional arrangements by 'voluntary associations' has been a traditional practice since the early days of the Republic. So-called 'utopian' undertakings of various sorts have simply formed a small part of a much larger fabric of 'secessionist' or 'revolutionary' activities in the American context.

Second, the locus of 'utopianism' in US culture has thus remained primarily individual, because hope is so widely valorized, because of the ubiquity of voluntary associations for hopeful activity (so many opportunities for organizational change), and the consequent opportunity to introduce change on a continuous, small-scale and evolutionary basis. These features render specifically utopian organizations, established for purposes of grandiose, large-scale, 'revolutionary' change largely unnecessary and irrelevant. Moreover, any 'utopian' organizations (like any voluntary associations) rapidly lose coherence in the face of the American ethos of 'secession.' In the American case, universal individual hope

neutralizes special, particular group or class hope. This is one factor in the failure of socialism to gain traction in the United States.

Third, American voluntary associations tended to distrust a separation into leaders and followers--indeed, to distrust the very idea of 'leadership' itself as 'undemocratic.' Given these cultural caveats, American voluntary associations (including those of the 'utopian' stamp) tended to be 'secessionist' bodies, aiming only to set up localized services and arrangements for their members withdrawn from other jurisdictions, without any ambition that their arrangements might serve as a model for eventual application to American society at large. Similarly, these associations in general did not impose a strict discipline on their members of the moment, whom they regarded and treated as bound to participation only so long as they willed to be so--that is only so long as they continued to share the goals and willingly to accept the supervision of the society. In general, members could join and depart as they chose to do so, with no strictures or mental pressure from the association. As in American society at large, individuals could leave at any time, for any purpose. And the association could and did not assume the 'cultural authority' to suggest that the ways in which its members conducted their business or their lives might be regarded in any way as a general (much less prescriptive) model for most or all other Americans.

Thus, American utopianism operates not through organizations, but through individual consciousness; not through membership, but through secession; not through allegiance, but through declarations of independence and dissent; not through form, but through power; not through structures, but through deconstruction and reconstruction. It is a process of mind, of virtual space; not of 'solid' commitment, but of indeterminacy and vagueness.

COLONIAL TIMES IN RETROSPECT

While the authors of the Declaration of Independence strove to differentiate Americans from the unworthy ‘British brethren,’ later writers, especially Washington Irving (1783-1859), tried to point out the contrast between the colonial past and post-revolutionary situation. This contrast appeared for the first time in Irving’s satire on the Dutch past and contemporary political scene of New York City, titled *A History of New York* and was published in 1808 as the papers of Diedrich Knickerbocker, a fictitious, eccentric but also dull, antiquary of Dutch extraction. Irving’s writing on the colonial era was not based on any great awareness of historical (dis)continuity and causality (as in the contemporaneous novels of Walter Scott), but on the correspondences between the basic habits and patterns of behavior in the pre-Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary times.

Irving often narrates commonplace events but situates them in the bizarre setting of early or traditional Dutch settlements in New York State. The bizarreness is especially evident in his *History of New York*, which overstates the immobility and inertia of Dutch burghers and makes much fun of their fashions and habits, without, indeed, overlooking their erotic relationships.

[...] the greatness of the lover’s passion seemed to increase in proportion to the magnitude of its object--and a voluminous damsel arrayed in a dozen of petticoats, was declared by a Low Dutch [i.e., of the Netherlands] sonneteer of the province [i.e., of New Amsterdam, later New York] to be radiant as a sunflower and luxuriant as a full-blown cabbage. Certain it is that in those days the heart of the lover could not contain more than one lady at a time, whereas the heart of a modern gallant has often room enough to accommodate half a dozen. The reason of which I conclude to be, that either the hearts of the gentlemen have grown larger, or the persons of the ladies smaller--this, however, is the question for physiologists to determine. (*AmTrad*: 215)

To stress the difference between European and American society and to enhance his satirical effects, Irving transposed some European (especially German) folktales and motifs into the new environment, where the tales retained their attraction but none of their magical credibility. The first instance of this was *The Sketch Book* (1819, 1820), written in London and published in New York under the pseudonym of Geoffrey Crayon. This made Irving the first American writer of international reputation. Folktale themes play an important role in the two best known tales from this collection, 'Rip Van Winkle' and 'The Legend of the Sleepy Hollow.' Using folk motifs as well as some historical details of life in Dutch villages in the period before the revolution, Irving did not merely demonstrate the sweeping nature of historical changes, he also introduced the first anti-hero, Rip Van Winkle, a counterpart of the model character of the successful American who made his first appearance in Franklin's *Autobiography*. Irving's hero is a person who cannot come to terms with the rapid tempo of American life but who, in the end, can find some advantage in his weaknesses. In the 'Legend of the Sleepy Hollow,' Irving introduced (in the character of the protagonist Ichabod Crane) a caricature of, at once, the Puritan and the Connecticut Yankee, a person unable to abandon the private magic world of past superstitions (Ichabod Crane was an avid reader of Cotton Mather's works on witchcraft), and therefore misinterpreting his own position in the village community as well as the favors of the coquettish daughter of the richest farmer. When frightened almost to death by a supposed supernatural apparition and beaten by his rival, a local heavy, he cannot stand the embarrassment and disappears, leaving behind a ghost story which immediately becomes popular and widely known as a local folktale.

Irving, in his early tales, not only traces the complex relationship between the worlds of fiction and reality, a relationship that the Puritans could not understand, but, looking back on the period of Revolution and Early Republic, he shows--especially in 'Rip Van Winkle'--

that historical changes may not be so sweeping as they first appear, and that the basic features of human nature are not easily transformed by revolutions. In these respects Irving may still appear to be close to the satiric and moralizing spirit of the Enlightenment. But his fiction also anticipates Romanticism in opening the way for historical romance which, among others, invents local myths, sagas and traditions to change 'the empty face' of the American landscape.

Even a conservative such as Irving could not help noticing, and reflecting, the mobility, 'unsettlement,' and destabilization of tradition, hierarchy, and authority that was in many ways characteristic of the migratory American society. That was a principal focus in the work of Irving's contemporaries James Fenimore Cooper, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville (whose greatest work, *Democracy in America*, was eloquently and canonically translated into English by Henry Reeve). Mobility, its dynamics, and its consequences were also to become a compelling theme for Emerson's fellow cultural critics Walt Whitman, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville.

The insistent and disturbing presence of transition and inchoation at the margins of a culturally rooted American society that Irving is trying construct is particularly poignant--and revealing. For as much as it seems he would like to 'edit' it out, he is unable to do so, staring in fascinated horror at the pervasive erosive process. In one passage, for example, clearly designed to praise the merits of settled society, his narrative is deflected midway by a threat to it:

I mention this peaceful spot [Sleepy Hollow, near Tarrytown, NY] with all possible laud; for it is in such little retired Dutch valleys, found here and there embosomed in the great State of New York, that population, manners, and customs remain fixed; while the great torrent of migration and improvement which is making such incessant

changes in other parts of this restless country, sweeps by them unobserved. They are like those little nooks of still water which border a rapid stream, where we may see the straw and bubble riding quietly at anchor, or slowly revolving in their mimic harbor, undisturbed by the rush of the passing current. Though many years have elapsed since I trod the drowsy shades of Sleepy Hollow, yet I question whether I should not still find the same trees and the same families vegetating in its sheltered bosom. (Irving 1981: 331)

And in a second passage, the dissociative phenomenon repeats, again contrary to original impetus, with even more force and impact. Again, speaking of the exemplary Sleepy Hollow, he informs us that

[A]ll these were nothing to the tales of ghosts and apparitions that succeeded. The neighborhood is rich in legendary treasures of the kind. Local tales and superstitions thrive best in these sheltered long-settled retreats, but are trampled under foot by the shifting throng that forms the population in most of our country places. Besides, there is no encouragement for ghosts in most of our villages, for they have scarcely had time to finish their first nap and turn themselves in their graves before their surviving friends have traveled away from the neighborhood; so that when they turn out at night to walk their rounds they have no acquaintance left to call upon. This is perhaps the reason why we so seldom hear of ghosts except in our long-established Dutch communities. (Irving 1981: 350)

7. INVENTING THE INDIANS: BRYANT, COOPER, SIMMS & LONGFELLOW

INTRODUCTION

In *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787) Thomas Jefferson expressed his regret that--for all their noble bodily and mental qualities, high moral and social principles like fortitude and respect for individual freedom, and eloquence comparable to Demosthenes and Cicero--the ethnic group of American Indians faced extinction. Though he saw them as potentially civilized people, comparing them to the Europeans living north of the Alps in the times of the Roman Empire, he believed that, contrary to most North European 'barbarians,' who had for a long time resisted the civilizing efforts of the Romans and even uprooted their empire, the Indians could be quickly absorbed into the new American nation mainly by means of philanthropy and government programs of agricultural development. In this way, he thought, European civilization could be regenerated in America where it would return to its 'natural' roots, and, conversely, the Indians would reap the benefits of this purified civilization.

We know that this scheme, though plausible in theory, produced the opposite effect in practice. During Jefferson's presidency vain attempts had been made to transform Indian hunters into orderly farmers. And when the natives refused to cultivate the land, it was seized from them and allotted to white settlers. The result was that the Indians were driven by military force to increasingly remote parts of the continent.

Nevertheless, in scholarly accounts of America, the Indians continued to be treated with great respect not only for their natural qualities, but also because of the ancient origin of their languages. Jefferson as well as some Spanish scholars of that time (Abbé Clavigero; Francesco Clavigero [1721-1787]) believed that the Indians had descended from an ancient race, related to the Semitic tribes, which came to America shortly after the confusion of

tongues during the construction of the tower of Babel. Jefferson lamented that the colonists 'have suffered many Indian tribes to extinguish, without [...] having previously collected and deposited [...] the general rudiments at least for the language they spoke' (1984: 227).

Linguistic considerations that might lead to the discovery of a common origin of Indians and Europeans were at that time often more important than natural, technological, or cultural differences mentioned by contemporary European scholars (for instance by Buffon, Abbé Raynal or William Robertson). These considerations established the Indians as the race of greater antiquity than the most ancient Asian civilizations.

But at the same time the antiquity of the Indians was already forgotten and devoid of meaning for white settlers. They had neither a history nor a comprehensible tradition: 'I know no such thing existing as an Indian monument,' complained Jefferson (1984: 223). In his description of his excavations in an Indian burial mound (or 'barrow') he does not conceal his frustration at the chaotic arrangement of the bones and the absence of any objects of value. Jefferson did not know that the Indians possessed a substantial oral tradition and mythology.

The civilizational pressure exercised on the Indians as well as the ignorance and disregard of actual cultural differences between them and the colonists led many Americans to believe that their new nation had been heroically expanding into a vacant space, a no-man's land, created for them by geological as well as historical cataclysms.

Although Native Americans were granted their lands beyond the Appalachians by the Royal Proclamation of 1763, their right was generally ignored both by the backwoods farmers and trappers and by the surveyors and the agents who had been bringing new colonists to Kentucky or Ohio. Finally, even the British Government started to exercise its pressure on the Indians to cede their lands to the white settlers. During and after the War of Independence, Native Americans armed by the British guns fought the American patriots. In 1790 George Washington's administration effected the adoption of the Indian Intercourse Act according to

which Native Americans should be seen as distinct nations with their own territories protected by the US Government. The Act also included the establishment of the Government trading posts, furnishing the Indians with agricultural tools and other benefits of civilization, and the regulation of alcohol trading. In spite of these legal measures, white colonists invaded the Indian lands of Ohio in 1791 and shortly after Washington appointed a fierce general, 'Mad' Anthony Wayne, who defeated the warriors of the Ohio Confederacy under the chief Little Turtle in the Battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794. Despite the religious and moral revival of the Midwestern tribes lead by the 'Shawnee Prophet' Tenskwatawa and the chief Tecumseh, Native Americans were again fought and defeated by the US Army especially during the 1812 war with Britain. The only tribe to recover after the war was the Cherokees. However, not even they could resist the increasing pressure, and they became victims of the Government policy of the Indian removal that began under James Monroe's administration (1817-1825) with the campaign against the Seminole nation in Georgia, and was completed during the presidency of Andrew Jackson (1829-1837) with the removal of about 45,000 Indians to the territories beyond the Mississippi. Jackson explained this campaign as 'just and humane policy' that

recommended them to quit their possessions on this side of the Mississippi and go to a country to the west where there is every probability that they will always be free from the mercenary influence of White men, and undisturbed by the local authority of the states: [...] the General Government can exercise a parental control over their interest and possibly perpetuate their race. (qtd. in Milner 1994: 162)

While for new settlers the lands of the Midwest were represented in the alluring figures of female meekness and fertility (as in the novel  *migrants* [1791] by Gilbert Imlay and Mary

Wollstonecraft, advertising the colonization of Kentucky and Ohio), scholars and artists were searching for enigmatic imprints and traces of natural and human history.

BRYANT

This interest also appears in the poetry of William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878), the son of an educated backwoodsman from Massachusetts. Bryant is often thought to be the first American follower of William Wordsworth mainly because he was one of very few Americans who read the *Lyrical Ballads* in the 1810s. But his actual inspiration in English literature goes back further to the poets of the 'graveyard school'--Edward Young, Thomas Gray, and others. His most popular poem 'Thanatopsis' (1814, 1821) is a meditation on American nature and on death. Only death will connect the Americans with their beautiful country, therefore they should think--instead of the terrors of death--about the grandeur of the virgin land with which they shall be mixed and which shall then become their 'great tomb':

The hills

Rock-ribb'd and ancient as the sun,--the vales
Stretching in pensive quietness between;
The venerable woods--rivers that move
In majesty, and the complaining brooks
That make the meadows green; and pour'd round all
Old ocean's grey and melancholy waste,--
Are but the solemn decorations all
Of the great tomb of man. The golden sun,
The planets, all the infinite host of heaven,
Are shining on the sad abodes of death,

Through the still lapse of ages. All that tread
The globe are but a handful to the tribes
That slumber in its bosom. (*Norton 3 1: 890*)

What is the place of Indians in this magnificent land where the dead ‘reign alone’? In ‘Thanatopsis’ they do not appear but in a later poem, inspired by Bryant’s visit to Illinois in 1832 and included under the title ‘The Prairies’ in the 1834 edition of his *Poems*, the ‘red men’ exist only as a threatening power which in the past destroyed a great American civilization (as old as that of Ancient Greece) whose dead sleep in what was thought to be the Indian burial mounds.

Are they here--

The dead of other days!--and did the dust
Of these fair solitudes once stir with life
And burn with passion? Let the mighty mounds
That overlook the rivers, or that rise
In the dim forest crowded with old oaks
Answer. A race, that long has passed away,
Built them;--a disciplined and populous race
Heaped, with toil, the earth, while yet the Greek
Was hewing the Pentelicus to forms
Of symmetry, and rearing on its rock
The glittering Parthenon. These ample fields
Nourished their harvests [...]
All day this desert murmured with their toils,

Till twilight blushed and lovers walked and wooed
In a forgotten language, and old tunes,
From instruments of unremembered form,
Gave the soft winds a voice. The red man came--
The roaming hunter-tribes, warlike and fierce,
And the mound-builders vanished from the earth. (*Norton 3 1: 895*)

Bryant is almost grateful that the Indians were repelled and driven into remote parts of the land at the foot of the Rocky Mountains. Thus the prairies could again become a quiet grave of the glorious ancient civilization as well as the beautiful 'virgin land' opened up for future colonists.

COOPER

While for Jefferson the Indians were evidence of the original vigor and perfection of American nature,⁹ for Bryant, fifty years later, they were connected with the destructiveness of death, and with the loss of the past. They were already coming to represent the forces of destruction menacing past grandeur and present beauties of America. Expelled from their own lands, and reduced to a chaotic and cataclysmic element, the Indians had finally become a theme for an artist who intended to integrate them into a new American myth. James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851) seems to have accomplished this feat in his Leatherstocking Series, featuring Natty Bumppo, the intrepid woodsman and trapper in deerskin leggings, who understands the wilderness and can be generous both to friends and enemies.

It is a well-known fact that from his second novel, *The Spy* (1821), Cooper was an attentive disciple of Walter Scott, whom he met in Scotland. He decided to represent the

⁹ Such arguments were used in Jefferson's controversy with Buffon, the French naturalist who maintained that the American project was doomed, because America was a continent where all living forms were degenerating.

Indians in a similar way to how Scott had depicted the Highlanders in *Waverley* (1814) and other Scottish novels. Like the Indians, the Celtic inhabitants of the Scottish Highlands were driven out of their native territories by big landowners who started to use their lands as hunting grounds or pasture. In Scott's days, the Highlanders practically disappeared from their native grounds, having been driven to Scottish and English industrial towns and often forced to emigrate to America or Australia. Both Scott and Cooper understood that this was a suitable time for the construction of nostalgic images of such natives who, unlike the living aboriginal people, would add glory to the past.

In Scotland as well as in America, this construction was a sophisticated and multi-purpose project. Richard Slotkin has pointed out that

both Scott and Cooper had used the genre [of historical romance] to create a literary basis for the nascent nationalism of their middle-class audiences. Their practice was to recover some crisis period from the nation's past and show in the resolution a definitive step realizing the destined and glorious present. Typically, political resolution was mirrored in the romantic alliance or marriage between hero and heroine representing the different cultures or parties [...] (1986: xiii)

But marriage was only the final solution and by no means a universal one in the novels of both writers. First of all, a 'reflector character' (Georg Lukács's term) had to be created so that the manners and the ways of life of the parties in conflict could be depicted without evident prejudices and unnecessary detachment. While Scott represented Edward Waverley as a mediator between the Highlanders and Lowlanders as well as between the Jacobites and Loyalists, Cooper in *The Spy* developed the character of Harvey Birch, who during the War of Independence operated on the neutral ground between the British and the American Patriots,

generously helping good people on both sides. In contrast to Waverley, Cooper's hero was much more active. He aided the marriage of the daughter of a British Loyalist to a patriotic American officer, helping the bride's father to emigrate ving his son, a British officer, from execution, and, above all, conveyed military intelligence to George Washington, who stayed in disguise close to New York (held at that time by the British). Though a person of low rank (a peddler, in fact) and though his actual occupation was thought ungentlemanly (no gentleman would ever become a spy), Birch was a 'natural aristocrat' and a man of moral principles. Unlike the much less distinct and more ambiguous Waverley, whom Scott himself called 'a sneaking piece of imbecillity,' Birch appears almost as an archetypal American hero who embodies democratic values. Therefore he did not end--like Waverley--in a fairly conventional marriage, but, having refused all honors conferred on him by Washington, he returned to his former itinerant trade.

In the following novel, *The Pioneers* (1823), Cooper deals with the post-Revolutionary period in the locale where he grew up, Cooperstown, which was founded by his father on the shores of Otsego Lake in upstate New York. For the first time he attempts to explore another important conflict--the clash between the laws of the wilderness and those of civilization, between the settlers and the Indians. This new antagonism refocuses the underlying political theme: the post-revolutionary conflict between the old Tory (Loyalist) aristocracy and the new Whig upper class who displaced the old landlords and claimed the land from them. This conflict was also dormant in Cooper's own family: his wife (*née* de Lancy) was the daughter of one of the biggest Tory landholders in New York and of the leader of the Loyalists during the War of Independence, while Cooper's father was of Federalist persuasion.

The story of *The Pioneers* develops from an apparently meaningless event. A veteran frontiersman Natty Bumppo, nicknamed 'Leather-Stocking,' is sentenced to jail for shooting

deer out of season. Natty does not accept the laws of civilization represented by Judge Marmaduke Temple, a retired Quaker gentleman and the biggest landholder in the region (Judge Temple is modeled on Cooper's father). For him, the law of the forest and moral law of God remain the only authorities to be respected. In spite of his aversion to civilization and the new landholders, Bumppo unknowingly becomes a mediator between the old and new landlords. Before the revolution he had been the employee of a staunch Loyalist, Major Effingham, whose lands later became the property of Judge Temple. When the demented Major is found in the wilderness where he was hiding from American Patriots, Bumppo helps to reveal that a man who is supposed to be an Indian, Oliver Edwards, and who in the meantime has courted the Judge's daughter, is in reality the grandson of Major Effingham. As a result, a wedding takes place that reconciles two powerful families--the owners of the land in the past and the present, as well as the warring parties--the Loyalists and the American Patriots (or the Tories and the Whigs). Another important feature of the marriage is that it dispels the fear of ethnic misalliance (the bridegroom is not an Indian). Bumppo remains faithful to the laws of the forest and God, and leaves for the western prairies having rescued an old Indian chief of the Mohicans, Chingachgook, from the forest fire, and nursed him till his death. The Indians no longer threaten white people, and the backwoodsman becomes the true hero of the story, who helps others to overcome political hostilities, and mediates between the lovers and their families, nature and civilization.

In the following novel, *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), the Indians take center stage and Natty mediates between them and white Americans. The time of the story is shifted back to the year 1757 when the Anglo-French war was raging in the forests along what is now the US-Canadian border. The Indians were involved in the conflict and fought on both sides, but in the novel they are mostly represented as the tribe of the base and depraved Iroquois who became the main allies of the French. The story starts when Cora and Alice, daughters of

Colonel Munro, the British commander of Fort William Henry, are on their way to join their father. The protection offered to them by white men is insufficient: in the wilderness they have to rely on their Indian guide, the treacherous Magua, who secretly cooperates with the Iroquois and meditates his revenge for the cruel and humiliating treatment he once received from Colonel Munro. Magua's plan to betray the small party to the Iroquois proceeds well due to the unrestrained behavior of Cora who feels sexually attracted to him, and despises her British guides. Fortunately, Magua's designs are foiled by Natty Bumppo, a scout in the service of the British, and by his two companions--the Mohican chief Chingachgook and his son Uncas. After several more fights and captures, Magua claims Cora as his property, and Uncas, the last of the Mohicans, follows him trying to rescue the girl he loves. Uncas's love for Cora has drawn the sympathy of the entire Delaware tribe, and they envision the marriage of Uncas and Cora as the fulfillment of the prophecy of old Chief Tamenund that Uncas will become his follower and save the tribe from extinction. However, both Uncas and Cora are killed by Magua and thus the utopian dream of a cross-marriage as the union of all American races (Cora has a trace of African American blood) collapses. Bumppo remains the only unvanquished hero: not only because of his capabilities, principles and beliefs, but especially because of his racial purity: 'I am a man without a cross,' he claims.

In this way racial tension becomes the major theme of Cooper's best known Indian novel. The highest values of the Indians, a corrupt, degenerate and dying race (corruption is associated with the demonic Iroquois, degeneration and extinction with the Delawares) are represented by the last members of its aristocracy: the two Mohicans, father and son. As Richard Slotkin shows,

Cooper substantially altered and reinvented Joseph [actually John] Heckewelder's account of Indian history. For Heckewelder [a minister of the Moravian Brethren, who published

his *History, Manners and Customs of the Indian Nations* in 1818] it is the Delawares, not the Mohicans, who are the original, 'unmixed' race [...]. (1986: xxii-xxiii)

Contrary to Heckewelder, Cooper stresses the exquisite purity of the last Mohicans. Uncas bears the mythical features of a Messiah. He must die to make the higher culture and purity of the Whites prevail: his character is constructed as the mythical forerunner of the White Man. The Mohicans are thus made to represent the old 'grandfather race,' the forbears of the present dominant nation.

In the following parts of the Leatherstocking Series--*The Prairie* (1827), *The Pathfinder* (1840), and *The Deerslayer* (1841)--Cooper covers the remaining periods of Natty Bumppo's life, from his early youth (*The Deerslayer*) to his extreme old age (*The Prairie*). However, none was as original and influential in its invention of the figure of the American Indian. Without their Mohican antecedents, the Apaches in the novels of Karl May would have never been created.

In Cooper's later work, we find stereotypes of such Native American stupidity and incompetence that Mark Twain famously went out of his way to lament their incredibility. But in his earlier work, particularly in the semi-autobiographical *The Pioneers* (1823), he gives us, based on his genuine personal experience of the Cooperstown area, one of the most moving, touching, and realistic portraits of the circumstances and existential subject-positions of Indians, pathfinders, pioneers, and settlers. In these portraits, he occasionally shows flashes of insight into the 'other' that anticipate those of Melville and Twain. It is interesting and useful to note, as well, that *The Pioneers* was published only three years after Washington Irving's nostalgic portrait of Sleepy Hollow--and that the 'frontier' town to Cooperstown, New York, was located less than two hundred miles from Irving's exemplar of settledness.

SIMMS & LONGFELLOW

In Cooper's time the Indian novel also flourished in South Carolina, where William Gilmore Simms (1806-1870) published a series of border romances. One of his most popular books, entitled *The Yemassee* (1835) after the local Indian tribe of the Yamasee (one of the tribes of the Seminole nation), describes the tribe's uprising fomented by Spaniards against the settlers in 1715. Simms was an avid reader of both Walter Scott and Cooper, but his novel lacks a 'reflector' character similar to Natty Bumppo who would become the mediator between the Indians and the whites. Rather, there is a faint figure of the villain known to us from the poems of Lord Byron, a renegade Captain 'Pepperbox,' fighting against his own people on the Spanish side. Contrary to Cooper, the most important part in the story is given to an Indian, Oconestoga, who is the son of the chief of the rebel tribe. Oconestoga is sent by his master Gabriel Harrison to spy on his own tribe. He is discovered and killed by his mother who thus saves him from the worst of fates, expulsion from the tribe. Only later does the reader learn that Harrison was the disguised governor of the state. Thus, the sacrifice of the young Indian helps the whites to regain their power. In *The Yemassee*, the Indians are not figured as mythical predecessors of the whites but rather as the allies of another, hostile power and culture, the Spanish empire and Catholicism which threatens the Puritan communities in South Carolina's backwoods, represented by the aged Puritan parson Matthews and his daughter Bess, who becomes the wife of the Governor. In this way, the novel does not thematize the shifting frontier. The stable life of a religious community seems to be its central value.

Another attempt to invent an archetypal American Indian was made by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882), a native of Maine and a Harvard professor of modern languages. Apart from his commitments in the Abolitionist campaign, Longfellow soon became known for his interests in European culture. He even wrote a strange symbolic poem

about Prague, 'The Beleaguered City' (1839), depicting it in a romantic vein as a place haunted by demons. But the focus of his interest remained in Germany and the Mediterranean until he discovered, in the work of his German colleagues Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, mention of the discovery of an ancient Finnish epic. At that time it was believed that the work in question, the *Kalevala*, was an authentic oral composition, but later it was discovered that it was a modern compilation and adaptation of Finnish folk poetry. Longfellow was inspired by the meter of the *Kalevala*, unrhymed trochaic octosyllabics, and wrote *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855), an epic about a semi-fictional Indian hero. The historical Hiawatha was a Mohawk chief who founded the Iroquois confederacy in the 1570s.

The poem draws from available ethnographic sources (writings of John Heckewelder, 1743-1823, Henry Schoolcraft, 1793-1864, and the paintings of George Catlin, 1796-1872), and idealizes Hiawatha not only as a powerful and vigorous hero, gentle lover and generous husband, but also as an introducer of agriculture and the inventor of the wampum script. Like Cooper's heroes, Hiawatha cedes center stage to the 'superior' Europeans, after encountering the first Christian missionaries. But in contrast to Cooper's project, Hiawatha is not involved in any reconciliation with the whites, as he lives before the conquest of America. Therefore the poem bears something of a resemblance to an ethnographic exhibit (containing for instance exhaustive information on Indian mythology and some of their ways of life). In spite of these museum-like features, the poem is at times artistically very impressive, especially in the scene of the death of Minehaha, the hero's wife.

The measure and beauties of Longfellow's Indian epic attracted Josef Václav Sládek (1845-1912), who translated most of the poem when he was staying with a family of Moravian settlers in Wisconsin at the end of the 1860s. In the poems written at that time (for instance 'On the Graves of Indians' ['Na hrobech indiánských']) Sládek figured the Indians as an extinct race that resembled the northern Slavs of Pomerania and Lusatia who were

massacred by bellicose Germans. A few years after Sládek's death, *Hiawatha* became an important source of information for the Czech boy-scout leaders in inventing Indian games. And in this way the invention of Indians had circumscribed its full circle: from the fictitious childhood of humankind to the fictions of children's games.

8. AMERICAN GOTHIC: BROCKDEN BROWN & POE

INTRODUCTION

‘The terror of many these [...] works is not of Germany but of the soul’ wrote Edgar Allan Poe in the Preface to his most extensive collection of short stories which appeared in 1839 in Philadelphia under the title *Tales of the Grotesque and the Arabesque*. Instead of imitating German novels and tales of horror he focused on psychic life, and especially on its fragmentation: the split between reason and imagination, or between consciousness and the unconscious. Though the same tendency appears in European Gothic and romantic novels, Poe carries it to a great degree of abstraction but at the same time preserves its intense emotional impact. This is typical of the description of the mental state of Roderick Usher in the famous story ‘The Fall of the House of Usher.’ The hero’s paintings are the proof of his derangement:

[...] from these paintings (vivid as their images are now before me) I would in vain endeavor to educe more than a small portion which would lie within a compass of merely written words. By the utter simplicity, by the nakedness of his design, he arrested and overawed attention. If ever mortal painted an idea, that mortal was Roderick Usher. For me at least, in the circumstances then surrounding me, there arose out of the pure abstractions [...] an intensity of intolerable awe, no shadow of which felt I ever yet in the contemplation of the certainly glowing yet too concrete reveries of Fuseli.

One of the phantasmagoric conceptions of my friend [...] may be shadowed forth, although feebly, in words. A small picture presented the interior of an immensely long and rectangular vault or tunnel, with low walls, smooth, white and without interruption or device. Certain accessory points of the design served well to convey the idea that this

excavation lay at an exceeding depth below the surface of the earth. No outlet was observed in any portion of its vast extent, no torch or other artificial source of light was discernible; yet a flood of intense rays rolled throughout, and bathed the whole in a ghastly and inappropriate splendor. (Poe 1938: 237)

Poe does not reject familiar gothic devices: in his tales we can find elaborate descriptions of ancient castles, legends of old times are retold, heroes encounter specters, are imprisoned in the dungeon of the Inquisition, etc. But no European Gothic and Romantic writer has been so preoccupied by the connection of the state of terror with abstract ideas symbolic of mental or spiritual condition of his heroes. 'If ever mortal painted an idea, that mortal was Roderick Usher.' In this preoccupation with the consciousnesses, internal states, and constructive processes of individuals, as well as with how they projected their 'moods' and imaginative constructs on the external world, Poe shared a common phenomenalist concern with Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville, Dickinson, and many of their mid-nineteenth-century affiliates of the Transcendentalist project.

This quality of Gothic writing, the focus on the symbols of liminal states of the human mind, on the bodiless, spiritual existence and, on the other hand, on the extreme suffering of living bodies, is, according to Marshall Brown, the sublime feature of this mode. The sublime, in the sense of awe felt before an unknown power as well as of the incommensurability of great things (mountains, waterfalls, oceans, the universe) to human cognitive and affective abilities, is a standard feature of the romantic aesthetic. But only Poe and his predecessor, Charles Brockden Brown, the Philadelphia novelist writing at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, transferred the Romantic sublime from the vast spaces of nature, haunted castles and horrid dungeons to the dark recesses of the human mind. While Brockden Brown may be said to have invented a specific form of American Gothic, Poe carried his

psychologism and his powerful style subjugating the reader's emotions and mind to perfection in his 'mathematics of horror.'

CHARLES BROCKEN BROWN

Charles Brockden Brown's (1771-1810) literary talent is distinguished by two opposing features. The first was the effort to deliver 'in artless and unpremeditated language [...] the sentiments suggested at the moment' (Brown 1977: 325; this was stated in an early essay 'The Rhapsodist' published in 1789). This later became important for Brown's psychological narrative technique, which could make the reader share the tensions and compulsion under which the text was written. The incantatory style does not convey *ideas* but evokes *moods* which *take possession* of the reader. Similarly, the events and ideas 'take possession' of the characters, who often represent more than their minds and bodies can bear. Therefore especially Brown's heroines become 'victims of his stories' (Brown 1977: 332) telling of male lust, cruelty, and crime.

This happens especially in the novel *Memoirs of Stephen Calvert* (1800) where Brown concentrates on the wrongs done to women in the name of 'love.' The 'coincidental' narrative (Garbo 1981; Patterson 1988) set mostly in the Old World draws strange and troubling parallels between political and love intrigues, between the workings of reason and the unconscious. Its most important feature is the narrative situation framing the tangle of somewhat bizarre stories. The tale is told by the hero settled on the frontiers of the civilized world, which at that time was the shore of Lake Michigan, in view of an uninhabited island, a kind of 'second Paradise.' He claims that he can 'escape remorse by interposing desert between himself and mankind' (Brown 1987: 125). In other words, in *Stephen Calvert*, the American dream seems to be reduced to a kind of utopian desire to be free from the political and cultural intricacies of the Old World and from the moral burden of its history. But, at the

same time, this emancipation is thought as incapable of effecting release from the consequences of heredity. Here, again, we see the close association of American utopianism with secession, withdrawal, and separation--with very limited regard for the efficacy of such flight or exile in bringing about significant, lasting personal or institutional change.

The second feature of Brown's literary talent was his interest in the workings of abstract reason, the transformation of landscape into a map, and the creation of utopias. These apexes also characterized the writing of the Early Republic but Brown ironized the easy solutions of American utopias and showed the paradoxes of utopian ideologies incorporated in contemporary political discourse. This is the major feature of Brown's essay *Alcuin. A Dialogue* (1798, 1815--complete text). The question the narrator asks his hostess, Mrs. Carter, 'Pray, are you a Federalist?' (1987: 9), introduces the basic theme of the equality of sexes and political rights of women, the issue which became exemplified in the contemporary pamphlets of Mary Wollstonecraft but was neglected by the Federalist Party. Brown creates a parody of utopia that, on the one hand, reduces ad absurdum contemporary feminist arguments and, on the other, shows the weaknesses of utopian discourses whose main aims were unification and consolidation of the US. The major problem of these discourses seems to be the marginalization of the sexual, as well as racial, other. To demonstrate the absurdity of such unification and consolidation, Brown not only removes the division of labor between the sexes, but he also does away with all differences in clothing, behavior, and biological functions.

In Brown's fiction, the schematic, utopian, scientific and utilitarian rationality becomes confused because of its clash with the dark forces which seem to belong either to nature or to human nature but in reality they arise 'out of nothing.'¹⁰ This nothing is in the gap

¹⁰ That is, which seem to originate in natural phenomena, such as the 'spontaneous combustion' of the old Wieland in the novel of the same name (an event that, according to Brown, happened due to 'electric commotion'), as well as in animals and primitive people (the Indians), or in the unconscious, and cause the disintegration of the hero's self.

between the private and public spheres of life, the gap which opens in the mind of each individual cured of the dreams of beneficent American nature and utopias of American freedom. The integrity of some heroes, for instance of Edgar Huntly or the youth from an early short story entitled ‘Somnambulism’ collapses in the wilderness; other heroes, for instance the Godwinian character Ludloe in *Memoirs of Carwin, the Biloquist* (1822; serial publication 1803-1805),¹¹ or the eponymous hero of *Ormond* (1799), fail or collapse in their attempt to seize universal power, and to materialize their social utopias by manipulating other people and their unusual capabilities (like Carwin’s ventriloquism in the *Memoirs*). One is reminded here of subsequent Transcendentalist-school cautionary tales of perverted ‘leadership,’ such as Hawthorne’s Hollingsworth in *The Blithedale Romance*, and, of course, of Melville’s Ahab, and of Emerson’s constant counsels of vigilance against the perverting effects of leadership (and discipleship).

Brown radically transforms European influences--of Rousseau’s sentimental novel, *Julie, ou la nouvelle Heloise*, of Samuel Richardson’s epistolary novel, and its important themes of seduction and reaffirmation of the heroines’ morality, of the use of the supernatural and terror in the Gothic fiction of Ann Radcliffe, of the *Bildungsroman* of the Enlightenment, and, last but not least, of Godwin’s and Enlightenment ‘novels of purpose’ and ‘novels of ideas.’ This transformation, however, does not result in an easy affirmation of American cultural difference, but in statements of similarities between European and American scenes and heroes. Their similarity consists in the difficulty of understanding human nature, when humanity ceased to derive its power from God and began to think of itself as a free agent, though scarcely admitting that its power--in the form of sexuality, the unconscious, or the

¹¹ Modeled after the heroes of the philosophical novels of William Godwin (1756-1836), especially Falkland in *Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794) a reethinker who cunningly manipulates and destroys other characters, including the hero. Godwin was a radical moral philosopher of the late Enlightenment. His most important treatise, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), considered the benevolent impulse in human reason the only source of social freedom and order, and accused existing social institutions of the corruption of individuals and society. Godwin’s thought influenced English Romantics--the young Wordsworth and Coleridge, and especially his daughter and son-in-law, Mary and Percy Bysshe Shelley.

unknown effects of scientific and technological development--constantly escapes its own control.

This shift from the divine to human scope of power relations occurs at the outset of Brown's best novel *Wieland, or the Transformation* (1798; subtitled, characteristically, *An American Tale*). The father of a newly settled Pennsylvanian family, a mystic born in Germany, dies of spontaneous combustion in his temple built on the verge of wilderness. Though this event may have a scientific explanation, it strikes other characters as a symbol representing possibly a heretic (Anabaptist) belief in the unmediated communication of the soul with God and in the self-annihilation as the ultimate acceptance of His absolute power (it is quite likely that Brown was aware of the influence of the Anabaptists and other utopian religious communities in his native Pennsylvania). Other references link *Wieland* with radical prophetic teaching of the Camissards, a Protestant sect, which fought the Catholic authorities in the south of France (Bas-Languedoc) at the beginning of the eighteenth century (White 2004: 45).

Despite his ominous death, old *Wieland*'s children Clara and Charles lead a relatively happy life. The son marries Catharine Pleyel from another German immigrant family and the daughter is in love with Catharine's brother Henry. This idyll is destroyed by the arrival of Carwin, a mysterious stranger who has come from England but who was born in America. Some time after his appearance the young *Wieland*, Clara, and Henry begin to hear unearthly voices, as if God or a guardian angel spoke in their consciousness, upbraiding them for moral lapses, and giving them orders. The voices drive *Wieland*, believing they come directly from God, to murder his wife and children. As a madman suffering from religious hallucinations, *Wieland* is confined in an asylum.

Only towards the end of the novel it becomes evident that the voices are produced by Carwin, because of his ventriloquist skills. Carwin then prevents *Wieland*, who has escaped

from the asylum, from murdering his sister, and having earlier told Clara the horrible secrets of his ventriloquism he flies to a remote corner of Pennsylvania. Clara finally marries Pleyel after the death of his first wife and tells her incoherent story about the misfortunes which befell the whole family. This ending coincides with the final dissolution of Wieland's faith in predestination as well as with the scene when God refuses to deal with Wieland's crime. Mad Wieland proclaims: 'Thou omnipotent & holy! Thou wast the prompter of my deed. My hands were but instruments of thy will [...]. In the fullness of thy justice I confide for my reward.' And God answers: 'You say that I am a criminal. Presumptuous man! [...] I am not commissioned to be thy punisher. A Space is allowed thee for repentance.' To which Wieland replies: '[...] I am fettered and surrounded [...]. I cannot reach thee where thou art, but let the commission be given [...] my hands should snatch thee from thy throne and hurl thee to death' (1977: 437; qtd. from Brown's draft). The only thing Wieland's 'God' (or, more plausibly, the voice of the other part of his split personality) does is to give him a 'space'--the madhouse cell as well as the gap in his distracted mind--for his 'repentance.' But the other part of the hero demands that 'the commission' should be given to him, to unmask the 'shadowy security' of God and to hurl him from his throne.

There is a relationship between the self, language, and power tested in Carwin's dystopian scheme of which Wieland becomes victim. But Carwin's dangerous experiment is not a mere trial of Wieland's integrity or his belief in predestination. Since Carwin's disembodied voices affect the lives, marriages and friendships of all the characters, they also show the weakness of the basic prerequisites of communal life. This is even more apparent in the sequel to *Wieland*, *Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist*, where the hero's 'supernatural,' ventriloquist power is nearly misused in the attempt to establish a new Utopian empire of reason and virtue, resembling the state dreamt of by Benjamin Franklin in his *Autobiography* but in fact based on the manipulation of the people by an elitist intellectual.

EDGAR ALLAN POE

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) differs from Brown at least in two respects indicated by the title of his book of short stories *Tales of Grotesque and Arabesque*--the use of grotesque and the free play of imagination (arabesque). Three years after he wrote his first story, *Metzengerstein*, subtitled 'In Imitation of the German,' he described the qualities that made for his success in magazine fiction (the genre in which he made his living, if we do not take into account editorial work and hack journalism, including, for instance, a book about shells). He wrote: 'the fearful coloured into the horrible: the witty exaggerated into the burlesque: the singular wrought out into the strange and mystical' (letter to T. L. White, the owner of the *Southern Literary Messenger* [30 April 1845]).

These features are evidence of a new approach to the sublime. This aesthetic category is no longer connected with important moral or existential questions, as it still was in Brown's writings, but becomes important *in itself* as an artistic effect in Poe's writing. But this artistic effect, whether it is achieved by an ironical detachment from the horror story ('Tales of the Grotesque') or by the suggestiveness of imagination ('Tales of the Arabesque'), is always linked with an abnormal psychic state of hallucination, hypnosis (or 'mesmerism'), or incipient madness typical of most of Poe's heroes, and which also threatens his readers if they take his narratives for granted and do not think of them merely as interesting artistic constructs. The machine-like construction of the plot, which utilizes analytical reasoning, is best apparent in such well-known horror stories as 'The Descent into Maelström' or especially 'The Pit and the Pendulum' where the mathematical game of horror is simulated by the changes of the movement of the pendulum, sliding of prison walls, etc. The last mentioned story gives a sophisticated answer to the pathetic questions asked at the end of Brown's *Wieland*.

Another development of this principle can be demonstrated in tales of detection ('The Murders in the Rue Morgue,' 'The Purloined Letter,' or 'The Gold Bug'). With these Poe became the founder of the detective novella and short story. A similar trend is typical of the tales whose purpose is to mystify the readers, as for instance in 'The Balloon Hoax,' 'The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall,' 'Some Words with a Mummy.' (Two of these tales, 'The Gold Bug' and 'Some Words with a Mummy,' were the first translated, or rather adapted, works of American literature in Czech culture. They appeared in 1853 in the journal *Lumír*.)

Rational and deliberate literary composition is advocated in Poe's critical essays ('The Poetic Principle,' 'The Rationale of Verse,' and 'The Philosophy of Composition'). The final impression the work of art makes, its 'beauty,' but also its other aesthetic qualities (for instance, its mood, which is melancholy in poetry, or its symbolism) result from analytical and purposeful use of artistic procedures. The size of the work must allow it to be comprehended in one reading (the work cannot be too long) and taste should mediate between abstract reasoning and moral judgements. In this way, the poetic principle becomes an alternative to 'science,' which Poe in one of his earliest poems apostrophizes as the power of decay ('Daughter of Old Time') or as 'the Vulture whose wings are dull realities' preying on the poet's heart.

Poe blames science for the destruction of the world of myths and fables. The condensed expression of his poetic principles can be found in a late cosmological essay entitled *Eureka*  *Prose Poem* (1848). According to what Poe says here, the universe was first created by God as an absolute unity. Only later God started to shape out of the primary particle a world composed of many entities, and in the course of this procedure he became one with this complex and heterogeneous cosmos. This universe can expand only when driven by God's will: when His volition is withdrawn at the moment of maximum expansion, it

collapses and returns to the unity of the original particle. This of course means annihilation, but the end is already predetermined in the beginning. Because of this, Poe calls the universe 'God's plot,' and compares its pulsation with the process of artistic creation which repeats, according to Coleridge's *Biographia Litteraria* (1817), divine creation in the finite limits of the work of art. The collapse of the structure of the work of art may not be caused by the cessation of the artist's will but by the displacement of one of its components. This reasoning is very important for understanding the role of the monotonous meter and distinct imagery in Poe's poetry.

The key to the meaning of Poe's poetry is not so much in his melancholic imagery but rather in his steady and mathematically precise rhythmic patterns. Their main principle is balance and proportion: like the whole poem, the line must have an adequate length and an appropriate, mostly rhymed, ending, which falls into a certain stanzaic structure. Both the line and the stanza then should produce emotional tension by contrasting the regularity of meter and the passionate expectation of the rhythm of the utterance. This, says Poe in 'Philosophy of Composition,' is the condition of Beauty, which can only originate from the conflict between 'Passion' represented by speech rhythms and truth implied in the precise numerical patterns of the meter. Therefore Poe chooses the *refrain*--the affirmation of the meter, rather than of the meaning--as a starting point for his description of the way in which his main poem 'The Raven' was composed. In its truncated brevity the refrain contrasts with the length of other five lines of the stanza composed of two iambic pentameters with irregular internal rhyme. While this internal rhyme seems to indicate the continuation of the lover's story as well as the recurrent pangs of his sorrow for the dead beloved Lenore, the refrain cuts this undulating movement of speech and emotions short by the ominous word 'nevermore':

And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting

On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon that is dreaming,
And the lamplight o'er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;
And my soul of that shadow that lies floating on the floor
Shall be lifted--nevermore! (Poe 1938: 946)

Of course, the symbolical aspect of Poe's imagery is also important here: the melancholy black bird sitting on the 'pallid bust of Pallas' and casting a shadow on the fallen soul of the poet represents the principal feature of Poe's work--the unresolvable conflict between mathematical and logical rationality (reason is allegorically represented by the bust of Pallas Athena) on the one hand, and the melancholy of the lost love and death as the ultimate limit of human existence on the other. Like the universe in Poe's essay *Eureka*, the entire poem appears to be kept together only by the poet's will but is, in fact, bound by the impersonal factor of proportion: of the sameness and recurrence of metric pattern and rhymes. This feature of Poe's poetry became later appreciated especially by surrealists (e.g., by the Czech poet Vítězslav Nezval [1900-1958]), but Poe had already been discovered by the French symbolists, who saw in him a prototype of the *poète maudit* (a damned poet) able to rebel against the philistine and materialist spirit of the age and transcend the misery of his existence and his own psychic fragmentation in impersonal yet beautiful symbolic poetry.

9. AMERICAN TRANSCENDENTALISM: EMERSON & THOREAU

INTRODUCTION

While American Gothic was preoccupied with the split within the self, American Transcendentalism is interpreted by many as the most significant romantic attempt to express, both in philosophical and in aesthetic terms, the unity of the individual supported by the vision of universal unity of nature and human soul. According to these interpreters, the inherent problem of such an expression is that this unity is not simply given, nor can it be easily achieved by means of a 'return to nature.' Philosophical understanding or artistic creation of such a unity is conditioned by radical rethinking and resolute changes of the individual's relationship to religious beliefs and traditions as well as to property, society and government.

In spite of these premises, expressed in some philosophical essays and poems of the movement's leader Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), and in the works and political stance of its best writer, Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), most of the Transcendentalists were peaceful, religious and academically oriented people with interests so abstruse as Hinduism (Upanishads, Bhagavad-Gītā), Buddhism, Confucianism, Christian and Muslim mysticism, German Romanticism and metaphysics, and, last but not least, Plato's philosophy and neo-Platonism. The precursor of the movement, who influenced especially Emerson in his youth, was William Ellery Channing the elder (1780-1842), a Boston minister who became an apostle of Unitarianism.¹² The group included the philosopher and educator Bronson Alcott (1799-1888); the liberal thinker Orestes Augustus Brownson (1803-1876); the elder Channing's nephews, William Ellery Channing (1818-1901), a mediocre poet, and William Henry Channing (1810-1884), a journalist; the Unitarian pastor and Christian socialist

¹² Unitarianism was a religious movement brought from England at the end of eighteenth century by the scientist Joseph Priestley. It stressed the single personality of God, in contrast to the Trinity, advocated the free will of individual, and opposed the doctrines of original sin and eternal punishment of sinners.

Margaret Fuller (1810-1850), the first American woman-journalist and the author of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), a pioneering American book on feminism; Elizabeth Peabody (1804-1894), who was interested in social reform and education; and the mystical poet Jones Very (1813-1880). They met between 1836 and 1840, informally and irregularly, at various members' homes in the Boston area, and were called the 'Transcendental Club' by outsiders (their own name for their group was either the Symposium or The Hedge Club). Beginning in 1841, they replaced their in-person meetings, for the most part, with a published journal, *The Dial*, edited first by Fuller (1841-42) and then by Emerson (1843-44), in which their philosophic and literary conversations continued in written form. Most of the group members, and even some outsiders, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, took part in the activities of a cooperative community Brook Farm (1841-1847), founded by George Ripley (1802-1880), a philosopher of religion and a Utopian Socialist. The philosophical principles of Transcendentalism have often been disputed. Sympathetic understanding and even unreserved praise (e.g., in F. O. Matthiessen's book *The American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* [1941]) never overruled objections and skepticism. One reputed weakness of Transcendentalist philosophy is its excessive reliance on the spiritualized notion of nature (as Sacvan Bercovitch shows, the Puritan emphasis on *sola scriptura* was replaced by *sola natura*) rather than on the authenticity of the self (in this respect, Thoreau was the only exception).

Moreover, it has been argued, the transplantation of the concept of the 'transcendental' (which gave the movement its name) from Immanuel Kant's philosophy (diluted by Coleridge) did not have the desired effect: instead of liberating American thought from empiricism and narrow commonsense attitudes (stressing that the main concern of our knowledge are not objects but 'our mode of knowing objects'), this move established a new

American ideology that identified the ideal with the real--the world of the senses and the realm of moral or psychic laws.

It may also be instructive, on the other hand, to consider the 'American Renaissance,' or 'Transcendentalist era' (c. 1836-1890; from the publication of Emerson's *Nature* to the publication of William James's *Principles of Psychology*), as constituting a seedbed for--and formulating the classic articulation of--the American 'mental posture' toward cultural and political democracy.

The term 'American Renaissance,' it is true, has linguistic problems, since it seems to imply a 'rebirth' of something, when in fact there was nothing to precede it. For its originator, F. O. Matthiessen, and others who have adopted it, it signified, as the term 'Renaissance' did--and does--for many Europeans, not so much a rebirth as a repository, a set of foundational concepts and practices, that have provided a definitional foundation for much of what was happening, and continued to happen, in American culture. Lewis Mumford preceded Matthiessen with the concept, and uses for it the terminology 'Golden Day,' which clarifies the signification even as it adds a tendentious, triumphalist rhetoric. 'American Renaissance' does avoid this triumphalism, and it also avoids the obvious terminological problems and ambiguities of the alternative term 'Transcendentalism'--which confusingly labels as 'transcendental' both a movement and a philosophical doctrine that were almost uniformly immanent and phenomenological (see Mumford 1926, Matthiessen 1941).

'Transcendentalism,' certainly as the 'subjective Idealism' that Emerson understood it to be, was not 'transcendental'--i.e., looking outside the 'immanent' phenomena of the experiential world for 'ultimate' truths or valuations. This has been a persistent, and significantly misleading, misinterpretation of the name that the 'Transcendental Club' (of which Emerson was a founding member) chose for themselves in 1836.

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Emerson's thought can be seen to have established the project and generated the problematics for most American literature and philosophy. His preoccupation with and the study of individual subjective consciousnesses, their self-fashioning and construction of their worlds became dominant in both areas. Both literature and philosophy thus became 'dramas of recognition' (Tanner 1986: 105) whose products came to constitute a species of *Bildungsroman*, in the sense that they investigate how we use consciousness to construct all order, structure, value, and meaning in our world-picture. They can also be usefully construed as a species of romance, in Hawthorne's sense, in that the picture is generally subject to sudden, fortuitous, contingent, indeterminate modifications produced by alterations in consciousness. As Andrew Delbanco has pointed out, these dramatic, spontaneous shifts in world-view based on inner transformations, changes of mind, represent with considerable fidelity a secularization or demystification of Puritan and other radical, Antinomian Protestant spiritual epiphanies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Human consciousness thus, in the American tradition, retains its autonomy, agency, volition, and impulse, rather than being reduced to a mere impression, a passive result, of mechanical causation and the material environment in which it functions. In this Emersonian mode, *we* happen to experience with a consequent priority given to the experiencer over the experienced--which illustrates the persistence of the idealism that has characterized the bulk of American literary and philosophical production (at least) since Emerson's time.

This construction by individual consciousnesses of all order, structure, value, and meaning, Emerson called 'moral' endeavour--the constant, active reconstruction of ever-changing values, as opposed to what had traditionally been regarded as 'morality': the acceptance of a fixed (and, as some argued, eternal) set of orders, structures, values, and meanings embedded in and prescribed by some authoritative entity external to the individual

consciousness. 'We are sometimes apprized,' he observes, 'that there is a mental power and creation more excellent than anything which is commonly called philosophy and literature' (Emerson 1990: 467; 'Poetry and Imagination').

'Power, new power, is the good which the soul seeks,' Emerson averred, as he began the process that eventually led him in the pragmatist direction of abandoning the distinction between right and wrong, or even between what was currently authentic or inauthentic in his own consciousness, in favor of thinking and living 'onward.' In that process, he adopted as a criterion for 'truth' that which would empower and vitalize him to continue the constructive, regulative-fiction-making process--a process which alone was 'capable of restoring the dead to life.' Ultimately, the operational premises of Emerson's 'textual pragmatism' resolved him to think and act not because there is hope (the possibility of change, contrafactuality, freedom) but as if there were hope. This subjunctive and performative *idée-force*, he tells us, became 'true' (authentic) for him, independent of its objective 'truth-value,' because it 'put [him] in a working mood' and because, since '[e]vents or things are only the fulfillment of the prediction of the faculties,' it 'produced the results that it premised': a fluid mental, conceptual, and constructive 'universe' in which anything can suddenly and spontaneously become something else, become 'true,' through an individual's internal process of 'troping,' of re-cognition, re-description, or re-metaphorization. Emerson's focus was thus not on the discovery (or, as he would phrase it, the 'creation') of objective, observable, external, eternal, positivistic 'truth,' but rather on the subjective process, common to every person/poet, of the generation of constantly-renewing, self-created and self-recreating, vitalizing and empowering metaphors and tropes through which evolving versions of each individual and her/his universe(s) could be given expression (Emerson 1990: 468 'Poetry and Imagination').

In this procedure, Emerson anticipated the pragmatism of both William James (1842-1910) and Richard Rorty (1931-2007), as well as Hans Vaihinger's (1852-1933) philosophy

of ‘as if.’ ‘The philosophy we want is one of change and fluxion,’ he insisted, ‘the creation is on wheels’ (Emerson 1990: 417; ‘Montaigne’): ‘all that is good in the universe’--including our ‘power’ (our capacity of creative, constructive change, renewal, and adaptation)--‘is in transition’ (Emerson 1990: 457; ‘Poetry and Imagination’).

Emerson constantly struggled to liberate himself and other contemporary and subsequent ‘experimenters’ with linguistic, literary, and life text  from all internal as well as external forms of ‘[f]atalism,’ determinism, and reification--in which we take a word, concept, trope, or other ‘regulative fiction’ created by ourselves or other human beings, and--for reasons of insecurity, nostalgia, or deference--alienate that subjective, plastic creation and freeze it into inflexible, objective ‘thingness’ (‘otherness’ outside our power or control), thereby imprisoning ourselves behind the ‘wall of that rule.’ At times, these reflections were solipsistic, psychotic, selfishly obsessive, or subjectively preoccupied. Nonetheless, they both characterized and helped to create the ‘shifting world’ of the American Renaissance (Hawthorne 1981: 140).

Emerson has been characterized, both by some of his contemporaries and by many subsequent commentators, as a disciple, or even a high priest, of naïve, arrogant cosmic optimism, with a ‘serene ignorance of the true nature of evil’ (McMichael 1985: 445). Yet in his mature writings, Emerson, whom some critics have dubbed ‘St. Ralph the Optimist,’ suggests that

Like sick men in hospitals, we change only from bed to bed, from one folly to another; and it cannot signify much what becomes of such castaways,--wailing, stupid, comatose creatures,--lifted from bed to bed, from the nothing of life to the nothing of death. (‘Illusions,’ qtd. in Poirier 1990: 403)

Similarly represented as an apologist for natural science, technology, industrialism, and capitalism, this ‘apostle’ became, as years went by, an outspoken anti-positivist and anti-commercialist, preoccupied less and less by their potential for multiplying material abundance and ‘happiness,’ and more and more by their threat to ‘moral’ creative vitality and freedom.

Despite all this, Emerson’s thought has often, based on his youthful proclamations, been connected with the positivistic belief in the unlimited progress of human knowledge safeguarded by the perfection of the creation. This is implied at the beginning of Emerson’s most youthful--as well as most famous--essay, *Nature* (1836):

Undoubtedly we have not questions to ask which are unanswerable. We must trust the perfection of creation so far, as to believe that whatever curiosity the order of things has awakened in our minds, the order of things can satisfy. Every man’s condition is a solution in hieroglyphic to those inquiries he would put. He acts it as life before he apprehends it as truth. In like manner, nature is already, in its forms and tendencies, describing its own design. Let us interrogate the great apparition that shines so peacefully around us. Let us inquire, to what end is nature? (*Norton 3 1: 903*)

In a way typical of European romantic thinkers and poets (J. G. Fichte, F. W. J. Schelling, S. T. Coleridge, Thomas Carlyle, William Wordsworth), Emerson’s essay investigates the purpose (or *telos*--in philosophical terminology) of Nature. Though defined as ‘not Me,’¹³ Nature can, by virtue of its essential unity (manifested in the unity of the landscape which cannot be owned by an individual, and of the horizon delimiting our vision of the landscape), lead the individual soul to recognition of the great unity of being which can be achieved in a vision and is not affected by the lapse of time:

¹³ In Emerson’s essay, ‘Not me’ refers to Nature defined as everything different from one’s own spiritual being--in Emerson’s words: ‘both nature and art, all other men and my own body’ (*Norton 3 1: 904*).

In the woods, is perpetual youth [...]. In the woods, we return to reason and faith [...].

Standing on the bare ground,--my head bathed in the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing, I see all.

The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.

(*Norton 3 1: 905*)

Thus, our Other, Nature, can bring us to the perception and reflection of our own identity with God. Or rather, as Emerson points out elsewhere, with the Over-Soul: 'that Unity, that Over-Soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other; that common heart, of which all sincere conversation is worship, to which all right action is submission [...]' ('The Over-Soul' [1841], *Norton 3 1: 973*). The Over-Soul, or 'The Highest Thou Always Unknown,' represents the unity of humankind and God. Emerson uses these words deliberately instead of saying only 'God' because he wants to stress a different union and a different power than the God of the Christians and the Jews. His philosophy is concerned with all religions, with general principles of human spirituality. How can God be revealed to us in all His otherness and incomprehensibility? How can we love and understand other men? The answer is through Nature in its broadest sense, i.e., by contemplating and transcending the phenomena of Not-Me.

There are several ways in which these phenomena may be contemplated and transcended. These ways correspond to particular purposes of nature discussed in the individual chapters of Emerson's essay. The first is *usefulness*, or '*commodity*.' Without natural nurture humankind would not survive, without natural processes the workforce would not reproduce, and arts, crafts, technologies and civilizations would not develop. In contrast to usefulness, *beauty* has its purpose in itself: in the ordered world, or *kosmos* according to the

ancient Greeks, yet this order always exists under a higher, moral law. While this may not yet be manifested in our observation of delightful aspects of nature (e.g., the landscape in all seasons of the year), it is evident in the beauty of great human deeds or actions, which become allegories of abstract and general human virtues. Thus, when a fearless patriot was dragged to a scaffold, the crowds sympathizing with him imagined ‘liberty and virtue [...] by his side’ (*Norton 3 1*: 909). But the balance of the phenomenal and ideal, material and spiritual can be attained only in the production of the work of art which ‘throws light upon the mystery of humanity’ (910). In art all separation of material life can disappear, because ‘a work of art is an abstract or epitome [symbol] of the world’ (910), revealing the universal in the individual, the general in the specific, and vice versa. Because of this symbolic transcendence, art is called ‘nature passed through the alembic of man.’

Another, and very important, purpose of nature is *language*, which is understood as a deliberate (teleological) arrangement of signs. Though linguistic signs depend immediately on nature, the purpose of language is not a mere communication of natural events: words are not only ‘signs of natural facts’ but also ‘symbols of spiritual facts.’ Especially in the case of primitive men, ‘all spiritual facts are represented by natural symbols’ (912). Because of this analogy between natural and spiritual phenomena, articulate language (‘parts of speech’) is conceived as a set of metaphors: ‘the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind’ (913).

This, after all, coincides with the general Protestant approach to the exegesis of Scripture. Emerson quotes the founder of The Society of Friends (the religious sect popularly called the Quakers), George Fox (1624-1691): ‘Every scripture is to be interpreted by the same spirit which it gave forth’ (*Norton 3 1*: 915). This cornerstone of Protestant hermeneutics appears to be the organizing principle of Emerson’s essay. It is because of the existence of Scripture that we can postulate the analogy between words and natural things, and this analogy allows us to perceive the unity, order and beauty of the universe. However,

this analogy or correspondence--the metaphorical character of language--became corrupted by the development of civilization and by 'the prevalence of secondary desires, the desire of riches, the desire of pleasure, the desire of power, the desire of praise,--and duplicity and falsehood' (912). It can be restored only by the benign influence of nature and may prevail in the radical moments of revolution. In this respect, Emerson rethinks and amplifies Wordsworth's theory of simple and sincere poetic language in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*.

The next purpose of nature is called *discipline*. The ambiguous word reminds us of ecclesiastical features of Emerson's doctrine: discipline means 'understanding of intellectual truths' represented by the general laws of practical reason (connected with property and working on the basis of debt; *Norton 3 1*: 915-16), the specific laws of natural sciences, and also moral laws, for 'every natural process is but a version of a moral sentence' (917). This passage reflecting the impact of Emerson's Scottish friend, the philosopher Thomas Carlyle, had an important influence in the later development of American literature, especially in the poetry of Walt Whitman:

The moral law lies at the centre of nature and radiates to the circumference. What is a farm but a mute gospel? The chaff and the wheat, weeds and plants, blight, rain, insects, sun,--it is a sacred emblem from the first furrow of spring to the last stack which the snow of winter overtakes in the fields. But the sailor, the shepherd, the miner, the merchant, in their several resorts, have each an experience precisely parallel, and leading to the same conclusions:  because all organizations are radically alike. (*Norton 3 1*: 917)

If we substituted Whitman's word 'democracy' for Emerson's 'moral', we would obtain an ideological scheme of many of Whitman's well-known poems. In the works of both writers nature, because of its metaphorical power, represents the ideal binding force of American

society. Moreover, in the chapter entitled 'Idealism' Emerson says that 'nature conspires with spirit to emancipate us.' Because of this, nature is the opposite of technology in which, even in Emerson's times, most Americans believed. At the same time, it is an ally of poetry and imagination that can also communicate ideal beauty and open to us the world of the Spirit-- which is the theme of the last chapter of the essay.

The final purpose of nature is the '*redemption of the soul*' (Norton 3 1: 930), which means 'restoring to the world original and eternal beauty.' In this way, the religious thought of American Puritans is transformed into a new, Romantic and Platonic natural religion which can do without churches, and aims at making the ordinary life of people poetic. The orientation of the essay becomes obvious when we consider that for Emerson it was a way out of a deep crisis, which he suffered during the time when he was a Unitarian minister.

Emerson's thought became influential also because he did not limit himself to general philosophical problems but discussed some burning issues of contemporary academic life, religion, political philosophy, morals, and literature, etc. In the speech entitled *The American Scholar* (1837, published 1841) and delivered before Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard, Emerson refused bookish learning that depended on European models and cultural traditions. He also showed that the particularization and mutual alienation of human activities 'in the *divided* or social state' did not avoid science and scholarship. Therefore, he claimed, the purpose of new learning should not be the scholar but rather the revival of 'Man Thinking,' of the general and variegated intellectual power in every individual. This revival can be achieved if the freeborn and gifted Americans rely upon their own instincts fostered by nature. Here again, Nature is used as a sign of otherness as well as the chief value establishing the universality and centrality of American culture.

In Emerson's opinion, revival in the intellectual sphere was inseparable from profound changes in American attitudes to religion and churches. The transformation of religious

consciousness was outlined in *The Divinity School Address* (1838) delivered before the senior class of Harvard College of Divinity. Here Emerson refused the representations of Christ made by established churches and theologians, and contrasted the church with the Soul. Because of his belief that Man was religious by his own nature ('Man is the wonder-worker,' was his dictum), Emerson saw the faith in Christ originate in the belief in 'the infinitude of Man,' that is, in the human ability to become one with God. The result was a repudiation both of contemporary secular notions of Christ as a historical character and of the authority of any church which aspires to mediate between the people and God, and to represent Christ on the earth in person, doctrine or ritual. 'Men,' Emerson argued, 'have come to speak of the revelation as somewhat long ago given and done, as if God were dead.' (Emerson 1990: 70; 'Divinity School Address')

'Self-Reliance' (1841) was another important early essay which discussed the standards of moral and political behavior of the individual. It, along with the essay 'Politics' (1844), profoundly affected Thoreau in his attitude of civil disobedience. The institution of private property, which is protected by the government, as well as the policy of parties, can neither be the origin of social progress nor of anyone's self-respect. The only way to freedom for an individual is a radical change in his or her relationship to things and social institutions, because

society is a wave. The wave moves onward, but the water of which it is composed, does not. The same particle does not rise from the valley to the ridge. Its unity is only phenomenal. The persons who make up a nation today,  next year die, and their experience with them. (*Norton 3 1: 972*)

The young Emerson is often interpreted as saying that we should rely merely on the individual self. However, the essay implies that the self has to be discovered as the way to the ridge of the wave, the approach to the Over-Soul and to the unity of the world.

Such a journey is a theme of Emerson's first book of verse, entitled *Poems* (1846), which describes his quest for transcendental wisdom and the 'fullness of Man overflowing into the world of things.' But here Emerson also finds (in the poem called 'Merops') that instead of naming such ideals a poet should be silent. The impossibility of the full expression of Emerson's philosophical ideas in his poetry leads to his skepticism to the creative possibilities of an individual and mankind, and to his gloomy and tragic existential experience (caused also by the death of his first wife and especially of his son Waldo). Some poems even betray a fear of easy analogies made in his philosophical texts. The optimistic vision has always tragic flaws, which Emerson confesses.



Emerson's early writings, such as *Nature* and 'The Over-Soul,' have been closely studied since their appearance by cultural critics and literary scholars, and have subsequently been made the basis for interpretation of Emerson's entire *corpus*. Frequently and unfortunately overlooked, however, have been the writings of more mature periods in Emerson's life, beginning with 'Experience' (1844) and continuing through the brilliant essays in *The Conduct of Life* (1860) to 'Poetry and Imagination' (1876). When one gives full weight to the formulations to be found in these later works, an Emerson emerges very different from the one to be found in the youthful preliminaries.

Although Emerson repeatedly expresses his longing for a stable universe of Platonic eternal verities, of 'great circling truths,' what his consciousness perceives, instead, is a 'flying Perfect' steadily receding from his grasp--not a clear blue sky where truth may be observed at the zenith, but low, scudding clouds, constantly obscuring vision (Emerson 1960-82: 4: 80-84; 'Journal Q'). Under these circumstances, in the absence of accessible objective

landmarks, he hypothesizes that his individual consciousness, at least, needs to begin, however reluctantly, to construct immanent, practical guides to life adapted to the conditions experienced by his consciousness. 'There are degrees in idealism,' he admits, as he embraces Kantian idealism rather than the Platonic version (Emerson 1992: 252, 256; 'Circles').

Under the existential and epistemological conditions in which human beings find themselves, Emerson suggests, it seems advisable for each consciousness to undertake provisional, flexible construction of all order, structure, value, and meaning in accordance with its 'nature'--that is, with the unique sensibilities and preoccupations of that particular consciousness. This 'moralizing' activity, as Emerson terms it--this creation of values, of regulative fictions of all kinds--brings 'life' to a hypothetical external 'nature' by projecting into that imagined space the activity and constructions of the internal 'nature' of a particular consciousness. Thus all structures and changes experienced by a given consciousness in 'external' nature--as well as in itself--are actually constructions and projections of the internal 'nature' of that consciousness. Human consciousness thereby becomes the presumptive creator of the universe as that individual consciousness knows it--and the 'divine' creative powers long alienated by human consciousnesses to a transcendent deity are recognized and reintegrated as immanent human capacities. (Emerson 1990: 443, 449; 'Poetry and Imagination')

In Emerson's view, each human consciousness is not the reflection of exterior nature, but the template for the projection of the 'nature' (the unique experiencing capacities and sensibilities) of that consciousness on 'external' nature--moving thereby from the posture of a spectator to that of a maker, a creator, and thus representing not a 'transparent eyeball' through which 'external' nature was registered unmediated, but rather a sphere with a reflective inner surface on which the 'nature' of that individual consciousness was projected, with no view to the outside. Each of these projections was done individually and uniquely; the

so-called 'Over-Soul' thus representing not a template for all consciousnesses, but rather a composite, an integral, of infinite individual, unique consciousnesses. The works of art-- language, metaphors, and tropes--by which each consciousness constructed external and internal 'nature' (all order, structure, value, and meaning) were thus approximate, provisional, and temporary 'regulative fictions,' adapted to the current inner environment of the projecting consciousness and liable to modification at any time that those inner conditions changed. In Emerson's phrase, 'the metaphor will hold': nature can be described any way that the describing consciousness chooses. That description--those metaphors and other tropes--could change suddenly with alterations in the experiencing, projecting consciousness:--everything could be converted into anything else by the process of redescription, remetaphorization. There was no intrinsic 'truth' or validity to any trope or description; validity was a function of consciousness, of changes in internal circumstances; under different conditions of consciousness, validity/truth 'happened' to different metaphors. (Emerson 2005: 87; 'The Poet')

Not surprisingly, Emerson's approach to language is constructive, projective, performative. Based on the extended tendency of his work over time, it seems fair to conclude that he rejected early on the idea of language as representative of or corresponding to some external reality. One might make a case for the representative approach in *Nature* (1836) and parts of some other early works, in which Emerson himself has not yet worked out the implications of his approaches; but by 1841's *Essays First Series*, he is, in the main, taking the former approach to language and metaphor: generative, poetic in the original Greek sense of 'creative,' not representational or descriptive--and, as with language and metaphor (the instruments of thought), so with thinking itself. It is, Richard Poirier argues, this 'volatile combination of dissociative and performative rhetoric [...that] makes [Emerson] "the American Scholar"' (Poirier 1990: xii).

From this cultural paradigm, there results a primacy of individual consciousness accompanied by an inaccessibility and inviolability of that consciousness for other consciousnesses. Since, under these conditions, one consciousness cannot know the other, there is no possible rationale for any consciousness imposing its authority on any other--no basis for cultural or any other non-individual, non-subjective (external) authority at all. Likewise, there is no basis for cultural authority, hierarchy, or valorization; all consciousnesses--and their products--were equally valid. This inaccessibility of the individual consciousness is the basis for the cultural democracy, moral identity, aesthetic democracy embraced and championed by Emerson and other 'American Renaissance' writers. This democratic sensibility based on the Emersonian concept that we are all poets, all creators, all makers, emphasizes the importance, the need for individuals to explore and cultivate their own consciousnesses, rather than become involved in potentially unreliable interactions with other consciousnesses. In this way, it transmitted to its heirs in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries a kind of secularized Puritan imperative for the intense scrutiny of one's own soul and inner authenticities. In his advocacy of that sensibility, Emerson was, as John Dewey characterized him, the 'philosopher of democracy' (Matthiessen 1968: 4).

Since the nature of each consciousness is unique, and therefore not comparable with any other consciousness, all constructions by all consciousnesses must be treated, in the absence of any basis for comparing those consciousnesses and the worlds constructed by them, as of equal value and validity--both in their current content and in the generative (value-constructing or 'moral') process. Authority is thus sited entirely within the individual consciousness, dissolving any basis for external or 'cultural' authority, and establishing the foundation for the equal validity of each consciousness that Emerson called 'democratic.'

American pragmatism--the philosophical conception that 'truth happens to an idea' as the inner environment of an individual consciousness changes, that there are no inherently

‘true’ (or survival-positive) ideas independent of the conditions in which they are being constructed--constitutes one very visible outcome of Emerson's work. Another is to be found in the Nietzschean approach to ‘truth’ as ‘regulative fiction,’ a strategy traceable in part to Nietzsche’s close study of and enthusiasm for Emersonian problems. Both pragmatism and Nietzscheanism have, in turn, made very significant contributions to the agendas and projects of modernism and postmodernism.

As Emerson understands it, the ‘nature’ of each consciousness comprises, at any instant, a synchronic ‘method,’ or ‘selecting principle,’ and a diachronic ‘progressive arrangement,’ both of which are unique to that consciousness and which may change over time. Because each consciousness is thus uniquely variable, the universe(s) constructed by that consciousness are also uniquely variable with changes in the constructing consciousness.

‘[W]hilst we deal with [our current construction(s)] as finality,’ he says, ‘early hints are given that we are not to stay here; that’

we must be making ready to go,--a warning that this magnificent hotel and conveniency we call Nature is not final [...], suggesting that nothing stands still in nature but death; that the creation is on wheels, in transit, always passing into something else, [...] no finality;--only provisional,--a makeshift; [...] It was steeped in thought--did everywhere express thought;...The ends of all are moral, and therefore the beginnings are such [...E]verything is in flight [...]-and the interest is gradually transferred from the forms to the lurking method. (Emerson 1990: 440-41; ‘Poetry and Imagination’)

Emerson’s concern was always with this ‘lurking method.’ The ‘laws’ of which he often speaks are never those of statics, of a stable system or equilibrium; they are always those of

dynamics--of change, evolution, transition, reconstruction, generation, creation, 'morality,' as he uses the word.

Focusing on the process as he does, Emerson manifests very limited concern about--if not indifference toward--the specific product of that process at a given instance. Emerson thus remains open to what Henry James later characterized as 'sweet American vaguenesses,' a 'pure American spirit...perfect liberty of appreciation.' Based on this, Emerson's 'gross intellectual hospitality' has been condemned by some for 'not discriminating,' for its 'want of 'moral reaction' [in the traditional sense of 'moral'],' and for its 'sadly insufficient perception of the bad' (Henry James 1963: 61).

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

During his lifetime Henry David Thoreau became known as 'an eccentric social experimenter' (*Norton 3 1: 1588*) inspired by Emerson's thought, and as a radical abolitionist who raised up his voice in defense of John Brown. Only the inhabitants of his native Concord and some citizens of Boston knew more about his dissident stance vis-à-vis the government, which became manifest when he was imprisoned for refusing to pay a state tax raised for the support of churches. The record of this experience as well as the statement of Thoreau's political stance was published anonymously in 1849 under the title *Resistance to Civil Government*. Later it became known under the shortened title *Civil Disobedience*.

What Thoreau did in this essay was transpose Emersonian notions of the unity of human life, spirit and activities into practical considerations of the prospects of an individual in the US political system. 'That government is best which governs least' begins Thoreau, and goes on to argue that the authority of government does not automatically follow from the fact that it has been democratically elected: as all other public institutions, government is susceptible to corruption:

The government itself, which is only the mode which the people have chosen to execute their will, is equally liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act through it. Witness the present Mexican war, the work of comparatively a few individuals using the standing government as their tool; for, in the outset, the people would not have consented to this measure.

This American government,--what is it but a tradition, though a recent one, endeavoring to transmit itself unimpaired to posterity, but each instant losing some of its integrity. It has not the vitality and force of a single living man; for a single man can bend it to his will.

(Norton 3 1: 1620-21)

The corruption and abuse of the government were not only caused by individuals, but also--and this is of importance--were inherent in its very functioning, in the system itself. The reason for all this was that government lost its original purpose (which was to serve the people) and began to serve only its own ends. In this respect, it came to resemble an alienated mechanism which makes machines out of citizens:

The mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies. They are the standing army, and the militia, jailers, constables [...]. In most cases there is no free exercise whatever of the judgement or of the moral sense; but they put themselves on a level with wood and earth and stones; and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose as well. *(Norton 3 1: 1622)*

The operation of this mechanism is no longer under public control, but the situation is not yet entirely desperate. Like Václav Havel in his well-known essay 'The Power of the Powerless,'

Thoreau claims that the self-destructive power of the state machine can be resisted by every individual who refuses to be ‘put [...] on the level with wood, earth and stones’ and realizes that ‘it is not necessary that he should do something wrong’ and become ‘the agent of injustice to another.’ In such a case it is necessary to ‘break the law’ and let one’s ‘life be a counter friction to stop the machine’ (*Norton 3 1*: 1626).

In his refusal to pay the poll tax and subsequent imprisonment Thoreau discovers the dehumanized nature of state power. It cannot reach the mind, the heart, the soul of an individual and therefore it manifests itself in the display of superior physical power. It can manipulate the body and the senses. In this respect, Thoreau sees physical nature as a counterpart of the state (for it reaches our minds, hearts, and souls) and writes his most famous book *Walden, or the Life in the Woods* (1854) as proof that man can live alone in natural environment without greater interference into its life, and achieve much greater freedom than anywhere in the society.

The book is written in a loose essayistic style flavored with humor and spiced with poignant irony. Thoreau speaks of it in the epigraph pointing out at the same time the distance between his writing and the tone of many romantics (e.g., Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who wrote ‘Dejection... In Ode’ [1802]): ‘I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as a chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up’ (*Norton 3 1*: 1635). The irony and the decentered, digressive style are very important because they give a different framework to the main business which is a meditation on the Emersonian theme: Nature is a symbol of the Soul. Thoreau’s book shows that the early Emersonian notion of transcendence is not so important as it may first appear: Nature is not merely a conduit to the Over-Soul, but is our partner in everyday life, a partner whose otherness must be respected but may also become our own mirror (though not as clear and smooth as the surface of the Walden Pond on whose shore Thoreau lived for more than two

years in a hut he made himself in order to prove his economic and social independence). In this respect *Walden* becomes a pioneering work of environmental thought whose basis is in the revaluation of the notion of time. By achieving economic independence, Thoreau also gains free time. In his free time, he can become perceptive to the rhythms of nature and start to enjoy his life in a way that differs from that of others in the midst of society.

The conclusion of the book points out the immense meaning of this transformation for the further life of humankind. And yet there is no mention of God, nor of history nor the 'use of nature.' Thoreau merely tells a well-known story, which then becomes an allegory of mankind's ability to overcome the 'woodenness' of 'society's most trivial furniture'--that is, the alienation and stupor of normal social life--and to attain a superior life granted to it by Nature. This, says Thoreau, is the true resurrection:

Every one has heard the story which has gone the rounds of New England, of a strong and beautiful bug which came out of the dry leaf of an old table of apple-tree wood, which had stood in a farmer's kitchen for sixty years, first in Connecticut, and afterward in Massachusetts,--from an egg deposited in the living tree many years earlier still, as appeared by counting the annual layers beyond it; which was heard gnawing out for several weeks, hatched perchance by the heat of an urn. Who does not feel his faith in resurrection and immortality strengthened by this? Who knows what beautiful and winged life, whose egg has been buried for ages under many concentric layers of woodenness in the dead dry life of society, deposited first in the alburnum of the green and living tree, which has been gradually converted into the semblance of its well-seasoned tomb,--heard perchance gnawing out now for years by the astonished family of man, as they sat round the festive board,--may unexpectedly come forth

from amidst society's most trivial and handselled furniture, to enjoy its perfect summer life at last! (*Norton 3 1*: 1808)

Thoreau's writing style--not based, as in important ways was Emerson's, on the classical rhetorical conventions of a trained, professional speaker--has generally proven more accessible to twenty-first-century readers than Emerson's. For such readers, who come to Thoreau before they come to Emerson, Emerson's writing and thought (if they come to Emerson at all) can easily appear to them, as it did to even so sophisticated a reader as the philosopher Stanley Cavell, 'like secondhand Thoreau' (1994: 124). The real influence, as Cavell eventually worked out, flowed clearly in the other direction. 'In understanding Thoreau's thought,' asserts distinguished Thoreau and Emerson biographer Robert Richardson, 'Emerson's work is indispensable.' 'Without Emerson, I don't think there would have been a Thoreau' (Richardson 2000-01:199). Even a cursory reading of Emerson's 'Politics' (1844) will establish its conceptual and rhetorical precedence to Thoreau's 'Civil Disobedience' (1848); and Emerson's 'Address to the Citizens of Concord on the Fugitive Slave Law' (1851) provides compelling testimony of Emerson's willingness to draw radical political consequences from his ideological formulations.

Thoreau's reputation as a 'doer,' an 'activist,' who acted upon and implemented that which Emerson formulated and embraced only in words, is open to considerable question. Thoreau's 1854 account of his 'wilderness experience' at Walden Pond, for example, turns out to be much more an extended metaphor than an accurate autobiographical, historical, or literal narrative of his actual life-situation in the 'Walden' days of 1845-47, during which he spent nights and mornings in the cabin but also spent most afternoons in town and not infrequently took meals with his parents. In the same manner, 'civil disobedience'--the subject of Thoreau's famous and influential essay--was, in Thoreau's life-experience, also

primarily metaphorical and symbolic. Outside his writings, Thoreau was much less a 'realist,' 'practitioner,' or 'activist' than was Emerson, who, as is often ignored or forgotten, spent fully twenty years of his life criss-crossing the ever-expanding country to deliver anti-slavery speeches in every city to which his career as a public speaker--and America's first 'public intellectual'--carried him. Thoreau, on the other hand, lived quietly and obscurely, in Concord all his life, even during his sojourn in the cabin at Walden Pond (about two kilometers from Concord center). In fact, it was during his Walden period (1846) that he was arrested, in Concord, for his one actual episode of 'activist' civil disobedience--non-payment of a trivial sum in taxes, for which he spent one night in the town jail before that pittance was provided to the town by Thoreau's relatives, probably his aunt Maria. Occasionally the name of Emerson, Thoreau's mentor and patron since Thoreau's graduation from Harvard in 1837, is mentioned in this connection, possibly because he employed Thoreau for several years as a live-in handyman in Emerson's home and subsequently given permission for Thoreau to construct his cabin on an Emerson wood-lot adjacent to Walden Pond.

10. LATE ROMANTICISM: HAWTHORNE & MELVILLE

INTRODUCTION

Late Romanticism in American literature is characterized by the reevaluation of earlier features and forms of American and European Romanticism. In America, these are the historical romance which in James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* established a national myth of the Frontier, the Gothic fiction of Charles Brockden Brown and Edgar Allan Poe, and the optimistic aspects of Transcendentalism, especially the faith in the perfectibility of humankind and the understanding of nature as a mediator between humankind and the spiritual essence of being (the Over-Soul). Among the reevaluated aspects of European Romanticism are Wordsworthian 'truth to nature' and sincerity, Rousseau's notion of the 'noble savage,' and the elevation of folklore and primitive cultures.

What are the most important artistic means by which these reevaluations are effected? First, irony, distancing the imagery and ideals of earlier romantics, and playing with them. Then, a keen interest in moral and historical aspects of American tales which was not typical of some authors of the Gothic genre, like Edgar Allan Poe. Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864), for instance, wrote a frontier tale 'Roger Malvin's Burial' treating ironically the myth of an intrepid frontiersman, a fighter against bloodthirsty Indians. Simultaneously, he wove in a moral theme of human responsibility for the life of another. Last but not least, the works of late romantics are distinguished by the interplay of allegorical, symbolic and 'realistic' features, and by the interpenetration of the traits of the romance, novel and essay. Hawthorne often used allegory as a typical form of the Puritan literature that interested him. He was inspired by the Puritan interpretation of empirical phenomena as the manifestation of God's intent or will but he transformed them into symbols of an uncertain and enigmatic human existence. Rather than mere method, allegory and its recognitions and misrecognitions of

reality was one of Hawthorne's main themes. In contrast to Hawthorne's allegories, Herman Melville (1819-1891) developed romantic symbolism, whose major feature is the extreme problematization of the American dream and of the nineteenth century myth of progress.

Despite their differences and contrasts, however, both Hawthorne and Melville were grapplers with Transcendentalist problematizations. Their engagement, along with many of their prominent literary contemporaries, with these issues, has proved to be historically and culturally formative. As we have seen, a number of the culturally-valORIZED and acculturated 'mental habits' or 'cultural paradigms' of American culture can be traced back directly to problematizations formulated by participants in the 'American Renaissance' of 1836-1890.

The great historic struggle of American culture from Emerson and the 'American Renaissance' onward (and, in many ways, from Puritan days) has been to 'liberate' itself from the 'Great Satan' of determinism (or, in an earlier guise, of predestination), from the mechanism, inanimateness, and spiritual 'death' of 'fatalism.' Emerson's Transcendentalism provided the means of that 'liberation,' by shifting the impetus of all human action out of the world of inexorable, mechanical, determinist cause-and-effort and into 'the vast shadow of the Phenomenal'--into human consciousness and subjective experience--thereby annulling the 'fatal' influence of all historical and societal 'circumstances' (Emerson 1992: 204; 'Friendship'). Thus might representative American consciousnesses, like the characters in Hawthorne's romances and like those other Americans whom Emerson urged to make 'the life of man [...] the true romance,' be freed from the tyranny of external determination and exist primarily in the realm of the imagination, not bound by time, space, causation, natural or societal laws, or any physical or material determinants. Become 'fictitious,' or self-constructed, like Hawthorne's eponymous character in 'Wakefield,' they might be bounded only by the limitations of individual consciousness. (Emerson 1992: 418; 'New England Reformers')

Hawthorne and Melville were also interested in the nature of fictions and fiction-writing, and in their changing role in society. Hawthorne reflected on the ethical and aesthetic meaning of strange illusions of reality produced in art. Melville addressed the problem of the meaning of writing in connection with the existence of an individual in an alienated society. Why should we write fiction when communication between people fails? Is it not then better just to copy legal papers, then to stop writing altogether, and--ultimately--to die? This dilemma is hidden in the repetitions of the phrase 'I would prefer not to' which characterize *Bartleby the Scrivener*, the hero of Melville's well-known short story.

On the whole it can be said that some works by Hawthorne and Melville (especially *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moby-Dick*) close the long period of the development of American literature from the Revolution to the Civil War. But they also foreshadow later developments. Hawthorne's last completed novel *The Marble Faun* (1860) anticipates the theme of Americans in Europe developed from the 1870s in the psychological novels of Henry James. And Melville's allegory and symbolism in *Moby-Dick* reveal--in the course of the transformation of the biblical substrate of the Puritan myth--possibilities for new and much more disquieting projections of American identity, in the late work of Mark Twain and even later.

Though Hawthorne and Melville knew and admired each other, their works and reputations are quite dissimilar. Hawthorne often concentrated on the Puritan past of New England (which was almost unknown in his time) and drew inspiration from old (Renaissance and Baroque) allegorical romances. Because of these features, his works did not--in his lifetime--appeal to the general reading public who were uninterested in his ethical themes and unable to appreciate his imagery and style. Melville, on the other hand, enjoyed great success with his two early novels of naval adventure (*Typee* [1846] and *Omoo* [1847]), which introduced a new environment--the exotic 'paradise' of the Southern Pacific, and gave the

common reader a vision of escape and liberation from the daily toil. But later, in *Mardi* (1849) and especially in *Moby-Dick* (1851), Melville's adventurous stories merged with political and philosophical allegories, symbolic patterns, and self-made mythologies which most readers found incomprehensible. He had become a difficult and esoteric author, and gained his reputation much later than Hawthorne, only with the emergence of a more sophisticated readership influenced by the *fin-de-siècle* revival of Romanticism (in England) and by incipient Modernism. Melville died in obscurity, and it was only following the publication of Raymond Weaver's biography of him (1921) and Lewis Mumford's literary studies of his work (1926/1929) that such American literary monuments as *Moby-Dick*, 'Bartleby the Scrivener' (1853/1856), and *The Confidence-Man* (1857) found their place in the canon. The figurative resurrection of Melville's reputation also produced a literal resurrection: of *Billy Budd*, a novella packed away at Melville's death, which was only rediscovered and first published in 1924.

The main difference between the two authors lies in their thematic--cultural and philosophical--focus. While Hawthorne is predominantly interested in the origins of American culture and in the way the originary past (the roots of American history and tradition) is related to his present, Melville focuses his allegorical and symbolic narratives on the horizon of American experience, and asks what happens if this horizon disappears  which in fact happens in 'Bartleby the Scrivener' and symbolically in *Mardi*, or if it is shifting continually like the mysterious whale of *Moby-Dick*, and thus avoids our grasp.

As a result, both authors have different approaches to time and temporality. For Hawthorne the originary Puritan past of America can still foreshadow the future (e.g., in *The Scarlet Letter* or in the tale entitled 'The Maypole of the Merrymount,' but perhaps most strongly in the novel *The House of the Seven Gables*), which is a view of time analogous to those of many other romantics. But for Melville, time becomes random and erratic: it can be

related neither to the origins nor to the objectives of humankind. This is reflected in the narrative structure of *Moby-Dick*, but also in his later novel *Pierre* (1852), whose hero ends by committing suicide because ‘he followed the ‘chronometrical’ standards of ideal Christian conduct, instead of the ‘horological’ standards of contemporary society’ (Hart 1983: 588). Uncertainty about time destroys the hope for salvation, which can still be found in Hawthorne, and also in other works by Melville. *Clarel* (1876), a long narrative and reflexive poem, gives perhaps the best evidence of Melville’s conviction that religious doubts cannot be solved in the present world where deformed, sectarian religion competes with scientific determinism. To specify and illustrate some of these general tenets, let us now have a closer look at several stages of each author’s creative development.

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

The beginnings of Hawthorne’s fictional work can be traced back to the late 1820s. During his studies at Bowdoin College in Maine he became acquainted with future politicians and literati, and was influenced by the contemporary call for a national American literature which would be independent of European themes and traditions, and give authentic form to the still expressionless face of the American landscape. These ideas were articulated especially during the celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of American Independence in 1826. But Hawthorne was by no means able to deal easily with this task. In fact, he would never be able to understand the idea that American historical fiction would serve a political and ideological program. He could neither imitate the works of James Fenimore Cooper who started to write historical romances at the beginning of the ‘20s, nor follow the method of Cooper’s great teacher, Walter Scott. Instead of mere interest in the cultural and political uses of history, Hawthorne’s fiction is characterized by a difficult and sometimes rather tangled interconnection between his own emotional experience, the history of his family (his remote

ancestors were grim Puritans who fanatically persecuted the Quakers and were also responsible for the witch trials in 1692), and the history of the colonial period with its dominant mythology of original sin on the one hand, and with the New Jerusalem on the other.

Hawthorne's first volume of short stories and sketches appeared quite late (1837), after two abortive attempts to write a series of tales from New England, and after years of seclusion and hard thinking over the individual stories. The title, *Twice-Told Tales*, not only reveals Hawthorne's pessimistic view of life (it is an allusion to a line from Shakespeare's *King John* 3.4--'Life is as tedious as a twice-told tale / Vexing the dull ear of a drowsy man'), but also points to the fundamental difference of Hawthorne's approach to history from the attitudes of his predecessors and contemporaries.

For Hawthorne, history is no general drama of humanity, as it had been for many romantics (for instance, Percy Bysshe Shelley or Poe in the poem from 'Ligeia,' 'The Conqueror Worm'). Such approaches to history are treated ironically in later stories, such as 'The Procession of Life' or 'Earth's Holocaust.' History is concrete and individual mainly because it includes stories that cannot be treated as mere historical sources but incorporate also invented narratives, elements of folktales or myths. In historical fiction, these stories are necessarily retold, and thus their relationship to the past and present, including historical facts, is changed. These changes may also be caused by the projection of Hawthorne's moral feelings as well as by the persistent tendency of his narratives to transform their events and motives into allegories and symbols, thus stressing their meaning as signs. In his later, longer 'romances' (*The Scarlet Letter* [1850], *The House of the Seven Gables* [1851], and *The Blithedale Romance* [1852]), Hawthorne sometimes goes farther, following Emerson into problematization, deconstruction, and destabilization not only of allegorical conventions and forms but also of the processes of value-construction and meaning-making themselves.

This is especially evident in 'The Minister's Black Veil,' where the piece of black crepe hiding the hero's face soon ceases to be an explicable sign of his despair over human sinfulness, and becomes a symbol of human separation in love, life and death, and of the (sometimes problematic, especially when psychologized) division between God and humankind, time and eternity, or between the signifier and the signified in the process of writing and reading. It can also be said that the veil symbolizes the impossibility of grasping Puritan consciousness as well as the complexity of the self, the hidden links between the conscious and the unconscious.

A similar shift from religious allegory to psychological and philosophical symbolism occurs in 'Young Goodman Brown,' but here the questioning of the moral duplicity of the Puritans reveals the necessity of reevaluating naive notions of the relationship between illusion and reality in art. How can we tell whether the hero 'really' saw the inhabitants of his town at the witches' sabbath, or whether this happened only in his dream? The mixture of allegorical and mimetic features (the whole tale can be read as an archetypal narrative of the Fall of Man, and, simultaneously, as a grim Gothic horror full of suspense) does not allow us to answer simply 'yes' or 'no.' The 'reality' of 'historical facts' has been emptied out by allegory, but the narrative illusion persists and makes us think hard about what was thought true and right in Puritan times and what is today.

Another example of Hawthorne's historical fiction questioning the relationship between art and reality is the story 'Alice Doane's Appeal' which also contains a vision of the execution of the victims of the Salem witch-trials in 1692. Here Hawthorne establishes a link between the symbolic figure of the wizard and himself as the author and narrator of the tale. The fact is that the author does not have more authority than the wicked wizard, and that the most important feature of his complex narrative (which tells three separate stories) is its illusoriness which makes the vision of Puritan atrocities appeal to present-day readers

(represented by two young ladies whom the narrator accompanies during a Sunday walk) who do not have any idea of colonial history. In this way some *Twice-Told Tales* become interesting *metatexts* commenting on the difficulties of representing the American past and on the use of historical fiction as an antidote to political ideologies and to a complacent faith in the great historical mission of American civilization.

The second collection of Hawthorne's short stories is called *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846). The title refers to a house in Concord, Massachusetts (originally belonging to Emerson's grandfather, a Congregationalist minister), where the author spent several happy years after his marriage to Sophia Peabody. The atmosphere of the town, which was the center of Transcendentalism and of many talks with Emerson and Thoreau, influenced Hawthorne's fiction. They made him write more about the general situation of humankind, the possibilities of science, technical progress, religion or imagination. His style became more ornamental and sensuous and his topics ranged from tiny details in the surrounding woods ('Buds and the Birds' Voices') to exotic images of Renaissance Italy ('Rappaccini's Daughter'). Like Emerson, Hawthorne was very cautious of common optimism concerning the role of science. In the story called 'The Birthmark' he expressed his skepticism concerning the scientific improvement of nature to ideal perfection. And in 'Rappaccini's Daughter' he problematized the religious distinction between the original innocence and the evil nature produced by the fall of man. He compared it to a modern, insoluble contradiction between the power of science and the poverty of the human heart. It is not clear whether the heroine is killed by the poisons generated in her father's experiments with plants, or by the lack of love and compassion on the side of Giovanni who thinks of her as the embodiment of original sin. There seems to be more poison in Giovanni's moral nature than in Beatrice's beautiful body.

Hawthorne's most important work, *The Scarlet Letter*, is often called an historical romance. This, however, is correct only partly with respect to the character of Hester Prynne's former husband Roger Chillingworth, and some very rare miraculous events, such as the appearance of the stigma on the breast of Arthur Dimmesdale, or the visions of the Puritans in the night sky. But neither is *The Scarlet Letter* a historical novel, since it does not deal so much with the life of the early Puritan settlement, as with the differences between Puritan and nineteenth-century readings of signs. For the people who had condemned her to wear the garment with the scarlet A, Hester was to become an allegory of adultery. This allegory had to be produced by the transfer of one 'explicit' meaning of the graphic sign--the letter A--to Hester's body. But Hester managed to change the imposed meaning of the letter both by her behavior and by her skills. A came to be understood as a sign for 'able' and 'admirable.' And when it appeared as a sign on the night sky, it could mean both 'Apocalypse' and 'America.' On the other hand, A became a sign of shame connected with the secrets of privacy when discovered by Chillingworth on Dimmesdale's body.

If we have to interpret the meaning of Hester's A, we can understand it as a symbol of the theme and value of nature in American history and culture. The letter cannot mean just original sin, that is, the cause of the fall of man. Nor can it only denote the imagined objectives of American history--the return to the fundamental values of Christianity or to the powers and riches hidden in nature. If it points to nature, it confirms the essential freedom of love, which makes no difference between the private and public life. The deferral of the meaning of the scarlet letter in the process of signification creates a space for the authentic life and creative play of art (Hester embroiders the letter and becomes famous for her art).

However, it can also be argued that the deferred meaning of the letter prepares the ground for the revelation of a boundary between nature and culture in the character of Hester's daughter Pearl: her 'kindred wildness' (closeness to forest animals) cannot be

represented by Puritan typological symbolism. Pearl's behavior seems to form *another symbolic language* (the romantic 'living hieroglyphic' of nature, *Norton 5 1: 1417*), pointing out the *difference* as the basis of the girl's identity (in the forest she is 'another and the same' child, 1418). Moreover Pearl's behavior questions all other identities derived from the symbolic language of Puritan culture. It is not surprising that her fate is left open: her ending up in a happy marriage is represented as a matter of popular belief, not the actual conclusion of Hawthorne's story.

The Scarlet Letter ends by Hester's return to New England, where she works patiently helping to improve relations between women and men. She is led by a firm faith that 'in *Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed*, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness' (*Norton 5 1: 1447*; emphasis added). This reference to another time ('Heaven's own' and not human) and another revelation ('a new truth [...] revealed') shows the value of faith, hope and love in practical life as the powers building up better relations among individuals and thus giving a different purpose to human history than the Christian myth of the Apocalypse.

Although Nathaniel Hawthorne set both his longer and shorter literary productions in specific time-frames and actual locations, and sometimes peopled them with historic personages, he was careful to disavow any pretension therein to factuality or historicity. Rather, in his great 'romances,' and in his introductions to them, Hawthorne presents an American alternative to the paradigm of the 'realist' European novelists like Balzac, Stendhal, and Flaubert, whose 'fictions' aimed at the positivist goal of describing (perhaps even explaining) individuals as the product of historical, cultural, economic, social, and environmental forces and conditions. These European novels had as aesthetic criterions the question of the plausibility or verisimilitude of the background constructed for each individual character, as well as the fidelity of the determined character of that individual to its

conditioning in responding to new social, political, economic, cultural, or moral situations into which it was inserted, in a series of behaviorist lab experiments, by the novelist under review. Hawthorne's 'romance,' on the other hand, presented the individual character not as the effect of external causes, but as a cause in itself, an autonomous consciousness capable through internal volition, life, power, of engulfing its environment and, through new subjective construction of its situation, of spontaneously changing its orbit, its trajectory, as it would have been predicted by observation of the external forces at work on that consciousness. In this 'romance' paradigm, the choices of the individual could not be predicted, determined, or changed by modulations in its external environment, but rather the nature of its perceived external environment could be altered, reconstructed--and the possibility or counterfactual situation constructed-- by its subjective, contingent changing of its mind or consciousness. Rather than experience's happening to the subject of the romance, that subject happened to experience.

In his 'Preface' to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), Hawthorne articulates this distinction between 'romance' and 'novel' as follows:

When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume had he professed to be writing a Novel. The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience. The former--while, as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart--has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation. (Hawthorne 1981: vii)

Thus, as Richard Poirier explains, Hawthorne was ‘making a distinction between works that create through language an essentially imaginative environment for the hero and works that mirror an environment already accredited by history and society. This distinction is usually explained [...] by saying that the first kind of environment belongs to the romance and that the second belongs to the novel [...the first] an invented environment, the other [...] the provided environment’ (Poirier 1985: 8).

Hawthorne’s romances that follow *The Scarlet Letter* (especially *The House of the Seven Gables* and *The Blithedale Romance*) may be said to follow Emerson’s claim that ‘[l]ife [itself] may be [...] a poem or a romance’ (Emerson 1990: 193; ‘Art’), but this claim is subjected to irony and subversion. Some of their characters are ‘unentangled,’ indeterminate, flowing--for instance, the pivotal character in *The Blithedale Romance*, Mr. Moodie (or Fauntleroy), is characterized by his ‘fatality [...] to behold whatever he touched dissolve’ (Hawthorne 1986: 185). Similarly, Holgrave in *The House of the Seven Gables*, notes that he ‘find[s] nothing so singular in life as that everything appears to lose its substance the instant one actually grapples with it’ (Hawthorne 1981: 31). And Miles Coverdale, Hawthorne’s wavering narrator in *The Blithedale Romance*, adds that he

was beginning to lose the sense of what kind of world it was, among innumerable schemes of what it might or ought to be. It was impossible, situated as we were, not to imbibe the idea that everything in nature and human existence was fluid, or fast becoming so. (Hawthorne 1986: 140)

Blithedale, says Coverdale, ‘looked vague [...] neither good nor bad [...] as if it were at a distance both in time and space, and so shadowy, that a question might be raised whether the

whole affair had been anything more than the thoughts of a speculative man. I had never before experienced a mood that so robbed the actual world of its solidity.’ This was primarily because, as Coverdale concludes, ‘when you try to analyze it, [reality] seems to lose its very existence, and resolve itself into a sickly humor of your own,’ that it was his own state of mind, his ‘mood, the substance of which was as yet too shapeless to be called thought [...] which gave the bright color and vivid reality to the whole affair’ (Hawthorne 1986: 37, 146, 139, 90, 138).

At least since the publication of ‘Self-Reliance’ and ‘Circles’ (1841), Emerson had rejected consistency and resulting ‘identity’ as bases for the conduct of life. ‘The notion, ‘I AM,’’ he insists, ‘[is] but [a] delusion [...O]ur pretension [...] even of self-hood [is] fading with the rest, [...]since] at last, even our thoughts are not finalities; but the incessant flowing and ascension reach these also, and each thought which yesterday was a finality, today is yielding to [another] generalization’ (Emerson 1990: 402-404; ‘Illusions’). Hawthorne and Melville both similarly explore the vulnerability and fragility of human identity, as well as of linguistic, conceptual, and all other forms of identity. A number of their characters are recognizable as ‘straw men’ through which widely-disseminated, stereotyped notions of ‘Emersonian’ self-construction are examined, questioned--and, in accord with Emerson himself, dissolved. Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* and Holgrave in *The House of the Seven Gables*, along with Melville’s Ahab and Bartleby, might instructively be regarded in this light--as also might Henry James’s later Christopher Newman and Isabel Archer. Skeptical as they all might have been of the Emersonian problematic (or at least its popular representation), engagement with that problematic provided an important focus for the projects of all three writers.

Time and again, in the works of Hawthorne and Melville we are confronted with a narrator who lacks credibility or provides us with contradictory information, a character

whose motives or moral posture incarnate ambiguity, a narrative technique that leads us to suspect the narrator's veracity, knowledgability, or perspective, and/or a vocabulary which dissolves messily in our hands like warm chocolate. If any interpretive authenticity is to be brought to this moral doldrums, it is only by the energy of the active, creative individual reader. This same ambiguity looms even more pervasively around the entire dramatic personae of self-constructing characters in Melville's *The Confidence-Man*, which, with the possible exception of *The Blithedale Romance* and some of Henry James's early work, is the American Renaissance's most penetrating fictional study of the process and products of Emersonian self-construction. And, again, if any authenticity of meaning is to be constructed from this moral chaos, it can only be through the energetic participation and personal moral judgment of the individual reader. For this purpose, Hawthorne and Melville, like Emerson, valorize the creative moral energy of each individual reader equally. This confidence in, this reverence for, and solicitation of, the creative participation of every 'gentle reader' in meaning-construction, sets the tone for the American 'aesthetic democracy' which Emerson and his colleagues in the 'American Renaissance' regarded as an indispensable foundation for American political democracy, and for the participatory 'democratic literature' that they produced, through which individual citizens might be encouraged to become more self-confident and energetic participants in making the personal choices and judgments on which depended the meaning-construction, value-construction, and self-construction that the 'American Renaissance' regarded collectively as 'moral.'

In considering the conditions under which 'romance' could best be generated, Hawthorne deploys the example of 'magic moonshine,' as it throws familiar objects, customary boundaries, and their observers into unfamiliar light, chiaroscuro (interplay between light and shadow), and mood. In this ambiguous, confusing, and unsettling milieu, this 'shifting world,' with daylight 'certainties' (literal and figurative) blurred, obscured, and

called into question, Hawthorne suggests that the imaginative and constructive power of each individual consciousness may be emboldened, provoked, to construct new order, structure, value, and meaning out of what had previously been a 'given' (externally and authoritatively valorized) matrix of relationships (Hawthorne 1981: 140). '[L]ate at night,' Hawthorne explains, 'I sat in the deserted parlor [of the Old Manse], lighted only by the glimmering coal-fire and the [...] magic moonshine [...], striving to picture forth imaginary scenes, which the next day, might flow out on the brightening page in many-hued description.'

If the imaginative faculty refused to act at such an hour, it might well be deemed a hopeless case. Moonlight, in a familiar room, falling so white upon the carpet, and showing all its figures so distinctly--making every object so minutely visible, yet so unlike a morning or noontide visibility--is a medium the most suitable for a romance-writer to get acquainted with his illusive guests....[A]ll these details, so completely seen, are so spiritualized by the unusual light, that they seem to lose their actual substance, and become things of intellect. Nothing is too small or too trifling to undergo this change, and acquire dignity thereby [...Everything] is now invested with a quality of strangeness and remoteness [...T]he floor of our familiar room has become a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other [...] one remove further from the actual, and nearer to the imaginative. Then, at such an hour, [...] if a man sitting all alone cannot dream strange things and make them look like truth, he need never try to write romances. (Hawthorne 1980: 44-45; 'The Custom House')

The relevant question thus ceases to be ‘what is it that I see?’--the watchword of traditional, representational art--and morphs instead into the characteristic inquiry of modern art, modern artists, and the ‘perspectivism’ of both Emerson and Nietzsche: ‘Is this what I see?’ In this crucial re-cognition, the way is opened to potential acceptance (and even valorization) of ambiguity, diversity, and the validation of subjective constructions of individual consciousnesses and subject-positions.

HERMAN MELVILLE

Melville’s creative development starts in circumstances very different from Hawthorne’s literary career. After his father went bankrupt and died, Herman left school at the age of eleven and became first a bank clerk and then worked in his brother’s fur-cap store. Some years later he taught in a country school and took a course in surveying and engineering but found no work. This made him think of going to sea. His first voyage to Liverpool in 1839 later became a model for his least complicated naval novel *Redburn* (1849) which also contrasts life in the US and in Britain (the comparison is unfavorable for the latter country). After his return he could not find a job again and he decided in despair to sail on a whaling ship to the South Seas. This was the beginning of his major formative experience.

In the summer of 1842 Melville and his shipmate deserted from the whaling crew in the Marquesas and spent some time with the aborigines who seemed to be living in conditions which were very close to Western fantasies of earthly paradise. But the pleasant feelings and daily joys were spoiled by anxiety when they found that the natives were cannibals. The suspense increased when the tribe insisted that Melville, who at that time was staying among them alone, ought to be tattooed. This was the reason of his final escape from the tribal village on board an Australian whaler. All these events became the basis of Melville’s first semi-autobiographical novel *Typee* (named after the tribe) which, thanks to its sharp

observation of the social, religious and moral customs of the aborigines, and the skillful use of suspense in an adventurous tale, represents a completely new departure in the genres of the naval and adventure novel. The aborigines were no longer constructed as noble savages facing extinction or degeneration (as they were in Cooper's novels), but became representatives of another, hardly imaginable world, that was a counterpart to the visions of the American Dream. In short, danger and death were lurking in the paradise.

After the success of *Typee* Melville wrote its sequel, *Omoo*. It was based again on his experiences from the South Seas, this time on the stories of his voyage on the Australian whaler, of the sailors' mutiny and the subsequent explorations at Tahiti and Imeeo (Aimeo or Eimeo or York Island, now called Moorea in the archipelago called Society Islands) in Polynesia. The book shows not only a deeper interest in aboriginal life and wild nature, but also a genuine concern for some members of the crew among whom a learned man and a philosopher, nicknamed Dr. Long Ghost, becomes the narrator's companion and mentor. This foreshadows further transformations of the literary genre: from the next novel on (that is, from *Mardi*), Melville starts to experiment in combining the tale of adventure and the philosophical essay. Also, the ship and its crew become symbols or allegories of humankind and its condition.

This process culminates in Melville's later novel, *The Confidence-Man* (1857), where the hero (whose character is derived from the popular swindler arrested in New York City) becomes the archetypal figure of the Devil, the first 'confidence-man' who corrupts the crew of the ship called Fidele and representing America. Here Melville foreshadows the later works of Mark Twain, who, however, could do without allegory, since he based his tale (*The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg*) on a different narrative tradition--the popular 'tall story.' *The Confidence-Man* is Melville's ultimate study of how (and whether) personal authenticity and self-construction might be authenticated interpersonally, of how (and whether) authentic

'confidence' (i.e., mutual reverence, love, or trust) is conceptually or practically viable. The Cosmopolitan, the central consciousness in novel, seems, at some level, to be engaged in an attempt to integrate the multiple, dissociated personifications of 'confidence-men' that flash momentarily before our eyes on the Fidele. In his effort to knit together these disparate colors, styles, customs, and cultures (in many ways the defining task of American culture), the Cosmopolitan also embodies what observers as early as James Fenimore Cooper had come to identify as characteristic of 'American taste, 'the object [of which] seemed to be profusion,[...] obtained entirely at the expense of order and elegance.' This characteristic American style appears to prioritize spontaneity, ecstasy, or excess of life over culturally valorized rules, restraint, discipline, and proportion (Cooper 1993: 135).

Allegory and experiment are dominant even in some of Melville's earlier works, especially in *Mardi* (1849), which, for this reason, became Melville's first unsuccessful novel. In the tale of a utopian archipelago in the Pacific (that gave the book its title), Melville blended different narrative traditions--the novel of adventure, modern allegorical and utopian discourses, Swiftian satire, as well as Viking sagas and biblical myth. All the known world, especially Britain and the US (called Dominora and Vivenza, respectively) is transposed to the utopian domain of Mardi. The islands are discovered by two seamen escaped from a whaler: the narrator of the novel and his friend Jarl. On their way to Mardi they meet a boat carrying a white girl, Yillah (who speaks the aboriginal language and is unconscious of her origin), and a native priest taking her to be sacrificed to some local god. The narrator falls in love with Yillah and rescues her. Her radiant beauty has miraculous effects but in fact serves only to the glorification of her lover, whom the natives of Mardi identify with a white avatar of a local demi-god, Taji. After some time Yillah miraculously disappears and Taji sets off to search for her. Accompanied by another demi-god, a local king Media and his subjects--a philosopher, a chronicler and a bard--he explores the archipelago. Gradually he becomes

disappointed with the values of all countries, including the consecrated ground of the supreme gods Oro and Alma and the realm of sensual love where he definitely loses his Yillah. In spite of his faults and failures (the chief one is his pretending to be a demi-god, and using Yillah as the tool of his power and influence) he decides to continue his search alone ‘over an endless sea.’ In this last gesture he anticipates the famous hero of *Moby-Dick*, the ‘monomaniac’ Ahab. *Mardi* can be read as a tale of a lost utopian ideal and also of the loss of the supremacy of Western civilization closed in its self-centered, snug and dreamy paradise.

Moby-Dick, published in Britain as *The Whale* (1851) is much more than a ‘symbolic account of the conflict between man and his fate’ as some critics tell us. This might be true if the book contained only the story of the monomaniac, demonic Captain Ahab (the name of the greedy, base and godless king who ‘led Israel into sin’ 1 Kings 21:23) and of his unsuccessful hunt for the fierce and cunning white whale nicknamed Moby Dick (the origin of this name can be found in the legend about an actual whale known as Mocha Dick which in the 1830s and 1840s killed about thirty men, drowned five whalers and fourteen boats). But this is by no means the full scope of Melville’s narrative. The long voyage (almost round the globe) of Ahab’s ship, the *Pequod* (named after an Indian tribe Pequot, exterminated by the Puritans in 1637), bears some allegorical features reminding us of the expansion of American civilization dominated by the desire to master and control nature and other cultures. However, this desire is not shared by all members of Ahab’s crew: especially by the First Mate, Starbuck (whose religious and moral reproaches do not have any effect on Ahab) and is entirely alien to the harpooner Queequeg (the son of a Polynesian king) and his counterpart, the philosophizing autobiographical narrator Ishmael whose name (‘God heard’)--originally given to the first but disinherited son of Abraham rescued by God with his Egyptian mother Hagar in the desert--signifies his exile from the American tradition established by the Puritans. It might be expected that the uncanny yet suggestive narrator is the only person who

escapes the general disaster. The last symbolic scene reminds us of killing the Albatross in Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*: a sea hawk pecking at the white flag of the sinking whaleship is accidentally nailed to the main mast by one of the desperate men. The crime remains without repentance, and the ship finally sinks 'like Satan' dragging 'a living part of heaven along with her' (Melville 1967: 469).

But this account of *Moby-Dick* would be reductive if we failed to remark on its 'encyclopedic' features. A great part of the book consists of essay chapters which deal with the classification, representation, life-span, pursuit, processing and use of whales. This account mocks and disrupts traditional structures of encyclopedic knowledge and principles of nineteenth-century science. Melville takes up the attempts of earlier romantics to achieve a synthesis of science and poetry but he also responds to claims expressed in Emerson's essay 'The American Scholar' that the new American learning should fuse the fresh experience and spontaneous creativity of the new nation with scientific knowledge and thus overcome the bookish, compartmentalized and alienated character of contemporary science. This is why Melville blends his naturalist, geographical, philosophical and historical learning with his experience of whaling voyages which includes both the extreme peril of the fishing and the daily work of a seaman. While encyclopedias have a fixed structure given by the correlation of individual disciplines, Melville's mock-encyclopedic writing grows from the existential situation of an individual. Its open and subversive form challenges the power of established scientific discourse responsible for our notions of 'reality.' To intensify this aspect of his writing, Melville ironically compares his book, 'a veritable gospel cetology' (i.e., science about whales; Melville 1967: 125), to a sacred book, the Bible. In the Christian tradition, and especially in American Calvinism, the Bible is held to be the expression of God's will and of the complete account of the history of the world. In ironic references to his book as an unfinished sacred text, Melville undermines traditional patterns of authority and opens this

writing to the Other: the future, the sea and the world of whales, which is more wonderful, inscrutable and permanent than any 'reality.' In this way *Moby-Dick* can be said to dispute the claims of modern civilization to global power, and also the political claims of US expansionism at the time of the Mexican War, especially of the doctrine of 'Manifest Destiny' (Duban 1983). Moreover, it fundamentally revalues human relationship to nature: according to F. O. Matthiessen, Melville

had gone [even] farther than Emerson in his realization that what you find in nature, whether you consider a phenomenon angelic or diabolic, depends [...] greatly on your own mood. [...] 'Nature [Melville said] is not so much her own ever-sweet interpreter, as the mere supplier of that cunning alphabet, whereby selecting and combining as he pleases, each man reads his own peculiar lesson according to his own peculiar mind and mood.' (Matthiessen 1968: 406)

The poor reception of *Moby-Dick* almost destroyed Melville's literary career. After the debacle of *Pierre* (which is now read as a philosophical novel ironizing Emerson's Transcendentalism), Melville tried to pull himself together and wrote a series of tales and sketches for *Harper's Magazine* which were later published as *The Piazza Tales* (1856). The best of these tales, *Bartleby the Scrivener*, is not only a testimony of Melville's fear of the breakdown in communication and death in poverty, but also a very modern, or rather a post-modern discourse, on the alienated and arbitrary nature of writing and of all communication acts. Prior to his becoming a copyist for a New York lawyer, Bartleby was a clerk at a very symbolic place: the Dead Letter Office in Washington, DC, where the postal service deposited and destroyed letters which could not be delivered. After having read Bartleby's life-story we are led to ask, what if all writing is like an undelivered letter?

It is also important that Bartleby is no mere victim of the social system but an epitome of the social condition of modern humankind (the tale ends by the narrator's exclamation 'O Bartleby, o humanity!') which cannot be improved by philanthropy represented by his boss. His philanthropy fails since it is a mere ornament of his power over money and people which Bartleby decided to resist. Bartleby's evasive answers to all orders as well as the offers of his boss signify his refusal both to participate in the labor process represented by the grotesque mechanism of the lawyer's office and to become an object of charitable activities. His response, 'I would prefer not to,' is a negative definition of freedom which shows a different orientation of free will from that resulting in the accumulation of wealth or the exercise of power.

The harsh tones of Melville's middle period grew quieter towards the end of his life. A posthumously published novella, called *Billy Budd* (1924, 1962), tells an allegorical story of the defeat of an archetypal American innocent, represented by the title hero, a typical Handsome Sailor of eighteenth-century balladry. Billy is accused of plotting a mutiny by a cunning Englishman, the petty officer Claggart, whom he kills by a single blow in the presence of Captain Vere. He is immediately court-martialed and condemned to death according to 'the Law of the Mutiny Act' (*Norton* 5 1: 474), a measure used for the suppressions of riots in the British Navy at the beginning of Napoleonic Wars. He is hanged despite the sympathies of Captain Vere, who recognizes his essential innocence.

The simple story does not even open the possibility of representing the psychological motives of characters. We do not learn why Billy refuses to defend himself, why Claggart decides to report him as a dangerous element, and why Captain Vere decides to apply the Mutiny Act in all its rigor. The only revealed causes are ideological: Claggart's 'patriotism' (*Norton* 5 1: 2475) and Captain Vere's conviction that in wartime, soldiers are not responsible to Nature, but only to the orders of the King and to the law, however ruthless it may be. The

absence of psychological depth is, in fact, dictated by the special circumstances in which the story happens, namely, in the wake of the French Revolution and the subsequent mutinies in the British Navy. In this specific setting, says Captain Vere, 'Budd's intent or non-intent is nothing to the purpose' (*Norton 5 1*: 2475). Only 'the prisoner's deed' really matters (2472).

In contrast to the scanty story and character description, the historical and mythological background is rather rich. There are references to a number of mythical and historical characters and events, starting with Alexander the Great, Merlin, Pope Gregory and the Angles, continuing with Luis de Camões's epic *The Lusiads* (*Os Lusíadas*, 1572) and accounts of 'great naval magnates' and ending with the American and the French Revolutions and the Napoleonic Wars). Moreover, the book includes several allusions to the Apocalypse and God's judgment. These are usually connected with the main hero. Billy Budd's blow which killed Claggart is called 'the divine judgment on Ananias' (*Norton 5 1*: 2468), Billy would have been acquitted 'at the Last Assizes' (2474; that is, during the Last Judgment), and Napoleon seems to fulfill the 'judgment prefigured in the Apocalypse' (2447). The representation of the historical background of the story is based on the repetition of the apocalyptic myth which gives an ultimate meaning to history.

Contrary to the Apocalypse, nothing specific is revealed in the scene of Billy's execution. 'God bless Captain Vere!' (*Norton 5 1*: 2481), exclaims Billy before he is hanged. His words seem no longer to express enforced obedience, but create a very special spiritual effect. Despite Billy's individual features, his 'rare personal beauty' and sonorous voice similar to 'clear melody of the singing bird' (2481), it is mainly the aspects of weather and sunlight that are responsible for the unusual power of the scene. Billy is hanged at the instant when 'the vapory fleece hanging low in the East was shot through with the soft glory as of the fleece of the Lamb of God seen in mystical vision' (2481; referring to Revelation 1.14). Although, significantly, no Lamb of God is seen, no apocalyptic vision is repeated,

Billy's death has the impact of a miracle, the sailor being turned into something like an angel, 'the pinioned figure' (2482). This impression is still intensified in the next chapter by the Purser's questions addressed to the Surgeon about the absence of spasms in Billy's body in the moment of hanging: the Surgeon, unable to explain the phenomenon scientifically, calls it 'an appearance the cause of which is not immediately to be assigned' (2483).

As the scene following Billy's execution shows, the miraculous power of his death must be put under the control of 'true martial discipline' (*Norton* 5 1: 2482). Despite this, Billy's story becomes a legend and thus he lives on among the sailors. This is also true of Melville's literary career, which became a legend making the author one of the greatest nineteenth-century American writers.

11. THE BIRTH OF MODERN POETRY: WHITMAN & DICKINSON

INTRODUCTION

The most important feature of modernity is the paradoxical connection of universalism and subjectivity. The more wide-ranging the projects of modern literature and philosophy, the greater the role of subjective consciousness. Either standing in the center of the world or displaced from it by an analytical observation of reality, by the fragmentation of the individual or by social experience, by experiments in language and poetic form, the individual self of the author, reader or hero always remains in focus for most modern writers. This is true even for the seemingly detached approaches of 'realistic' fiction.

Modern literature and art in general are sometimes mistakenly called anti-traditional. This error has originated in a superficial understanding of the modern revolt against romantic clichés. For instance, Walt Whitman's attacks on the faint imitations of the Byronic hero, or on the code of chivalry in the South are accompanied by his rather traditional attitudes to Jeffersonian ideals of democracy. Emily Dickinson's experimental poems depend on the tradition of church hymns and Puritan spirituality.

All this implies that the boundary between Romanticism and modern art is difficult to trace. Nonetheless, we can get a clearer idea of it by observing structural changes in the modern vision of the world which had started already in Romanticism. While some romantics (for instance Poe and, in some interpretations, Emerson) believed that subjective consciousness had full meaning only in relation to some absolute whole (the Over-Soul or the universe), for modern writers this universal totality was no longer self-evident. It was either to be reproduced in poetry dealing with the commonest things and thoughts, or to be ironically distanced (together with the self), thus opening the way for poetry based on subtle nuances of

meaning. These approaches and their differences are evident in Whitman's and Dickinson's poetry:

A child said, What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands;
How could I answer the child? ... I do not know what it is any more than he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,

A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropped

[.....]

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

[.....]

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,

And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.

(Whitman, 'Song of Myself,' 90-94, 101, 120-121, *Norton 5 1*: 2099-2100)

An Unconcern so sovereign

To Universe, or me--

Infects my simple spirit

With Taints of Majesty

[.....]

My Splendors, are Menagerie--

But their Completeless Show

Will entertain the Centuries

When I, am long ago,
An Island in dishonored Grass--
Whom none but Beetles--know.

(Dickinson, poem 290, *AmTrad* 562)

While in Whitman the new drift of poetry seems to consist in the expansion of the small details into universal images, of everyday experiences into metaphysical abstractions (the motif of grass 'comprises' the whole life from childish questions to death, and, at the same time, it is imaginatively expanded to include the movements of the universe), in Dickinson the main movement is the condensation of meaning. This process excludes philosophical references and opens up space for the play of figurative language ('their **Completeless Show/ Will entertain the Centuries**'; metaphors emphasized). Both main features are important for the further development of modern poetry, based on free verse and an increasing emphasis on language as the source of imagery.

WALT WHITMAN

Walt Whitman (1819-1892) was born of British and Dutch ancestry at a Long Island farm. In his youth he was interested in the life of the local fishermen, and in the growth of a new urban community in Brooklyn, where his father had begun to work as a carpenter. He had little regular school education and soon started to work as an office boy. Later he became a journalist and worked first for the *Brooklyn Eagle* and then for a number of local papers. Before his twenty-third year he was appointed editor of Manhattan daily called *Aurora*. At that time he was an active member of the Democratic Party.

After 1848 Whitman became convinced that the Mexican War had been the beginning of 'the irrepressible conflict' threatening the stability of the whole country. This awareness

also influenced the experimental poem he had been writing since 1847 and made him think of addressing all Americans. During the long years of work on the poem Whitman gave up his journalistic career and went to live with his parents in Brooklyn. He earned his living as a part-time carpenter.

The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* appeared in 1855 and became a landmark in the development of American poetry as well as of modern art in general. This was mainly because of Whitman's pioneering use of free verse, which does not have a metric pattern (regularly repeated sequences of stressed and unstressed syllables), but is accentuated by irregular rhythmic impulses and modulated by the different length of lines. Whitman's free verse is rooted in the tradition of biblical (or 'cadenced') verse of the Psalms and the Song of Solomon.

In dealing with *Leaves of Grass* we should first try to understand the meaning of the word *self*, especially in the longest and most important poem 'Song of Myself.' In his late essay 'A Backward Glance o'er Travell'd Roads' (1888) Whitman wrote:

'Leaves of Grass' [...] has mainly been [...] an attempt, to put *a Person*, a human being (myself, in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, in America), freely, fully and truly on record. I could not find any similar personal record in current literature that satisfied me [...] No one will get at my verses who insists upon viewing them as a literary performance [...], or as aiming mainly toward art or aestheticism.

I say no land or people or circumstances ever existed so needing the race of singers and poems differing from all others, and rigidly their own, as the land and people and circumstances of our United States need such singers and poems to-day, and for the future.
(*Norton 5 1: 2251-2252*)

In other words: the self becomes a metaphor of a genuine American poem, expressing the 'land, people and circumstances of [...] United States.' If the poet is able to 'assume' this persona--that is, speaking of himself like the continent, country and its people, and also like the whole material and spiritual universe in historical time--all readers should be able to do the same. The symbolic figure of the self thus becomes the mediator between the author and his readers and a symbol of their creative potential. Since it is 'assumed' it can never be identified only with the author, or with the reader. In this way, the self of Whitman's poetry aspires to become a new bond of diversified American society:

I celebrate myself,

And what I assume you shall assume,

For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

(*'Song of Myself,'* 1-3, *Norton 5* 1: 2096)

The self in Whitman's poems is never abstract: it integrates the most diverse features, material and spiritual, good and bad, moral and immoral, masculine and feminine, heterosexual and homosexual in a surge of 'unspeakable passionate love'

I am the poet of the Body,

And I am the poet of the Soul,

The pleasures of heaven are with me, and the pains of hell are with me,

The first I graft and increase upon myself. [...] the latter I translate into a new tongue.

I am the poet of the woman the same as the man

And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man [...]

(‘Song of Myself,’ 422-427, *Norton 5 1*: 2109)

From the symbolic figure of the self there is a very short way to another dominant feature of the poem: the image of *grass*. The connection of the two motifs is evident in section 17 of ‘Song of Myself’:

These are the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands, they are not original with me,
If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing or next to nothing,
If they do not enclose everything they are next to nothing,
If they are not the riddle and the untying of the riddle they are nothing,
If they are not just as close as they are distant they are nothing.

This is the grass that grows wherever the land is and water is,
This is the common air that bathes the globe.

(‘Song of Myself,’ 353-359, *Norton 5 1*: 2107)

The concreteness of the self and the everydayness of Whitman’s poem are symbolized by the motif of the grass. Poetry can never belong to individuals. It is a bond (‘yours as much as mine’), it writes and deciphers the ‘riddle’ of existence. It is close as well as distant like grass and the elements giving life. In this way, the romantic universal ideal (the world created by imagination) is transformed in Whitman’s work.

However, Whitman’s poetry is not so simple and concrete as it may appear from the above lines. It is also poetry of different cultures. The approach to them is similar to that of the Transcendentalists. Like Emerson, Whitman is interested in Asian myths and religions: in

the poem 'Facing West from California's Shores' he sees his poetry as a part of the general movement of cultures which started in India several thousands of years ago, and, though it progressed almost round the globe, it has not yet found its meaning. This also indicates that Whitman redefines the American otherness so far based on the ideas of the Declaration of Independence which determined American nationality in connection with nature and human freedom, and in opposition to British tradition and historical claims. Whitman's poetry no longer seeks these values. It sees American culture as part of the great cycle of all cultures which moves further and further 'from the God, the sage, and the hero,' and from the earthly paradises ('from the flowery peninsulas and spice islands'). In later poems, however, Whitman finds something 'more' in this circular movement, as in the last section of 'Passage to India':

Passage to more than India!

O secret of the earth and sky!

Of you O waters of the sea! O winding creeks and rivers!

Of you O woods and fields! of you strong mountains of my native land!

(*'Passage to India,' 9.233-236, Norton 5 1: 2189*)

Thus, the greatest discovery of modern poetry is not the excitement of technical civilization (which we find in other of Whitman's poems, for instance in 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,' and which influenced early modernistic 'civilization poetry,' e.g., the works of the Belgian poet Emile Verhaeren, or S. K. Neumann) but the everyday world of common things, both small as the leaves of grass and grandiose as the Sierras. As the poem 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking' shows that death is also as much a part of this world of common things as a 'song of the sea.'

Leaves of Grass remained Whitman's only collection of poems. All later productions were included into this volume and the book grew almost until the last moments of Whitman's life. Only the 'Deathbed Edition' from 1892 became Whitman's Collected Works.

Among later additions, *Drum Taps* is the most significant. The poems were written during the Civil War and based on Whitman's experience from military camps and army hospitals (where he served as a wound-dresser), and on his acquaintance with President Lincoln, whose death he mourned in the elegy 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd.'

Apart from newspaper articles, letters and prefaces Whitman wrote little prose. Besides his memoirs in the form of a private journal published in 1883 under the title *Specimen Days*, one of his best known works is *Democratic Vistas* (1870), originally a series of three essays written for the literary magazine *The Galaxy*. The third essay about the 'vistas' for American literature betrays Whitman's isolation on the contemporary literary scene which was dominated by 'a parcel of dandies and ennuyees, dapper little gentlemen from abroad, who flood us with their thin sentiment of parlors, parasols, piano-songs, tinkling rhymes, the five-hundredth importation [...]' (*Norton 5 1: 2255*). In spite of a wide reading public and efficient printing technologies, U.S. literature was not sufficiently protected by copyright law from being flooded by second- and third-rate productions of British writers. In this situation Whitman felt that American literature was still waiting for the 'fresh local courage, sanity, of our own [...] stalwart Western men [...] Southerners' (*Norton 5 1: 2255*). Whitman probably had not read Bret Harte's stories in *Overland Monthly* (a journal published in San Francisco from 1868), and was hardly interested in Mark Twain's 'jumping frogs' or 'innocents abroad.'

EMILY DICKINSON

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) was born in Amherst, Massachusetts. Her father, a successful lawyer and congressman, was a trustee and the treasurer of Amherst College. She was mostly self-educated: except for a short time at Amherst College and in the female seminary she never attended any school. Even her reading was not all that extensive in comparison to other writers: she read some Victorians (the Brontës, the Brownings, Tennyson, and George Eliot), the Transcendentalists (Emerson and Thoreau), and she learned the most from John Keats's poetry. Nor did she travel widely: she never left Amherst except for short visits to Washington, Philadelphia, and Boston.

She never married but was quite influenced by the thoughts of men who were her lovers or friends. When she was young, a law student at Amherst College and free thinker Benjamin Franklin Newton (1821-1853) introduced her to a new world of ideas. When he died of tuberculosis, Reverend Charles Wadsworth (1814-1882) of Philadelphia became her 'dearest earthly fiend,' spiritual guide and most probably the addressee or theme of many of her love poems. Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1823-1911), a minister, soldier, militant abolitionist, and also a literary critic, encouraged her to write poetry and became the editor of the first collection of her poems (published posthumously). In later years she was courted by Judge Otis P. Lord (1812-1884), Justice of the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts. Her secluded life and unwillingness to marry resulted from an effort to keep her inner self inviolate. She wanted to avoid sharing the drabness of everyday married life as well as the hopes of the eternal life with any of the men she knew. In the poem she wrote to Rev. Wadsworth, the figure of a husband melts with the figure of God, thus ironically connecting the trivialities of married life (broken porcelain which can no longer be on display) and the emptiness of death ('Shelf' is both in the cupboard and in the mortuary where dead bodies are laid) and of eternal Life.

I cannot live with You--
It would be Life--
And Life is over there--
Behind the Shelf

The Sexton keeps the Key to--
Putting up
Our Life--His Porcelain--
Like a Cup--

Discarded of the Housewife--
Quaint--or Broke--
A newer Sevres pleases--
Old Ones crack. (poem 640 *Norton 3 1*: 2388)

Dickinson started to write poetry in the early 1850s developing traditional formal models--church hymns and folk ballads. Therefore most of her poems have short stanzas of three to six lines. Some lines are not rhymed at all (which is typical of some variants of balladic stanza), some end with half-rhymes, consonances or assonances (*back/look, resume/June*). These half-rhymes often become ironical figures both distancing the existential seriousness of Dickinson's message:

I like a look of Agony,
Because I know it's true--
Men do not sham Convulsion,

Nor simulate, a Throe-- (poem 241 *Norton 5 1*: 2496)

and the conventional themes and diction of church hymns:

Oh Sacrament of summer days,
Oh Last Communion in the Haze--
Permit a child to join.

The sacred emblems to partake--
The consecrated bread to take
And thine immortal wine! (poem 130 *Norton 5 1*: 2492)

In the latter poem, 'the child' which cannot take part in the Communion is symbolic of both the naive, unmediated approach to the world of the senses, and, at the same time, of the separation of the poet's self from the people, and her closeness to nature which is the source of eternal life including, however, the death of an individual.

These are the roots of Dickinson's reflexive lyrical poetry which, in spite of the proclaimed naive attitude to the world of the senses, deeply transforms the perception of reality. The sensuous facts are no longer important: they provide a mere point of departure to a complex and surprising play of metaphors which tell us of the illusory nature of the world of the senses and of its dependence on the 'mistakes' of language, that is on catachreses (specific metaphors linking semantically or stylistically incompatible words)

These are the days when skies resume
The old--old sophistries of June--

A blue and gold mistake. (poem 130 *Norton* 5 1: 2492)

The figure of catachresis points back to sophisticated paradoxes of the metaphysical poetry of John Donne, but for Dickinson the secret of human being consists more in the ironic play of language than in the anatomy of human reason and senses. Her lyric confirms the independence of the poetic reality from the empirical world. In this she differs from some modernists, who--as for instance T. S. Eliot--look more to the metaphysical poets, and anticipates the poetry of others (Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams), who were more interested in how language creates meaning and what it means for us.

The great themes of Dickinson's poetry are the parallels between nature and death (against which sometimes love and faith stand), and the lapse of time ('evanescence'). All this means that standing outside of any of these elements and refusing to identify with traditional values, she can focus on her subjectivity which is not circumscribed either by the world of the senses or by history and its epochs but by language and the pleasures of writing (of being on the boundary of worlds, of time and eternity):

Next time, to stay!

Next time, the things to see

By Ear unheard,

Unscrutinized by Eye--

Next time, to tarry,

While the Ages steal--

Slow tramp the Centuries,

And the Cycles wheel! (poem 160, *AmTrad* 553)

Though Dickinson's imagery and language are mostly disharmonious (this impression is reinforced by unusual punctuation which does not indicate syntactic structures but marks the pauses in speech) her poems nevertheless create harmony out of disharmonious figures, images and tones:

Of Bronze--and Blaze--

The North--Tonight--

So adequate--it forms--

So preconcerted with itself--

So distant--to alarms (poem 290, *AmTrad* 560)

The harmony is 'preconcerted' with itself, i.e., it has not been instrumented by any metaphysical power). It resembles the song of Orpheus which stands in sharp contrast to the sermons of Christianity.

In her lifetime, Dickinson published only seven of her poems. The first edition of her poetry, containing 116 poems appeared under a simple title, *Poems*, in 1890. It was the work of her friend T. W. Higginson and of her acquaintance from Amherst, Mabel Loomis Todd (1856-1932), who was in possession of a substantial part of the manuscripts. Another part belonged first to Emily's sister Lavinia (1833-1899) and then to her niece Martha Dickinson-Bianchi (1866-1943), who published a selection of Emily Dickinson's work under the title *The Single Hound: Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1914). Appearing at the dawn of Modernism, the book made Dickinson an influential poet with the new generation, including Ezra Pound (1885-1972), and especially Marianne Moore (1887-1972). Gradually, Martha Dickinson published about seven-hundred poems in five collections. The publication of the poems

owned by Mabel Todd had waited until 1945 because of the legal battle for the Dickinson property including Emily's poems. Only then did Mabel Todd's daughter Millicent Todd Bingham (1880-1968) publish a substantial selection of 668 poems entitled *The Bolts of Melody*, and the preparations of the critical edition of complete poems could begin. In 1955 T. H. Johnson brought to light the whole corpus of 1775 poems. Though they were written in the provincial world of a former Puritan town, they have much more to say to the people of the twentieth or twenty-first centuries used to the global space created by technological civilization.

For Whitman and Dickinson, as for Emerson, there was no intrinsic 'truth,' 'goodness,' 'beauty,' or 'harmony' in anything; if harmony existed, it could do so only as a result of necessarily provisional construction by a temporary, fleeting 'harmonizing' consciousness. As words and metaphors were renewed, old lines blurred and dissolved, and previously-separated entities ran together to form new agglomerations. '[T]he poet turns the world to glass, [...] and sees the flowing or metamorphosis; perceives that thought is multiform. [...] Mountains and oceans we think we understand [...until] they are melted [...], and come out men, and then, melted again, come out words' (Emerson 1990: 205; 'The Poet'). In Dickinson's poem, human brain is transformed in a similar way:

The Brain--is wider than the Sky--

For--put them side by side--

The one the other will contain

With ease--and You--beside--

The Brain is deeper than the sea--

For--hold them--Blue to Blue--

The one the other will absorb--

As Sponges--Buckets--do--

The Brain is just the weight of God--

For--Heft them--Pound for Pound--

And they will differ--if they do--

As Syllable from Sound--

(Dickinson 1951, poem 632)

12. MARK TWAIN, THE TALL TALE, & LOCAL COLOR

INTRODUCTION

The beginnings of American regionalism are not regional at all, lest we consider the *frontier* a region. However, this is hardly possible, since the frontier was shifting all the time and ran through many landscapes and territories. Moreover, American notions of the frontier in the early eighteenth century differ greatly from ideas current a century later. While in the pre-Revolutionary times the backwoods of Virginia or the forests of what later became New York State were the actual location of the frontier, after the Louisiana Purchase (1803) the frontier seemed gradually to disappear. The new territory was spreading to infinite distances and its outer rim (the Rocky Mountains and the basin behind them) had to be explored by special expeditions organized and financed by the government. As a consequence, the actual location of the frontier was no longer important: what became significant were myths or tales giving meaning to the new expansion of the Americans to the West.

One of the most important myths is ‘Manifest Destiny,’ the permanent progress of civilization across the continent caused directly by Divine Providence. This gave the tales of western expansion a necessary form (Smith 1986: 23). Another significant myth of the new territories is, from the time of James Fenimore Cooper, the pioneer: a lone, intrepid, and noble individualist ‘paving the path for civilization and national prosperity’ (25). These words were uttered by no one less than the greatest hero of the Wild West, William F. Cody, also known as Buffalo Bill (1846-1917), in response to the congratulations of Senator John Thurston. The senator called the famous gunman and owner of the Wild West Show ‘a great national and international educator’ (25).

What happened in the period of the expansion to the West can be called the dislocation, or rather deterritorialization of the frontier. The frontier was identified with a new, religious as

well as technological, form of the American Dream. It even began to lose its traditional aspect of wilderness. Despite the fact that many people in the first half of the nineteenth century had been skeptical about the colonization of the West (Stephen H. Long of the US Army Engineers named it the Great American Desert and considered it 'unfit for cultivation and [...] uninhabitable'), the stony deserts of the Great Basin were mostly represented as future paradises that can be created by irrigation (there were conjectures about the existence of immense underground water supplies), and new farming methods.

As a result, the language of the frontier became laden with utopian images of abundance, plenitude, and exotic varieties of life. This is especially typical of what Daniel Boorstin called *booster talk*: 'giving noble names to insignificant places and things' (1965: 296). 'Boosters' were the settlers whose aim was to develop the place by their own enterprise and to attract more people to it. Therefore they not only built hotels and railroads but were also introducing a new language of success, cultural values, tradition and prosperity. They used noble names (Athens, Alexandria, Rome) for towns which often soon decayed into 'ghost towns'-- depopulated and ruinous settlements. They also gave exotic, evocative names to uninhabitable, dreary territories. Thus, a considerable desert area of the Great Basin was named Nevada according to the snowy peaks of Sierra Nevada, which is actually in California. Named in noble ways, and packaged in geographical myths (e.g., the desert belt being the location of the most advanced ancient civilizations--such as Egypt, Babylon, or Carthage, and the settlement of the Great Basin recreating the glory of these civilizations) the land almost lost its actual presence. It was swallowed by aggressive booster talk, similar to the language of modern advertising.

A different way of speaking was called *tall talk*. This was not a language of business and advertisement used by boosters. Though based on the same principle of overstatement, it was a language of jokes, blurred, ambiguous meaning, humor, and irony. It was used mostly by

gold miners and ordinary colonists for entertainment and also in order to avoid topics directly referring to the harshness and dangers of their everyday life. The most important features of tall talk are comical or grotesque metaphors and similes, often gradated into hyperboles (e.g., 'He walks through a fence like a falling tree through a cobweb.' or 'She slings the nastiest ankle in old Kentucky'--i.e., she dances brilliantly with sex-appeal), and vague or ambiguous use of quantifiers ('pretty considerable better').

Tall talk is the yarn from which *tall tale* is woven, a folk genre of the frontier anecdote characterized by hyperboles or violent understatement (which often takes the form of black humor). It blurs the distinction between the fictitious and the real: the 'realistic' features only enhance the absurd and grotesque effect, as for instance in this passage from Mark Twain's *Roughing It* (1872):

they settled in Morgan County, and he got nipped by the machinery in the carpet factory and went through in less than a quarter of a minute; his widder [widow] bought the piece of carpet that had his remains woven in, and people come a hundred miles to 'tend the funeral. There was fourteen yards in the piece. She wouldn't let them roll him up, but planted him just so--full length. (*Norton 3 2: 21*)

In this way, the independence of the speech and of the narrative are affirmed. The narrative frees itself from established authorities and becomes more than a way in which some events are told. It invents the events in a strange chain of associations, it can go on endlessly, and is finished only when the speaker stops or the listener runs away.

According to Wonham, 'the tall tale [...contains] more than one potential meaning--it does express a will to lie and a contradictory will to tell the truth *at the same time*' (1993: 31; my emphasis). It also consists in a 'rhetorical pattern of interpretive challenge and response'

dramatizing ‘the interaction of voices without pretending to solve them into a single, unified voice’ (Wonham 1993: 67). In this way, the tall tale creates a new community of narrators and listeners, scattered in an immensity of the Big Empty (the vastness of the Great Basin) and communicating both orally and in printed word, at tall tale contests and festivals as well as reading and writing the tales, and circulating them by means of printed medium and even internet (Ghost Stories).

Although the tall tale is not specifically American¹⁴ and was recorded a long time before the settlement of the Far West,¹⁵ it can be argued that it was most fully realized only there, helping the settlers deal with the contrasts they met in the ‘incomprehensible vastness of the continent’ (Brown 1989: 2). As Carolyn Brown shows, the tall tale can mediate between three types of folk narratives: ‘true’ accounts, mostly of personal character, expected and believed to be based on facts; ‘fictional narratives’ such as ‘Märchen, fable, joke, trickster tale, ghost story, and so on’; and, finally, ‘truth narratives,’ that is, myths and sacred histories which cannot be verified and are matters of religious belief (1989: 10). The particular power of tall tales consists in the dramatization of the relations between the truth and lies, and consequently between narrators and their audiences (Brown 1989: 17). An important function in this respect is the relation of the community to strangers: the yarns pretend to educate ‘greenhorns’ or ‘tenderfoots,’ at whom they are mostly aimed, in the complexities of life and the art of discrimination.

The major technique of the tall tale, exaggeration, leads to the overstraining and collapse of metaphor (compare the above extract where the carpet cannot serve as a metaphor of the dead husband but must be ‘planted [...] full length’ to display ‘his remains woven in’). The

¹⁴ Carolyn S. Brown (1989: 11) has traced its origins to the antiquity, to Plutarch’s account of the words ‘congealed with cold the moment they were spoken’ in some northern land, and later the German Baron Münchhausen’s adventures published in an English adaptation as early as 1786.

¹⁵ Wonham mentions Benjamin Franklin’s letters of the 1770s, especially ‘The Traveler’ telling of the whales leaping across the Niagara Falls, *The General History of Connecticut* (1781) by Samuel Peters and James Kirke Paulding’s early local color fiction (1993: 28-29).

grotesque hyperbole may sometimes appear suddenly, at other times it occurs gradually on an extensive scale of probability. Thus a familiar thing or act, e.g., an attempt to make a long jump across a ditch or creek, develops into an improbable event of jumping across the Grand Canyon and ends in an absurd situation: seeing that he will not get to the opposite bank, the jumper turns around in the air and walks back (Brown 1989: 24). As a result, the ironic attitude to reality and the impossibility of its representation are supplanted by a much more efficient gesture of humor which facilitates survival in and adaptation to harsh and unpredictable reality.

The tradition of the tall tale originated in the 1830s. In 1835 the so-called *Crockett Almanacks* started to appear, recording popular stories of frontier storytellers,¹⁶ and tall tales were also published in the paper called *The Spirit of the Times*.

MARK TWAIN

The tall tale was still very popular when Samuel Langhorne Clemens (1835-1910) left in 1861 after an unsuccessful period of service in the Confederate militia for the Nevada Territory where his more successful brother Orion (1825-1897) became government Secretary. The adventurous journey to Carson City and various schemes to get rich became the subject of *Roughing It* (1872), a book composed of loosely connected stories, some of which can be called ‘tall.’

In 1862 Clemens established himself as a journalist in Virginia City in Nevada. He became the editor of a booster paper called *Territorial Enterprise* and he started to use the pseudonym ‘Mark Twain’ meaning ‘two fathom depth of safe water’ in reminiscence of the pre-war times

¹⁶ David or Davy Crockett (1786-1836), originally a Congressman and Colonel of the US Army, gained the reputation of an eccentric and intrepid frontiersman in the 1830s. He was captured and executed by the Mexican army after the siege of the Alamo in 1836. Some heroes of the Western saga were modeled on actual frontiersmen, such as Daniel Boone (1734-1820), a legendary explorer of Kentucky at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Mike Fink (c. 1770/1780-c. 1823), a boatman on the Ohio and Mississippi rivers in the early nineteenth century, and Kit (Christopher Houston) Carson (1809-1868) who helped California expeditions from the 1820s through the 1840s. Others, for instance Paul Bunyan, have been invented.

in which he piloted Mississippi steamboats (his experience is the source of *Old Times on the Mississippi* [1875] and other works). As a miner and journalist Clemens became both acquainted with the life in the camps and interested in tall tales. His first publication, *Jim Smiley and his Jumping Frog* (1865; there are several titles of this tale, including ‘The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County’ and ‘The Notorious Jumping Frog of the Calaveras County’) resembles a transcript or imitation of a tall tale. But it may also be an ironical version of a booster tale, and thus it becomes an independent work of literature (an adventurous enterprise is substituted by betting, riches by a surfeit of animals, and booster names are given--ironically--to animals: the puppy is called Andrew Jackson--referring to the popular US president, 1829-1837; the frog is named Daniel Webster--after a leading antebellum politician and charismatic orator).

In *Roughing It* a different feature of literariness can be seen. It is also based on irony which is directed not only against the loose, incidental development of the tall tale, but also against another specific feature of frontier talk: the jargon of an itinerant preacher. The speaker tells a bizarre story of how a missionary and his wife had been eaten by cannibals who then were saved, because of having received the godly substance of the servants of the Lord.

But mind you, there ain't nothing ever reely lost; everything that people can't understand and don't see the reason of does good if you only hold on and give it a fair shake; Prov'dence don't fire blank cartridges, boys. That there missionary's substance, unbeknowns to himself, actu'ly converted every last one of them heathens that took a chance at the barbecue. [...] Don't tell me it was an accident that he was biled [boiled]. There ain't no such things as accident. (*Norton 3 2: 21*)

The narrative confirms the contrary: it is driven by accidental association of ideas, and people are lost in it: as we saw earlier, they for instance can die, having been processed by machinery (in the carpet factory), and woven into commodities (a three-ply carpet) which then become fetishes or monuments. But the passage points to another dimension of the narrative: instead of a metaphysical notion of the whole it is based on the process of the *dissemination* of meaning. The original burlesque disappears and is replaced by another meaning, completely dissimilar. Thus both the 'main idea' and the characteristic genre features get lost: what remains is the energy of popular language creating the narrative and wasting itself at the same time.

In 1864 Mark Twain arrived in San Francisco and a year later he started to contribute to the *Californian*. Here his first tales appeared, and he also became acquainted with another story-teller and successful writer from the West Coast, Bret Harte (1836-1902), a journalist and a poet who also started to write short stories from mining camps and had great success with the collection entitled *The Luck of Roaring Camp and Other Stories* (1870). In comparison with Twain, his stories used current literary language, and employed colloquial speech only in dialogues. He also did not imitate or recreate the grotesque or absurd aspects of the tall tale. His stories were based on the moral and psychological contrast between characters. In general, they were more popular with contemporary readers than Twain's works.

In his later development Twain seems to abandon the tradition of the tall tale but he never forgets it completely. His next and very popular work, *Innocents Abroad* (1869), has features of cultivated journalism. Twain was commissioned to write a series of letters for two papers, *Alta California* and the *New York Tribune and Herald*, describing a steamship tour to Europe, Egypt, and the Holy Land. In his ironic letters Twain mocks European sights and manners from the position of an American democrat who has no understanding of cultural differences

and looks at everything foreign very critically and with deep suspicion, noticing the undemocratic, decadent, and pretentious aspects of the Old World. Of course, the irony works both ways, as the later works, unpublished in Twain's lifetime (e.g., his *English Notebook*) clearly show. While in *Innocents Abroad* the balance is still in favor of Americans, later satires mock their lack of culture, ignorance, and narrow-mindedness.

The real gateway to Twain's literary success was not his writing but his marriage to Olivia Langdon, the delicate daughter of a wealthy industrialist from New York State. No doubt the newly married couple were happy, as Twain's famous letter to his childhood friend Will Bowen (dated 6 February 1870) testifies. Twain was provided for. But the letter reveals also other consequences of this event. Stylistically and thematically, it is split in twain. On the one hand there is the powerful associative flow of Twain's childhood reminiscences, an utterance whose syntax resembles the tall tale. On the other hand, the letter contains some passages of polished and conventionally sentimental speech representing his happiness with his 'Angel' Olivia. This gap foreshadows the later division of Twain's work into publishable and unpublishable parts: it was Olivia, or Livy as he used to call her, who objected to the publication of many bitter satires on Americans and on the whole human species, called *Letters from the Earth, Papers of the Adam Family, Damned Human Race, Burlesques on the Etiquette*, etc.). The main objection was the godlessness of Twain's criticism, the absence of any moral or divine aim in the life of Americans. In *Letters from the Earth* which appeared as late as 1963, Twain (disguised as Satan) mocks the absurdity of the conventional meeting-house vision of eternal life:

In man's heaven *everybody sings!* The man who did not sing on earth is able to sing there; the man who could not sing on earth is able to do it there. The universal singing is not casual, not relieved by intervals of quiet; it goes on, all day long, and every day, during the

stretch of twelve hours. And *everybody stays*; whereas in the earth the place would be empty in two hours. The singing is of hymns alone. Nay, it is of *one* hymn alone. The words are always the same, in number they are only about a dozen, there is no rhyme, there is no poetry: 'Hossanah, hossanah, hossanah, Lord God of Sabaoth, 'rah! 'rah! 'rah! siss!--boom! [...] a-a-ah!' (Letter II: Satan to Michael and Gabriel, *AmTrad*: 1095)

This somber vision of America and its ideals is to be found even in Twain's earlier works. The central theme of many of them is the baseness and corruptibility of Americans who, in pretending unblemished morality, have ceased to distinguish between appearance and reality (e.g., in the novella *The Man Who Corrupted Hadleyburg* [1900]). A complete collapse of the distinction between the true and the false, the fictitious and the real is typical of the last, posthumously published, allegorical novel *The Mysterious Stranger* (1916), whose Satanic protagonist is called Philip Traum.¹⁷ The novel, which vainly tries to distinguish between the unconscious (or 'dream') and conscious (or 'reality') selves, displays 'the other side of Samuel Clemens, Realist. In an ultimate uncanny moment [...] reality itself is dismissed and dissolved' (Crow 2009: 85):

there is no God, no universe, no human race, no earthly life, no heaven, no hell. It is all a Dream, a grotesque and foolish dream. Nothing exists but You. And You are but a Thought--a vagrant Thought, a useless Thought, a homeless Thought, wandering forlorn among the empty eternities! (Twain 1970: 405)

¹⁷ The book was first published 'in the editorial abridgement by Alfred Bigelow Paine,' Twain's literary executor (Crow 2009: 84). The first draft of the book entitled *The Chronicle of Young Satan* narrates the adventures of the main character in the medieval Austrian village. The second draft named *Schoolhouse Hill* re-introduces Twain's major boy heroes, Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. It also uses for the first time the number '44' for the chief protagonist (an alternative title was No. 44, New Series 864962), which also became incorporated in the title of the third version *44, the Mysterious Stranger: Being an Ancient Tale Found in a Jug and Freely Translated from the Jug* published in 1982 as a definitive text by the editors of the 'Mark Twain Project.' Interestingly enough, the number may also refer to Christ in esoteric numerology. For a summary of the interpretations see Schmidt (2010).

During his years at Hartford, Connecticut, Twain felt very lonely and repressed. He had to meet people from the higher echelons of Hartford society, dominated by polished upper-class artists, for instance Harriet Beecher Stowe. After his first satirical novel, *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today* (1873), which he wrote in collaboration with a conventional Hartford writer, Charles Dudley Warner (1829-1900), he ceased to publish anything satirical and decided to return in his imagination to the times of his childhood and youth spent on the Mississippi. His first book of the Mississippi series, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (the original title was *A Boy's Manuscript*) appeared in 1876, but the first draft dates as early as 1870. This novel, though successful in Twain's time, soon became mainly reading for boys.

Twain's writing rose to a higher artistic level in his following autobiographical work *Old Times on the Mississippi* (1875), which he later made into a book entitled *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), confronting his recollections of boyhood and youth with recent impressions from the visit of his native country. The book became important for the development of Twain's style and gave him the opportunity to reconsider his aesthetic stance (he refused the influence of Scott's romanticism in Southern literature and praised such regionalists as George Washington Cable [1844-1925] of New Orleans or Joel Chandler Harris [1845-1908]).

Between 1876 and 1884 Twain was working on his major novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which became the first modern American epic. This was not Twain's ambition, rather he wrote the book with the intention of representing the speech and life of the Mississippi valley, a place he knew so well. Therefore he was careful to select typical dialects and to invent a plot which would lead the reader downstream through the valley. An interesting feature of the river part of the plot is the regular alternation of chapters whose scene is the stream of the river and those which take place on the riverbanks. The stream also

plays a role as plot-device, since it carries the raft with Huck and the runaway slave, Jim, along, and thus works against every attempt of theirs to transform their journey into an adventurous pursuit of freedom.

Instead, Huck and Jim become observers of the life on the riverbanks and especially of many instances of fraud and violence. The fake aspects of Southern Romanticism and booster behavior are depicted in the characters of the Duke of Bridgewater and Dauphin or King Louis XVII of France, confidence men who also pretend that they are the famous English actors, David Garrick and Edmund Kean. The danger of mass violence is represented in the lynch scene. Another dominant feature of the book is the problem of the relationship of the whites to the blacks. It is significant that Huck does not change his wary attitude to Jim for ideological or political reasons. He does so simply because he cannot treat Jim as a thing and forget the relationship they have established. When Jim is sold by one of the confidence men to Phelps farm, and the adventurous attempts to free him fail, he is liberated in the traditional Southern way, by his rightful owner, Miss Watson.

All these features reveal that *Huckleberry Finn*, in spite of its Southern scope, is a narrative extending well beyond the limits of the Mississippi valley. What makes it especially valuable is the productive tension between the adult's and child's perspective which characterizes the first-person narrative of the hero. Another remarkable feature is the plot development where outer causes always baffle the effort of the heroes to transform it into a conventional novel of adventure. It seems strange, but *Huckleberry Finn*, though conceived as a local-color book, becomes the first novel of uprootedness, with the hero always 'on the road,' like the protagonists of the Beat generation. In the last lines Huck makes this clear: 'I reckon I got to light out for the territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it.' In this way Mark Twain returns to his beginnings in the West and to the faded magic of the tall tale.

It can also be argued that the novel, in one of its crucial scenes concerned with the essential problem of truth and lie, establishes a firm link with the Emersonian tradition. In the climactic sequence of Huck Finn's transition to responsible proto-adulthood, he weighs the obligations and liabilities of reporting his slave friend Jim as a runaway, Huck first decides to satisfy his 'civic' (Emerson would call it 'reflex') obligation by betraying Jim, and then almost immediately reverses himself and chooses to satisfy his personal (Emerson would call it 'direct') obligation to himself and his own conscience by not betraying his friend.

Huck describes his inner state as he finishes writing the letter reporting Jim's status and location:

I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and I knowed I could pray now. But I didn't do it straight off, but laid the paper down and set there thinking--thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to being lost and going to hell. And went on thinking [...] and then I happened to look around and see that paper [...]. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself: 'All right, then, I'll go to hell'--and tore it up. (Twain 1983: 205-207)

In Huck's soul-searching we can clearly hear the 'echo,' of an iconic 'American Renaissance' public proclamation on 'moral' (i.e. value-constructing) activity--Emerson's 'Self-Reliance':

Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind [...]. I

remember an answer which when quite young I was prompted to make a valued adviser, who was wont to importune me with the dear old doctrines of the church. On my saying, What have I to do with the sacredness of traditions, if I live wholly from within? my friend suggested: 'But these impulses may be from below, not from above.' I replied: 'They do not seem to me to be such; but if I am the Devil's child, I will live then from the Devil.' No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it. (Emerson 1992: 134-35; 'Self-Reliance')

In numerous ways, it is possible--even instructive--to see in Mark Twain's work and consciousness the influence of Emerson and his associates in the 'American Renaissance.' In his appreciation of the 'other' and his critique of its limited appreciation and exploration by many contemporary (white/male) writers, for example, Twain manifests a clear awareness of the diversity ideal in the cultural paradigm of American democracy. His commentary on the portrayal of Native Americans by James Fenimore Cooper provides one instance of this sensibility; and his treatments of African Americans in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), *Those Extraordinary Twins* (1892), and *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894) present others.

OTHER LOCAL COLOR

Other representatives of the 'local color' movement are often 'dislocated' like Twain. A leading journalist of the New South, Joel Chandler Harris (1845-1908) was mostly interested in the black folklore of Georgia. In 9 books commonly called 'Uncle Remus stories' (1880-1948) he created a powerful, though at times highly schematic, image of African Americans, influenced by their oral story-telling tradition and using their dialects. Mary Wilkins Freeman

(1852-1930) and Kate Chopin (1850-1904) are early feminist writers; Harriet Beecher Stowe is best known as the abolitionist and author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). The only well-known writer who comes close to our idea of a regionalist is Sarah Orne Jewett (1849-1909), an author of novels, tales, and sketches about her native Maine.

In spite of this, American literary scholarship has seen a revival of interest in regionalism. As Charles Crow points out, this change has been effected both by 'the spectacular appeal to readers today of the books with regional emphasis' and by the revaluation of old canons based on 'the assumption that regional writing was inherently minor.' Crow highlights the importance of 'feminist scholars' (especially of Judith Fetterley) who 'challenged the belief that the literature of 'small and private lives' was necessarily less important than stories about seafaring and fighting Indians.' Although it can be admitted that works of regional literature may provide contemporary readers with a possibility of the nostalgic escape to the rural world of the past, it should not be overlooked that 'the perspective of a region [can] offer a useful minority view, a healthy subversion, of dominant values' (Crow 2004: 1-3).

13. FICTIONS OF REALISM AND CONSCIOUSNESS:

HOWELLS & THE JAMES BROTHERS

INTRODUCTION

Rather than discussing standard definitions of realism, this chapter explores relations of fiction and reality in the work of William Dean Howells, Henry James, and his brother, William James, an important US philosopher and founder of Pragmatism. In search of a realistic representation of the late nineteenth-century US society, Howells is still greatly indebted to European nineteenth-century authors, sharing their ‘fictions’ of literature as an objective and ‘critical’ representation of society, its tensions and conflicts. Later he, from today’s point of view rather mistakenly, believes in the mission of literature to solve social conflicts by ethical means and produces one of the best known nineteenth-century American utopias. Contrary to Howells, Henry James discovers the multiple, productive role of fictions in shaping the consciousness of his characters, stimulating their efforts to come to terms with European culture and, most importantly, engendering the aesthetic and moral truths of literature and other arts. Finally, William James, who sees human consciousness as a ‘stream [...] of subjective life’ (James 2007: 239), integrates fiction into philosophical reflections of experience, coining the phrase ‘the stream of consciousness,’ one of the basic terms for the critical analysis of modernist novel.

WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS

Young William Dean Howells (1837-1920), the son of a jack-of-all-trades, printer and owner of a booster newspaper in Ohio, gained in his post-frontier ambience a glaring reputation of a self-taught polyglot. His early career of typesetter, journalist, and finally biographer of

Abraham Lincoln during his election campaign in 1861, won him a consulship in Venice--an exciting opportunity to explore European history and culture.

Unlike the ironical Mark Twain of *Innocents Abroad*, Howells saw Europe through a miraculous halo--or was it a haze?--of history. He did not know much about European art, and could not understand the purpose of John Ruskin's thorough study of Venetian Gothic, but he was mad about the feeling, or the atmosphere, of history in Italy. 'At home,' he said, 'one may read history, but one can realize it, as if it were something personally experienced, only on the spot where it was lived' (qtd. Spiller et al. 1963: 839).

For Howells, this imagined history became synonymous with a unique individual experience but was strangely incompatible with the dreariness of present life. Howells could not bring together the world of experience and imagination: in his early books he was either a keen observer of everyday social life and of the apparent effects of the past in it (*Venetian Life* [1866]), or a dreamer of historical events using the picturesque nooks of old cities as stage scenery (*Tuscan Cities* [1885]). Later, in *A Little Swiss Sojourn* (1893), he almost identified himself with an escapist view of European history as a pleasant illusion allowing him to forget for a while about American life and his literary trade. For him, as for many Americans, 'Europe was becoming a château to be rented for a season of self-indulgence' (Spiller et al. 1963: 840).

This story can be contrasted with what we know about Howells's contemporary and friend Henry James who was inspired by the same conflict between the fictions of the past and imperatives of the present when he began to develop his 'international theme' and the theme of the artist in conflict with society.

For Howells, however, history became something more than pleasant vacation scenery. In 1875 he wrote a mediocre novel *A Foregone Conclusion* playing with the tricks and devices of Gothic romance. In Howells's narrative, the scheming villain--a Catholic priest--is in fact

no villain at all, only a weakling suffering from agnosticism, who mistakes the interest of a young American expatriate, Florida Vervain, for genuine love. He dies before he can do any serious harm. The Gothic plot, which was still widely used in popular American literature, thus ends before its completion (the *foregone conclusion* is thematized in the title). Its ending, however, does not dispel deep doubts about Florida's moral character in the heart of her previous lover, an American artist and consul in Venice (and Howells's autostylization). His suspicion condemns him to many years of restless travel before he finally decides to marry his nearly 'fallen' love. As we can see, Howells attempted to debunk historical clichés of Gothic narratives (a lusty friar, the Wandering Jew) without having found any serious use for European history. In spite of this, Gothic dreams of suppressed shameful passions continued to haunt his 'realistic' novel writing. As Charles Crow points out, his novella *The Shadow of a Dream* (1890) was published simultaneously with his principal realistic novel *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890) and shares with it the names of principal characters. Even in his later works (collections of short stories *Questionable Shapes* [1903], and *Between Dark and Daylight* [1907]), 'short stories exploring memory, dreams and occasionally ghosts' appear (Crow 2009: 78-81).

Howells' trade of novelist required a considerable degree of conformity with the tastes of his reading public. As the chief editor (1871-1881) of *The Atlantic Monthly* (a leading US literary magazine founded in Boston in 1857), he transformed the themes of his Italian sketches into clichés out of which he could build a short story located in an American urban setting. These tales were later collected under the title *Suburban Sketches* (1871). 'If the public will stand this,' Howells told Henry James, 'I shall consider my fortune made' (qtd. Spiller et al. 1963: 888).

It is not surprising that Howells could extend his adaptation to another genre where he had already been successful with European themes. Travel books were quite popular in the Gilded

Age, and so Howells's first 'realistic' novel *Their Wedding Journey* (1871) was based on this model. It is a narrative without a plot and almost without incident. Howells based it on the description of favorite American sights (Niagara Falls, Montreal) as well as of some drab details of American life (dirty streets of New York City) presented with a charming mood in their 'vast, natural, unaffected dullness.' The bearers of this charming mood are the newly married couple, Basil and Isabel March, who also appear in several later books, most significantly in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. In *Their Wedding Journey*, the pride in the native honesty and beauty of America and the creation of representative American heroes result both in the obliteration of the historical theme and to the emergence of the props of the later powerful discourse of 'realism': the avoidance of 'the heroic or occasional phases' of human life and the search for typical human behavior in the 'habitual moods of vacancy and tiresomeness' (Spiller et al. 1963: 889).

But Howells was not so dull as may appear from these quotes. To keep his reading public, which consisted mostly of middle-class women, he had to entertain them. And to entertain them he invented an almost archetypal story of a sensitive country girl or boy thrown into a sophisticated Europeanized society. Unlike Henry James, who also uses these plots, Howells focuses on the triumph of an innocent heroine or hero in a scheming and dangerous society (this is what happens in *A Chance Acquaintance* [1873] and *The Lady of the Aroostook* [1879]).

In Howells's later fiction this innocent woman figure becomes passionate and possessive. This is the case of Marcia Gaylord, the heroine of *Modern Instance* (1882), a novel describing the decay of a middle-class marriage caused by a self-centered, unscrupulous husband, whose personality falls apart under the influence of alcohol. The heroine's triumph consists not only in her elemental vitality, but also in the moral delicacy that she displays later in an affair with a lifeless, over-idealized hero, a minister, who is the true opposite of the beastly husband.

In his best novel, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), Howells ceases to employ black-and-white contrasts between characters and does not make any clear-cut division between the innocence and cultivation leading to corruption. The hero, a sturdy *nouveau riche* from Vermont, wants to penetrate to the top circles of Boston society (called Brahmins). Although he is rebuffed, a member of a Brahmin family, Tom Corey, starts to court one of his daughters. Due to a misunderstanding the love affair breaks up, and later, Lapham's fortune is threatened by his unsuccessful speculation. It is exactly at this moment that Lapham rediscovers his sound country roots. He refuses to cheat and to sell his almost bankrupt firm to an English syndicate. Instead he accepts his bankruptcy, and returns to Vermont to lead a respectable life. Just as Lapham comes to understand that money and social status are not of overriding importance, so Tom Corey decides to marry Lapham's elder daughter whom he loves, despite the imminent risk of losing his position in society. They go abroad to escape the unbearable pressure of social distinctions.

In this novel Howells develops a new theme of moral rectitude which is no longer a distinctive feature of a young and innocent heroine, and which is jeopardized both by the patricians and by the *nouveaux riches*. In his later work we can see that his fiction has an even stronger moral cast--especially after his acquaintance with Tolstoy's writings (which started in 1886 when Howells read *War and Peace*), and with the thoughts of Christian Socialism. In *Annie Kilburn* (1887/88) he teaches a Tolstoyan lesson that money is useless without sympathy toward the poor induced by their suffering. He unsuccessfully attempts to apply Tolstoyan principles in the novel about the Negro problem called *An Imperative Duty* (1892). In *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, a panoramic social novel set in New York, Howells's program becomes distinctly socialist. He creates a counterpart to his favorite type of a greedy *nouveau riche* (this time the owner of a newspaper), an old trade-union leader and a pre-1848 German

socialist, who champions the program of orderly political action which would secure government control of finance and social welfare.

This turn is the result of Howells's increasing preoccupation with socialist thoughts and utopias, including Laurence Gronlund's *The Co-operative Commonwealth* (1884) and William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890). This utopian surge made him write a naive utopian romance *A Traveller from Altruria* (1894) where Aristides Homos attempts to explain the classless but very dull society of his native nowhereland to a bunch of horrible wealthy snobs. The book reveals the fictions of Howells's socialist faith which could not lead him anywhere, and which had only widened the gap between his allegedly 'realistic' writings and the authentic Life he so much extolled. In 1888 he wrote to Henry James self-ironically:

After fifty years of optimistic content with 'civilization' and its ability to come out all right at the end, I now abhor it, and feel it is coming out all wrong in the end, unless it bases itself anew on a real equality. Meantime, I wear a fur-lined overcoat and live in all the luxury my money can buy. (qtd. Spiller et al. 1963: 896)

The loss of direction evident from this letter and some later novels is even more conspicuous in Howells's theoretical and critical thought. In a book called *Criticism and Fiction* (1894) he championed the vision of the critic as a scientist who has 'to discover principles and not to establish them,' but in the following volume *Literature and Life* (1902) he was making normative judgments. To become true to life literature should banish tragedy, concern itself with the more smiling aspects of American life, and disregard sex for the interest in it is 'all too common.'

The most paradoxical version of Howells's theory of 'realism' can be found in his 1899 lectures entitled *Novel Writing and Novel Reading*. Howells claims that he wants to be

‘impersonal’ but in fact he does the opposite. He surprises all sound people with a vulgarized Platonic notion of truth which is ‘the only beauty’ (*Norton 3 2: 299*), but he also makes clear that by truth he means the authenticity of artistic expression, which was an important romantic value (Wordsworth’s ‘truth to nature’). The only difference from Wordsworth consists in Howells’s preferring dullness to Wordsworth’s ‘state of excitement.’ Praising the ‘novel’ as well as the ‘romance’ as ‘pure’ and ‘sincere’ genres, he scathingly condemns the so-called ‘romanticist’ novels and directs his sacred rage at the three ‘falsest’ writers, Dickens, Hugo, and Dostoyevsky, since they allegedly portrayed actual life in a distorted way, using ‘excesses of drawing and coloring,’ and working with ‘the extravagant, unusual and bizarre’ (301). In other words, Howells abhors the power of passions, emotionality, and grotesque which subverts the fictions of the firm rational order of his allegedly ‘realistic’ social universe. Thus, the ‘joint’ between his experience and ‘fiction’ he wanted to hide from the reader’s eyes is revealed.

This is also evident from his later division of the novel into three different categories: autobiographical, biographical, and historical. Those categories are intended to describe narrative strategy (first- and third-person forms), subjective and objective perspective, as well as the epistemological and aesthetic characteristics of respective classes (e.g., the biographical novel, narrated in the third-person, about a central character may be either subjective or objective, and it is valued higher than the autobiographical novel and lower than historical fiction). It is not difficult to guess which form obtained the highest mark. Of course, the historical novel which ‘involves a thousand contradictions, impossibilities’ and where the artist can be ‘convicted of the most grotesque absurdity.’ History, in Howells’s view, is no longer a pleasant dream of historical actions and events of his Tuscan travels but a supreme power over human lives, a power invented by the nineteenth-century thinkers (such as Hegel, Carlyle, or Marx). And the most ambitious dream of the nineteenth-century authors is to

achieve omniscience--an illusion of power over history and a semblance of divine sovereignty. Such is Howells's vision of an ideal godlike author who

dwells in a world of his own creating where he is a universal intelligence, comprehending and interpreting everything [...] frankly and straightforwardly, without accounting in any way for his knowledge of the facts. (*Norton 3 2*: 281)

This fiction of the author as the ruler of history may be the 'hidden joint' linking Howells's fictions of 'realism' and the changeable strategies of his writing.

HENRY JAMES

Unlike Howells, Henry James (1843-1916) took his European experience much more seriously. He understood it as a challenge to his vocation as an artist. He took all pains to grasp the impact of cultural differences between America and Europe on the psychology and moral nature of his characters. Instructed by Hawthorne's allegorical writing (and especially by the multi-layered meaning of his images connecting tradition and experience) he became a thorough analyst of the nexus between the lapse of time, sensuous experience, and the sense of the past in European culture. In this respect he can be called a predecessor of Marcel Proust.

Besides these qualities, James became an important critical thinker who considerably influenced early Formalism and New Criticism. From his essays (e.g., *The Art of Fiction* [1884], which influenced, among others, Robert Louis Stevenson's apology about the 'romance' aspects of the novel in 'A Humble Remonstrance'), notebooks, prefaces and letters, the main ideas of an influential critical book, Percy Lubbock's *Craft of Fiction* (1923) are developed (Lubbock prepared the first complete edition of James's writings). James was

the first to emphasize 'the craft of fiction,' the dominance of style and rhetoric over the narrator's subjectivity. According to him, the author cannot merely create a picture, he must convert the novel into an imaginary *drama* taking place in the mind of the reader. Therefore also, the point-of-view (Lubbock's term derived from James's critical reflections) signifies the relationship of the novel, as an impersonal structure, to the reader. It is no longer the authorial omniscience, but the narrative technique and style that influence the way the novel is read. Instead of *telling* the writer should *show*.

Apart from his significant influence on modernist literature and formalist theory, James, 'furnishes the most important link between modernism and the generation of his father and Emerson.' What James shared with Emerson and his followers was 'the belief that the quality of our individual consciousness--how we know--is more important than any inventory of what is out there to be known' (Anderson 1988: 702-703):

He [...] carries forward what was central in the work of Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, and Melville: the assumption that the individual could [...] judge the world from a perspective wider than that offered by society and history [...]. What James has done is to shift the focus of the novelist's concern from attention to the events of a fictional world to the question: how is the scene being perceived [...] It is in fact James's use of 'point of view' that seals the connection between him and his father and Emerson, as well as between him and other members of the first generation [of American modernists]. (Anderson 1988: 705-706)

The continuity between Emerson and the principal 'American Renaissance' writers, on the one hand, and the first American modernists (beginning with Henry James), on the other, was that they 'proposed that each individual was potentially capable of

fashioning himself and building a total conception of the world,' that they 'tried to define themselves without [...] help from human others [...] to "build a self."'

(Anderson 1988: 701-702, 699)

In the first period of his work Henry James sometimes seems to use a setting slightly similar to Howells's Italian novels (*Daisy Miller* [1878]), but there are also quite significant differences. James pays more attention to the reactions of an eager American *pilgrim* confronted with the fascinations of the intricate European world of art, history and social affairs (this is already evident in an early short story James wrote, 'A Passionate Pilgrim' [1871]). This leads to the formation of an important general theme of his fiction: an (erring) pilgrim vainly searching for his homeland. The theme seems to be close to an autobiographical stylization of the author who was in search of his homeland from 1875, traveling back and forth between the US and Britain, France, or Italy.

Another dominant theme of an artist in conflict with himself and with society is inaugurated in the short stories (e.g., 'The Madonna of the Future' [1873]) and in the novel *Roderick Hudson* (1876) which disputes the importance of erotic passion as the inspiration of art and shows the dangers of enthusiastic, unreflective behavior, imitating romantic moods and attitudes.

The third theme is called 'international' but in fact it deals with the cultural difference between American and Europe, and with the life of American expatriates. These are the themes of *The American* (1877), *The Europeans* (1878), the novella *Daisy Miller*, and other works. The first period of James's creative development ends in 1881 with *The Portrait of a Lady*, a masterpiece connecting important aspects of all the three major themes.

The Portrait of a Lady is a novel about the beautiful and intelligent Isabel Archer, a penniless American of marriageable age brought to Europe by her wealthy expatriate aunt.

The social situation of the heroine is somehow similar to that of the work of art: she is 'marketed' (there are several matchmaking situations in the novel), possessed (by her husband, a dilettante and shallow aesthete), and there are even attempts to 'exchange' her for another woman: she is used as a mediator in the unsuccessful match between her former suitor, an English lord, and her adoptive daughter. Her presence in several social environments--in Victorian England, Paris, as well as in the American expatriate community in Italy, links the international theme to a modification of the 'failed artist' theme (the failure of her marriage is mainly due to her disillusionment with her husband's moral qualities and aestheticism). In addition to this, she becomes a focus of the international theme (she establishes the contrast between her American husband and her former, refused suitor, the English lord) and links it to the theme of the pilgrim in search of homeland. Though she has reached full independence and mastery of the Parisian social world, she refuses the repeated wooing of her original American lover and returns to her homeland only to take care of her adoptive daughter. In this way, she confirms the gap between her 'value' (her various social 'uses' and her independent perfection in Paris) and her 'meaning' which is always being deferred but at the same time is also 'performed' in the course of her unfinished pilgrimage.

The second period of James's work, ending in 1898, is marked by intense experimentation (including an unsuccessful attempt at writing for the theater; the interest in acting and dramatic art is characteristic for the novel called *The Tragic Muse* [1890]) and extreme sophistication of perception. In these years, he produced refined psychological fictions, as for instance *What Maisie Knew* (1897) or *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), tracing the boundary between the world of 'innocence' and 'experience,' and exploring the psychological, moral and social aspects of evil. It is interesting that the latter novel which emphasizes the evil power of illusions which have become a part of mental life, uses the means of the Gothic tale of terror and even of the fairy tale (of Bluebeard) to problematize the boundary between

‘appearance’ and ‘reality.’ The fantasies of a governess, projecting the influence of spirits into the behavior of children entrusted to her, become a dreadful power (it does not matter whether its cause is sexual repression or not) damaging and destroying their lives. As Charles Crow points out, ‘the story’s blank spaces necessarily tempt readers to construct their own narratives’ revealing uncanny meanings of the complex, multilayered novel (Crow 2009: 75). Despite the complexity of James’s Gothic tale, the most important works of this period, weaving a different, more sophisticated web between the international, artist, and pilgrim themes, are his novellas and short stories about illusions, artistic creation and love.

In his questioning James problematizes the Platonic basis of mimesis (representation of transcendental truth, the ‘Ideas’ in art) which Aristotle tacitly integrated into his conception of artistic imitation based on *probability* of the representations of life, and on the ability of humans to imitate better than any other animal. The problem of imitation is disclosed in ‘The Real Thing’ (1892), a short story in which an aging fashionably dressed couple, who have exhausted their resources, visit a painter and want to sit as models for his illustrations to fashionable novels. The artist is at first impressed by the wife’s ladylike airs, and therefore he decides to accept them. But soon he finds her inimitable because she is fully concentrated on her presenting the empty values of social status, on her being ‘The Real Thing’:

I began to find her insurmountably stiff; do what I would with it my drawing looked like a photograph or like a copy of a photograph. Her figure had no variety of expression--she herself had no sense of variety [...]. She was always a lady certainly, and into the bargain was the same lady. She was the real thing, but always the same thing. (*Norton 3 2*: 347)

There seems to be more truth in the illusion of the painter’s art who can create a gentleman and a lady out of a cockney girl and a poor Italian smelling of garlic. This illusion becomes

both a commodity (the painter can sell his illustration to his publisher) and an appeal to those who thought that life consisted in the imitation of The Real Thing, be it the idea of Ladyship or any other authoritative mark of social status. In the end the disillusioned couple come again, no longer wanting to *be* The Real Thing, but willing to *do anything* in the studio, to assist in the wonderful work of *representation*. What matters is the variety and elusiveness of this work, and not its semblance to fixed ideas, values or appearances. And this conclusion is relevant for life as well as for art, though forms and consequences are completely different:

They had bowed their heads in bewilderment to the perverse and cruel law in virtue of which the real thing could be so much less precious than the unreal; but they did not want to starve. If my servants [i.e., the Cockney girl and the Italian] were my models; then my models might be my servants. (*Norton 3 2: 356*)

In *The Real Thing* the artist who knows the secret of representation (the ‘perverse and cruel law’ correlating illusion and aesthetic but also exchange value) is an uncontested authority. However, in some later stories his sovereignty is challenged when the theme of illusion is reintroduced in connection with questions of truth, memory, and meaning. The chief difficulty of discussing these relationships seems to consist in the analogies between inspiration and love, and, on the other hand, between the secret of the work of art and the secret of a loved person. These analogies have a deep tradition in Western metaphysics: they can be traced back to the fourth and most important type of madness, or inspiration (*mania*) in Plato’s dialogue *Phaedrus*. According to Plato, this ‘divine’ madness is the desire to see again ‘the true beauty’ of the world of Ideas which the ‘lover’ recalls when looking at earthly beauty (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 249 D-E). While in Plato the position of a philosopher (lover of wisdom) is analogical to the position of the lover of young boys (and, consequently, the two analogies

constitute parallel metaphors linked together in a trope called *metalepsis*: both forms of inspiration are related to the beauty of truth), in James the two analogies fall apart and no relation to the world of Ideas is established. Like Hawthorne's aesthetic creed revealed in his late tales 'Feathertop' and 'The Artist of the Beautiful' (both 1851), James's artists are craftsmen of *illusions*, not of transcendental reality.

This is evident from a later short story called 'Maud-Evelyn' (written after 1895 and published in 1900 in the *Atlantic Monthly*) where a young man succumbs to the suggestion of a couple who have lost their daughter, and imagines himself as their son-in-law. He plays the game seriously (as a vocation), but without any specific intent. Gradually, he creates illusions of his and Maud-Evelyn's courtship, wedding, married life, and his own widowhood and mourning. Maud-Evelyn's parents are consoled, and they die in peace, never having learned the truth, let alone the secret of their illusions. The most interesting moment of the story is that the man takes his role so seriously that he cannot live in a different way, and he dies to reunite himself with his invented wife. In this way his trustworthy play is connected with the past and with 'the glow of memory, the play of fancy.' This connection explains an important link between the theme of the artist, his creation, tradition, and European history. The stories from which history is made up may be invented as this one certainly is. But it is our imagination and the sense of the past which transforms ordinary things into 'relics' invested with the power of memory.

Another dimension of the analogies between inspiration/love and the secrets of the work of art and the loved being are found in the short story called 'The Figure in the Carpet' (included in the collection entitled *Embarrassments* [1896]). Here, a young enthusiastic critic is trying to find out the secret of the aesthetic value of the work of a brilliant novelist. This secret is called rather cryptically 'the figure in the carpet.' The young enthusiast asks the novelist to *initiate* him into the mysteries of fiction, but he fails to understand when the author calls his

work 'the organ of life.' He reacts in a typical way: 'I see--it's some idea *about* life, some sort of philosophy [...] some game you're up to with your style, something you're after in your language.' In other words, the 'figure' is something different from what the *author* intends or seems to have intended. It appears to be the structural unity of the work of art (the 'general intention' hidden in the text). But the problem is that we do not have any access to this 'general intention': the article of the expert critic is unfinished, because of his sudden death, and the widow refuses to betray his secret which had become 'her life' but also the memory of 'the Dead.' Thus, the meaning is never actually present, being constantly deferred by the random interactions of events, intents, and words. Where, then, is 'the figure in the carpet?' It is neither *in* the artist, nor *in* the critic, nor even *in* the lover, husband or wife. It does not have any location at all: it is *the force* of the narrative that makes us listen to the narrator's tale and desire the absent secret.

All these complex attempts to trace the joint between art and life contribute to the full development of James's international theme in the third phase of his artistic career (1898-1904). It includes the novels *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904) which more persistently return to the earlier versions of the international theme in *The Portrait of a Lady* and *Daisy Miller* but they also emphasize (and problematize) the Protestant theme of Divine Grace and the Platonic notion of the identity of moral and aesthetic ideal. In *The Wings of the Dove*, Milly Theale, who seems to be a symbol of God's Grace, suffers from a mysterious lethal illness and dies prematurely in consequence of a revealed stratagem of friends who want to make her 'happy.' In *The Golden Bowl*, the seemingly flawless bowl which was bought to symbolize the constancy of patriarchal marriage and the virtues of the bridegroom reveals the flaws of the relationship, and is finally dashed to the floor. Afterwards the heroine works to establish proper relationships in her family circle: she tactfully shows the

husband she knows about his love affair with her father's wife, and when he renounces the woman, he can appreciate the values of his wife's character.

In *The Ambassadors* (1903), James focuses on the connection of the themes of love, aesthetic cultivation, and aesthetic ideal. Lambert Strether, a hero remotely resembling the author, comes to Europe as the ambassador of his fiancée, a rich widow, Mrs. Newsome, from Woollett, Massachusetts. In Liverpool he meets a witty and ironic expatriate, Maria Gostrey, who helps him to reflect on the events of his mission to Paris where he has to find Chad, the son of Mrs. Newsome, and bring him back home to the girl to whom he is engaged. Chad is found in the company of an aging but still exquisitely beautiful, elegant and refined Parisian, Mme de Vionnet, through whom Strether starts to understand the refinement and tradition of European culture. But he also feels the 'lapse of time' and the inevitable process of the decay of values he started to admire. Despite this, his imagination is able to grasp the link between the sensuous beauty of the heroine, the city, and the memories of the past which become the traces of European cultural history. While Strether traces Europe and its past in the appearance of Mme de Vionnet, comparing her (in his fantasy) to a nymph, Cleopatra, a Renaissance cameo, and the Jacobin heroine standing in front of a guillotine, Chad keeps her as a mistress, and later abandons her because she is already too old for him. His egotism is not revealed, but Strether's behavior is found irresponsible by another party of 'ambassadors' sent by Mrs. Newsome (including Chad's sister, her husband and his fiancée). Though Strether finds their ways uncultured and outrageous, he decides to return to America and be 'true' to himself and his European experience. In contrast to Strether, Chad never admits to himself nor to the 'ambassadors' the slightest doubt about his being right in everything he has done and finally returns to Woollett with hopes of an easier life made possible by his mother's money. Thus, *The Ambassadors* redefines James's international theme in terms of the clash

between traditional and modern values: between European aestheticism and American Puritanism on the one hand, and modern pragmatism on the other.

The last period of James's creative life brings both revisions of traveled roads (a collection of short stories called *The Finer Grain* is published in 1910) but also a wave of new experimental writing (the novels entitled *The Ivory Tower* and *The Sense of the Past*, both published unfinished and posthumously in 1917) ended prematurely by James's death. Before his death, James became a British subject in 1915 in order to 'show allegiance to the Allied cause' which his native country refused to do until 1917.

WILLIAM JAMES

On the face of it, William James might seem an unlikely candidate for inclusion in a study of American literature. However, the closer one looks, the more one perceives him to have in common with his brother Henry and especially with Ralph Waldo Emerson. As Richard Poirier has remarked, both William James and Emerson were 'essentially' philosophers of 'language and literature'--and both were, in addition, very successful and influential practitioners of the art of literary construction and communication (Poirier 1987: 34). What Emerson was to the Transcendentalist generation of American thinkers and writers of the mid-nineteenth century, William James was to the succeeding, phenomenologist and pragmatist generation. What Emerson introduced to American philosophy, epistemology, and literature, James consolidated and normalized.

William James (1842-1910) was Henry James's elder brother. Both were sons of Henry James, Sr. (1811-1882), moral philosopher, who was an admirer and friend of Emerson. When William was not yet one year old, Emerson was asked by Henry James, Sr., to bless the child as he slept upstairs in the James home in New York City, where Emerson was visiting.

During their formative years, the James boys were intensively exposed by their father to Emerson's writings.

William James spent almost four decades as a professor of psychology and philosophy at Harvard University. He was one of the most articulate and respected academics of his time, and among his students were future US President Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919), George Santayana (1863-1952), W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963), G. Stanley Hall (1844-1924), Gertrude Stein (1874-1946), Walter Lippmann (1889-1974), and Alain Locke (1886-1954). In 1872, he founded, with Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. (1841-1935), Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), and Chauncey Wright (1830-75), the Metaphysical Club. His *Principles of Psychology*, published in 1890, rapidly became the standard American text on introspective psychology and phenomenology. In 1907, he published his philosophical masterwork, *Pragmatism*, which was further elaborated and clarified in *A Pluralistic Universe* and *The Meaning of Truth* (both 1909). Like *Principles of Psychology*, these philosophical works were written in eloquent, engaging, and generally non-technical language, which makes James's work in both fields readily and enjoyably accessible to the general educated public. With Charles Peirce and John Dewey, he is recognized as one of the founding fathers of Pragmatism.

William James develops in *Principles of Psychology* (1890) his pragmatist conception of human thought and language:

Let us call the resting-places the 'substantive parts,' and the places of flight the 'transitive parts,' of the stream of thought. It then appears that the main end of our thinking is at all times the attainment of some other substantive part than the one from which we have just been dislodged. And we may say that the main use of the transitive

parts is to lead us from one substantive conclusion to another. (William James 1987: 243; *Principles of Psychology*)

James imagines converting all nouns to verbs, all reification to re-cognition--conceiving everything as process, not product; spirit, not matter; power, not form; living, not the having lived: all 'art' (the outward, inert, completed, excreted *product*) as 'art-*ing*' (the inward, living, developing, flowing, creative *process*); all 'poetry' as 'poet-*izing*'; all 'experience' as 'experienc-*ing*.'

William James, whom Jacques Barzun characterizes as America's 'greatest philosopher' (Barzun 1961: 133) thus drew heavily on his Emersonian training in formulating his philosophy of 'pure experience,' America's 'only native philosophy, pragmatism' (Reese 1980: 136).

Richard Poirier generalizes the argument even further, asserting that, in its sphere, philosophic pragmatism works 'the way poetry does--by effecting a change of language, a change carried out entirely within language, and for the benefit of those destined to inherit the language' (Poirier 1992: 132). Rowe characterizes Emerson's proto-pragmatism, and William James's version of pragmatism, as 'rhetorical' or 'textual' pragmatism that 'works in and through language, not beyond it,' calling attention to the 'vagueness,' the temporary and approximate nature, of all 'regulative fictions' (to use Nietzsche's term) (Rowe 1997: 3). 'The effort of reading' Poirier insists, 'like the effort of writing [and of value-construction], is entirely its own reward. To ask for more, to seek security in meaning, is a cheat upon literature and upon life. It is like a surrender to Fate' (Poirier 1987: 44).

For Poirier, literature creates a dynamic, virtual, 'textual space that is an alternative to the world of ordinary experience, physical materiality, and denotative meaning.' This is the aesthetic 'world elsewhere' of Poirier's eponymous earlier book; it is also the subjective

space in which all order, structure, value, and meaning is constructed by each human consciousness (Rowe 1997: 3). Within that space, everything is provisional, inchoation is perpetual, and change is constant. There, '[t]he truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it [...]. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events' (James 1987: 574; *Pragmatism*).

Consciousness does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as 'chain' or 'train' do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A 'river' or a 'stream' are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. *In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life [...].* When the rate [of change or flow] is slow we are aware of the object of our thought in a comparatively restful and stable way. When rapid, we are aware of a passage, a relation, a transition *from* it, or *between* it and something else. As we take, in fact, a general view of the wonderful stream of our consciousness, what strikes us first is this different pace of its parts. Like a bird's life, it seems to be made of an alternation of flights and perchings. (James 2007: 239, 243)

William James thus adds to his brother's subject-position concept of 'point of view' (ever-shifting perspective, parallax) the even more demanding one of never-ceasing 'stream of consciousness.' Both constituted observational and narrative strategies central to modern art, literature, and philosophy, and they have made of both brothers foundational theorists in those disciplines and of modernity itself.

In these destabilized, always transitional conditions, Richard Poirier points out the utility of Emerson's and James's 'rhetorical' or 'textual' pragmatism as a very effective means of sensitizing us to harbingers of coming change by 'calling attention to the vague, to the

extravagant, to the superfluous [...] work[ing] in and through language, not beyond it [...]. [It] recommends 'vagueness' as a counteraction to the dogmatizing of existent truths and as the necessary condition for the exploratory search for new truths. (Poirier 1992: 41-42). As James summarizes:

[L]anguage works against our perception of the truth [...]. [I]t is very difficult, introspectively, to see the transitive parts for what they really are. [...]. The truth is that large tracts of human speech are nothing but signs of direction in thought, of which direction we nevertheless have an acutely discriminative sense [...]. These bare images of logical movement [...] are psychic transitions, always on the wing, so to speak, and not to be glimpsed except in flight. Their function is to lead from one set of images to another. As they pass, we feel both the waxing and waning images in a way altogether peculiar and a way quite different from the way of their full presence. If we try to hold fast the feeling of direction, the full presence comes and the feeling of direction is lost [...]. It is [therefore] the re-instatement of the vague to its proper place in our mental life which I am so anxious to press on the attention. (James 2007: 241, 243, 252-54)

James's pragmatism thus asks us to 'take care lest our own cherished beliefs block or disrupt the flow of experience [...]. [I]f we do not remain open and flexible, then we will [...] be unprepared to recognize [new] truth when it does appear [...]. [I]ndividual experience should be released from the control of any conventional or imposed or already timed narrative sequence' (Poirier 1992: 41-43). This 'shifting world' thus constitutes a fluid and dynamic virtual space characterized by what Henry James describes as its 'sweet American vaguenesses' (James, 1994: 13).

One of the younger James's defining characterizations of Americans and American culture was 'how little honour they tend to heap on the act of discrimination':

[I]t is of the genius of the American land and the American people to abhor, whenever may be, a discrimination. They are reduced, together, under stress, to making discriminations, but they make them, I think, as lightly and scantily as possible [...]. Gradations, transitions, differences of any sort, temporal, material, social, whether in man or in his environment, shrank somehow, under its sweep, to negligible items; and one had perhaps never yet seemed so to move through a vast simplified scheme [...]. [I]t registers itself on the plate with an incision too vague and, above all, too uniform [...]. There were the two sexes, I think, and the range of age, but, once the one comprehensive type was embraced, no other signs of differentiation. (James 1994: 45-46, 225-26, 332-33)

They are, he grumbles, 'all princes here' (James, 1990: 39).

Reflecting many of his brother's characterizations in *Pragmatism* (1907), Henry James often represents nature, in any given construction, as a temporary abode (a conceptual 'hotel'), with a creation 'on wheels' (Emerson 1990: 441; 'Poetry and Imagination'), and Americans as inveterate, habitual, and indiscriminate travelers from one (metaphorical or moral) location to another. 'Fate' when he writes in *The American Scene* (1907) of America and its denizens as:

perpetually provisional, the hotels and the Pullmans--the Pullmans that are like rushing hotels and the hotels that are like stationary Pullmans--represent[ing] the

stages and forms of your evolution, and...not a bit, in themselves, more final than you are. (James 1994: 300)

Like his brother Henry, William James had been raised by his father to be a cosmopolitan. His influence was not limited only to the United States. His ideas also became well known to  Europeans like Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology; Karl Mannheim, pioneer of the sociology of knowledge; and James Joyce as well as other European modernist writers, like Karel Čapek.

14. NATURALISM

INTRODUCTION

Conventional definitions of Naturalism in later nineteenth-century fiction emphasize the influence of the natural sciences, mainly of contemporary biology dominated by Darwin's theory of evolution (based on the doctrine of the 'survival of the fittest' by means of genetic modification under the influence of environmental changes), strict determinism (narrative causality is regulated by impersonal biological or social forces, rather than by actions of individual characters), and scientific methods of writing based on observation and experiment. To illustrate this, a famous passage is usually quoted from Émile Zola's essay *The Experimental Novel*:

In short, we must operate with characters, passions, human and social data as the chemist and the physicist work on inert bodies, as the physiologist works on living bodies.

Determinism governs everything. It is scientific investigation; it is experimental reasoning that combats one by one the hypotheses of the idealists and will replace novels of pure imagination by novels of observation and experiment. (*Norton 3 2: 6*)

However, the language of manifestos can hardly be used to describe actual developments in literature. Reading the works of the American Naturalists we often find a great degree of emotional involvement in the lives and passions of their characters, as for instance in the hero of Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* we discover chance and chaos instead of determinism (as in Henry Adams's autobiography *The Education of Henry Adams*), and we can even find apologies for *romance* as an imaginative method of writing which does not

have to be based on the laws of objectivity and probability (as for instance in Frank Norris's critical essays).

How then can we deal with naturalism and not reduce it--scientifically--to a set of formulas? Let us first question the prerequisite of all 'scientific' writing, the 'objectivity' of 'human and social data.' From the analysis of Howells's novels and critical opinion we have found that this 'objectivity' is often quite 'subjective': though it leans on grand generalizations like 'history,' 'life,' 'experience,' it always privileges authorial subjectivity disguised as the omniscient, 'divine' creator of the novel world. The reason for this substitution becomes evident from the following passage from Howells's novel *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890):

Accident and then exigency seemed the forces at work to this extraordinary effect; the play of energies as free and planless as those that force the forest from soil to the sky and then the fierce struggle for survival [...] The whole at moments seemed to him lawless, Godless; the absence of an intelligent, comprehensive purpose in the huge disorder, and the violent struggle to subordinate the result to the greater good, penetrated with its dumb appeal the consciousness of a man. (*Norton 3 2: 4*)

Here the chaos of society and the struggle for survival appear to signify the absence of 'intelligible purpose' which is divine goodness, power, and law. Fortunately, laws made by an omniscient author in his fictional world start to operate instead of divine laws, and 'the consciousness of a man,' appealed to as the good principle of evolution ('the violent struggle to subordinate the result to the greater good,' emphasized at that time by positivists like Herbert Spencer) now aspires to become the center of the universe. Scientific, progressive, and, above all, moral human being has become a substitute for God. This development is

typical of the utopias of the so-called realists (for instance for *Men Like Gods* by H. G. Wells and for Howells's *A Traveller from Altruria*).

HENRY ADAMS

In naturalistic fiction, decentralized, chaotic reality is not recentered in the moral order of the fictional world. Reading a curious autobiography of a descendant of two American presidents and a Harvard professor of history, *The Education of Henry Adams* (1906, 1907), we are aware of the collapse of the moral order, and of the final failure of the Enlightenment project of education. Henry Adams (1838-1918) begins his book with the example of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who in his *Confessions* (1782) reveals the mean features of his character in order that others would discover meanness in their own hearts. When Rousseau's 'warning against the Ego' was taken up by nineteenth-century educators, they were not brave enough to confess their faults in public. Despite this, they demanded self-effacement from their pupils. As a result, the Ego, instead of becoming a model worthy of imitation, was degraded into a mere 'manikin' (i.e., a mannequin or a model of a human figure used by painters when studying folds of drapery, or a dwarf) on which the clothes of superficial education are arranged and displayed. What are we left with, says Adams at the end of the Preface to his book, is no longer the 'central man' but this model which can serve as 'any other geometrical figure [...] for the study of relation.' If the manikin can be replaced with 'any other geometrical figure' (*Norton 3 2*: 896), it no longer keeps its central position which it had held earlier thanks to the moral integrity of the ego and to the supreme authority of God.

According to Adams's friend Henry Cabot Lodge (1850-1924), *The Education* was written as a sequel to *Mount Saint Michel and Chartres: a Study of Thirteenth-Century Unity* (1904, 1913). In this book Adams started to study the movement of human history and culture 'from a fixed point [...] the point of history when man held the highest idea of himself as the unit in

a unified universe' (*Norton 3 2*: 894). It does not surprise us then that *The Education* is subtitled *The Study of Twentieth-Century Multiplicity*.

The main features of this multiplicity are the dissociation of personality into a number of incoherent social roles (this is one aspect of Adams's life emphasized in his autobiography), and, what is more disquieting, the collapse of the ordered empirical universe, as well as of the civilized Western world, into chaos. This word becomes the ominous title of Chapter XIX of Adams's book. Having commented on the political and cultural situation of England, where 'improvement, prosperity, power were leaping and bounding over every country road' but where also 'experience ceased to educate' and 'one bad style was leading to another' (*Norton 3 2*: 909), Adams proceeds to record the chaos that sprung up in his mind when he saw his sister dying of tetanus in the colorful atmosphere of the Tuscan spring. Later he describes the situation in Paris at the beginning of the war with Prussia in July 1870. The war is 'brought out [staged] like an opera of Meyerbeer,' and an individual becomes 'a supernumerary hired to fill the scene,' watching the regiments 'march to the front without sign of enthusiasm' (913). All this indifference cannot hide the symptoms of a catastrophe. These are best evident in the central passage of the chapter describing the death of Adams's sister and the dissolution of his major certainties, the world of his senses and the faith in the beneficent Nature as a source and safeguard of life:

The first serious consciousness of the Nature's gesture--her attitude towards life--took form then as a phantasm, a nightmare, an insanity of force. For the first time, the stage-scenery of the senses collapsed; the human mind felt itself naked, vibrating in a void of shapeless energies, with resistless mass, colliding, crushing, wasting, and destroying what these same energies had created and labored from eternity to perfect. Society became fantastic, a vision of pantomime with a mechanical motion; and its so-called thought

merged in the mere sense of life, and pleasure of the sense. Stoicism was perhaps the best; religion was the most human; but the idea that any personal deity could find pleasure or profit in torturing a poor woman [i.e., Adams's sister dying of tetanus], by accident, with a fiendish cruelty known to man only in perverted and insane temperaments, could not be held for a moment. For pure blasphemy, it made pure atheism a comfort. God might be, as the Church said, a substance, but He could not be a Person. (*Norton 3 2: 912*)

It is important that when losing his faith in the empirical world Adams also doubts the existence of any purpose in nature, for instance of the progress secured by divine order, and hence of the aim of human life as well as of the meaning of social consciousness. And above all, he repudiates the existence of a personal, anthropomorphous God as the highest unity of the universe. All evil then seems to be caused by the accidental working of an impersonal cosmic mechanism. This universal machine which differs from the human-made engine by its obscure design and random functioning is later redefined by Adams in individual, social, and historical terms.

In the chapter entitled 'The Dynamo and the Virgin' Adams attempts to define the common substance of this chaotic universe. Standing in one of the halls of the Paris World Fair which took place in 1900 he is intrigued by the feelings he has while observing a huge dynamo. Despite its familiarity, the dynamo appears strange to him, because of the 'occult mechanism' of generating electric energy. Of course, Adams knows the scientific explanation of the mechanism, but he cannot verify this process by his senses. This leads him to believe that there is a 'break of continuity' (in the order of things) between the dynamo and the steam-engine moving it. This gap gives the dynamo its specific meaning as a *sign* or a *representation* of power which is related to the steam engine in the same way as the Cross is related to the cathedral. In other words, the metonymic, scientific explanation of the two

different ways of generating energy (the steam engine and the dynamo) cannot satisfy Adams. Therefore it is substituted by the metaphorical connection between the invisible process of generating energy and its sign. The Cross and the dynamo are just two different signs of the substantial force resident in and generated by the chaos of the universe.

The energy represented by the machine has a unifying power. But how was it in the Middle Ages when the technology was not so developed? Then, Adams says, the substantial energy of the universe was represented by a completely different symbol: the Virgin Mary as the mother of Jesus. This is a fact forgotten by most Americans because of the Puritanism inherent in the American tradition. For Adams, who repudiates Puritanism, the Virgin appears to descend from powerful pagan deities of fertility like Venus, or the Egyptian Isis. What prevents us then, he asks, from comparing the Virgin because of her fecundity and reproductive power, to ‘the animated dynamo?’ (*Norton 3 2: 922*). It would be a mistake to call this reflection an anthropomorphizing gesture. On the contrary, understanding the figure of the Virgin as a mere sign of universal energy Adams excludes the possibility of treating any other forms of this energy, like the electricity, in anthropomorphous terms. This provides him with the basis of ‘a dynamic theory of history.’

Like Adams’s reflections, naturalist fiction also traces the links between chaos, energy, and history. None of the American naturalists, however, produced a theory of fiction or of the ‘cosmic machine.’ All began their careers as journalists and they were used to keeping a keen eye on the details of social (and in Jack London’s case also natural) life. Some, like Stephen Crane, noticed violent or taboo aspects of low life, and they had considerable difficulties with the prudishness of censorship. Others, like Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, and Jack London were close to the efforts of contemporary radical journalism, represented, for instance, by the so-called muckraking movement, which got its offensive name from President Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919) in 1906 for revealing corruption in business and politics; its major

works are Ida Tarbell's (1857-1944) *The History of the Standard Oil Company* (1904), or Upton Sinclair's (1878-1968) book *The Jungle* (1906). Most of them were influenced by the new views of American culture (its independence from European tradition and its multiculturalism) typical of the essays and journalism of Henry Louis Mencken (1880-1956).

FRANK NORRIS

Frank Norris (1870-1902) began his career with writing popular romances set in San Francisco. But he also thought of transforming poetical elements of romance which undoubtedly had great popular appeal into elements of his naturalist fiction dealing with serious individual and social problems of the booming capitalist society. In this way he anticipated some tendencies in the works of later writers, especially of F. Scott Fitzgerald. While in *McTeague* (1899) Norris still describes the individual tragedy of a middle-class marriage caused by atavism and the desire for riches, in *The Octopus* (1900; the first part of the unfinished 'Wheat Trilogy' dealing with the growing of wheat and with the speculations with it on the stock exchange) he managed to grasp the functioning of the inhuman and impersonal social mechanism; this well-researched novel deals with the vain fight of the prosperous wheat farmers in San Joaquín Valley south of Stockton, California, against the railroad company. To seize their land the company first assumes control of all important businesses, offices and institutions in the vicinity and gains considerable influence over the government. No action taken against this new power is effective, not even the armed resistance of the farmers. Poetry written about the farmers does not change the situation either, though it becomes popular all over the country. In the conclusion, the poet who has tried to help the farmers during their vain struggle, goes to see the president of the railroad corporation. He expects to meet a perverse, inhuman criminal but instead he faces a cultivated and even sentimental gentleman, who makes all efforts to persuade him that his actions were dictated by circumstance and economic laws. This scene

demonstrates that Norris's theme in *The Octopus* is not how power functions, but the rationally ungraspable nature of its operations, and especially of the evil and violence it causes. In other words, people are never entirely in control of the social powers of finance, industry and technology.

STEPHEN CRANE

In contrast to Norris, who in *The Octopus* focuses on the vain collective resistance against the impersonal, chaotic forces of social development, Stephen Crane (1871-1900) is attracted by the aspects of violence in the life of individuals, and by their fight for survival in the inhuman society and nature. His most important work, the first modern war novel, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), was written without any authentic war experience, but this does not mean that it lacks power. Crane singled out the most important moral problem of the modern war: the absence of traditional heroism and its substitution with tremendous anxiety and fear. Henry Fleming, the hero of the novel fails when he attempts to face the terror of hand-to-hand combat, and flees. Fortunately, he ends up in a group of wounded soldiers, and is also injured. In spite of his good luck he inwardly suffers because of his lack of courage and failure in battle. His suffering is aggravated when he sees his friend Jim Conklin maimed and cannot prevent his death. On the next day he suddenly starts to fight frantically. Seizing the regimental colors while under enemy attack, he re-establishes his reputation. The important fact is that his 'heroism' does not have any moral or patriotic motive: it is an action of a similar kind as his escape from the battle line. In spite of this, the moment of facing the impersonal and cruel war machinery becomes an experience of great personal importance for the main character. Having resisted the awful power he is now ready to combat the egotism in himself. In this way, he can understand the meaning of the violence and even have 'a large sympathy for the machinery of the universe' (*Norton 1 2: 906*).

THEODORE DREISER

In contrast to Crane, Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945) focuses in some of his major works on the failure of the individual to come to terms with the impersonal power of the chaotic social, as well as biological, machine. This is certainly true of his novel *An American Tragedy* (1925) where the hero, Clyde Griffiths, a poor boy from Kansas City, tries to evade his responsibility for the death of a child in an automobile accident. Fortunately he meets his rich uncle who employs him in his collar factory and gives him a chance for social ascent. Though Clive is successful in his work and is in love with a rich and brilliant girl, Sondra Finchley, he cannot move upwards without committing a murder. He has to kill his former mistress, Roberta Alden, a factory girl who is pregnant by him. He drowns her half intentionally and half by chance in a lake at a remote holiday resort, is detected, condemned, and electrocuted. Neither his trial nor his death bring any truth into his life where crookedness and monstrosity were too close to weakness and misery. The intention to accuse American society of producing such an anti-hero also fails.

This badly written novel bears witness to the failure of the search for the strong American hero in the 'Trilogy of Desire' modeled on the life of Charles T. Yerkes, a Chicago speculator, and consisting of *The Financier* (1912), *The Titan* (1914), and *The Stoic* (published posthumously in 1947). It also demonstrates the weakness of the autobiographical enterprise in the novel entitled *The Genius* (1915) dealing with the problems caused by the uncontrollable sexual drive of the hero, a promising painter who turns to a publishing business and is destroyed by the consequences of his love affair with an upper-class girl.

Dreiser's best work is his first novel, *Sister Carrie* (1900). Its story undermines the myth of an innocent American girl created by Howells and others. Carrie Meeber comes from Wisconsin to Chicago, and soon loses her illusions about city life. To do away with everyday

drabness and social insecurity (unemployment) she uses her charm to win a well-to-do lover, a seemingly affluent salesman. Later she becomes aware of his inferiority and finds a more wealthy and intelligent man, the manager of a fashionable bar. Though he has left his wife for her, he ceases to satisfy her, when he loses the money they stole, and becomes dependent on her. As a star in musical comedies Carrie no longer needs him and he gradually sinks to the lower depths of society. Finally he commits suicide. Despite its dreariness, clumsiness, and pseudo-romantic clichés *Sister Carrie* was important at least in two respects. First, for its concentration on the desires, dreams and fears of average Americans, and second, for its becoming the cause of Dreiser's long-lasting fight with censorship. The first edition of the book was suppressed by the publisher because of 'immorality' and the novel could appear only after seven years. Dreiser's fight with prudishness contributed to the liberalization of American society and literature at the beginning of the twentieth century.

JACK LONDON

The work of Jack London (1876-1916) seems to show at least two ways out of the universal chaos of the naturalists. Neither the career of the artist, a working-class self-made man in the semi-autobiographic *Martin Eden* (1909), nor the beastly life of a ruthless adventurer Wolf Larssen in *The Sea-Wolf* (1904) are for him solutions to the deepening individual and social crisis. Sometimes he searches for a utopian golden age modeled more after his desires than after the Marxist doctrine he studied, sometimes he projects a return to nature. The former tendency is typical of his utopian novel *The Iron Heel* (1908), depicting the collapse of the long fascist reign of monopolies in the near future (1932) and the arrival of an ideal society. The latter tendency appears in his novel *The Valley of the Moon* (1913) in which the young couple find peace in the rural retreat of Sonoma County, after the trials and tribulations of their life in the Bay Area.

But the most important work which puts at stake the values of civilization and humanity is one of London's animal tales, the novel entitled *The Call of the Wild* (1903). The hero, a dog called Buck, is stolen from his master, a well-to-do Oakland judge, sold to the North at the time of the gold rush, used--and almost killed--as a sledge-dog by a number of owners, and taken care of by his last master, John Thornton. When Thornton perishes, Buck finally loses his instincts of subordination and responsibility to human beings and leaves civilization forever to become finally a leader of a wolf-pack. On his flight he overcomes the dangers of the Darwinian fight for survival, and becomes a representative of a different set of values based in the individual and his ability to resist the destructive forces of the world. Today, this Nietzschean conclusion (the possibility of values radically different from those grounded on traditional philosophy and morals is the question at the core of Nietzsche's philosophy) is perhaps more interesting than all of London's other schemes influenced by social Darwinism, or Marxism. Thus, in Jack London's animal story the notion of a chaotic mechanical universe is discarded and a new set of values, based on the *otherness* of the animal world is discovered. This is a decisive step beyond nineteenth century anthropocentrism, whose downfall caused empirical, social and universal chaos that became an important theme of naturalistic fiction.

15. ABOLITIONISM & AFRICAN-AMERICAN LITERATURE FROM BEGINNINGS THROUGH THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

INTRODUCTION

The history of African American writing and culture is difficult to write without the assimilation of otherness of the black people. This otherness is usually assimilated because it subverts not only accepted ideas of national unity, cultural identity, and common humanity, but also unconscious perceptions of racial and sexual identity as well as difference. In his book *Black Skins, White Masks* (1992), Frantz Fanon gives an almost trivial example of this subversive or disruptive mechanism: a little white girl fixes her look on the Negro (the writer himself) and starts to shriek: 'Look, a Negro [...] Mama, see, the Negro! I'm frightened!' and throws herself weeping into her mother's arms. Her half-conscious gesture reveals the fear of the absence of some characteristic sign (white skin), the complicity between narcissism (the little girl sees her 'mirror image' in her mother and cannot see it in the Negro) and aggression connected with the girl's 'desire of mother,' and the impossibility to transfer this desire onto another object. In contrast to this, 'the black child turns away from himself, his race, in his total identification with the positivity of whiteness' (Bhabha 1994: 76). Racism, in short, is no superstition: it is connected with the unconscious and subconscious aspects of sexual identity.

Colonial societies can exercise power and establish control over the people of other races and cultures using strategies of surveillance. The other race must be segregated so as to be better watched or policed. These societies also most often identify their desired stability with myths of origin, purity, and cultural superiority. The disruptive power of racial differences is covered up by their fetishization. The absence of whiteness in the segregated blacks leads to the fetishization of white color, innocence, purity, etc. Furthermore, the otherness of race, or sometimes just of culture or religion, is neutralized in stereotyped images of 'lewd Niggers,'

‘criminal Gypsies,’ or ‘idiotic Irish.’ Because of the links between narcissism and aggression, these stereotypes are often ambivalent, or, to be more precise, they include a whole range of repulsive as well as desirable forms. This is not only the case of the Indians represented both as ‘noble savages’ and as a degenerate race, but also the very instance of the blacks who, apart from being perceived as signs of the demonic, the evil and the beastly, are also necessary as the evidence of the stability of authority, power, wealth, and the whole social hierarchy (this, for instance, was the accepted meaning of black servants in the nineteenth century). Along these lines one can understand why ‘the Negro is a demand, but only if he is made palatable in a certain way’ (Fanon 1992, qtd. in Bhabha 1994: 78). ‘Made palatable’ here indicates the assimilation of otherness.

ABOLITIONISM

The narrative of the history of American Abolitionism can trace the different routes of this assimilation. While in the South, African Americans were needed primarily for economic reasons, in the North there was no such need. But in both societies there was a culturally motivated demand for blacks, though for widely different purposes. Whereas in the South the possession of the blacks was the mark of a higher social status and of cultural superiority, in the North the African Americans were first used as a means of social and political struggle.

Slavery in the United States was, to a significant degree, the product of economic opportunism. Racism in the United States, on the other hand, was generally speaking a political strategy created and championed by particular ‘white’ groups to serve their interests. While the results were similar in kind, if not degree, Southern and Northern racisms were the products of different causes and situations. In the South, beginning in the seventeenth century, the owners of large plantations, fearing the numbers of black slaves on their lands and equally fearing the economic and political egalitarianism (and potential sympathy for ‘oppressed’

blacks) of the rapidly multiplying 'poor white' population of small farmers in the western parts of their colonies, introduced and popularized stereotypes of blacks (particularly black males) as primitive, sexually aggressive, and violent. The only way to control these 'predators,' the planters and their spokesmen argued, was through the formation of a majority alliance between planters and poor whites (under the leadership of the planters) which, through its superior numbers and aggressive suppression of black/slave aspirations, could keep the slaves (and later the freed blacks) 'in their place.' In the North, on the other hand, the principal proselytizers of racism were immigrant groups arriving in the US from Europe during the second half of the nineteenth century. In direct competition with freed black immigrants from the South for unskilled labor and factory positions in Northern cities, these immigrant groups adapted and disseminated the 'black' stereotype to encourage restrictions on their non-white immigrant rivals that would put them at any number of disadvantages in the economic competition with the European immigrants. The creation by immigrant-dominated Northern city governments of black 'ghettoes' far from possible sources of employment was one result; exclusion of blacks from factory employment because of their 'troublemaking' nature was another. On their side, the various European immigrant ethnicities ('races,' as they were designated in the nineteenth century) implicitly and explicitly offered to make common cause with older Northern 'white' resident groups against the new 'threat,' and thereby, over time, managed to exchange their alien ethnic 'racial' identities for recognition as fellow members (and defenders) of the 'white' race.

As concern grew among the 'white' populations of both the North and the South about the effects of slavery, movements to eliminate the 'peculiar institution' developed in both regions. These were of two kinds, with a nomenclature that has proved confusing both in the nineteenth century and subsequently. The 'anti-slavery' movement generally advocated the gradual dissolution of the slave system by the successive purchase of groups of slaves from

their owners by public authorities (on a state-by-state basis) and/or voluntary associations, and the manumission of those slaves by their new owners. For the most part, ‘anti-slavery’ activists worried that freed slaves (either because of intellectual inferiority or because of the profound ignorance in which they were kept by their former owners) might, especially if freed *en masse*, impose a crippling burden on Southern (and/or American) society. They, therefore, favored piecemeal liberation and frequently complemented these initiatives with plans for shipping the former slaves, almost as they were freed, ‘back to Africa,’ in settlement colonies established there through the efforts of American organizers to receive them.

The other, more radical formation opposed to slavery was what was called the ‘abolitionist’ movement. It was much more of a mass movement than ‘anti-slavery,’ composed as it was of less well-to-do individuals, many of whom were also enthusiastic participants in the religious revival of the Second Great Awakening. This membership generally meant the ‘abolitionist’ movement had limited respect for the ‘property rights’ of Southern slave-owners and, often, a strong sense of divine imperative for their cause. Such radicalism made ‘abolitionism’ potentially a powerfully disruptive force in American society. The political program of the ‘abolitionists’ called for the assumption of unprecedented prerogative by the federal government, which would, through federal legislation and initiative, outlaw slavery in the nation and mandate the immediate liberation of all slaves (approximately three million overall), with no compensation to their former owners. Not only would this fundamentally disrupt the economic system of the South (historically by far the richest and most productive segment of the American economy), but it would ruin, through expropriation, the dominant social and political elites of every Southern state. That the ‘abolitionist’ solution was the one ultimately endorsed to bring an end to slavery in the United States had almost incalculable costs and consequences; but adopted it was, with the political

ascendancy gained by the new Republican Party, of which 'abolitionists' formed a principal constituency, after 1860.

Radical religious reformers understood slavery and racial hatred as manifestations of moral and political corruption in the nation which still identified itself with the myth of New Jerusalem. The abolition of slavery thus became one aspect of 'universal human emancipation' that was the highest duty of the American people to the nations of the whole world. Thus, the desire to free African Americans was integrated into a utopia of the general spread of democracy and equality. This was typical of the thought of the pioneer of Abolitionism, the Quaker reformer Benjamin Lundy (1789-1839), who published his own paper *The Genius of Universal Emancipation* (1821-1835, 1838-39) first in the Southern states (Tennessee, Maryland), and later in Texas, which at that time was an independent republic. (Lundy was searching there for suitable places to be colonized by liberated slaves and fought against the attempts to make Texas a part of the US which he regarded as the ruse of Southern slaveholders). In the 1830s the most important Quaker Abolitionists were the sisters Grimké (Sarah Moore [1792-1873] and Angelina Emily [1805-1879]) daughters of a rich planter from South Carolina. They left the South in their youth and worked for the American Anti-Slavery Society in Philadelphia. Their pamphlets (e.g., *An Appeal to the Christian Women in the South* [1836]) not only criticized the social conditions in the 'nominally free' slaveholding states but also combined the anti-slavery campaign with the fight for the rights of women (*Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Woman* [1838]). Their collection of documents *American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (1839) was used by Harriet Beecher Stowe as a source for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

In the late 1820s and early '30s the South saw a great increase of the fear of the blacks and of racial hatred on both sides. At that time also, the first African-American voices were heard

calling for a general uprising against slaveholders. David Walker's (c. 1785-1830) pamphlet *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* was published in Boston in 1829. Shortly thereafter, the South was shaken by the first rebellion of slaves under the leadership of Nat Turner (later described in the novel by William Styron). These events made Abolitionist campaigns in the South impossible. From that time on, the Abolitionist Movement became identified with the North, and, most specifically, with New England and Massachusetts.

Meanwhile, in the South 'the Negro was a demand' though no longer as a human being, but as an animal which must be degraded into a thing and remain in the property of the master. The debate in the legislature of Virginia in 1831 and 1832 commented on by the local lawyer and legislator Thomas R. Dew (1802-1846) in a pamphlet entitled *Review of the Debates in Virginia Legislature* (1833) showed that the abolition of slavery was not so much a moral issue (almost half of the house was for the emancipation of the slaves) but a practical problem of economy and security. Therefore the results of the debate stressed the necessity to keep the slaves almost at any cost and the duty of each slaveholder to stay with his slaves and to watch them closely. The status of the slave became identified with the difference of race. In this way, the Negro degraded to a thing became the cornerstone of the supposedly changeless Southern society based on the 'metaphysical' values of honor and virtue.

In the North, Abolitionism developed into a political movement of the lower classes against the government's tolerance of the injustice in the Southern states. It even gave birth to the first 'third' political party in the US history, the Free Soil Party (1848-1854) constituted in opposition to the spread of slavery into the territories added to the US after the Mexican War (1846-1848). The party, however, failed to fulfill its main objective when it could not prevent the adoption of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill in 1854, granting the new territories freedom to decide whether they would allow slavery or not. This measure was criticized by Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865), then a Republican candidate for the senatorial election, in the well-

known speech 'A House Divided' (1858). Here Lincoln opposed the Democratic Party demands of 'squatter sovereignty' or 'the sacred right of self-government' in the new territories (these notions were also included in the Kansas-Nebraska Bill), but did not refer to a radical Abolitionist stance either. For Lincoln, the debate on slavery in the territories was mainly an instance of the defects of the contemporary legal system which were threatening basic democratic rights granted by the US Constitution, especially the right of 'the citizens of each State [to] be entitled to all privileges and immunities of citizens in several States.' In his ironical speech Lincoln showed the limits of individualistic notion of freedom (the Democrats proclaimed that the 'perfect freedom' of the people included the right to vote *for* slavery as well as against it) and argued for the supremacy of the Constitution over the legal measures taken by individual states. All this does not mean that Lincoln at that time spoke for the prohibition of slavery in the entire territory of the US  Only in 1864 did Lincoln decide to take the leading role in the process of the adoption of the Thirteenth Amendment of the US Constitution which made slavery illegal all over the country.

In literature, Abolitionism was first marked by the 'emotional identification with the downtrodden' (Spiller et al. 1963: 569). It soon became divided into several streams. The first was overtly political, represented by the powerful yet quite abstract rhetoric of the abolitionist press led by William Lloyd Garrison's (1805-1879) paper *The Liberator* (1831-1866). The rhetoric of Garrison's propaganda resembled that of the early working-class movement in Europe. He also composed some poems like this one which was to be sung to the tune of 'Auld Lang Syne':

I am an Abolitionist!

The tyrant's hate and dread--

The friend of all who are oppressed

A price is on my head!

My country is the wide, wide world--

My countrymen mankind:

Down to the dust be Slavery hurled:

All servile chains unbind!

More artistic, yet still quite rhetorical, are the poems of John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-92), especially his 'Ichabod' aimed against the popular statesman and erstwhile defender of American democracy, Daniel Webster (1782-1852), who, in his fear of the disintegration of the Union effected the so-called Compromise of 1850. This included the adoption of the Fugitive Slave Bill according to which Southern slaveholders could retrieve their runaway slaves to the north of the Mason-Dixon Line. In spite of political circumstances which gave rise to it, 'Ichabod' is not an overtly political poem: its rhetoric resembles that of a sermon. Whittier compares Webster's shame to the shame of Noah who could not hide his drunkenness before God. Also, the title points to the Hebrew tradition: it means 'the Glory has departed from Israel.'

Whittier's poetry represents the main, Christian and moralizing drift of the Abolitionist movement. The most successful propaganda novel published in this line is doubtless *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896). The book, which started to appear in monthly installments in 1851, was a direct reaction to the Fugitive Slave Bill. Stowe was raised in a puritanical family. Her father was a leading theologian of the Second Awakening and founder of the important Lane Seminary in Cincinnati, Ohio, which prepared ministers for difficult work in the frontier states and western territories. Stowe's husband was also a professor of theology.

The framework of Stowe's book is Christian: she claimed to have a vision of a beaten slave forgiving his tormentors. The hero becomes a model of an ideal Christian, redeeming with his sacrifice the evils of slavery. An interesting fact is that Stowe wrote her book without any direct knowledge of the situation of the slaves (she only saw some very mild form of slavery during her visit in Kentucky). She was also quite tolerant with the Southerners: all her villains are northern renegades. The only active resistance against slavery in the book is justified by the sanctity of motherhood. This is the explanation for Eliza's 'madness and despair' motivating the dangerous escape with her small boy across the floating ice on the Ohio River. Here also Stowe emphasizes the effect of Eliza's brave deed: an unconscious awakening of Christian mercy which makes the 'poor heathenish Kentuckian' help the mother instead of betraying her to his neighbor. In short, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* appeals to Christian sentiments on both sides: of the slaves as well as of the slaveholders, all who can change the violent and brutal conditions of their relationship. Both kinds of people need emancipation from their savagery which is possible only through the miraculous influence of human sacrifice, repeating the sacrifice of Christ and the suffering of the Virgin Mary.

The accent on Christian mercy in Stowe's novel was not dominant in other, more radical forms of Abolitionist literature emphasizing either native traditions of freedom among the Yankees or criticizing the government policy, especially the effort to expand southern territories, which culminated in the Mexican War. In both cases the plight of African Americans and the issue of slavery became mere vehicles in the political campaign attacking the very unity of the USA. According to James Russell Lowell (1819-1892), whose satirical *Bigelow Papers* (1848--First Series) appeared in *Boston Courier* (1824-1851) and *The National Anti-Slavery Standard* (1840-1870), the Yankees of Massachusetts should no longer watch the events in the South, but should start a new revolution 'ez quick ez winkin'' as 'in the days o' seventy-six.' The strange spelling of this collection of letters and poems, and its

deliberately colloquial style appealed to Yankee farmers who detested the compromising leaders of the nation, and protested against financing the slave driver states from their taxes. There is a certain limit to Christian mercy, says the half-literate, yet cunning Yankee Hosea Biglow to the Southerners:

I'll return ye good fer evil

Much ez we frail mortils can, [mortals]

But I wun't go help the Devil

Makin' man the cus of man; [curse]

Call me coward, call me traitor,

Jest ez suits your mean idees,--

Here I stand a tyrant-hater

An' the friend o' God an' Peace! (*AmTrad*: 833)

In this resolute 'messidge' of Massachusetts to the South, the unity of the nation as well as of human beings is put in question: as a man-made union which can be broken if it becomes a curse:

Man hed ough' to put asunder [ought to separate]

Them thet God has noways jined; [joined] (*AmTrad*: 833)

Here, the 'Black Question' becomes the central, political and religious issue not by reference to the Constitution, but with respect to divine authority which had not legitimized the master-slave relationship.

This attitude is also shared by other, more philosophically-minded Abolitionists. Emerson had been an anti-slavery activist since the mid-1840s, delivering, whenever possible, an uncompensated anti-slavery address in every city he visited on his professional lecture circuit. Too subtle-minded to endorse uncritically, most of the time, the more politically and economically disruptive tenets of ‘abolitionism,’ his typical position on the subject placed him, strategically, closer to ‘anti-slavery’ than to ‘abolitionism’ per se--at a time when even Abraham Lincoln was publicly doubtful about the capacities of suddenly-liberated masses of African American slaves to fend for themselves and therefore remained skeptical about the full-blown ‘abolitionist’ agenda.

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) joined the abolition campaign in the eighteen-fifties. In his memorable speech ‘A Plea for Captain John Brown (1859), Thoreau argued that the fight against slavery is the act done ‘in obedience of a much higher command’ than the orders given in battle. It establishes the superiority of man over a military or state machine. In this way, the racial division and the slave problem seem to unite, rather than divide. They create a unity of new human beings, heroes of the fight for the Abolitionist cause like Captain John Brown, no matter how dubious his heroism really was. This appeal to heroism is a gesture aimed at the whites who, according to Thoreau, had not realized that they have never lived: ‘in order to die you first must have lived [...] There was no death in the case, because there had been no life; they merely rotted or sloughed off [...] Let the dead bury their dead’ (*Norton 3 1*: 1845). In Thoreau’s opinion, the campaign against Abolitionism is identified with the fight against the alienating state machine, a well-known theme of his ‘Civil Disobedience.’

While the Abolitionists saw the emancipation of slaves as the liberation of general human nature, or the revolt against the existential situation, for the African Americans the emancipation had a completely different dimension. For the early authors, Olaudah Equiano

(1745-1797) and Phyllis Wheatley (c. 1753 - 1784), it was a gift from their white masters, helping the writers to identify with the superior white culture. Whereas Equiano still tries to represent his African origin in terms understandable to the whites, Wheatley disclaims it as something dark and demonic.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS

A completely different attitude toward African-American identity is typical for the first important work of black literature, Frederick Douglass's (c. 1818-1895) *Narrative of the Life of an American Slave* published in 1845 by William Lloyd Garrison. Douglass had not been released from slavery: his escape became an opportunity to let people know about the horrors of slave life and strategies of survival. This fact gives a completely different dimension to the general existential question posited by Thoreau: Douglass proves that powerless people, excluded from civic society, can deal with the basic questions of freedom and choice more successfully than free citizens. Yes, 'slaves are like other people' Douglass admits, but not because they have the same 'human nature' but because of the same conflicts, selfish interests and quarrels, as well as loyalties to the masters they serve. What is general, then, is the state of conflict, not unity, and subordination. Also, the writer does not become a personality because inspired by some heroic deed. There is no exemplary, monumental heroism in *The Narrative*, but the fortitude of the hero seems to consist in his permanent resistance against the dehumanizing and often sadistic violence to which his body and soul are almost permanently exposed. This resistance is dictated by the necessity of survival: it never needs any 'higher' idea as a support or justification. No notion of 'human dignity' is ever invoked. In spite of this Douglass acknowledges the value of reading and learning for his survival, and he is also positive about the value of the trade in which he was trained. Only when his living conditions are unbearable, Douglass decides to change them: when for instance his strategy to

pay his master for his freedom (with the money he was earning as a craftsman) fails and he is forced to work constantly without any repose, he finally decides to escape. No doubt his decision is made in regard for the danger of his resorting to physical violence: in the crucial quarrel with his master he is prepared to deal with him 'blow for blow,' which, of course would be pernicious.

Despite Douglass's preoccupation with his suffering and his strategies for survival, *The Narrative* is concluded by an 'Appendix' which contains a heated attack against the religion of the Americans. Douglass professes that they are mere Pharisees who practice superficial forms of religion. They sing hymns of 'heavenly union' yet subvert this union by the violence committed on the slaves. In this way the authentic life of the fugitive slave is removed from traditional constructions of the master-slave or white-and-black relationship. But Douglass's satire of the 'heavenly union' as a major feature of Christian hypocrisy is not as general as it may seem. The 'union' is the mark of closure of colonial society where 'the slave prison and the church stand near each other' and 'the dealers in the bodies and souls of men erect their stand in the presence of the pulpit, and they mutually help each other' (*Norton* 3 1: 1935). Here spiritual violence is compared to the violence committed on the bodies of the other people. The difference of race and the aggression it provokes cannot be masked by any unifying ideology.

WASHINGTON AND DU BOIS

In the period after the Civil War, significantly different strategies were advocated by 'Northern' and 'Southern' black regarding how best to equip the masses of freed slaves for economic, social, and political participation in American society. In his influential autobiography *Up from Slavery* (1901) based on the eponymous speech, which inaugurated the Atlanta Exhibition in 1895, Booker T. Washington, a Virginian, argued for cooperation

between black vocational educators and white philanthropists to train former slaves in economic and social behaviors by which they could, over time, win respect and acceptance from their (primarily Southern) neighbors. Washington thus hoped to enable most former slaves to remain in and become contributors to the recovery of the South. To create the educational alliance that he envisioned, however, Washington conceded that, for the present, Southern blacks would need to suspend aspirations to political participation or unregulated social intercourse in their home states. With time and their growing capacity to make constructive and responsible economic contributions, he was convinced, that would change; but it would, inevitably, take decades, if not generations. Washington's speech is well-known as the Atlanta Compromise made in the fear of the new upheaval of racism (which Mark Twain satirizes in his essay 'The United States of Lyncherdom' published posthumously in 1923) and with the modest hope that the blacks will become equal to the whites by patient labor, by the development of their crafts and technological knowledge.

Washington's principal antagonist was W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963), of Massachusetts, a 'Northern' black. Du Bois envisioned and advocated an exodus of African-American former slaves from the region of their enslavement, to constitute significant proportions of the population in all other areas of the country, particularly in economically more dynamic urban areas outside the South. To prepare and position them for this new role, Du Bois advocated the concentration of available resources, black and white, not in ever-multiplying replications of Washington's vocational Tuskegee Institute to train the black southern masses, but rather in the provision of higher education to a new African American leadership cadre, a 'talented tenth,' through foundation of a relatively small number of black colleges, particularly in the South. Such institutions would encourage and enable the African American leaders/intellectuals they trained immediately to assume responsible political and social, as

well as economic, roles--and to become advocates for similar African American participation generally--in the South as in the North.

One of the first African American scholars, Du Bois is mainly remembered for *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903), one of the first sociological studies of African American life which pays attention to the specificities of black culture as well as to the importance of the race question for the twentieth century. Du Bois refused to see the life of the African Americans as a specimen of 'local color' as it was presented both by the whites (*Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings* [1881] by Joel Chandler Harris [1848-1908]) and by black regionalists like Charles W. Chesnutt (1858-1932), who produced his collections of tales (*The Goophered Grapevine* [1887], *The Conjure Woman* [1899]) in North-Carolina dialect.

One of the greatest of under-acknowledged African American writers of the pre-World War I period was the poet, novelist, essayist, playwright, and polymath genius, Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906). In his poetry, Dunbar, a 'Northern' black (like Chesnutt, Baldwin, and Toni Morrison), manifests what Du Bois calls the 'double consciousness'--sometimes boldly exploring the expressive potential of the black dialect, black discourse, and black rhetoric that he had experienced since childhood and at other times writing highly polished lyric poems in the 'white' tradition. Dunbar died very young, but the literary and cultural output of his short life was both abundant and brilliant, including *Lyrics of Lowly Life* and the haunting 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,' which provided a metaphor that echoed and resonated in black literary and cultural life for the remainder of the twentieth century.

Du Bois's work had a significant influence on the following generations, which included Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Martin Luther King. Rather than emphasizing 'black exceptionalism' and demanding special concessions and considerations, this rhetoric portrayed black Americans *as* Americans, and endeavored to portray or explain the 'other' (i.e., themselves) to themselves and their countrymen in terms that evoked a sense

of their common Americanism, their shared humanity. That such a strategy is to be found in at least one strain of rhetoric in most post-colonial societies does not make it any less characteristic of the American and African-American case.

This widespread endorsement of replacing traditional black cultural, linguistic, social, economic, and political norms with those of the surrounding larger culture and society does find some resistance among black commentators and literary practitioners in the post-Reconstruction era. Du Bois deploys European examples and models to demonstrate that African Americans, far from being a unique 'problem people' in a uniquely problematic American situation, occupy instead in many instances positions of deference and economic vulnerability quite comparable to those of continental tenant farmers.

HARLEM RENAISSANCE

W. E. B. Du Bois had also a powerful influence on the first wave of African American cultural emancipation. This occurred in Harlem (originally an affluent white residential area which was resettled by the blacks during World War I) in the 1920s and is called 'Harlem Renaissance.' The main authors of 'Harlem Renaissance' are Langston Hughes (1902-1967), Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960; for a treatment of Hurston, see the twentieth-century section) and Jean Toomer (1894-1967), but there were also others like the Jamaican poet Claude McKay (1890-1948), and American Countee Cullen (1903-1946). For Hughes the basis of African-American identity was the blues rhythm as a combination of bitterness and ecstasis (his most important collection of poems is called *The Weary Blues* [1926]). Hughes's poetry contains also nostalgia for the primitive tribal life in Africa. It presents the personality of the black performer--the singer--who can represent the mixture of tragic and comic, melancholy and grotesque in the black soul and express the yet unspoken desires and hopes of African Americans.

For Toomer, on the other hand, the identity of the blacks is given by the blend of the archetypes of their unconscious (which appear, like ‘race memories of king and caravan, / High priest, an ostrich, and a juju-man’ [*Norton 3 2*: 1481, ‘Georgian dusk’]) and the violence inherent in their history. The metaphors of Toomer’s poem ‘Portrait in Georgia’ point to a close relationship between the racial and sexual other, a white girl of unspeakable beauty, and the violent death of a lynched Negro. This is the very specific difference into which the African-American identity could be inscribed in 1923:

Hair--braided chestnut,
coiled like a lyncher’s rope,
Eyes--fagots,
Lips--old scars or the first red blisters,
Breath--the last sweet scent of cane,
And her slim body, white as the ash
of black flesh after flame. (*Norton 1 2*: 1310)

In these figures of speech, the beauty of the desired sexual object, the whiteness of the fetish, is interlinked with the horrors of racial violence. Toomer, who later studied the occult and dreamt of the spiritual union of the races, here leaves a challenge for us in a string of metaphors which do not unite at all. In writing the other we have to rewrite our own identity: figuratively speaking we have to die in the figures of speech and produce a text which will talk about our own disfiguration.

16. WOMEN'S LITERATURE BEFORE WORLD WAR I

INTRODUCTION

The beginnings of nineteenth-century women's literature in the US are connected not only with the women's emancipation movement but also with Abolitionism and with the rise of the interest in the culture and life of Native Americans. Although Mary Wollstonecraft's essay  *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) had a considerable influence in educated circles (Charles Brockden Brown referred to it in his satirical utopia *Alcuin* [1798], and Susannah Rowson [1762-1824], a pioneer American novelist, actress, and dramatist, was directly influenced by it in some of her *Miscellaneous Poems* [1804]), the women's emancipation movement in the US drew from different sources, especially from the teaching of religious sects, like the Quakers or the Shakers,¹⁸ and from the Abolitionist movement (the work of the Grimké sisters, discussed briefly in the preceding chapter, is an example of the combination of anti-slavery and women's rights movements).

Conventional antebellum (pre-Civil War) literature written by women and for women is represented by the poetry, autobiography, sketches, and children's books of Lydia Huntley Sigourney (1791-1865), the ladies manuals and cookery books of Eliza Leslie (1787-1858), and the romances of Catharine Maria Sedgwick (1789-1867), including *Hope Leslie* ; *Early Times in the Massachusetts* (1827), a counterpart of James Fenimore Cooper's (1789-1851) historical romances. But the texts that attract attention today were written (or sometimes orally narrated) by women living on the margins of society. Apart from the works of African Americans discussed below, these texts include *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison*

¹⁸ The sect of Shakers, actually The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Coming, was founded in New England by Ann Lee (1736-1784) who came over from Britain in 1774 to preach against war; it emphasized bodily and spiritual cleanliness, simplicity of dress, and rigorous discipline, including celibacy. Many leaders were women (called 'eldresses'--a feminine form of 'elder'), and Lee herself had been worshipped as The Second Coming of Christ. This provoked an angry debate between established churches and the members of the sect. There are ironic references to Shakers in the tales and sketches of Nathaniel Hawthorne, e.g., 'The Shaker Bridal' (1838, 1842).

(1824), a recorded account of the life of an Irishwoman captured by the Indians in her early teens and acculturated as a Seneca Indian; this narrative undermines many stereotypes of Indian 'savagery' and their behavior toward women.

Another group of interesting texts are the tales, sketches, poems, and editorials published under pseudonyms in *Lowell Offering* (1842-45; later called *New England Offering* [1847-1850]) a periodical which published the writings of women operatives in the textile mills of Lowell, Massachusetts (the editor of the magazine was a mill worker Harriet Farley [1817-1907], among other contributors only the name of Betsey Chamberlain is known). The *Lowell Offering* writers deal not only with issues of the equality of the sexes and of social injustice, but also--sometimes with shrewd humor--of the everyday troubles of the mill women.

A recently discovered and quite extraordinary work of early African-American literature is the *Spiritual Autobiography and Diary* (1981) of Rebecca Cox Jackson (1795-1871), a unique record of the religious and existential experiences of a woman who left a male-dominated Southern Methodist Church, entered a predominantly white community of Shakers in Pennsylvania, and later founded 'a mostly-female community of Afro-American Philadelphia Shakers' (Kilcup 1997: 50). The most interesting part of Jackson's text are the diary entries that record her extremely lively dreams and visions. While repressive male authority in the Methodist Church is symbolized by a cruel ritual slaughter ('he took a long knife and cut my chest open in the form of the cross and took all my bowels out and laid them on the floor by my right side' [Kilcup 1997: 51]), or outrageous brutishness ('the men had killed all the women and children, and were dragging them like dogs through the street' [51]), spiritual enlightenment is brought by a mysterious woman (seen in another dream) 'sent from God to teach me the way of truth and lead me into the way of holiness' (51). This leads to a deep friendship between Jackson and Rebecca Perot expressed in terms of mystical ecstasy and passionate love:

I stood in the west door looking westward on the beautiful river. I saw Rebecca Perot coming in the river, her face to the east and she aplunging [plunging] in the water every few steps, abathing [bathing] herself. She only had on her under-garment. She was pure and clean, even as the water in which she was abathing. She came facing me out of the water. I wondered she was not afraid. Sometimes she would be hid, for a moment, and then she would rise again. She looked like an Angel, oh, how bright! (Kilcup 1997: 53-54)

But Jackson's Diary is more than a sequence of mystical visions. It also records the anxieties of the writer in the predominantly white religious community and her efforts to improve the life of the sect and to become its leader (e.g., 'The Dream of the Cakes,' or the entry of 8 April 1857, entitled 'Dream of Home and Search for Eldress Paulina').

In contrast to Jackson's writings that were unknown to her contemporaries, the voice of the former slave Isabella Van Wagener, who became known as Sojourner Truth (c. 1797-1883), was strong enough to mark the beginning of the campaign for women's emancipation. An ardent Abolitionist, she decided to fight for women's rights and gave a memorable speech, known sometimes as 'May I Say a Few Words?,' at the Women's Rights Convention at Akron, Ohio, in 1851. Like Jackson, she used a religious argument to support the idea of women's equality to men. Her clever reasoning disclaims the manhood of Jesus Christ as the origin of spiritual authority, and anticipates the crisis of the society ruled by men:

And how came Jesus into the world? Through God who created him and woman who bore him. Man, where is your part? But the women are coming up, blessed be God, and a few of the men are coming with them. But man is in a tight place, the poor slave is on him,

woman is coming on him, and he is surely between a hawk and a buzzard. (Kilcup 1997: 57)

Another important feature of Sojourner Truth's stance derives from her memories of slavery. As a slave she was not treated as 'the weaker sex' at all, she had to work as hard as men. Therefore she sees the main reason for the equality between men and women based on the strength with which women like her can face the labors, sorrows, and pains of life. Her speech, despite its being recorded and possibly adapted by Frances Gage (who published it in 1878 as the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*), has a rare vigor and authenticity:

Dat man ober dar [over there] say that women needs [need] to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to have de best place every whar [where]. Nobody help me into carriages, or ober mud puddles, or gives me any best place [...] and ar'n't I [am I not] a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! [...] I have plowed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head [surpass] me--and ar'n't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much (when I could get it), and bear de [the] lash as well--and ar'n't I a woman? I have borne thirteen chilern [children] and seen 'em mos' all [most of them] sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with the mother's grief, non [none] but Jesus heard--and ar'n't I a woman? (Kilcup 1997: 58)

MARGARET FULLER

The most intellectual woman writer of the antebellum period was Margaret Fuller (1810-1850). She was educated by her father and soon became known for her brightness, her knowledge of languages (she read Ovid at the age of eight, and was fluent in German and

Italian), and her wide reading among Harvard professors. After the death of her father in 1835 she had to take care of her younger brothers and sisters. Despite her domestic duties she taught in Boston and in Providence, Rhode Island, studied Goethe's work and later led an intellectual conversation group of Boston women, discussing Emerson's philosophy, Greek mythology, demonology, religious creeds, and other subjects. She became one of the Transcendentalists editing *The Dial* from 1840 to 1842.

Her role in the development of the Transcendentalist movement and in the formulation and evolution of Emerson's thought, was significant; and it is often underrepresented, if not overlooked. Fuller was a founding member of the 'Transcendental Club,' in the meetings and conversations of which she actively participated from its foundation in 1836 until its physical assemblies ceased in 1840. At that time, those in-person meetings were replaced by a journal, *The Dial*, in which the conversations characteristic of the Transcendentalist Society continued, now in print, from 1840 until 1844. Fuller was chosen, at Emerson's suggestion, to be editor of *The Dial*, and she worked closely with him both in carrying out those editorial duties and in consulting with him on the preparation of a number of articles for *The Dial*, many of which were subsequently published as part of Emerson's *Essays: First Series* in 1841. In 1842, Emerson succeeded Fuller as editor of *The Dial*, a responsibility which he retained throughout the remaining existence of the journal. During the time of their intimate intellectual involvement, Fuller even resided for an extended period in Emerson's Concord home, much to the perplexity of Mrs. Emerson. The full extent of Fuller's influence on Emerson's thought in a crucial formative period during this close collaboration may never be fully known or knowable; but, given Fuller's formidable personality and her habitual insistence (in Emerson's presence and elsewhere) on being given at least as full a hearing on any topic as a male counterpart, influence there certainly was. Fuller's powerful persona, her intelligence, her intensity, and her (for Emerson) sometimes intrusive demands for full

intellectual equality and collaboration, had evident impact on Emerson's attitudes (expressed at this time and later) on women's potential and women's situation personally, domestically, and societally, as well as on his understanding and constructions of love, friendship, and friends as 'beautiful enemies.'

Fuller also had a powerful impact on two other Concord residents: Nathaniel Hawthorne, then occupying the Old Manse, an Emerson family property, who constructed Fuller-avatars as central figures in two of his great romances (*The Scarlet Letter* and *The Blithedale Romance*); and Henry Thoreau, who lived as a handyman in Emerson's home during Fuller's residence there, and who, when Fuller died in a shipwreck off Long Island, New York, in 1850, immediately set off on the macabre but revealing errand of combing the nearby beaches in search of Fuller's lost manuscripts.

In 1844 Fuller published a successful travelogue, *Summer on the Lakes*, based on her trip to the Midwest, describing, among other things, the life of the Indians and their deteriorating conditions. It shows the falsity of stereotypes, such as the dirtiness and cruelty of Indians, the ugliness and disgracefulness of their women, and it accuses the white Americans, their religion and government, of brutalizing the natives:

[T]he stern Presbyterian, with his dogmas and his task-work, the city circle and the college, with their niggard concessions and unfeeling stare, have never tried the experiment [to civilize the Indians by the 'efforts of love and intelligence'] [...] Our people and our government have sinned against the first born of the soil, and they are the fated agents of a new era, they have done nothing [...]. Worst of all when they invoke the holy power to mask their iniquity; when the felon trader, who all the week has been besotting and degrading the Indian with rum mixed with red pepper, and damaged tobacco, kneels with

him on Sunday before a common altar [...] My savage friends, cries the old fat priest, you must, above all things, aim at *purity*. (Kilcup 1997: 109-10)

Fuller's pregnant and pointed style attracted the attention of Horace Greeley (1811-1872), the owner and editor of the *New York Tribune*, who offered her a permanent job. Thus, Fuller became the first woman journalist in the US who lived on her own salary. Apart from reviews (some appeared in 1846 as *Papers on Literature and Art*), she wrote articles dealing with the living conditions of the blind, the insane and female prisoners. In 1846, she was promoted--as Greeley tells it, she virtually promoted herself--to become the *Tribune's* first female editor and its first female foreign correspondent.

An article that Fuller wrote and submitted to the *The Dial* became the basis for her feminist book, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845). In it, Fuller still accepts the division of labor made on the basis of gender but argues for equality in life relationships ('While Goetz von Berlichingen rides to battle his wife is busy in the kitchen; but difference of occupation does not permit the community of life, that perfect esteem [...] [Norton 3 1:1526]). She criticizes contemporary legal forms and the traditional understanding of marriage, according to which women are the property of men, and compares it to slavery. She argues for the freedom of women in emotional and social relationships: 'Woman, self-centered, would never be absorbed by any relation; it would be only an experience to her as to man. It is a vulgar error that love, a love to woman is her whole existence [...] (Norton 3 1: 1531). The relationship between a man and a woman should be based on individual emotional experiences and mutual responsibility.

But Fuller sees the man and the woman neither as mere separated individuals, nor as a single harmonious creature. Though she writes about 'The Great Radical Dualism' she does not understand the relation between the sexes as a dialectical opposition. On the contrary, she

emphasizes the dynamic nature of their relationship, a constant flow of energy between the opposite sexes and even shifting gender roles ('women [...] bear immense burdens [...] man [may] nourish his infant like a mother' [*Norton 3 1*: 1529]). Her idea of fluidity and oscillation between genders and even sexes anticipates recent developments in women, gender and 'queer' (gay, lesbian, transsexual) studies: 'Male and female represent two sides of the great radical dualism. But, in fact, they are perpetually passing into one another. [...] There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman' (*Norton 3 1*: 1528).

After a disastrous love affair with a German Jew, Jacob Nathan, Fuller left for Europe in 1846 as foreign correspondent for the *New York Tribune*. She met many thinkers and writers of a revolutionary persuasion, such as Thomas Carlyle, George Sand (whose sexually liberated stance made her rethink her own notion of independence based on virginity), Adam Mickiewicz, and Giuseppe Mazzini. During her sojourn in Italy she fell in love with a Roman, Marquis Ossoli, who was eleven years younger than she. Their illegitimate child was born during the revolution in Italy on which she still reported for the *Tribune*. She supported the anti-Austrian party during the events of the spring of 1848 and befriended its leader, Princess Belgioso. Despite being accepted in the highest circles of Italian society she was condemned by her prudish British acquaintances, Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett. In 1849 she probably married Ossoli, but they both died in a shipwreck on her return voyage to the US.

ELIZABETH CADY STANTON

Fuller's premature drowning deprived the nascent American women's rights movement of one of its natural leaders and left to her much younger fellow Transcendentalist Elizabeth Cady Stanton a disproportionately large responsibility in this undertaking. Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902) was one of the principal architects of the women's rights movement in the US during the nineteenth century, and its most articulate spokesperson and ideologist. Of

educated and middle-class background, she spoke primarily to and for middle-class women, advocating not only for women's suffrage but also for a much broader agenda of 'women's rights.'

Stanton initially participated in the anti-slavery movement, in the course of which she met Quaker activist Lucretia Mott (1793-1880) at the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840. Between 1843 and 1847, Stanton and her husband resided in Boston, where their circle included Emerson, Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, the Alcotts. In the same company was also to be found feminist pioneer Margaret Fuller. After the Stantons removed to Seneca Falls, New York, in 1847, growing dissatisfaction on the part of Elizabeth and some other female colleagues over their marginalization by men in the anti-slavery movement and many other life-spheres led those women to convene the first Women's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls in July 1848. To publicize those proceedings and to provoke attention to them, Stanton produced a provocative women's rights manifesto in the form of a feminized re-editing of the iconic American Declaration of Independence. From that time forward, she became the voice of the new movement. Her position was consolidated after 1851, when she met and formed a life-long working alliance with Quaker Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906), who was rapidly to become the women's rights movement's most effective organizer.

Unlike many of her colleagues, Stanton was also concerned with a number of women's issues beyond voting rights, viewing voting rights as only one means by which these other issues could be addressed. These issues included women's parental and custody rights, property rights, employment and income rights, gender-neutral divorce laws, increased economic opportunities for women, birth control, and the right of women to serve on juries. Like many in her time, she was an ardent advocate of the temperance movement, which she

(and they) viewed as critical to reducing abuse of women and children by inebriated males in an age when family law and public administration offered few remedies.

When her opposition to passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments without the inclusion of women in their guarantees led her into extended and heated confrontation with her friend and longtime collaborator Frederick Douglass, there resulted a politically harmful schism between black male reformist leaders and white female counterparts, as well as a damaging split in the women's rights movement itself. In 1869, two opposing women's suffrage organizations were founded: the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA), which was headed by Stanton and pursued an agenda of 'women's issues,' beyond suffrage, considered too radical by the better-funded, larger, and more representative American Woman Suffrage Association, headed by Lucy Stone (1818-1893), Elizabeth Blackwell (1821-1910), and Julia Ward Howe (1819-1910). The division persisted until 1890, when the NWSA and the AWSA merged to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA)--the parent organization of what became the League of Women Voters--under Stanton's presidency.

Stanton remained a firebrand throughout her life. The provocation of the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions from the Seneca Fall Convention of 1848 was followed by feisty comments in the 1860s denigrating middle-class white women's deference to African-American males (which alienated Douglass), then by controversial endorsement of interracial marriage (Douglass's, 1884, which unalienated Douglass), by eloquent testimony to Congress on the need for female self-reliance ('The Solitude of Self' [1892]), and finally by Stanton's insistence (against the opposition even of her closest confederate, Susan B. Anthony) on publishing a *Woman's Bible* (2 volumes [1895, 1898]), a controversial feminist redaction of the iconic religious document of the culture, similar in provocative spirit to her controversial feminist redaction of the culture's iconic political document in 1848. Based on fifty years of

experience in the movement, she also produced, with Anthony, three volumes of a definitive *History of Woman Suffrage* (1881). It was in the context of this and other autobiographical work, that she and Susan B. Anthony formulated a mutually-confirmed formula to characterize their working relationship of five decades: it was Stanton, they agreed, who ‘forged the thunderbolts,’ and Anthony who ‘threw them’ (‘Obituary: Elizabeth Cady Stanton Dies at Her Home,’ *New York Times*, 27 Oct. 1902).

The histories and development of the black liberation and women’s liberation in the United States have been closely, if ironically and sporadically, linked. Many of those whose dissatisfaction with their marginalization in male-dominated society and societies led them to attend the first Women’s Rights Convention organized in 1848 by Elizabeth Cady Stanton at Seneca Falls, New York, had accumulated more than a little of that dissatisfaction through their work in the Anti-Slavery movement--segregation and isolation of women at the World Convention of which in 1840 was a formative event in shaping her future attitudes, strategies, and tactics. When the first Women’s Rights Convention did meet in July 1848 in remote Seneca Falls, Frederick Douglass was one of the few men in attendance. Having traveled there from Boston, he ultimately made an impassioned speech that rescued from rejection by the Convention Stanton’s provocative Declaration of Sentiments, a feminized redaction of the Declaration of Independence. The friendship and alliance of Douglass and Stanton endured for decades, until it fell victim, after the abolition of slavery by the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, to the divisive strategies of those whose goal it was to confound the efforts of both by bringing their respective civil/political rights priorities into direct conflict by demanding that they choose whether women *or* freed male slaves should first be granted those rights.

The resulting confrontation, which endured for decades, undermined the feminist-black alliance and crucially weakened the position of both causes. As the ‘sweet American vaguenesses’ inherent in the American cultural paradigm and the fluidity of construction

characteristic of American pragmatism contributed to the blurring of gender identities and priorities, so likewise did they contribute to the blurring of racial identities.

GILMAN AND OTHERS

Around the mid-nineteenth century, literary works addressing a broader audience started to appear. The best example of satire of the contemporary position of women in marriage is from a collection of sketches by Fanny Fern (Sara P. Willis, later Parton [1811-1872]), entitled *Olive Branch* (1851):

‘Now girls,’ said Aunt Hetty, ‘put down your embroidery and worsted work; do something sensible, and stop building air-castles, and talking of lovers and honey-moons. It makes me sick [...]. Love is a farce; matrimony is a humbug; husbands are domestic Napoleons, Neroes, Alexanders,--sighing for other hearts to conquer, after they are sure of yours. The honey-moon is as short-lived as a lucifer-match [striking match]; after that you may wear your wedding dress at the wash tub, and your night-cap to meeting [religious service], and your husband wouldn’t know it [...].’ (Kilcup 1997: 117)

Among other important women writers of that period are Lydia Maria Child (1802-1880), the author of an early science fiction story ‘Hilda Sifverling’ (1846), a talented poet Frances Sargent Osgood (1811-1850), the novelist Louisa May Alcott (1832-1888), daughter of the Transcendentalist Bronson Alcott (known for *Little Women* [1868-1869], a semi-autobiographical novel of domestic life). Other authors (for instance, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Sarah Orne Jewett, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Emily Dickinson) representing some developments in the latter half of the century, such as politically committed Abolitionist

literature, local color, and, in Dickinson's case, incipient modernism, have been discussed in preceding chapters.

The turn of the century, or, to be more precise, the period between 1890 and 1920, is characterized by important changes in women literature which affect genre forms especially in prose. These shifts include the fusion of political women's writing and modern fiction techniques (e.g., inner monologue foreshadowing stream of consciousness, fragmented narrative perspective, and laconic, suggestive, emotionally restrained style made famous later by Hemingway) in the 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935), and in the interpenetration of naturalism, psychological techniques, and the women's 'problem novel' in the works of Kate Chopin (1851-1904), Edith Wharton (1862-1937), and Willa Cather (1873-1947).

Until quite recently, Charlotte Perkins Gilman was known only as a political and woman rights activist, the editor of *The Forerunner* magazine (1909-1916), and the author of a book entitled *Women and Economics* (1898) and criticizing the contemporary position of women in marriage and society, and of *Herland* (1915), a feminist utopian novel. She became part of new canons of women writers mainly because of her autobiographical short story 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' first published in the *New England Magazine* (1886-1917). The story is based on the actual circumstances of the treatment of Gilman's puerperal depression (or 'neurasthenia,' as was its contemporary clinical designation) by the so-called 'rest cure.' This treatment (used by her husband, a physician named Stetson) consisted in separation from the baby, absolute isolation, special medication, and prohibition of almost any physical and mental activity, including reading and writing. Stetson's cure drove Charlotte almost to insanity, and made her divorce her husband, though she knew that she would lose her child, and be exposed to public scorn.

The story can be read as an account of an escape from a power structure regulated by male authority and impersonal scientific discourses. The heroine is degraded into a passive object of her husband's 'loving' care which however serves only as a cover-up for the impersonal power of medicine manipulating her vital functions. Forced to stay in bed she concentrates on the elusive pattern of a tattered yellow wallpaper on the walls of her room, 'dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study' (Kilcup 1997: 487). This pattern and the whole surface of the yellow wallpaper become a complex symbol, representing not only the repression the heroine is exposed to ('the bars' [492]; the power of science and of the whole male-governed social order), but also the shattered state of her psyche: 'when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide--plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions' (Kilcup 1997: 487). The complexity of the symbolic structure consists in the merger of impersonal connotations (the description of the pattern as a non-representational, 'abstract' design) and personifications (the lines 'commit suicide').

This dualism is further complicated by the symbol's development that may represent the growth of the heroine's madness manifested by hallucinatory perception typical of serious mental diseases (or even protracted sensory deprivation): the abstract pattern on the yellow paper seems to change into fragments of a human face ('absurd, unblinking eyes' giving it an 'expression'). The doubling of the pattern indicates a further stage of the heroine's hallucinations, and makes her feel the uncontrollable power of the unconscious: 'a subpattern in a different shade, a particularly irritating one, a strange provoking formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that [...] front design' (Kilcup 1997: 489). The transformation of this figure in a different light marks a turning point in the development of the symbol and of the heroine's mental state: in moonlight the pattern appears to represent a

figure of a woman behind the bars. Recognizing her 'mirror image'¹⁹ in the illusive play of lines, lights and shadows, the heroine begins to grasp her prisoner-like situation. She decides to liberate the shadow-woman that becomes her own imaginary self: "I've got out at last," said I [...]. "And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" (Kilcup 1997: 496). The symbolic act of tearing the wallpaper off the walls makes an opening for the heroine's search of a new identity, independent from her husband, from medical discourse or from patriarchal society and its symbolic language, dominated, as Jacques Lacan shows, by 'the name of the father.'²⁰

CHOPIN AND CATHER

While Gilman's story projects the possibility of emancipation from the repressive power system, Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* (1899) is a tragic story of an unsuccessful attempt at liberation. The heroine, Edna Pontellier, the wife of a rich New Orleans businessman, finds out that her life is not determined by her social and family role of a fond wife and loving mother, and that she can 'give up the inessential' (her money and comfortable life) but 'wouldn't give [her]self' to anyone (*Norton 3 2: 545*). She decides to leave her husband and children and tries in vain to find happiness in relations with other men: in love to her friend Robert and in sex with her seducer Arobin. Though perceptive and thoughtful (she even reads Emerson), she cannot find any serious purpose in her life. Hoping to become an

¹⁹ The term was first used by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), who noticed that babies before eighteen months of age are powerfully attracted by their own mirror reflection which they assume as the 'Ideal-I' even before they learn to speak and identify themselves with the 'symbolic order' of language. This shape (or *Gestalt*), among others, fixes the 'turbulent movements that the subject feels are animating him' and 'symbolizes the mental permanence of the *I*, at the same time as it prefigures its alienation' (the shadow-woman in Gilman's story is behind the bars). The image may appear 'in hallucinations or dreams' as '*the imago of one's own body*' or as 'the *double* in which psychical realities, however heterogeneous, are manifested.' The image 'should be capable of formative effects in the organism' ('The Mirror Stage,' in Lacan 1977: 2-4).

²⁰ In his essay (originally a lecture) 'Function and Field of Speech and Language' Lacan defines 'the name of the father' as 'the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of law' (1977: 67). The name does not refer 'to the real father, nor to the imaginary father [...], but to the symbolic father' whose appearance as a signifier is linked not only to the law but also 'to death' (1977: xi). The role of the heroine's husband in the story (a representative of the authority of science treating the heroine as a child), and his collapse at the end in which he resembles a dead body which the heroine must creep over 'every time,' can also be explained by this interpretation.

artist she tries painting but without any success. She cannot go beyond a rather superficial aesthetic attitude to everything in life. This is made clear by her counterpart, the pianist Mademoiselle Reisz, a plain woman disliked by many people but a genuine artist. It is not by chance that Edna Pontellier recalls her words when she decides to commit suicide by drowning in the sea: 'And you call yourself an artist! What pretensions, Madame! The artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies' (598). The only 'daring' decision Edna can make is to resign in her search for identity and to yield to nature despite her terror of a lonely death in the ocean. Her death carries the desire of the romantics and Transcendentalists to the ultimate end (in Byron's phrase, 'to mingle with the universe'). In the moment of death Edna seems to perceive the harmony and beauty of nature, symbolic of the continuation of life: 'There was the hum of bees and the musky odor of pinks filled the air' (599). Chopin's novel was called 'trite and sordid' even by more decent reviewers, others condemned it as 'gilded filth,' 'essentially vulgar,' and 'unhealthily introspective and morbid in feeling.' As a result, Chopin fell into obscurity and until the 1970s she was remembered only as a minor local color writer of New Orleans (for her short stories collected as *Bayou Folk*, 1894).

Because of its development into the 1940s and the variety of its themes and genres, Willa Cather's novelistic work cannot be adequately discussed in this chapter (see the twentieth-century section for a further discussion of Cather). Nonetheless, two themes appearing in her novels published during the 1910s are important with respect to her role as a woman writer at the turn of the century. The first theme is the courage and responsibility of young women in the difficult conditions of prairie farming, their faith in the fertility of soil, and their ability to survive extreme hardships taking care of the family. This theme is developed in *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Ántonia*. The second theme is the shaping of the woman artist in the novel *The Song of the Lark* (1915) which in part takes place in the newly settled areas of Colorado and

Arizona. A typical feature of both types of novels is the link between the soil, or landscape, and a woman figure. This link establishes the identity of the heroines in a violent and changeable social environment.

EDITH WHARTON

Unlike the two above novelists who are linked with the developments of local color writing, Edith Wharton's work is connected with life in the East, the 'genteel tradition,' but also with the psychological complexity and the 'international theme' of Henry James's novels.

Nonetheless Wharton is not a mere follower, let alone, imitator of James: in her best novels, *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920) she created not only very complex female characters, Lily Bart and Ellen Olenska, but also attempted to analyze their rare, elusive and vulnerable love relationships where illusions, ideals and dreams often substitute for reality. Moreover, she was an unusually penetrating critic of the social conventions of her time, including taboos, social roles, the function of money, and the position of women who had to earn their own living as professionals or factory operatives.

A descendant of a distinguished New York family, Wharton was privately educated to become, like her heroine Lily Bart, an ornament of high society. At the age of sixteen she published her first poems. After the death of her father she married Edward ('Teddy') Wharton, of the same leisure-class as herself. Unwilling to accept the values of her class from an early age, she was not happy in this conventional marriage. The publication of her fourth novel *The House of Mirth* (following three short novels *The Touchstone*, *A Gift from the Grave* [both 1900], and *Sanctuary* [1903], and a historical novel *The Valley of Decision* [1902]) demonstrated not only her literary mastery, but also her ability to create an immensely popular book that ran through eleven printings just in the year of its publication, and, as a result of clever promotion and marketing strategy, brought Wharton a considerable profit of

\$20,000. Gaining thus independence from her husband, who in the meantime was sinking into chronic depression, she had a secret love affair with a journalist, William Morton Fullerton. In 1911 she moved to France to become an expatriate like Henry James. Like him she contrasted French and American concepts of honor in the novella *Madame de Treymes* (1907), confronted French and American manners and way of life in novels, such as *The Reef* (1912) and *The Custom of the Country* (1913). Unlike James, she became interested in the industrial environment, where she located her novel *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), and in the life of the poor and simple people which she explored in *Ethan Frome* (1911), a novella telling a tragic love story which takes place on a bleak Massachusetts farm. This work proved Wharton's ability to deal with an entirely different social environment and other qualities of life than in her preceding books. In 1913 Wharton divorced her husband against the wishes of her family. During the war she published fiction and non-fiction, and she also organized charitable activities, like hospitals for soldiers and asylums for homeless people and refugees. For her war activities she became Chevalier of the French Legion of Honor. In 1921 she won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Age of Innocence*, and in 1923 she received an Honorary Doctorate from Yale University.

As an author of women's literature Wharton remains acclaimed for her novels *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*. Both are set mainly in New York City and its environs, and deal with love relationships destroyed by social conditions and by the unwillingness of lovers to make a radical decision, separating themselves from the upper class. However, representations of society and the main characters are different in each novel.

While *The House of Mirth* takes place in the present time (the mid-1900s), *The Age of Innocence* is a historical novel which captures life in the 1870s when the structure of the upper class starts to change as a result of the influx of *nouveaux riches* from the West. This

transformation is already finished in *The House of Mirth*, but some members of the upper class, descendants of the old New York aristocratic families, still refuse to notice it.

While the hero of *The Age of Innocence*, Newland Archer, is, more or less, a passive character whose major function is to reflect the varieties of social life, Lily Bart, the heroine of *The House of Mirth*, though having also some features of a 'reflector character' (she mediates between the old families, *nouveaux riches*, professionals and poor people), is much more active, embarking on a unique career of a 'professional' woman in the world of leisure. Deprived of financial support by the death of her parents and later by her aunt (disinheriting her because of her misconduct) she tries to make a living by playing cards, organizing social events for her rich friends, speculating with their money on the stock exchange, and working as a secretary for *nouveaux riches*. Sometimes she is invited to spend a weekend with her rich acquaintances, or to take part in a yacht cruise to the French Riviera. Her disrespect for conventional manners and infatuation with handsome or wealthy men lead her to social scandals which ultimately destroy her, preventing her from solving her economic situation by a rich marriage (when she has the first opportunity, she simply detests the upper class suitor for his dullness; her second chance to marry a very rich, but socially objectionable Jew is marred by her loss of reputation). Unable to make a living as a laborer (a milliner and mill worker) she dies of exhaustion and drug overdose. Lily Bart (whose name links a symbol of purity with 'barter,' i.e., sinister, even illegal trade) is neither shrewd enough to understand the power of money over social relationships, nor sufficiently thoughtful to realize the intellectual nature of independence which she sees in her only love, the lawyer Lawrence Selden. On the other hand, it can also be argued that she understands her relationship to Selden as by necessity a free and open one, not ending in marriage or in her recognition of Selden's intellectual superiority.

In *The Age of Innocence* the tables are turned. While Lawrence Selden makes no compromises, Newland Archer, also a lawyer, fails to be true to himself and his love by consenting to marry his rich but conventional fiancée May Welland, instead of maintaining a genuine emotional as well as intellectual relationship with a foreigner, Ellen Olenska, the separated wife of a Polish count. The love relationship, revived after Archer's wedding with May, is later destroyed by Archer's wife when she tells Ellen of her pregnancy. Afraid of the break-up of his marriage Archer does not have enough courage to visit Ellen who had to move to Paris. He refuses to see her even after the death of his wife, and prefers to keep an ideal image of her. It can be said that Newland Archer's faith in illusions instead of an authentic emotional relationship resembles some aspects of Lily Bart, but Lily is a more complex character anticipating the otherness and independence of Olenska and the courage to live on the margin of society. Were it not for her illusions and carelessness, and for her passion for fashions and appearances, Lily would have managed better.

The ways in which upper-class society is represented in both novels are also different. In *The House of Mirth*, one of the last novels of 'the Gilded Age,' money is the major representational code, translating the solid world of old high class families into an ephemeral, 'evanescent' show where illusion and reality, new and old riches mingle and interpenetrate (one of the most important scenes of the book takes place at a private theatrical where Lily appears in a *tableau* representing a seductive life-size portrait of Mrs. Lloyd by the English painter Joshua Reynolds). In *The Age of Innocence*, the code of money, illusions, fetishes, and simulacra at least partially gives way to the language of tribal relations and taboos. This implies that the latter novel is more consistently satirical, displaying the life of the powerful and the rich under a semblance of ritualized blood relationships. Janet Beer Goodwyn notices the closeness of Wharton's satire to economic reflections on her contemporaries, especially to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's essay 'The Economic Basis of the Woman Question' (1898).

According to Gilman the fast evolution and technological progress of her age have not changed the domestic sphere at all:

men and women who are familiar with [...] Roentgen rays, who have accepted electric transit, who are as liberal and progressive in mechanical lines as need be hoped, remain sodden and buried in their prehistoric sentiment as to the domestic relations. [...] women and the home are supposed to remain the same. (qtd. in Goodwyn 1995: 309-10)

Apart from satirizing this state of society Wharton asks important questions about the autonomy and independence of women and men in love, and about the role of illusions in emotional and erotic relationships. This, together with the accomplishments of her style and her penetrating analysis of varied social environments, makes her undoubtedly the most sophisticated and stimulating woman author of the early twentieth century. While Kate Chopin questions female independence in the worlds of the senses, art, manners and social roles, while Willa Cather focuses on the vitality of women and their ability to preserve and renew elementary structures and qualities of life, Edith Wharton deals with the problems of women in the complex nexus of socio-economic, cultural and psychological relationships which are not reduced to roles, attitudes or ideals.

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**TWENTIETH-CENTURY
AMERICAN LITERATURE**

(Justin Quinn, editor)

Justin Quinn, Erik S. Roraback, Hana Ulmanová, Pavla Veselá, Clare Wallace

18. MODERNISM 1910-1930

INTRODUCTION

Modernism is the key word of the two decades that this chapter covers. This was a transformation of the arts that by times responded to and reacted against the political and social upheavals first of World War I, and then of the economic boom that followed in the 1920s, both in the United States and Europe. Indeed, the experience of many American writers in this period was primarily European (for instance, Ezra Pound, Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, and T. S. Eliot spent significant periods there), and even those that remained at home (such as Wallace Stevens and William Faulkner) paid close attention to the cultural transformations that were sweeping through that continent. It was also the period that paved the way for the great achievements of African-American literature later in the century, with the establishment of the Harlem Renaissance, which was a confluence of talent in the fields of music, literature, and the visual arts in New York in the 1920s and '30s.

The period from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the 1920s in US history is referred to as the Progressive Era, as American society mobilized against the nexus of big business and politics forged during Reconstruction and after. Upton Sinclair published *The Jungle* in 1906, a lurid criticism of the meat-packing industry in Chicago at the turn of the century, which exposed unhygienic practices (e.g., old, contaminated meat consigned for the military on the presumption that the soldiers would die soon in any case) with labor conditions that amounted to wage slavery. Sinclair, along with the journalists of *McClure's*, an illustrated monthly magazine that regularly published stories of this kind, profoundly contributed to the transformation of public opinion (this type of journalism was referred to as 'muck-raking'). Drawing strongly on the narrative technique of naturalists such as Dreiser

and Norris (discussed in chapter 15 of the previous section), Sinclair also brought attention to the difficult plight of new immigrants (the family at the centre of the drama are Lithuanian).

Immigration, labor relations, and big business: these three areas underwent extensive change during this time. Previously, the majority of immigrants had hailed from Germany, Eastern Europe, and Scandinavia; in the 1910s it was overwhelmingly Italian, though there were still sufficient immigrants from Eastern Europe to warrant an act restricting them in 1924. Most new immigrants in this period settled in the North, the Mid-West and the West. The labor force was also organizing in response to big business, especially the Industrial Workers of the World, also known as the Wobblies. This tendency would be an important factor of intellectual life in the 1930s, as many writers and artists strove to embody left-wing ideals in their works. The 1910s also saw the implementation of the assembly line in the production of Ford cars, and more generally Henry Ford's idea of the industrial workforce, not as wage-slaves, but as consumers, contributed to the amelioration of employees' standard of living.

The US entered World War I as late as 1917, and it was clear to all that the country's participation was crucial to the outcome. However, it would not be until after the next world war that the foreign interests of the country took on a permanently global dimension. No-one had yet been told that the British Empire was effectively finished, and although America's economic prosperity in the next decade was impressive in many areas (powered by the boom in telecommunications and automobiles), the US was still a long way from the imperial status it would gain later in the twentieth century.

The Roaring Twenties, as the soubriquet indicates, made a very new sound. In music it was primarily jazz, as this new genre was broadcast to the nation through the new radio networks. Jazz was one of the most original American contributions to world culture, as new rhythms and musical structures, as well as instruments, were employed in a widely popular form. One

might on occasion see a particular type of woman dancing to this music, known as the flapper. She was an index of the changing position of women in American society: women's suffrage was ensured by the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution of 1920, which stated that 'the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.' The other sounds rose from the assembly lines, often staffed by demobilized soldiers, who with their rising incomes had access to new ranges of consumer goods. The cars that were manufactured made a novel type of noise as they sped down the recently built roads. Exceptionally then, one of the most important new media made no noise at all: films would not become talkies till 1927.

One of the reasons that F. Scott Fitzgerald became so famous was because he was able to catch exactly these sounds and atmospheres. Towards the beginning of *The Great Gatsby* (1926), he describes the beginning of a party at a large residence on Long Island, just outside New York City. The house belongs to the eponymous romantic hero, a man who makes large amounts of money out of Prohibition, supplying illegal bars, called 'speakeasies.' (Note the mention of cocktails, invented to flavor the poor-quality illegal alcohol of the time.)

The lights grow brighter as the earth lurches away from the sun, and now the orchestra is playing yellow cocktail music, and the opera of voices pitches a key higher.

Laughter is easier minute by minute, spilled with prodigality, tipped out at a cheerful word. The groups change more swiftly, swell with new arrivals, dissolve and form in the same breath; already there are wanderers, confident girls who weave here and there among the stouter and more stable, become for a sharp, joyous moment the centre of a group, and then, excited with triumph, glide on through the sea-change of faces and voices and color under the constantly changing light.

Suddenly one of the gypsies, in trembling opal, seizes a cocktail out of the air, dumps it down for courage and, moving her hands like Frisco, dances out alone on the canvas platform. A momentary hush; the orchestra leader varies his rhythm obligingly for her, and there is a burst of chatter as the erroneous news goes around that she is Gilda Gray's understudy from the Follies. The party has begun. (Fitzgerald 1986: 42)

The term 'modernism' is used to refer to a wide range of cultural phenomena occurring roughly in the period under consideration here (though some writers date it as lengthily as 1870-1940). In many of the arts it consisted of a fundamental reconsideration of the means of representation--of subjectivity, plot, society, and history. To take the first as example: in *David Copperfield* (1849-50), the narrator is introduced in a sociable and amicable way to the reader, backgrounds are explained and laid out clearly; there is no presumption of prior knowledge of the characters or situations. In contrast, when the reader opens the first page of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), one is plunged without explanation into the obscure thoughts of a young introverted intellectual. In some respects, one must read the entire book before one can begin to understand the first page. Second, the intricate and finely dove-tailed plots of a novelist like Dickens are replaced by a drama of subjectivity and viewpoint, as one negotiates the transitions from one centre of consciousness to another. Third, social and political institutions in the work of, say, another Victorian writer such as Anthony Trollope are presented in a transparent and comprehensible way, whereas often in the novels of modernists such as Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner, one gains only the most fragmentary ideas of how they function. Woolf's London, in, say, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), can hardly be understood in political and professional terms, as can Trollope's London in, say, the Palliser novels (1864-79), where the interconnections of commerce and parliament are presented dramatically.

Indeed, the idea of fragmentation is central to many of the arts in this period. When Georges Braque painted his *Woman with a Guitar* (1913), he orchestrated fragments of vision into a new arrangement, in contrast to the relative realism of preceding centuries. One recognizes elements of guitar and woman in the painting, even as one wonders how they can really represent those objects. Many modernist poems, novels and dramas make a similar gambit: they challenge the viewer or reader with their distance from widespread conventions of representation, whether it is in the dramatic structure of Eugene O'Neill's *Strange Interlude* (1928), where characters break off from the main action to deliver long, psychological soliloquies, or in the connected interior monologs of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930), or in Wallace Stevens's 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird' (1923).

Modernism also initiated revaluations of cultural traditions. For instance, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound endeavored to dispense with the nineteenth-century canon of taste, at the very moment that they embarked on publication of their own works. They, like many other writers, had to create the critical criteria for the correct understanding of their texts. Much of this kind of work was done through magazines with dedicated editors, small circulations, and demanding articles. (To use Dickens again as counter-example: the Victorian novelist contributed to and for many years ran journals that reached a wide audience.) One reason for the small circulation of those magazines was the difficulty of modernist texts; another was the disagreement between the wider public and modernist writers about what belonged in literature. Put reductively, in one chapter of *Ulysses* Joyce counterpoints high-flown patriotic speeches with the farts of Leopold Bloom. Modernist writers often admitted what would have been perceived as low and sordid subjects into their writing; certainly one could go from one end to the other of the complete works of Dickens, Trollope, Collins, and even Thackeray, without encountering even the most distant reference to the way in which human beings actually reproduce. D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) is an extreme example

of the way in which modernist taste in such matters broke with the past. So, just as modernists expanded the ways in which we represent human subjectivity, so too did they transform public discourse about the body.

But while innovation was prevalent in the period, it was not the only game in town. The works of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Willa Cather, Robert Frost, Edith Wharton, and Sinclair Lewis would not, in stylistic terms, have caused the great Victorians to raise an eyebrow. In many respects, there was much continuity with the past as well: for instance, Stevens with Romanticism, Wharton with the genteel tradition of the late nineteenth century, Sinclair Lewis with Naturalism, and Robert Frost with all nature poetry going back to Hesiod. These writers did not merely reproduce traditional gestures and styles--they developed them--but neither they did break with the past in as dramatic a fashion as the likes of Eliot, Pound, and William Carlos Williams. If we consider the career of later writers such as Thomas Pynchon and Lyn Hejinian, we have to use the narrative of modernism giving way to postmodernism; but the counter-example of John Updike suggests the ways in which Victorian realism absorbed the experiments of modernism (use of stream of consciousness, lack of prurience, etc.), and to an extent made those innovations part of popular literary fiction. Likewise it is difficult to understand the work of a later poet like Richard Wilbur without knowledge of the strong tradition through Frost that connects him to the nineteenth century and further back; yet he also is in conversation with his great modernist predecessors.

The American novelist who best exemplifies that continuity is perhaps Henry James: deeply embedded in Victorian, and more generally European, realism, he nevertheless foreshadowed the work of Marcel Proust, Robert Musil, Joyce, Woolf, and Faulkner through his acute and protracted explorations of psychology. Like many modernists, his field of action and influence stretched beyond America, unrestricted by nationalist ideology or isolationism. James was born in America, he died a British subject in England, he was fluent in the major

European languages: this is a model of the writer not so much deracinated as at home in the larger world.

The narrative of an American national literature was extremely influential during the twentieth century, but it is misleading to exclude external contexts. Although the following chapter, like all other chapters in this book, will concentrate on writers of American origin, the student is encouraged to explore the ways in which these writers were in dialog with their counterparts in Britain, Ireland, and further afield. The narrative of a national literature has also come under attack in the last two decades for its exclusion of internal contexts, most notably African-American writers, and those of the other ethnic groups that struggled for definition in the United States. The century that follows, especially after World War II, is arguably the century of the hyphen, as African-American, Jewish-American, Native-American, and Asian-American writers take centre stage.

THEATER

*Tendencies in American Theater at the Turn of the Century*²¹

If the development of a theater culture in America was initially hampered by Puritan orthodoxy, by the nineteenth century theater is well established as a form of popular entertainment. Between 1870 and 1900 (a period sometimes referred to as the ‘Gilded Age’) a number of interconnected elements were manifest that affected the course of American drama in the twentieth century. There was a growing audience with a taste for spectacle, melodrama, and reproductions of Shakespeare plays. Monopolies, centralization, and commercialization were prominent features of the business environment, while significant theater impresarios such as James William Wallack (Wallack’s Theatre New York) and Augustin Daly (Fifth

²¹ A note on spelling: The spelling of the word theatre/theater is far from consistent in the American context. Many institutions, groups and publications preserve the European spelling of the word. In the sections that follow the original spellings have been preserved in the names of institutions, in the titles of publications and within quotations; the remainder of the text follows current American spelling, i.e. theater.

Avenue Theatre) dominated management. David Belasco (1853-1931) is perhaps one of the most influential personalities in this milieu. His career in theater, which stretched from the 1880s to 1930, is a varied one; not only did he write, produce, and direct plays, but his work in stage design and lighting was pivotal in introducing naturalistic theater to the American public. From 1902 onwards, Belasco promoted and popularized nineteenth-century realism on the stage through his set designs. The extent of his commitment to absolute realism was famously illustrated by the re-creation of a Childs restaurant in *The Governor's Lady* (1912), which replicated exactly the furniture and food of a Childs restaurant near the theater and in which the actors prepared pancakes and coffee as part of the show. The late nineteenth century was also an era of star performers both American and foreign, and acting dynasties (notable families include the Barrymores, the Drews and the Davenports). While obviously playwrights were a part of this theater culture, they were usually not in the limelight, and much of the drama written in the late nineteenth century has been forgotten. In this sense, in particular, popular American theater shared much with the European theater of the age.

As the twentieth century commences the rapid transformation of American society is matched by the brisk growth in the number of theaters being built. According to *The History of American Theatre* (1998), between 1900 and 1930 over 80 new theaters were built in New York alone (Hardison Londré and Watermeier 1998: 622). The centralization of commercial theater around the Broadway theater district was a lucrative business, with theater producers wielding considerable power unfettered by unionization until the 1930s. The 1926-27 season alone saw 297 shows on Broadway (Hardison Londré and Watermeier 1998: 622).

Simultaneous with this boom, is the decline in types of theater deemed unprofitable, in particular touring companies that had been previously an integral part of the American theater context. Finally, with regard to performance styles, American mainstream theater in the early decades of the twentieth century tended toward naturalism with a growing interest in

psychological accuracy. Tours by the Moscow Art Theatre in the 1920s, and the publication of Konstantin Stanislavski's autobiography, *My Life in Art* (1924), were to give rise to an American movement in acting in the 1930s.

The New Stagecraft and the Little Theatres

Responses to these tendencies and phenomena form the basis of American drama as it develops in the early decades of the century. First, proponents of the New Stagecraft reacted to what they perceived as the gimmicky nature of Belasco's exact realism. The influences here are European and modernist: Adolphe Appia, Edward Gordon Craig, Max Reinhardt. Advocates of the New Stagecraft argued for a scenography conceptually distinct from Belasco's authentic reproduction of the world beyond the stage. While it could be argued the Belasco's productions are significant in their attempts to bring the everyday realities of modern American life into the theater, his critics charged him with a merely decorative approach to setting. Instead, the New Stagecraft focus was upon minimalist set design that expressed some subjective reality derived from the play. A key figure in rendering this trend in the American context is Robert Edmond Jones (1887-1954), a designer whose career began in 1916 and who later worked closely with playwright Eugene O'Neill. Other important American designers include Lee Simonson (1888-1967) who worked with the Theatre Guild and, in the late 1920s, Jo Mielziner (1901-75) and Donald Oenslager (1902-75) who became known for forms of scenic poetic realism (see Hardison Londré and Watermeier 1998: 286-88).

A second response might be observed in the Little Theatre movement that emerges in the 1910s among those seeking an alternative to the constraints of the Broadway business. The Little Theatre movement mushroomed in the early decades of the twentieth century and by the 1920s there were numerous Little Theatres across the continent. Among the most well-known

are Chicago's Little Theatre (1912), New York's Neighborhood Playhouse (1915), the Washington Square Players (1915), the Cleveland Playhouse (1915), the Provincetown Players (1915) and the Pasadena Playhouse (1917) (see Chansky 2004: 1-32).

In contrast to Broadway, the Little Theatres were low-budget and organized by amateur groups who rejected the commercialization of mainstream theater and prevailing popular tastes. They generally drew their inspiration from European modernism and avant-garde theater, the works of playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, and George Bernard Shaw, and specific theater companies such as the Moscow Art Theatre, the Abbey Theatre, the Freie Bühne. The Little Theatres espoused the use of small performance spaces, by necessity, but also as a means of fostering an intense and intimate experience of theater allegedly lost to Broadway. Such theaters involved a wide spectrum of participants--intellectuals, actors, directors, artists, writers, and free-thinkers--who wished for reform, for experimentation, and for communal activity.

Finally, although the Little Theatres were not initially committed to nurturing a national drama, they are widely recognized as a crucial motivating force in its establishment. Two, in particular, play an important role in the development of a distinctly American drama in the twentieth century--the Provincetown Players and the Washington Square Players. Even as early as 1921, these theaters were described as 'the real birthplace of American drama' (Archer 1921: 9).

The Washington Square Plays and the Theatre Guild

The Washington Square Players were founded in 1914 by a group interested in producing symbolist drama, realist drama, and work by American writers. Their first season 1915-16 included plays by Anton Chekhov, Frank Wedekind, and Maurice Maeterlinck. However, it is noteworthy that of the fourteen one-act plays and pantomimes performed between February

and May of 1915, only five were by non-Americans. The group continued with a varied and energetically produced program of plays over the course of its four-year existence and succeeded in holding ticket prices down to a minimum, even when they moved to the Comedy Theatre in the Broadway area in 1917.

In 1918 the original group disbanded when several of its members went to fight in World War I, although in 1919 it reformed as the Theatre Guild, which continued into the 1970s. The Theatre Guild's finest years are arguably the 1920s and '30s. In this period they were instrumental in developing an audience for European classics while supporting an array of American playwrights such as Elmer Rice and Eugene O'Neill, both in New York and on tour in America from the late 1920s. As William B. Scott and Peter M. Rutkoff note 'the success of *The Adding Machine* [by Elmer Rice in 1923] fulfilled the Theatre Guild's ambition to challenge Broadway's financial and artistic hegemony' (Scott and Rutkoff 1999: 207). Christopher Bigsby treats the history of the Theatre Guild in detail in *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama* (1998) enumerating the Guild's contribution to the theater history of the period. He notes that in contrast to the Washington Square Players who always remained amateur, the Theatre Guild was a commercial and professional enterprise. It was not concerned with creating either an experimental or a specifically American theater, and had no manifesto, be it social or artistic. Its strengths lay in the quality of the theater it produced, its weaknesses in the ultimate conservatism of its productions (see Bigsby 1985: 120-158).

The Provincetown Players

The Provincetown Players appear more or less in tandem with the Washington Square Players. The Provincetown project was developed by a group of writers and artists while they were on holiday in Provincetown Massachusetts in 1915, partly in opposition to the

Washington Square Players who some perceived as insufficiently American in orientation. A more prosaic motivation was also provided by the fact that several of the holidaymakers had work recently refused by the Washington Square Players. Among the founding members of the group were George Cram Cook, Susan Glaspell, Neith Boyce, Robert Edmond Jones, and, later, Floyd Dell.

Under the influence of George Cram Cook (1873-1924) the Players set about establishing a creative community that would apply non-naturalistic stage styles and support American dramatic writing (Bigsby 1985: 13). Cook, originally from Iowa, was an unconventional spirit who had tried various careers and was one of the driving forces of the group. Bigsby describes the mixture of ideas that merged in their philosophy, combining ‘anarchism [...], visionary socialism, mystical assertion of life against death’ along with liberalism and Cook’s interest in ancient Greece (Bigsby 1985: 6).

Susan Glaspell (1876-1948), who also hailed from Iowa, had begun her writing career as a journalist before moving to fiction. Cook and Glaspell had both been drawn to the creative energy of Chicago and the Chicago Renaissance, and then later moved east where they married. In Provincetown, encouraged by Cook, Glaspell wrote her first play, *Suppressed Desires*, which was one of the Players’ first offerings.

In the summer of 1915 the Provincetown Players produced their first set of short plays in a building on a wharf in Provincetown with impromptu sets created by Robert Edmond Jones. The following summer, after generating interest in the project among their friends in New York, the group performed a further set of plays on the wharf. Although most theater histories focus on how, by the second summer, the group had encountered the writer who was to dominate American drama--Eugene O’Neill--before turning to O’Neill’s mammoth presence and oeuvre, it is worth looking at another work presented during that second summer. In

addition to O'Neill's *Bound East for Cardiff*, Glaspell's one act play *Trifles* is a gem in the early American canon that merits attention.

Trifles is based in part on a murder investigation Glaspell encountered while she was a journalist in Iowa. It is a play that deftly combines simplicity with suggestion. The dramatic structure is plainly climactic, the plot straightforward. A man has been strangled in bed, his wife is held as a suspect although the male characters can find no motive. The play develops in the interactions between two female characters, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale, who come to understand what has happened because they can interpret minute domestic details. They are periodically interrupted by the male characters, the County Attorney, the Sheriff, and Mr. Hale, who dismiss their comments as domestic nonsense. An analogy is developed between the fate of the woman's pet canary, the woman herself and the brutal manner of her husband's death. Through their contemplation of Mrs. Wright's loneliness, the cruelty of her husband, her quilting and the remains of the canary, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale assemble discrete pieces of knowledge and information and 'stitch' them together to form a pattern. Thus a second analogy emerges between the unfinished quilt and the women's conversation. Convinced that they have discovered Mrs. Wright's motive, the women nevertheless empathize with the suspected murderer and close ranks to protect her. The play provides an implicit feminist critique of women's position within a patriarchal society where they are trapped by marriage and voiceless before the law. Glaspell went on to write other plays for the group, as well as a version of *Trifles* in prose entitled 'A Jury of Her Peers.' She and O'Neill were among the Provincetown Players' most committed long-term participants. However, in her lifetime she was better known as a novelist and short-story writer. Since her death much of her work has fallen out of print, although the collection of essays edited by Linda Ben-Zvi, *Susan Glaspell: Essays on Her Theater and Fiction* (1995), is one of the books that has launched a good deal of recent scholarly interest in Glaspell's writing.

In the autumn of 1916 the Provincetown Players moved to a space in New York's Greenwich Village. Over their first six seasons the group produced more than ninety new plays by new or emerging writers (Hardison Londré and Watermeier 1998: 272) including the likes of Djuna Barnes and Theodore Dreiser. In contrast to the Washington Square Players, the Provincetown Players remained committed to experimental work, though their direction changed somewhat after Cook's death in 1924. Eugene O'Neill, Robert Edmond Jones, and theater critic Kenneth McGowan took charge and the company continued on a more professional footing until 1929. There are differing accounts of the trajectory and internal politics of the Provincetown Players: some interpret the group's demise as the inevitable conclusion of an amateur, idealistic, and experimental project; others focus on the tensions between Cook and O'Neill; and for some the Players' failure was dictated by their own success when O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* (1920) transferred to Broadway. As Linda Ben-Zvi suggests:

The elements that led to the disbandment of the Provincetown Players were evident from the inception of the group; indeed, the outcome was inevitable. From its beginnings, the Players sought to fulfill two seemingly incompatible goals: to remain amateurs, motivated by a collective group ethos dedicated to the needs of serious individual playwrights who wished to develop their own talents. The Players would be, as Cook imagined the group, 'a beloved community of life-givers,' putting on plays both for the fun of it and for the higher love of beauty. At the same time the theater would become a serious laboratory in which playwrights could test their ideas, free of all restraints, even the need for popular success. If they remained committed amateurs, how would they develop the skills needed for playwrights to mature in their craft? If dedicated to communal

enterprises, how would they serve the individual writer above all others? If seeking fun, how would they at the same time be true to the highest calling of art? (Ben-Zvi 2005)

These conflicting tendencies however are, as Ben-Zvi points out, not merely evident in the Players, they ‘encapsulated the spirit of the time: contradictory, youthful, joyous, rebellious, and visionary’ (Ben-Zvi 2005).

Eugene O’Neill

Eugene O’Neill (1888-1953) is the most significant writer to emerge in the Provincetown group, and Glaspell and Cook were instrumental in launching his career. O’Neill arrived in Provincetown in the summer of 1916 with a selection of material for consideration: a volume of short plays, *Thirst and Other One Act Plays* that had been published by his father, and *Bound East for Cardiff* (a play that had been rejected by the Washington Square Players). As Glaspell famously states in her biography of Cook, *The Road to the Temple*, when the group heard *Bound East for Cardiff* they ‘knew what they were for’ (Glaspell 1927: 254).

O’Neill would become the greatest American dramatist of his age and he remains one of the most important playwrights in any Anglophone canon. His career spans more than three decades from *Bound East for Cardiff*, *Bread and Butter*, and *Servitude* all written in 1914, to *A Moon for the Misbegotten* composed 1941-43, and with *Long Day’s Journey into Night* (1956), *A Touch of the Poet* (1958), and *More Stately Mansions* (1967) published after his death. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1936--the only American dramatist ever to receive the prize--and won four Pulitzer Prizes.

O’Neill differed from the members of the Provincetown Players in a number of respects. First, in contrast to Cook, Glaspell and the others present in 1916, O’Neill had been reared in the theater. His father was James O’Neill (1844-1920), an Irishman who had made a career of

performing the role of Edmond Dantès in *The Count of Monte Cristo*. James O'Neill toured America with the show for nearly thirty years, reputedly playing Edmond Dantès more than 6000 times (Black 1998: 6; Bigsby 1985: 37). Eugene O'Neill had grown up with the theater of nineteenth-century melodrama (he spent the first seven years of his life on the road), and the business of popular theatrical entertainment. It was an inheritance he would both reject and benefit from. When the twenty-eight-year-old O'Neill arrived in Provincetown with his work, he was not in pursuit of amateur escapism, he was already committed to the project of serious playwriting. And although he shared an interest with the original Provincetown Players in philosophy, psychology, and the work of Strindberg, his vision of the theater was 'as a place for the free development of the individual playwright [... rather than as] a community of amateur live-givers' as advocated by Cook (Ben-Zvi 2005).

A second major difference that marks O'Neill in 1916 is a set of experiences that were to inform all his creative work. The most scarring was the discovery as an adolescent that his mother's morphine addiction dated from the time of his birth. In 1902, following her suicide attempt, his father and brother revealed the story of her addiction and laid the blame at Eugene's feet. Predictably, the trauma of this experience led him to dissolute behavior well before he reached the end of adolescence. There follows a litany of misfortunes, mishaps, and poor judgments--O'Neill dropped out of Princeton, fathered a child, secretly married and then abandoned his new family to work in South America. There he experienced the rough existence of sailors and conceived a great respect for men of the sea. In 1911, his wife filed for divorce and he attempted suicide. Following a period of relative stability, O'Neill contracted tuberculosis, and while recovering in a sanatorium, he began to write plays. Upon his release his father funded his attendance at Harvard where he participated in a playwriting course, but due to a disagreement James O'Neill refused to pay for a second year's fees and Eugene resumed a life of hard-drinking and occasional living rough. O'Neill's discovery of

his vocation as a writer to some extent enabled him to escape his traumatic youth and to process it aesthetically, but he was troubled with bouts of heavy drinking and depression and a family life that was never less than turbulent. Clearly the O'Neill family was marred by obsessive and addictive tendencies--his mother Ella O'Neill struggled for many years with morphine addiction and his brother Jamie drank himself to death by the age of forty-five. Such a family context conferred upon O'Neill a lifelong ambivalence about maternal love, sexual desire and family life--themes he explores in his drama.

Given this background, O'Neill's constant interest in 'human nature under pressure' (Biggsby 1985: 36), the workings of fate and the dictates of heredity are perhaps unsurprising. Tragedy for him was the highest form of dramatic art, and one he spent his life trying to perfect. Early in his career he communicated his wish

to see the transfiguring nobility of tragedy, in as near the Greek sense as one can grasp it, in seemingly the most ignoble, debased lives. And just here is where I am a most confirmed mystic, too, for I'm always acutely conscious of the Force behind--Fate, God, or biological past creating our present, whatever one calls it [...] and of the one eternal; tragedy of Man in his glorious, self-destructive struggle to make the Force express him instead of being, as an animal is, an infinitesimal incident in its expression. And my profound conviction is that this is the only subject worth writing about and that it is possible [...] to develop a tragic expression in terms of transfigured modern values and symbols in the theatre which may to some degree bring home to members of a modern audience their ennobling identity with the tragic figures on the stage (qtd. in Biggsby 1985: 45).

Part of what makes O'Neill's work fascinating even today is how he relentlessly experiments with different concepts, aesthetics, and dramatic approaches. Nevertheless, one element is consistently present in everything he wrote: as the above quotation indicates, O'Neill's is a theater engaged with expansive existential issues as opposed to specific social realities or political concerns. It is actively informed by his reading of Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Jung, and Freud. Egil Törnqvist explores the ways in which O'Neill incorporates ideas drawn from literature and philosophy and argues that although the playwright was to deny the influence of psychoanalysis, the plays, and the author's working notes, suggest otherwise (Törnqvist 1998: 18-32). These tendencies set him apart from many of his contemporaries in the 1920s and 1930s.

O'Neill's drama is eclectic, powerful and does not submit to easy synopsis. Throughout his career, several focal points become apparent--the sea is a repeated motif in the one act plays, but as Bigsby argues a more significant unifying element in the early work is a fascination with 'blighted lives, consumptive young women and a pervasive smell of death' (Bigsby 1985: 38). This fascination is refined in the expressionistic plays *The Emperor Jones* (1920) and *The Hairy Ape* (1922). In the former, O'Neill tackles questions of race, history, language and ritual through the encounter of an African American and the natives on an island in the West Indies. Brutus Jones escapes to the island where he initially dominates the natives and becomes emperor but ultimately becomes their victim. Tension is built through the use of sound--the drum beats that suggest the protagonist's heartbeat and aurally generate a sense of frenzy. The play is noteworthy, too, because it featured Charles Sydney Gilpin (1878-1930), a black actor. In 1921 Gilpin became the first African American honored by the Drama League of New York on the basis of his performance in O'Neill's play, giving rise to some controversy 'regarding the propriety of inviting a black to the annual banquet' (Monroe 1992: 139).

The Hairy Ape (1922) is an allegorical drama packed with metaphors of human alienation and modernity. Motivated by an encounter with a pallid rich young woman, the inarticulate protagonist, Yank, moves from the hellish clamor in the belly of a ship where he feeds the furnace, through various encounters in a city, to his death in the clasp of a gorilla in the zoo. What is manifest is a dystopian modernity represented by the machine (the ship) and the urban spaces of the play, where the protagonist fails to find any sense of belonging, being rejected by the idle rich, the zealous socialist workers, even his working companions.

Human desire and an attempt to represent interior worlds dramatically inform *Strange Interlude* (written in 1923, produced in 1928). The play is the first of a number of epic works attempted by O'Neill and bizarrely, given its length (four hours), dense psychology and experimental form, was the play to provide O'Neill with financial security--it ran for more than four hundred performances on Broadway and sold 100,000 copies (Robinson 1998: 74). *Strange Interlude* is constructed around an extended use of the soliloquy. Characters speak their thoughts between the play's dialogues, implicitly suggesting a form of mask--what is spoken camouflages or distorts what is thought. To some degree too, the play deploys a form of stream of consciousness to communicate the interior worlds of the characters. Structured in an episodic fashion, *Strange Interlude* follows a cluster of characters--the female lead, Nina, and her three men, Charles (an ineffectual writer unnaturally devoted to his mother), Ned (her lover, a doctor and an intellectual) and Sam (her husband, a businessman and simple soul)--over a twenty-five year period. Nina, an archetypal O'Neill female character--a blend of 'Romantic eternal feminine [...] Victorian femme fatale, [...] and] castrating woman' (Robinson 1998: 74)--manipulates the men according to her confused desires. The play has been read as a 'mythicizing of the cultural condition of the United States in the nineteen-twenties' (Murphy 1998: 139), but above all it is an experiment in psychology decidedly marked by Freudian motifs.

Although tragic elements are present in all of O'Neill's plays, his attempts to develop a modern form of tragedy is the most important focal point in his work. *Desire Under the Elms* (1925), the extended trilogy *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1932), set at the time of the American Civil War and based on Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, and, most of all, *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (completed in 1942, first produced in 1956) illustrate O'Neill's efforts to perfect a forceful tragic structure. *Desire Under the Elms* deploys the image of the family house beneath the smothering weight of dark elm foliage. Abbie Putnam is among the first of many sexually predatory female types in O'Neill's work. In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, O'Neill's concern with masks is mapped onto a complex citation of classical tragedy. While the characters in this play do not literally wear masks, their faces are repeatedly described as mask-like. The mask metaphor serves to indicate their oscillation between deception and self-deception while changes in their fate are, according to extensive stage directions, expressed through transformations in physical appearance. By contrast, *Long Day's Journey Into Night* is a much tighter dramatic construction with rich characterization evidently drawn from O'Neill's own painful family background. Self delusion, denial and incontrovertible destiny materialize as each character's weakness is revealed.

Due to illness and other personal crises, by the mid-1930s O'Neill withdrew from Broadway to spend the latter part of the decade working on an epic cycle of plays to be entitled *A Tale of Possessors Self-Dispossessed*. It was never finished, though two parts, *A Touch of the Poet* and *More Stately Mansions*, appeared posthumously. The most important works he completed in this period just before a debilitating illness prevented him from writing further were *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, *The Iceman Cometh* (1939), and *A Moon for the Misbegotten* (1943)--all are strongly autobiographical.

O'Neill's plays are an idiosyncratic mix of intense emotion, experiment, and, at times, over determination (with novelistic stage directions and overused motifs or devices), that ironically verge upon the melodrama he so violently sought to reject. As Bigsby notes

The clotted prose, the moments of pure poetry, the conscious experimentalism, the anguished engagement with the dilemma of free will and determinism, the creation of characters pressed to the very extremes of the social world and of experience itself are the mark of a writer whose imagination was always drawn to excess but who was always concerned with discovering a way in which the human spirit could survive the rigors of a painful and disillusioning life. (Bigsby 1985: 41)

But for all its excesses and weaknesses, O'Neill's work is of fundamental importance to the development of American drama in the twentieth century.

American Modernism on Stage

Though O'Neill casts a long shadow, a number of other playwrights during the 1920s also won substantial public acclaim with plays that capture the spirit of modernism in the American context. *The Adding Machine* (1923) and *Street Scene* (1929) by Elmer Rice (1892-1967), and *Machinal* (1928) by Sophie Treadwell (1885-1970), used expressionist and non-naturalistic devices to explore aspects of urban modernity. In particular, the focus upon the mechanistic (which appears in *The Hairy Ape*) is a pronounced feature of both *The Adding Machine* and *Machinal* that has also attracted critical interest. Jerry Dickey provides a fuller appraisal of the significance of Treadwell specifically in an essay entitled 'The Expressionist Moment: Sophie Treadwell' in the *Cambridge Companion to American Women Playwrights*

(Dickey 1999: 63-81). In the decade that follows such an engagement with modern life continues to develop, wedded with experimentalism and a more prominent political ideology.

PROSE FICTION

Ernest Hemingway and the Consequences of War

In many respects the main historical and cultural phenomena of 1920s resulted from World War I, and so we must first consider how this war affected American writers. Those who wrote war fiction mostly went into the war before the US officially declared its intentions in April 1917. They wanted to get into the thick of it, to do something, to join before the excitement was over. Malcolm Cowley, the distinguished literary critic, in his *Exile's Return* (1934), lists twelve future American writers who drove ambulances or camions, and there were many more. Most joined for the vaguest of reasons. When Ernest Hemingway's Lieutenant Henry in *A Farewell to Arms* (1927) was asked why he, an American, was fighting in an Italian war, he responded evasively: he had studied architecture at home, he spoke Italian, there was nothing better for him to do. In chapter 4 of this novel, the English nurse Catherine Barkley says to him:

'What an odd thing--to be in the Italian army.'

'It's not really the army. It's only the ambulance.'

'It's very odd though. Why did you do it?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'There isn't always an explanation for everything.'

'Oh, isn't there? I was brought up to think there was.' (Hemingway 1994:17)

Not only reasons are lost--what is missing here above all is an explanation, or even the expectation of one.

Hemingway (1899-1961) described his own injury, on the night of 8 July 1918, as death.

Malcolm Cowley reports that he said the following:

I died then, I felt my soul or something coming right out of my body, like you'd pull a silk handkerchief out of a pocket by one corner. It flew around and then came back and went in again and I wasn't dead any more! (Hoffman 1955: 68)

Though not all the details here might be true, they do have a meaning--Hemingway's awareness of death, his own experience, had separated him from his American past (like many of the characters of his short stories). It is as if Hemingway re-entered the world and had to find a new perspective from which to view and judge it. The wound for him was 'unreasonable,' that is, he did not know why it happened to him in particular. Those who were remote from this experience and tried to explain it were obviously faking--they did not know what they were talking about, because if they knew, they would not talk at all. Words like 'dignity' or 'glory' or 'sacrifice' were tested by reality and failed, and there were no replacements available. In the following passage, the protagonist of *A Farewell to Arms* is talking about the war in Italy:

I did not say anything. I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain. We had heard them, sometimes standing in the rain almost out of earshot, so that only the shouted words came through, and had read them, on proclamations that were slapped up by billposters over other proclamations, now for a long time, and I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with meat except to bury it. There were many words that you could stand to hear and finally only the names of

places had dignity. Certain numbers were the same way and certain dates and these with the names of the places were all you could say and have them mean anything. Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates. (Hemingway 1994:165)

The first sentence here indicates an important restraint: Hemingway *refrains* from saying things, and this strategic silence on abstract matters is central to his prose style. Also in place of abstraction he favors facts (names, numbers). His innovation and his genius was to make literature from a pared-down description of reality--both on the grand level of international politics and of the life of the individual.

The memory of war haunts Hemingway's earliest fiction. The stories of Nick Adams's youth in *In Our Time* (1925) rely on the security provided by Nick's father and mother and the natural setting. However, that security is undermined by the tortured comment in the sketches describing the author's own encounter with violence, and thus, the overall effect is highly unsettling.

Emotions ran high in the post-war period, often culminating in the experiences of returning soldiers. Since they had no clear reasons for having fought, they were also psychologically hurt, disillusioned, and uncertain of the future. The sharpest portrait of the returning soldier can be found in Hemingway's short story 'Soldier's Home' (1925). Harold Krebs, who had come back too late to his hometown in Oklahoma and therefore missed all the official parades, could not adjust to his old life. He loved no one, did not enjoy his family, his home, or the opportunity to take a girl out or drive a car. The only thing he was able to do was to make his mother weep, since she did not understand. He had no roots any longer, so he had to leave.

The Lost Generation and F. Scott Fitzgerald

Even noncombatants felt that they were the victims of a huge stupid deception. Nothing genuine had come out of the war, which itself was such a drastic departure from customs and traditions that it was impossible to return to them. The general mood was one of rejection: they rejected the American politicians who did not accept any responsibility for world affairs, choosing isolation instead. They rejected the older generation that had involved the young in the absurd murderous folly. Why, then, should they feel responsible for the postwar world or indeed for anything? They felt that their only responsibility was to themselves.

Soon Gertrude Stein in France accidentally heard the phrase ‘lost generation,’ and used it as a literary label. Why was this generation lost, and what did it lose? It was lost, first of all, because it was uprooted, by experience torn away from any tradition. It was lost because the schools and education had prepared it for a world very different from the postwar world, and because their combat experiences prepared them only for travel and the pursuit of further thrills. It was lost because it had no attachment to any region, because it tried to live in permanent exile. It was lost because it rejected all the older values, but had not as yet created new ones. They also lost God.

Nevertheless, in the sobriquet ‘lost generation,’ the noun is as important as the adjective. They might or might not be lost--the future would settle that issue--but they had already shared adventures and formed the same opinions. After the war some of them would go to Greenwich Village, in New York City, or back to Europe, as the recession of 1921 made America expensive for them. They did not want advertising, installment plans or universal salesmanship, and they did not intend to write books about these things. They felt alienated in this commercial world, and therefore left in those two directions: Greenwich Village or Europe.

The Village contained in itself two different currents, two types of revolt: the individual and the social, or the aesthetic and the political, or, in other words, a revolt against Puritanism and a revolt against capitalism. Briefly, it is possible to label these tendencies as bohemianism and radicalism. However, all the radicals of 1917 were defeated by the course of events. The bohemian tendency was victorious, and people no longer talked about revolution--they talked about psychoanalysis. *The Masses*, a leftist journal, was replaced by magazines like *Pagan* or the *Little Review* (their names expressed their values). Social concerns did not arise again before Black Friday, which began the Wall Street Crash.

Soon Greenwich Village was crowded. It was so popular that everybody insisted on living there. No longer able to accommodate everyone, it simply just expanded across the US-- women began smoking cigarettes on the streets of the Bronx, drinking beer and cocktails in Iowa and having perfectly swell parties in Seattle. This prepared the American public for the new generation of writers: at the age of twenty-four F. Scott Fitzgerald was earning \$18,000 a year with his stories and novels, and Hemingway and John Dos Passos were internationally known novelists before they were thirty. From the very beginning they were professional writers.

As Malcolm Cowley summarized, there were about seven main ideas which started to flourish in Greenwich Village, and soon spread throughout the US:

1) The idea of salvation by the child. --Each of us at birth has special potentials which are slowly crushed and destroyed by a standardized society and mechanical methods of teaching. If a new educational system can be introduced, one by which children are encouraged to develop their own personalities, then the world will be saved by this new, free generation. (This was, of course, already one of the themes in *The Education of Henry Adams*.)

2) The idea of self-expression. --Everybody's purpose in life, be it a man, a woman, or a child, is to express himself, to realize his full individuality through creative work, and if not that, then at least through beautiful living in beautiful surroundings.

3) The idea of paganism. --The body is a temple in which there is nothing unclean, a shrine to be adorned for the ritual of love.

4) The idea of liberty. --Every law, convention or rule of art that prevents self-expression or the full enjoyment of the moment should be shattered and abolished. Puritanism is the greatest enemy. The fight against Puritanism is the only fight with which free individuals are justified in allying themselves.

5) The idea of female equality. --Women should be economic and moral equals of men. They should have the same pay, the same working conditions, the same opportunity for drinking, smoking, taking or dismissing lovers.

6) The idea of psychological adjustment. --We are unhappy because we are maladjusted, and maladjusted because we are repressed. If our individual repressions can be removed--for example by confessing them to a Freudian psychologist--then we can adjust ourselves to any situation, and be happy in it.

7) The idea of changing place. --'They do things better in Europe.' England and Germany have the wisdom of old cultures, the Latin people have admirably preserved their pagan heritage. By expatriating himself, by living in Paris, Capri or in the south of France, the artist can break Puritan barriers, drink, live freely and be wholly creative. (Cowley 1979: 60-61)

And artists did leave for Europe, where at that time one could encounter a similar cultural and intellectual atmosphere. Two American women had been in France already during the war: Edith Wharton (1862-1937, discussed in chapter 17 of the previous section) and Gertrude Stein (1874-1946), the latter a profoundly influential writer of modern American fiction. She came to Paris in 1903. In 1905 she wrote *Three Lives*, probably the earliest truly

modern work of American fiction, and published it at her own expense in 1909. When the expatriates started to arrive, she was working on *The Making of Americans*--she had already bought her Picassos and had sat for a Picasso portrait herself, and her salon at 27, rue de Fleuris, was already well established as a center of events.

Nowadays, it is very difficult to measure Stein's influence exactly. Although Hemingway toward the end of the 1920s revised his opinion of her work, she had helped many other writers who were beginning their careers. She had urged him to 'see things in a contemporary way' and develop a style which would be consistent with the nature of 'things seen.' As a result of her influence, Hemingway incorporated a new sense of time into his style, namely the 'continuous present.' In the fiction he wrote in the 1920s the time perspective is really not a series of quick breaks in the narrative with flashbacks, capturing external events, but a continuous temporal flow, describing rather feelings and emotions of an individual. For instance, time in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926; the English edition is entitled *Fiesta*) is highly subjective: it is mediated through clusters of personalities. In the 1930s Hemingway once more returned to what might be called public time, and his narratives became closely connected to public events (e.g., his novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls* [1940]).

From the 1920s on, there was no interruption in the movement toward France. Artists and writers, photographers and journalists, people single or divorced, with or without talent but sharing the same ideas, deserted their homeland. Year by year, the migration continued at an ever swifter rate. During the second half of the decade, the motives for this eastward move underwent an imperceptible change. The earlier exiles were driven abroad by their hatred of the materialistic American way of life, in their search for freedom, knowledge, or old art and culture. Those who came after them felt the same, but not as strongly. Instead of being attracted to some European values, they were primarily repelled by America; rather than going somewhere, they were running away from something. They were not so much exiles as

refugees. Then, as the American colony in Paris grew, it began to dissolve--there was boredom, gossip, intrigues. Soon, quite a few Americans moved onward, looking for a place that was as yet unspoiled by themselves.

On the penultimate page of *This Side of Paradise*, his first novel from 1920, F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) unforgettably described the lost generation, whose members grew up 'to find all gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in men shaken' (Fitzgerald 1922: 304). With the same power he also described the 1920s as 'the greatest, gaudiest spree in history' (Gray 2004: 435). The once liberating movement of the 1920s soon achieved its goals: both Puritanism and the genteel values of the nineteenth century, both in life and in art, were discredited. The orgy of spending more and more money on more and more goods in the midst of the economic boom was becoming increasingly grotesque, and the Jazz Age ended in hysteria. The individualistic way of life no longer produced individuals. Artists were fleeing from social conformity, but at the same time created certain patterns of escape and revolt, which were repeated endlessly. The flapper of Fitzgerald's novels and stories again and again, without any variation, performed her gesture of tired sophistication. As Daisy Buchanan in his masterpiece, *The Great Gatsby* (1925), says: 'You see I think everything is terrible anyhow [...] Everybody thinks so--the most advanced people. And I know. I've been everywhere and seen everything and done everything' (Fitzgerald 1986: 22). Fitzgerald's own tragic decline, if one looks at the chronology of events, was not the result of the Depression--it happened during the boom itself.

After the stock market crash of October 1929, and throughout the 1930s, social responsibility, virtually absent from the American scene for almost a decade, became the central preoccupation. Those writers who had begun their careers in the 1920s revised their points of view (and sometimes also narrative techniques, see above) and devoted themselves to portraits of great social forces. In Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, the protagonist,

Robert Jordan, voluntarily dies for a cause, that is, he believes in his role in the Spanish Civil War so much that he is able to die in the name of what he thinks is justice. He actually defends the same grounds which Lieutenant Henry in *A Farewell to Arms* (see above) had deserted.

Doubtlessly, the 1920s had, at least at the beginning, their positive values as well. Since the lost generation lost even its past, though, it was ignorant of its meaning for themselves. They did not realize that many young writers of the 1890s had also revolted and also tried to introduce European standards of art into American literature--they overlooked Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945), Sherwood Anderson (1876-1941), Edwin Arlington Robinson, Edgar Lee Masters, Carl Sandburg, and many others, who were also a lost generation, and maybe even more tragically lost, since their work did not enjoy the same response. These postwar writers felt that both they and their experiences were unique, but this feeling was ill-grounded, and in this matter their ignorance of even the immediate cultural past is most apparent.

In any case, not all the writers of the 1920s served in the army during the First World War, and not all of them spent their postwar years in Europe. William Faulkner got as far as the Canadian Royal Air Force, but never saw action and soon came home to Oxford, Mississippi, where he more or less stayed for the rest of his life. In the summer of 1925 he went to Europe for the first time (he walked through Italy and France). He did not return before 1950, when he won the Nobel Prize and personally attended the ceremony in Sweden. Soon after the war he established his own themes and narrative voice, and his connection to what we have described as the Lost Generation is very loose.

As for other important writers of those ten years, Katherine Anne Porter (1890-1980) worked for a newspaper in Denver and then left for Mexico City, where she lived for most of that decade. She did not consider herself an expatriate at all. Thomas Wolfe (1900-1938) was too young for military service and was a shipyard worker at the time. After 1925 he traveled

widely in Europe, but differed from all the other exiles, because he preferred Germany to France, and indeed to all other countries. Before the Nazis took over he felt more at home in Munich than in North Carolina.

The greatest traveler in this generation of ambulance drivers was, without a shadow of a doubt, John Dos Passos (1896-1970). He would only stay in Paris for brief periods, when on his way to Spain or Russia or Turkey or Syria. Most significantly, however, he differed in one point: he was a radical in the 1920s, while all his friends were indifferent to politics, and he became increasingly conservative in the following decade, when the prevailing mood shifted towards radicalism. In general, the pattern of the 1920s can be described as follows: exile (whether geographic or spiritual) and return from exile, alienation, and reintegration.

As for the representative texts of the Lost Generation, there are two that in many ways illustrate the contemporary intellectual climate and became canonical: Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Hemingway's novel became something of a manifesto of that generation--it captures all the feelings and strange mixtures of emotions its members suffered from, and depicts not only life in Paris, which for example for the protagonist Jake is already empty, but also includes a 'slice of life' from Spain. Even though bullfights and unlimited drinking during the fiesta do not represent the real Spain, for Hemingway's heroes this is the kind of life they are fascinated with and long for: in their eyes this stands for the return to nature and natural codes of behavior.

The Great Gatsby is set solely in America (on Long Island and in New York City). Here one encounters not only the idea of an American dream, that is, the desire for financial success, but also the myth of the self-made man. At the same time, there is a strong contrast between the 'old rich' and the 'new rich,' and many other symptoms of the time depicted there: fast cars, fast parties, prohibition with all its consequences. The hero, that is, the great Gatsby himself, is in a way a semi-autobiographical character; he accumulates all his wealth

for one reason, namely to win the heart of his beloved from youth (Fitzgerald had to become rich and renowned before his beloved Zelda would have him). Nick Carraway, the narrator of the story, then, has the same attitude towards the very rich as the author himself--he is attracted and repulsed at the same time. If not a manifesto, this novel certainly became a chronicle of the American Jazz Age.

As for the effect on the international position of American writing, the members of the Lost Generation were in their thirties and so too young to be responsible for this overwhelming upturn. Their impact would come in later years. The change was brought about predominantly by the literary efforts of an older generation with Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, Eugene O'Neill, Willa Cather, T. S. Eliot, and Robert Frost.

Willa Cather

Willa Cather (1873-1947) was born in Virginia, but moved with her family to Nebraska in the early 1880s. At the time, many settlers were arriving here from all over Europe (among them Czechs, French, and Swedish), and this created a polyglot community that was brought together by its struggle with the recalcitrant land. This struggle would become one of Cather's central themes. During her time at college, Cather began work as a journalist and in 1896 she moved to Pittsburgh to edit *Home Monthly*. The contrast between west Pennsylvania and Nebraska could not have been more stark: her new domicile was one of the centers of burgeoning American iron industry. In 1906 she moved to New York City to work on *McClure's*, a high-circulation monthly magazine that covered mainly political and social topics. It was the hub of the new muckraking style of journalism, which exposed corruption and abuse in business corporations such as Standard Oil and the steel industry. Although professionally devoted to *McClure*, Cather was increasingly frustrated with her work on the

magazine, and in 1908 she met the New England writer Sarah Orne Jewett who urged her to concentrate on her own fiction.

The novels that followed were among her finest, among them *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Ántonia* (1918), both set in the Nebraska of her childhood. One of the central achievements of these works was her depiction of female characters. For most of the nineteenth century, women in fiction were imprisoned in a Victorian ethics that viewed them as either virgins or whores, disqualified from taking part in the great affairs of the world. Even a novelist as cynical as Thackeray could not resist this ideology, and punishes the independent and resourceful Becky and rewards the tedious but dutiful Amelia at the end of *Vanity Fair* (1847-48). Faced with this legacy, Cather commented:

I have not much faith in women in fiction. They have a sort of sex consciousness that is abominable. They are so limited to one string and they so lie about that.... When a woman writes a story of adventure, a stout sea tale, a manly battle yarn, anything without wine, women and love, then I will begin to hope for something great from them, not before. (Cather 1970: 277)

Cather's biographer comments, in turn, on this attitude:

These rejections of the 'feminine' in Cather's early critical writings are part of her dedication to classical, heroic forms of narrative with hard clear lines, strong stories and epic simplicity. The project to take over a male tradition of writing meant, at this stage, that she also had to appropriate the dominant male critique of female weakness and emotionalism. (Lee 1989: 13)

The result in the fiction was a woman like Alexandra Bergson, whose intelligence and resourcefulness exceeds that of the male characters: she is the true pioneer of the book *O Pioneers!*. Yet she is not in revolt against her society, as was Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), which Cather scathingly reviewed. Rather she is one of its central agents, able to take on patriarchal values (embodied in the figures of her two oafish brothers), and establish a large successful farmstead in Nebraska, which makes both herself and her brothers wealthy. She dresses in a male style (much like Cather herself), and she is clearly the dominant partner in the marriage that she makes at the end (the husband is a failed artist and something of a broken man).

The other important theme of the book, and indeed of Cather's career in general, is that of the pioneer. Bergson loves the land she cultivates, but paradoxically, her success helps create civilization, which disgusts her: she is nostalgic for that which she helped erase. (This explains her advocacy and protection of Ivar, an eccentric man, by many considered insane, who is in touch with the flora and fauna of the country in an almost mystical way.) In this, Bergson resembles many of the characters of the later novels, for instance, *The Professor's House* (1925) and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927). The latter is one of Cather's finest achievements and is set in the Southwest, as the eponymous archbishop looks back on his life in which he succeeded in establishing the Catholic faith in New Mexico. The work took all his love, but he is content to leave the world that he helped create, in the same manner as Alexandra Bergson.

Cather falls outside the discussion above of the Lost Generation. She was not an exile. She would not have condescended to write about Fitzgerald's kind of material. She was not a stylistic innovator in the manner of Joyce, Woolf, and Faulkner. Her gender subsequently served to marginalize her from the male-oriented literary canon. Moreover her later historical

novels of the 1920s and '30s underlined the degree to which she was out of step with her time. One critic remarks:

Cather's 'retreat' into the historical novel was considered evidence of how out of touch she had become with contemporary American life. During the 1930s she was attacked by Marxist critics as a reactionary who was incapable of engaging with the social issues of the day. (Thomas 2007)

Initially, feminism revised Cather's status as a minor local-color novelist in the 1980s. She has subsequently drawn interest from the eco-criticism movement of the 1990s. But more recently she has taken on the dimensions of a general American classic, beyond those categories.

Sinclair Lewis

One of the values that Cather rebelled against was gentility, or niceness. Another writer who did this was Sinclair Lewis (1885-1951), the first American writer to win the Nobel Prize for literature, something not even Mark Twain or Henry James achieved. It would, however, be naive to think that this honor was bestowed for literary merit only, although it brought a certain degree of recognition to both Lewis and his literary colleagues. American literature simply also became more important because America as a country was more important in world affairs. In December 1930, when the Swedish Academy gave Lewis this prize, it was not only saying that Lewis was a great writer, but it was also acknowledging the fact that the United States was a powerful country.

The characteristic features of Lewis's works were emphasized in the welcoming address by the acting secretary of the Swedish Academy:

Yes, Sinclair Lewis is an American. He writes the new language--American--as one of the representatives of a hundred and twenty million souls. He asks us to consider that this nation is not yet finished or melted down that it is still in the turbulent years of adolescence. The new great American literature has started with national self-criticism. It is a sign of health. (Cowley 1979: 297)

What did Sinclair Lewis criticize? The answer is the suburban white middle class, which throughout the 1920s experienced unprecedented growth. In 1920, he wrote *Main Street*, where he introduced his Midwestern metaphor of the small town, but only in *Babbitt* (1922), did he begin a full-scale investigation of the small Midwestern city which he aptly called Zenith. Here he searched for every manifestation of corruption, stupidity, and demagoguery, and since the city prospered and grew steadily, his opportunities for finding these also increased. His interest was primarily anthropological: he studied the strange tribe of the middle class, carefully documenting their habits, forms of speech, and gestures.

His hero's name is Babbitt (there was a new word coined after him--babbitry), and he represents a solid citizen with uniform opinions. He dedicated himself to the religion of business, the morale of which asks you to buy more things, whether you need them or not, and also to Unselfish Public Service, which demands the right kind of political activities: warning against the 'Red professors' at the university, protecting the local political scene against all the subversive elements, etc. When Babbitt describes Our Ideal Citizen, he means the 'regular guy,' a true-blue standardized American. As he says, Zenith has one advantage over big cities like New York: there are very few 'foreign-born' people with 'foreign ideas.'

Nevertheless, Babbitt has more engaging sides to his personality--he privately doubts his own loud confidence and starts to flirt with 'alien' ideas. For a while he breaks all the social,

political, and sexual taboos, associates with bohemian types, gets himself a mistress, and openly makes fun of Prohibition. He even begins to play the role of a liberal by defending the strikers. Since Lewis's own position was that of a liberal humanist, in the end one discovers that Babbitt is only weak--not unkind, ungenerous, or even fascistic. He returns to his family and his old friends and habits just because he cannot deal with his newly gained freedom--he feels alone, he does not want to be an outsider, he cannot stand the isolation from his clan of 'Good Fellows.' He goes back to his wife Myra, who is as a personality completely unimportant, and with a proper degree of family correctness asks her forgiveness. He becomes a member of the Good Citizens League and finally runs to the efficient Reverend Doctor Drew, who very efficiently prays with him for five minutes (which he efficiently measures on his watch), and then Babbitt rushes off to make a meeting of the Don't-Make-Prohibition-a-Joke Association. But Sinclair Lewis understands him--the author pointed out the follies and absurdities of middle-class stereotypes, but would never condemn the middle class as such.

When Sinclair Lewis gave his Nobel Prize Speech, he praised writers of the younger generation most:

[...] most of them living now in Paris, most of them a little insane in the tradition of James Joyce, who, however insane they may be, have refused to be genteel and traditional and dull. I salute them with a joy in being not yet too far removed from their determination to give to the America that has mountains and endless prairies, enormous cities and far lost cabins, billions of money and tons of faith, to an America that is as strange as Russia and as complex as China, a literature worthy of her vastness. (Cowley 1979: 297-98)

They did exactly that.

POETRY

Rupture and Continuity

There are two narratives that help us to understand the poetry, and indeed the literature, of this period in American letters. The first is that of modernism, which tells us of a violent break with the preceding centuries, a rupture that was both stylistic and thematic. This critical narrative has been the dominant one for most of the twentieth century. The second narrative is that of continuity, and shows the ways in which poetic styles and themes, established over the preceding seven centuries or so, remain at the centre of poetry in English, including that of the US. Paradoxically, both narratives can be used to explain the work of the same poets. In what follows I will describe these narratives in more detail and then go on to discuss several poets individually.

First, modernism. In 1911, a young American poet named Ezra Pound (1885-1972) approached a British writer, Ford Maddox Ford, to show him his poems. Pound was 25, the name of his book was *Canzoni*; Ford was 38. Pound's book was in the best Pre-Raphaelite style of nineteenth-century English poetry--full of Incense, Light, Glamour and Angels. Beauty was spelt with a capital B. It was lofty, sacred, disconnected from the idiom of everyday language. So there he sat, reading the old-time verses of an anxious American poet, who eagerly awaited his verdict. Ford looked at the poems, looked at Pound and instead of replying got up and threw himself on the floor and rolled there for a while, as Pound looked on, gradually beginning to understand the nature of the critical comment that was being communicated to him. The poems would not do, and Pound would one day assert that that roll saved him three years.

What did he mean by this? Pound was one of the foremost poets of the group of writers we now call modernist. They were writers who consciously attempted to break with the previous English poetic tradition, to make it new, as Pound himself said, to throw off the nineteenth century (those tired rhymes and etiolated diction) and to write the poetry of the new century. Part of this battle to make things new for Pound entailed the elimination of previous prosodic forms. As he said: 'To break the pentameter, that was the first heave' (Pound 1987: 532). Pentameter had, since the time of Shakespeare and Spenser, been considered the basic metrical unit in English poetry, and so the image of breaking it is a particularly powerful icon for the violent arrival of modernism. Pound, T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), Wallace Stevens (1879-1955), William Carlos Williams (1883-1963), and many other poets of the day, would all experiment with various types of free verse, feeling that a new poetry must not only have a new subject matter, but also a new technique.

Above all, then these were poets that were consciously 'modern' in terms of technique and content and their work marks their sense of exhaustion of the European literary tradition; the intuition that huge renovation work would have to take place if anything was to be salvaged from the wreckage. Indeed, the very image of 'wreckage' was important for many writers of the time: they felt that they had inherited a tradition that was in fragments and the literary techniques that they developed involved the arrangement of cultural fragments (usually in the form of quotations, references or mythological parallels) within the literary artifact itself.

Second, continuity. In 1961 Roy Harvey Pearce published an influential book entitled *The Continuity of American Poetry*, with the aim of presenting the uninterrupted unity of American poetry from the seventeenth to the twentieth century. But he had particular difficulty finding continuity in the period 1890-1910. After the epochal, if ignored, achievements of Whitman and Dickinson, there seemed to be no major American poet worthy of study. The work of Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869-1935) and Edgar Lee Masters (1868-

1950), while of interest, was not of the first importance. The problem here is that the English language is not coterminous with the borders of the United States, and there were many great poets writing in this period outside America, among them, Thomas Hardy, W. B. Yeats, A. E. Housman, and, later in the 1910s, Edward Thomas (Gerard Manley Hopkins's poems were published in 1918). These writers did not attempt to break with the past in the manner of the modernists (they employed traditional rhyme and meter); however, the foregoing did react against the canon of Victorian poetic taste. For instance, Yeats drew upon Irish folk material to avoid the sentimentality, enervation and moralizing that made Tennyson perhaps the central poet of the preceding era. Housman drew upon the English ballad tradition to create the spare nostalgia of *A Shropshire Lad*, mixing stories of the pastoral life with those of war.

The finest American exemplar of this continuity is Frost (1874-1963), who began publishing in the 1910s (having forged a close friendship with Edward Thomas in England). Narrators of modernism, from Lionel Trilling on, have had a signal difficulty with his work: on the one hand, they recognize its excellence, but on the other, they are unsure how such a traditional poet can be co-opted into the story of modernism. Attempts have been made, none very persuasive. He writes in traditional rhyme and meter; his themes are farm-work and the seasons, themes that would not have surprised either Horace or Virgil. Arguably, Frost was the first of many fine American poets in this vein during the twentieth century, among them Richard Wilbur, James Merrill, Donald Justice, Elizabeth Bishop, and, closer to the present, A. E. Stallings, and Ernest Hilbert. To complicate the picture further, within the oeuvres of poets who are usually considered the protagonists of modernism, such as Eliot and Pound, we find poems that can also fit into this narrative: for instance, 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley' by Pound, and Eliot's Sweeney poems, and parts, if not all, of *Four Quartets*.

Ezra Pound and Imagism

The first important chapter in the career of Ezra Pound was his Imagist manifesto. Imagism was a poetic movement invented to help propagate the work of his friend, Hilda Doolittle, known usually just by her initials, H. D., and was later taken over by Amy Lowell, a poet from the influential and rich American family that had produced James Russell Lowell in the nineteenth century, and would later produce Robert Lowell, one of the most important American poets of the twentieth century. In its initial stages, Imagism demanded a turning outward towards objects, as opposed to turgid poetic introspection, the like of which was purveyed by English *fin de siècle* poets--full of mists, vague sadness, and mysterious female beauties who often had a fatal effect on the poor poet. Pound wanted to get rid of this melancholic atmosphere and write clear, objective verse. He formulated it thus in March 1913:

THE IMAGIST MANIFESTO

- I. Direct treatment of the 'thing,' whether subjective or objective.
- II. To use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation.
- III. As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome. (Pound 1970: 83)

The first rule instructs the poet not to distract him- or herself with extraneous matter, whether this be imagery or Victorian sentimentality. The second rule instructs the poet once again to pare down language, make it as spare and concise as possible--cut out all the flourishes and fancy phrases; as he noted 'one is tired of ornamentation, they are all a trick, and any sharp person can learn them' (Pound 1970: 88). The third rule, refers mainly to poetic technique--the musical phrase will replace iambic pentameter. When we try to define this musical phrase,

we run into difficulty, but essentially this manifesto should be read for what it eliminates rather than for what it promises.

The image, as Pound presents it here is a way of avoiding traditional ways of organizing the lyric, and indeed of avoiding traditional syntax. Sequence (which unfolds in time and is the basis of narrative) is substituted by an imagistic unit (present in space), and its significance can be apprehended all at once, without the passage of time. It is the opposite of music in this respect. To apprehend the climax in a passage of music you must have attended to everything that has come before. The image, however, should be apprehensible all at once. Pound felt that since Latin characters, which are used for the writing of English, have no necessary graphic relation to the things they describe, they are less faithful in their description of reality. Exemplary for him was the Chinese language, whose written characters have their roots in the depiction of particular objects or states of affairs. Of course, Pound does not abandon Latin characters when he writes poems, rather he attempts to present the images as clearly and directly as possible, trying to make the poem the truest *depiction* of things, without personal anecdote or narration of any kind. Pound himself narrates the procedure by which he came to write one of the most important Imagist poems:

The 'one image poem' is a form of super-position, that is to say, it is one idea set on top of another. I found it useful in getting out of the impasse in which I had been left by my metro emotion. I wrote a thirty-line poem, and destroyed it because it was what we call work 'of second intensity.' Six months later I made a poem half that length; a year later I made the following *hokku*-like sentence:--

'The apparition of these faces in the crowd:

Petals, on a wet, black bough.'

I dare say it is meaningless unless one has drifted into a certain vein of thought. In a poem of this sort one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective. (Pound 1970: 89)

Here we can see the process of elimination: Pound cuts away the old rhetoric and melancholy and in the poem presents two images in a calm precise tone. And the tone is almost as important as the sparseness of the images: what Pound wishes is for the juxtaposition of the images themselves to create the emotion, and not some proclamation of sadness by the poet himself. And it is clear that even though Pound has eliminated much of what was thought to be poetry--and to an extent still is--the poem is nevertheless an exquisite act of imagination. There is first of all the image of the faces in the Metro, a fairly common urban experience; but the imaginative leap of the poem occurs with the second line: it suggests the strange equivalence of the faces with the petals. Suddenly, the serene pastoral image of the petals invades the space of the Metro; Pound makes a miniature landscape (almost Japanese) collide with the dirt, grime and hassle of public transport. He is not telling you what to think and he is not telling you what he thinks--instead the poem demands that you, the reader, stare hard at these images and interrogate them for yourself. Pound, in accordance with his manifesto, presents the objects directly, is utterly minimalist in his use of language, and composes in the musical phrase, rather than the iamb, helped in this by the poem's being something of a haiku. And once again, writing the poem was a process of elimination and concentration on the objects themselves.

Pound's earlier work had also drawn attention for its metrical experimentation as well as for its knowledge of medieval literature, especially Provençal poetry. Unlike his predecessor,

Walt Whitman who often seemed to have taken nothing from the European poetic tradition, Pound immersed himself in it, as well as developing a very strong interest in Chinese poetry, the characters of which language would later adorn his *Cantos*. Indeed, the idea of translation itself was to become central to his further career. In the instance of the collection, *Cathay* (1915), Pound, using the notes of the scholar Ernest Fenollosa, made translations of Chinese poetry. The gross inaccuracies of these translations were later revealed; nevertheless, those errors do not take away from how Pound succeeded in reconstructing the heretofore unknown worlds of Chinese history for the English reader. These poems display a serene humor and compassion which would, unfortunately, be largely absent in his later work:

SEPARATION ON THE RIVER KIANG

Ko-Jin goes west from Ko-kaku-ro,

The smoke-flowers are blurred over the river.

His lone sail blots the far sky.

And now I see only the river,

The long Kiang, reaching heaven. (Pound 1977: 73)

In this version of Rihaku's poem (Li T'ai Po, also known as, Li Po, eighth century CE), each line, more or less end-stopped, is an imagistic unit, so that the writing of the poem is less a threading of images together into syntax but rather a laying of images down one on the other, as petals fall, without any overt effort on the poet's part to link them. The poetic act becomes the placement of images contiguously rather than their subordination to a series of statements that builds up a rhetorical argument. Among other translations, or versions, which Pound carried out in the 1910s was his *Homage to Sextus Propertius* (1917), which was, as the title has it, a homage, but also a translation, reworking of and reply to the Latin poet.

But Pound's Imagist manifesto had not completely cleared the stage for the new modernist poetry. In the poem, 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley' (1919, 1920), Pound buried and lamented *fin-de-siècle* English poetry. By times bitterly satirical toward both the contemporary literary scene (*cf.*, the figure of Mr Nixon) and the bloody destruction of World War I (Pound lost several friends and associates to it, among them the philosopher T.E. Hulme and the sculptor, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska), it is a difficult poem which employs Pound's favorite device of the *persona*.

The Cantos

In the same decade Pound conceived the idea of his monumental sequence, the *Cantos*; he would spend the rest of his life working on it. The first three sections were published in 1919 and the full edition was only published in 1976. As these dates bear witness, the poem stretches through most of the twentieth century and registers in its course some of the most significant political transformations, most famously World War II, during most of which Pound lived in Italy and from 1941 broadcast propaganda for the Fascist cause (he was an anti-Semite and a deep admirer of Mussolini, who, he claimed, was able to comprehend the *Cantos* in one brief glance). Even Pound's most devoted admirers have difficulty defending this phase of his career (for instance, see Cookson 1985: 69).

On 24 May 1945 he was imprisoned at the American Army Discipline Training Center at Pisa. Cookson comments: 'For three weeks, until he became ill, Pound was put in a wire and concrete cage, six feet by six and a half, reinforced, in his case with 'air-strip' steel [...]. There was no protection from rain and wind' (Cookson 1985: 71). Perhaps because of these conditions *The Pisan Cantos* are more than elsewhere in the sequence suffused with the transformations of daylight and landscape. Perhaps it is also because Pound was humbled to an extent by his imprisonment that he was not as capable of imposing his imaginative systems

upon the world as he was in previous cantos. Such is the position of Donald Davie, when he writes that ‘Pound’s attention had shifted somewhat from this grand design to the tight “designs” achieved on a smaller scale, which the natural world throws up momentarily and incessantly’ (Davie 1965: 172).

Even as early as the second decade of the century, Pound was aware of the main limitation of Imagism: a great epic work could not be written under its rubric. His subsequent attempt, with Wyndham Lewis, to make the image move (Vorticism) was short-lived. He then searched in other directions. The *Cantos* represents Pound’s lifelong attempt to write, in his words, ‘a poem including history.’ He wanted a form that could comprehend within its boundaries the course of global civilization and culture, and get to the bottom of the social and cultural ills he saw everywhere around him. Rather than try to provide a synopsis of the whole poem (which would be too general to be helpful), I will enumerate some of the themes and techniques of *The Pisan Cantos* (1948), which number LXXIV to LXXXIV. There are several levels, or voicings, which Pound moves between.

First, there is personal reminiscence of famous and not-so famous friends. This mode is telegraphic in a diaristic way, often employing nicknames or jocular sobriquets.

Second, there is economic theory. Pound rails against currency speculation and money-lending (usury), which he thought lead to the destruction of culture and which he associated with the Jews. Usury is the making of money out of nothing,’ that is, the usurer does not take any raw material and make some object out of it, as, say, the sculptor does; this, for Pound, is a sign of degeneration. He argues that if the State lent money then usury would be unnecessary, and by way of illustration he points to the city-state of Athens, an example of cultural and military excellence combined. But the State does not lend money, and the operations of usury have destroyed Europe once more through warfare. Pound remarks: ‘the

useful operations of commerce / stone after stone of beauty cast down / and authenticities disputed by parasites' (Pound 1987: 462).

Which brings us, third, to talk of beauty. Occasionally this emerges from his diaristic accounts of artists ("“beauty is difficult” sd/ Mr Beardsley' [Pound 1987: 458]) and then blends into the fourth element of pellucid and serene landscape description. Pound's gaze is equanimous and calm: he will lovingly note the objects of the landscape, and he does not try to impose his systems on them. They provide moments of redemption for someone who feels damned.

Fourth, such moments of light are like fragments of a paradisaal utopia, or ideal city, which Pound dreams of amidst the ruins of Europe. This, he tells us, 'exists only in fragments,' and there is 'no vestige save in the air' (1987: 452). This city is conceived of as a contrast to the extant cities of the world, which are founded on corrupt economic theories (usury, currency speculation) and which therefore have lost the sense of beauty.

If we look at the first of the Pisan Cantos, LXXIV, we will see many of these voicings working together. This is one of the central poetic methods of modernist poetry: collage. Different personae, moods and sometimes even languages, are juxtaposed in one continuous text without explanatory transition material. Therein lies its difficulty. The implication is these fragments are part of a larger whole, which is impossible to describe; or, as Pound puts it at the end of the *Cantos*, 'it coheres all right / even if my notes do not cohere' (Pound 1987: 811).

The enormous tragedy of the dream in the peasant's bent shoulders

Manes! Manes was tanned and stuffed,

Thus Ben and la Clara *a Milano*

by the heels at Milano

92). Again, Pound indicates that he is dealing with the destruction of all of Europe at the very least, or as he says later: ‘from the wreckage of Europe, ego scriptor’ (Pound 1987: 472). ‘The city of Dioce’ is Pound’s shorthand for a paradisaal utopia, the dream of which stands in stark contrast with the present state of affairs. Mention of this leads him to the Chinese serenity of the following lines, as though he drifts off in a daydream from the horrible reality surrounding him. The ‘process’ mentioned here was associated by Pound with ‘the Way’ of Taoism, which enjoined that man should never depart from the processes of nature. The ‘whiteness’ of the last lines is glossed by Cookson thus:

After Confucius’ death, when there was talk of regrouping, Tsang declined, saying: ‘Washed in the Kiang and Han, bleached in the autumn sun’s slope, what whiteness can add to that whiteness, what candour?’ (Mencius III, 1, IV, 13.)

(Note to Pound’s translation of *The Analects*.) (Cookson 1985: 73)

I quote this directly because it is not immediately clear what connection this has with the preceding ideas. The teachings of Confucius were important for Pound, but here as in many other places in the *Cantos* he fails to integrate these teachings in a convincing way into the body of the poem, in contrast, for example, with Yeats’s use of esotericism.

Many readers when faced with such telegraphic poetry and its glosses four times its length will abandon the poetry in despair. A question must be asked: to what extent is the poem the ravings of a man who was for a period judged insane by American psychiatric experts. (A similar question arises in the Czech context with the case of Ivan Blatný.) The suspicion is that Pound’s *Cantos* employ modernist collage not in order to mime the confusions of a degenerate civilization, but rather to mask the extensive confusions and madness of one particular American who committed treason in the service of one of the most evil regimes of

this century. There is no doubt that throughout the sequence in general there are passages of exceeding lyric beauty, and one can only approve of the huge ambition of the project, but those passages are so scattered and the whole sequence itself is so incoherent that it is hard not to judge it a complete failure and a waste of a poetic gift. Gertrude Stein remarked of him that ‘he was a village explainer, excellent if you were a village, but if you were not, not’ (Stein 1966: 217); one reason perhaps why the poem fails is that the village explainer tries to explain the world. The next generation of American poets would be more modest in their aims and technique than Pound.

T. S. Eliot

The same defense of mimesis is often made for the shorter, but no less demanding poem, *The Waste Land* (1922), by T. S. Eliot. Eliot had modernized himself independently of Pound, a fact which shocked the latter when they first met in England in 1914. In 1908, Eliot was in his last year at Harvard when he came upon Arthur Symons’s book, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), on the subject of French poets of the nineteenth century, including Paul Verlaine, Jules Laforgue, Arthur Rimbaud and Stéphane Mallarmé. The encounter transformed Eliot’s poetic style from a pale imitation of Tennyson into the dislocated, imagistic style of Laforgue. Symbolism, as defined by Symons, provided a way into dark, unseen worlds. It was a poetry in which nuances of images represented the contours of invisible, psychological mysteries. For Eliot, it provided a way toward his own poetry of tortured subjectivity, and instinctively he turned toward the city as an emblem of humanity’s alienation and the disintegration of culture. So while Imagism turned its gaze outward to the clear world of objects, symbolism concentrates on finding emblems for human subjectivity. This is the Janus-head of modernist poetry.

Eliot's supreme achievement in the Symbolist mode is 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' (1915), which is a monolog of a shy, middle-class man addressed to an unknown other (possibly a lover, possibly an inner voice addressing an outer persona). The psychological drama of his inaction is, as he admits himself, not that of any latter-day Hamlet: the fate of the nation does not hang on his 'decisions and revisions.' The poem takes the reader across a city of

certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells [...]. (Eliot 1963: 13)

The evening, we are told, 'is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherised upon a table' (Eliot 1963: 13). So Eliot's city, rather than being a place of energy and possibility, is melancholic, abandoned, a place where lives of quiet desperation emerge and are extinguished without consequence. Human communication is impossible (an important theme throughout Eliot's later work), even, or perhaps especially, between man and woman: 'human voices wake us and we drown.'

'The Love Song' is Eliot's most important early work. There followed *Poems 1920* and then in 1922, *The Waste Land*, by many considered the central poem of the century in English. While Eliot would later deny that the poem had this kind of scope, many critics have taken it to voice the disillusionment and pessimism of an age, and not just Eliot's own disillusionment and pessimism, which was considerable. (Most of the poem was written while Eliot was convalescing after a nervous breakdown.) It employs what Eliot, when reviewing James Joyce's *Ulysses* for *The Dial* in 1923, would later call the 'mythical method.' This was

a method by which parallels are made between antiquity and the contemporary world, enabling the writer to give ‘a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history’ (qtd. in Traversi 1976: 11). Joyce used Homer’s *Odyssey*, and Eliot for *The Waste Land* used vegetation myths culled, as the notes to the poem tell us, from recent studies in anthropology, one of which was James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915). The poem draws an analogy between the England of the later years of King Arthur’s reign, withering until the Holy Grail can be found, and the modern world. Eliot superimposes the myths on urban scenes, so that one character addresses another thus:

There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying: ‘Stetson!

‘You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!

‘That corpse you planted last year in your garden,

‘Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?

‘Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed? [...]’ (Eliot 1963: 65)

The superimposition, as these lines show, leads to a kind of grim surreal comedy.

But Eliot’s employment of the ‘mythical method’ was not as consistent as Joyce’s in *Ulysses*, and the poem is, famously, a collection of cultural fragments, deeply allusive and often just plainly quoting literature from different languages in the original, among them Italian, German, French and even Sanskrit, in the final section. ‘Burial of the Dead’ is the first section of the poem and it begins with a description of the seasons:

April is the cruellest month, breeding

Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing

Memory and desire, stirring

Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers. (Eliot 1963: 63)

There is a great sense of cosmic fatigue about these lines--nothing seems worth striving for, nothing seems fertile any longer. The rejuvenation of vegetation in the springtime brings with it no corresponding reinvigoration of the soul. This exhausted tone is played off against the participles that end-stop most of the lines: they imply action and motion, while all that really results is 'a little life with dried tubers.' What is also important to note here is Eliot's use of the first-person plural, which immediately gives this sense of general fatigue a collective cast. Less the psychological crisis of one individual it is that of a whole culture that is no longer in contact with the natural world it inhabits. The next verse paragraph asks the question which the rest of the poem attempts to answer:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images [...]. (Eliot 1963: 63)

This 'heap of broken images' is perhaps the best description of *The Waste Land* itself; and its author and its reader go in search of the possible roots and branches that grow out of the stony rubbish. The answer is given in the poem's final section.

But there are many land- and city-scapes to traverse before that. The rest of 'The Burial of the Dead' is a mélange of voices and apparitions--of the city described above, but also,

importantly, of the hyacinth girl, which proves a moment of clarity and insight that is almost mystical. It is also a moment of love and tenderness, things that are scarce in the alien spaces of the poem:

‘You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
‘They called me the hyacinth girl.’
--Yet when we came back, late, from the hyacinth garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the silence. (Eliot 1963: 64)

Nothing could be further from this heart of light and silence than the next section of the poem, ‘A Game of Chess,’ which anatomizes the fraught relations of the sexes. Charged with disgust for the physicality of love (and it is noticeable that there is nothing bodily about the encounter with the hyacinth girl in the preceding section), this passage begins by providing a mythological context through references to Ovid’s tale of the horrific love triangle of Procne, Tereus and Philomel (the story of how a king rapes his wife’s sister, and how that wife in revenge kills their child and feeds it to the unknowing king). Eliot then moves to a brief dialogue, which registers contemporaneous middle-class lovelessness; following this he turns to the pubs of London and listens in on the conversations of the working classes. The nuanced neurasthenia of the previous passage is absent here, and these people speak of sex and marriage in the same forthright way as one would of the purchase of groceries. There is no love here, just calculating wives and husbands wandering off for better sex elsewhere. The section is interspersed with the voice of the bar-man who is calling on the customers to drink

up and leave, as is the custom in English pubs. What is stunning about this is how Eliot at the section's close modifies these voices, through an allusion to *Hamlet*, to an almost tragic pitch, pressing us to mourn for the very people who only lines before disgusted us with their vulgar and conniving nature:

Hurry up please its time

Hurry up please its time

Goonight Bill. Goonight Lou. Goonight May. Goonight.

Ta ta. Goonight. Goonight.

Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night. (Eliot 1963:
69)

Part 3, entitled 'The Fire Sermon,' turns our attention outwards from the private sphere of the relations between the sexes to consider the city once again. Perhaps the most important figure of the poem steps forward here: he is Tiresias the prophet, who once had lived for seven years as a woman and played a key role in Sophocles's Oedipus plays. Once we hear his voice, we know that we have heard him unidentified in previous sections, especially in the question in 'The Burial of the Dead.' He witnesses the loveless coupling of two people in the city. After the man leaves, the woman puts on a record and Tiresias follows the strains of the song out through the window into the city. What follows is one of the most luminous passages of the poem:

'The music crept by me upon the waters'

And along the Strand, up Queen Victoria street.

City, city, I can sometimes hear

Beside a public bar in Lower Thames Street,
The pleasant whining of a mandoline
And a clatter and a chatter from within
Where fishermen lounge at noon: where the walls
Of Magnus Martyr hold
Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold. (Eliot 1963: 72-73)

The luminosity of the passage resides in the juxtaposition of a loving description of everyday London (the public bar, the fishermen chatting) with the ‘Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold.’ The combination is central to Eliot’s poetic: utterly faithful to the contemporary world as he sees it, yet all the while hungering for moments of beauty and spirituality that transcend that world. It is also worth commenting on the strong iambic cast of the lines, despite Pound’s proclamation about the end of iambic pentameter. Granted, there is not an extended passage of blank verse in *The Waste Land*, but the old meters are still found at the heart of poetic modernism.

For all of Eliot’s protestations that the poem was just concerned with his own crisis of 1921, the poem is clearly about nothing other than the parlous state of Western civilization. One critic has said that ‘the method is that of meaning achieved through a process of cohering intuitions, never through the statement of an externally valid point of view’ (Traversi 1976: 39), as, say, in the poetry of Tennyson. In other words, Eliot has gathered together the fragments of Western culture in the poem and it is up to the reader to sift through them for meaning. However, a *deus ex machina* does make an appearance in the final section, ‘What the Thunder Said,’ speaking in Sanskrit. It tells the reader to ‘give, sympathize and control,’ instructions which Eliot illustrates with some of his best lines of poetry:

DA

Datta: what have we given?

My friend, blood shaking my heart

The awful daring of a moment's surrender

Which an age of prudence can never retract

By this, and this only, we have existed

Which is not found in our obituaries

Or in memories draped by the beneficent spider

Or under seals broken by the lean solicitor

In our empty rooms [...]. (Eliot 1963: 78-79)

Human communication in *The Waste Land* is well-nigh impossible, but there are certain moments, as above, when it can happen. Eliot is the fervent scribe of those occasions.

Eliot's Later Poetry and Criticism

Eliot's most important later poems are *The Hollow Men* (1925), *Ash-Wednesday* (1930), and *Four Quartets* (1935-1942). There is not space here to discuss them in full. *Four Quartets*, his last major work, is a philosophical poem that meditates upon the meaning of time and mystical experience, as well as providing a somewhat oblique autobiography, as it moves between the landscapes of America and England. The war also plays a significant role as the poem progresses, especially in the last section, 'Little Gidding,' as Eliot considers the role of art in a time of crisis. Never a prolific poet, Eliot's *Collected Poems* weighs in at 235 pages. In his later years he devoted himself increasingly to drama and criticism. In many of his plays one can see a dialogue with Symbolism being continued, as he attempts to work out the relations between mystic states of vision and everyday life, with the attendant problems of

communication. Connected with this are his investigations of the foundations of human identity in a public world.

Many critics have commented on the importance of the idea of deracination to modernism in general, and Eliot's name is often invoked as a prime example of this. Although born and educated in America, he moved to England to pursue postgraduate work in philosophy, remaining there for the rest of his life, and eventually, like Henry James before him, becoming a British subject. This move back to the Old World was accompanied by an increasing traditionalism in other areas of Eliot's life. He joined the Anglican church; he declared himself a royalist; he adopted the mild anti-Semitism that was so pervasive among the English upper-classes early in the century.

His criticism was influential, and he coined several terms that conditioned the way people read and criticized literature for many decades, among them the abovementioned 'mythical method.' Another was the 'dissociation of sensibility': the idea that in the seventeenth century a split between sense and reason took place, with dire effects on literature. Eliot holds up John Donne as an example of a 'pre-dissociation' poet, who could feel his thought with the same immediacy as he could smell a rose. A third was the 'objective correlative,' the idea that the artist must find publicly shareable images that correspond to inner states of feeling. Although these ideas have now become obsolete for the way people think about literature and culture, they exerted great power in the mid-century, and one can see how they animated and provoked many eminent critics on both sides of the Atlantic, such as Randall Jarrell, William Empson, Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and F. R. Leavis. His centrality as a critic, along with the success of his poetry and his editorship of Faber and Faber, the most important publisher of poetry in Britain to this day, meant that Eliot's presence was felt in almost every corner of the world of poetry. His poetry, however, remains for many readers and critics the outstanding achievement of the century.

Robert Frost

As was outlined above, modernism's break with the past enables a discussion of some but not all of the significant poetry that was written by Americans in this era. For instance, the poetry of Robert Frost (1874-1963) is often considered the dying gasp of nineteenth-century poetry in America (emphasis on traditional poetic forms such as rhyme, stanzas, meter; reliable personae recounting the lyric moment; nature as subject matter), and yet, as Frost's dates demonstrate, he was the contemporary of the modernists, and even the most cursory glance at American poetry in the second half of the twentieth century shows that the tradition that Frost wrote in did not gutter in the 1920s and '30s but continued in full strength to the present day. Granted, it did not continue as the mainstream, but became one more in the growing array of rhetorical techniques available.

Frost is often considered the most conservative of poets, both in terms of technique and politics. He read at the 1961 inauguration of John F. Kennedy as President of the United States (as Maya Angelou would later do for Bill Clinton, albeit with a very different message). As he stood on the podium--a wise white-haired old poet, a figure the nation could trust--the wind blew away his papers. Nevertheless, he recited the poem 'The Gift Outright' from memory. He was versed in country things, as the title of one of his poems has it, and had spent a lifetime communing with nature and writing about this. When the American poetic tradition was attacked later by the Language group, they homed in on this image of Frost at the Presidential inauguration. However, Frost's public persona was in many respects at odds with his poetry: despite its traditional forms, it often takes danger, vacuum and loss, for its themes, and it does so without consoling the reader. For Frost, the safe enclosures of poetic form often forced him to meditate on what was *excluded*, left out in the cold of a winter night--the chaos that swirls wildly beyond humanity's ability to control it. His best work is

preoccupied with everything inimical to the human impulse to construct houses and fictions that protect people from the elements.

An excellent example of this is 'Desert Places,' in four quatrains rhymed AABA. The scene could not be more conventional: a man standing in the midst of nature talking about what he sees and feels. In his choice of rhyme-scheme Frost makes things a little difficult for himself by having to find three rhymes per stanza, as opposed to the more usual schemes ABAB or ABBA. This contributes to the sense that Frost has to wrestle his speaking voice in his chosen form, and this sense of muscular effort is present everywhere in his poetry. It is the exertion and achieved feats of the skilled craftsman. The snow falling cancels the usual visible world and makes the speaker feel that he is confronting a void which is alien to his self:

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast
In a field I looked into going past,
And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,
But a few weeds and stubble showing last.

The woods around it have it--it is theirs.
All animals are smothered in their lairs.
I am too absent-spirited to count;
The loneliness includes me unawares.

And lonely as it is that loneliness
Will be more lonely ere it will be less--
A blanker whiteness of benighted snow

With no expression, nothing to express.

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces

Between stars--on stars where no human race is.

I have it in me so much nearer home

To scare myself with my own desert places. (Frost 1972: 296)

Apart from a whispered *oh* the first quatrain is a neutral description of the scene. It is the second quatrain that establishes the emotional weather of the poem: the speaker is 'too absent-spirited to count,' but count what? Count the cost of the quick erasure of the landscape? The human cost of feeling out of place? The next line employs a typical Frostian paradox: loneliness is figured as a collective and inclusive state of affairs, whereas one would normally associate isolation and exclusion with the idea. Frost loves twisting our expectations. In the third verse loneliness is spreading further and further afield, and again he uses paradox: 'A blanker whiteness of benighted snow.' He is playing with the etymology of 'blank,' which is 'white,' and then describing the snow as 'benighted.' 'Benighted' has two meanings in English: it means to be covered in the darkness of the night (and to see snow at night can be a ghostly experience); and it is to be lost in moral or intellectual darkness. And then the final line strikes the most fear into the reader as much as the speaker: 'With no expression, nothing to express.' This is the real chill of the poem, a state of affairs that is completely void of communication and is what was meant above when Frost's poems were said to often take danger, vacuum, and loss as their themes. At this point the speaker is undergoing a crisis, a moment of deep fear as he feels that his own human utterance will be lost in the spreading 'loneliness' and 'blanker whiteness.' It is a fear of one's own extinction as well as a vision of the world without communication.

But then the poem turns. Something of a fighting spirit returns as Frost becomes proud almost at having faced this void, and boasts that his void is more terrible than the interstellar spaces that some 'they' is always talking about. It is this braggart tone which says: 'You think that's scary? Well, look at me, I can really scare the hell out of myself.' One usually does not brag about such things, and this paradox of being proud of one's fear, is once again a typical Frostian turn of thought. An existentialist like Albert Camus would later look into the same void and shower it with execrations, but for Frost there is something almost humorous, as though the speaker is winking at you, while never once reducing in dimensions the terror of what he sees.

Jay Parini, in his essay on Frost in *The Columbia History of American Poetry* (1993), begins by adducing Edwin Arlington Robinson and Carl Sandburg (1878-1967) as the main influences on Frost's poetry. This clearly chauvinist agenda occludes Frost's more significant relationship to the work of Thomas Hardy and Edward Thomas, both poets of the English tradition. Just as the Norton editors were anxious to establish an American pedigree for Ezra Pound, so Parini wants *his* Frost clean of European contamination. Only later does Parini admit that Thomas was 'a profound influence on his work' (Parini 1993: 262), and then only cursorily. Frost learnt several things from Hardy: first, that the pastoral mode was still alive and kicking in English poetry; second, that one does not have to abandon the formal resources of English poetry in favor of free verse in order to write work that is of its moment; and third, that it is possible to write pastoral poetry *sans* Victorian sentimentality.

But in righting the balance of American readings of Frost, such as Parini's, we must not go too far in the other direction. Frost was profoundly aware of his American background, and of New England as the primary locale for his work. The most important precursor, also from New England, was Emerson, and much of Frost's poetry conducts an intense and combative dialogue with the philosopher of Concord. Above all, Frost was concerned with the dialogue

between self and nature, and where Emerson's nature was more accommodating to the human imagination, Frost's is a place of conflict, struggle and only occasional respite. The human mind when encountering the natural world must work hard to know its place and its powers. The poems which result from these moments were, Frost thought, 'momentary stay[s] against confusion.'

Hart Crane

Frost, ensconced in the countryside of New England, was somewhat skeptical of cities and the knowledge that emanated from them, while Hart Crane (1899-1932) attempted to celebrate them in his micro-epic, *The Bridge* (1930). Along with Carl Sandburg, Crane was a kind of American Futurist who wished to forge new myths for humanity by taking the achievements of technology as his theme. What Crane needed in order to write such poetry was a public symbol of those achievements and for this he chose Brooklyn Bridge in New York, designed by the German engineer, John Roebling and built between 1867 and 1882. The poem begins in a tone of ecstatic, almost hysterical praise for the bridge, and the focus of the prologue speeds erratically around it and its environs, looking at the people working in nearby buildings, the subway diving beneath the river, a suicide standing on the bridge, white shirt billowing, about to jump (Crane himself committed suicide by drowning). The poet is inspired and intoxicated by the grandeur of the bridge in the same way that Shelley was by the west wind, and the first section ends by proclaiming that the bridge can 'lend a myth to God' (Crane 1984: 64). Explaining this modern mythology takes Crane on a whistle-stop tour of American history, which figures the bridge as the logical culmination of American cultural achievement.

Crane was completely serious in his hubristic celebrations of technology, and the higher he climbed, the harder a fall he prepared for himself. This occurs in the sixth section of the

poem, 'Quaker Hill,' where he realizes that the world, and more specifically America, remains concerned largely with money and not with the sublime symbolisms he confected around Brooklyn Bridge. That is, the technology his poem hymned was generally considered an instrument used by humanity for gaining material power, and not an object of veneration in and for itself. This realization leaves him embittered, and he is as indiscriminating in his condemnations of America as he was in his earlier praise. Although the poem ends on a positive note, this section pre-dates the more pessimistic passages and signally fails to take into account the negative visions of 'Quaker Hill.' It is a mere repetition of the ecstasies and hysteria of the Prologue, and as such is unconvincing.

19. THE POLITICAL TURN, 1930-1945

INTRODUCTION

Framed by two events that left an impact on the entire twentieth century--the New York Stock Exchange crash in October 1929 and the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945--this era witnessed an intensification of conflicts inherited from the previous decades. Cultural shifts between 1930 and 1945 corresponded to the political, economic, and social ones: with exceptions, modernist experimentation and aestheticism ceded to political commitment, which began to fade towards the end of the period. The years were also marked by the strengthening of regionalism and a sharp ascent of popular culture.

The weaknesses of the previous era culminated in the economic breakdown of the United States in the 1930s. Most notably, as Eric Hobsbawm observed, ‘the roaring 1920s were not a golden age on the farms’ (Hobsbawm 1996: 90), and nor were they roaring for factory workers and immigrants. During the Depression, the situation of workers, farmers, and immigrants even worsened. Automobile production--a symbol of the 1920s and a major sector of the American industry--halved; banks and businesses closed. Unemployed city poor crowded in soup kitchens and bread-lines, warmed by ‘Hoover blankets’ (old newspapers) and ‘Hoover leather’ (paper lining in shoes). Farmers migrated in search of employment, especially from the draught-stricken Dust Bowl. (Their plight was immortalized in John Steinbeck’s canonical novel, [*The Grapes of Wrath*](#) [1939], discussed below.) Large numbers of immigrants were deported and strict immigrant quotas were introduced. It proved fatal for many German Jews, who were denied refuge from their increasingly fascist homeland. (In spite of the anti-immigration policy, however, immigrants continued to arrive--and write literature as well. An interesting contribution is *Out of this Furnace* [1941], written by a

Slovak-American author Thomas Bell ‘as an answer to all those unthinking people who looked down on the Slovaks’ [Sollors 2002: 391].)

The depression did not merely swell the ranks of the poor and homeless; it also increased their abilities to organize and protest. Labor unrest was driven both by the workers themselves and by various left-wing groups, associations, and parties. The era witnessed the forceful development of the modern American labor movement. Women and minorities contributed; however, the most prominent leaders were white and male, and problems of race and gender were subordinated to those of class. (As Barbara Foley pointed out [Foley 1990: 161], Thomas Bell’s novel *All Brides Are Beautiful* [1936], which features an unemployed leftist radical who contents himself with domestic work while his wife is employed, is exceptional. In most proletarian literature, just as in the real world of leftist politics, the situation was the opposite.)

Elsewhere, the situation of women and minorities was similar. On the one hand, there were improvements; on the other, much remained unchanged. The Depression altered family patterns. Marriage, birth, and divorce rates fell (in part because people could not afford any of them), and white women were forced to search for work due to the overall economical instability. At the same time, most New Deal programs were designed for unemployed white males and they ‘reinforced socially conservative views of women’s work inside and outside the home’ (Kleinberg 2006: 201). The case was similar for African Americans, who were appointed to various federal institutions, but continued to suffer from segregation and discrimination. No Civil Rights legislation was passed during this period, and the racial stratification of the society persisted. The Empire State Building--opened in 1931 to demonstrate financial and economic power--remained empty due to the Depression, but it became profitable through the movie *King Kong* (1933), exploiting the deep anxiety of the white male America that had built it: that of miscegenation.

The Depression's economic, political, and social conditions were echoed in the cultural sphere. 'Stark economic realities and new political intensities distanced the twenties from the thirties,' David Minter wrote, and 'writers were acting more like eager-minded schoolchildren bent on studying the past and organizing reform movements than like cultural refugees left with nothing to fall back on except the lonely discipline of writing and the shared pursuit of pleasure and prosperity' (Minter 2002: 187). Certainly, the entire 'nervous generation' of the 1920s did not begin to 'write red' the day the market crashed; some continued to work largely unaffected. Poets such as Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, and Robert Frost, whose poetry in various ways extended the modernist projects of the previous two decades, reacted to changing social circumstances without becoming politically engaged. Other writers remained critical of the establishment, but without a political commitment: Henry Miller, for example, opposed bourgeois morality in his Tropics trilogy (1934-1939), and Djuna Barnes did the same, in a less misogynist manner, in her highly experimental *Nightwood* (1936). Both writers followed the tracks of detached, defiant, and alienated modernists; during the 1930s exiled and in the case of Miller, outlawed.

At the same time, literature--poetry notwithstanding--became overtly engaged with politics. In the words of Tim Woods:

Michael Gold wrote manifestos exhorting a proletarian poetry; John Wheelwright produced a hybrid poetry of Christianity and Marxism; Muriel Rukeyser produced a strongly first committed first book of poetry entitled *Theory of Flight* (1935); and this is not to mention works by poets as diverse as Genevieve Taggard, Edna St. Vincent Millay, E. E. Cummings, Richard Wright, Edgar Lee Masters, Edwin Markham, William V. Moody, Lola Ridge, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Carl Sandburg, all of whom

contributed to the range of socially engaged poetry marked 'political' in the period.

(Woods 2006: 457)

Some literary trajectories turned to the right (one extreme being that of Ezra Pound); but most writers consciously supported leftist politics. The largest left organization of the Depression years, the Communist Party, sponsored cultural activities, such as John Reed Clubs, and published its literary periodicals, like *The New Masses*. In the mid-1930s, many unemployed writers began to work under the patronage of the Federal Writers' Project (FWP, 1935-1943). (The Federal Theater Project is discussed below.) Its main objective was the American Guide Series, but the program supported a number of leftist and African-American writers, like Nelson Algren, Richard Wright, John Steinbeck, Arna Bontemps, and Margaret Walker. Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), for example, was written while he was employed by FWP. Other writers--like Dorothy Parker or, more famously, Ernest Hemingway--turned to fighting fascism in Europe.

An intensified engagement of literature with politics contributed to the revival of realism in the 1930s. 'The Dean of U. S. Proletarian Literature,' Mike Gold, advocated 'proletarian realism,' and many works that centered on the hungry poor emerged, including Nelson Algren's *Somebody in Boots* (1935) and Josephine Herbst's Trexler family trilogy (1933-1939). Yet, the Depression realism was affected by modernism and many socially committed writers employed modernist techniques, including linguistic experimentation, stream of consciousness, and shifts in narrative perspective. Much of Langston Hughes's writing, for example, is jazz-induced, and John Dos Passos's Depression era magnum opus, *USA* (1930-1936), consists of twelve fictional narratives from different points of view, making use of newspaper headlines, political speeches, lyric fragments, and stream-of-

consciousness memoir, among others. Even the widely ridiculed proletarian novel, Clara Weatherwax's *Marching! Marching!* (1935), experiments with typeface and punctuation.

In their collection of essays *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930), twelve 'Southern Agrarians' condemned industrial capitalism, materialist ethics, technology, consumerist habits, and wasteful competition. They advocated instead a return to the 'leisurely' agrarian life of the past. Even though several of the 'Agrarians,' most notably John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, and Cleanth Brooks, enjoyed more renown as the fathers of New Criticism, which dominated the American academy after World War II, they continued to nourish their connections with the South. Brooks, for example, helped with the formation of Faulkner Studies and Southern Literature Studies.

Interwar regionalism, however, was not exclusively southern, white, male, and chauvinistic. As Robert L. Dorman pointed out, it included 'pioneer agrarian-republican communities, Indian tribal cultures, and immigrant-borne folk life' (Dorman 1993: 10), as well as growing African-American presence. Besides the outstanding (albeit in the 1930s unappreciated) figure of William Faulkner, literary voices from the regions include Eudora Welty, Erskine Caldwell, Thomas Wolfe, Zora Neale Hurston, and Katherine Ann Porter. These writers, in their disparate ways, focused on the life outside the city, and explored the effects of modernization and industrialization on the region. Regionalism also found strong expression through folklore. The Folklore Project (run under FWP), collected various forms of testimonies from across the United States, with an emphasis on areas distant from urban centers. It contributed to the revival of folk music during the 1930s and the emergence of National Folk Festivals.

At the beginning of the 1930s, the United States plunged into the depression. At the end of World War II, it emerged victoriously and, backed-up by the Bomb, began to dominate Western postwar policy. The war boosted the country's economy and brought changes in the

social sphere, largely due to the newly created opportunities for employment. Farmers' profits increased; women and minorities were needed both in combat and production. Migration increased once again. Patriotism helped soothe conflicts that accompanied wartime social changes, but not always successfully: 1943 race riots in Detroit and New York, for example, left behind several dead (O'Brien 2006: 245). Membership in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People sharply increased, and another civil rights organization, the Congress of Racial Equality, was founded in 1942. The war and internal social unrest led to the creation of the Fair Employment Practices Committee, which was a step towards desegregation, but the era also brought about an expansion of the government's international and domestic intelligence services; 'to meet its new responsibilities, the FBI increased both its number of agents and its budget fivefold' (O'Brien 2006: 246).

Somewhat ironically, the war years also began the official resurrection of modernism. As Werner Sollors wrote, 'the US became virtually identified with the culture of modernism by mid-century so that modernism now appeared as American as apple pie, the culture of modernism as an American 'homemade world,' and modern art as 'the great American thing'' (Sollors 2002: 362). The shift, as Sollors pointed out, had little to do with modernist artists and writers themselves; rather it was influenced by the aesthetic choices made by the United States's enemies: Nazi Germany and, progressively more clearly, the Soviet Union. That both Germany and the Soviet Union eventually chose realism as their guiding aesthetics was partially responsible for the sanctioning of modernism in the West in the second half of twentieth century, during the Cold War.

POPULAR CULTURE, BEGINNINGS TO 1945

The burgeoning of popular culture dates primarily to the last two decades of the nineteenth century, when massive immigration, urbanization, technological innovations, and economical

shifts 'prompted a multifaceted mass culture where tens of thousands and then hundreds of thousands and more could simultaneously enjoy the same minted music (definitely including dance), literature, vaudeville and then film' (Buhle 2006: 392). Drawing on the folk culture of the past, but complicit with the structures and technologies of capitalism, modern popular culture has emerged in multiple forms, ranging from early newspapers, dime novels, exhibitions, and minstrel shows to a contemporary 'set of generally available artefacts: films, records, clothes, TV programmes, modes of transport, etc.' (Hebdige 1988: 47).

The early twentieth century established three forms--radio, cinema, and recording technology: these gradually marginalized the printed word and live performances, which had constituted the foundations of popular culture in the previous century. Radio, developed for nautical and military reasons, turned into a commercial success, and cinema attracted audiences from its infancy: by 1910, tens of millions of Americans went at least once a week to the movies (Cullen 1996: 142). Popular print culture nevertheless lived on, for instance in the 'pulp': fiction magazines of various genres from 'the bottom of the literary pyramid in terms of esteem, cost, and the status of its readership' (Cullen 1996: 159). Likewise, although recording technology transformed popular music and helped the popularity of some of the greatest jazz names in history, such as Duke Ellington or Louis Armstrong, records were initially white middle-class entertainment (notably, the authors of the first jazz record were white) and jazz continued to be disseminated through clubs.

The depression intensified the growth of popular culture. Radio became a real mass medium. Gone were the days when ladies worried that listening to wireless programs might mar their faces with 'radio wrinkles.' In the 1930s, nearly everybody--the rich and the poor, the metropolis and the region, the educated and the illiterate--could follow the latest news as it happened, listen to Roosevelt's 'fireside chats,' sing along with Woody Guthrie, or shed some tears with a radio soap opera. But news and entertainment came hand in hand with

advertisement, and listeners were urged to buy Pilsbury cookies and Lucky Strike cigarettes. Probably the best known broadcast from the era was Orson Welles's adaptation of the H. G. Wells's novel *The War of the Worlds*, which many unsuspecting Americans mistook for an announcement of an actual Martian invasion. It spurred further studies of the power of the mass media.

With television still in the cradle, the Hollywood industry boomed. Tickets were surprisingly cheap, and people in spite (or because) of the depression flooded the cinema. By 1930, movies could talk and soon after, they appeared in gleaming colors. In a number of films, as Paul Buhle wrote, 'New Dealish sentiments were evinced and extended leftward, with Paul Muni, Gary Cooper, or James Stewart as heroic exemplars of outraged decency at the social effects of unemployment and, however belatedly, the threat of fascism' (Buhle 2006: 399). Social dramas appeared (e.g., *Massacre* [1933], a film about the plight of the Native Americans). The immigrant avant-garde continued to influence the development of American cinema, both in terms of content and technique, but the industry was also affected by censorship, exerted both on moral and political grounds. The depression's later years gave rise to patriotic films like *G-men* (1935) or *Special Agent* (1935), in which gangster heroes changed into police officers. The greatest popularity was enjoyed by backstage musicals, screwball comedies, horrors, and westerns. It was also the golden age of animation, dominated by Disney classics like *Three Little Pigs* (1933) or *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937).

The paperback revolution of the 1930s popularized a few 'high-brow' authors, like John Steinbeck or Ernest Hemingway, but real best-sellers were historical epics such as Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1937), which sold three and a half million copies in a decade, and detective fiction (Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Erle Stanley Gardner). Nationwide, Americans read magazines, saturated with advertising, and comics

gained popularity. They ranged from adventure titles (featuring heroes as Tarzan, Superman, Batman, the Human Torch, and Plastic Man), detective strips, and soap-opera strips to ‘Tijuana Bibles’--underground comics depicting, for instance, the popular cartoon characters Popeye and Henry ‘engaged in explicitly erotic activity’ (Somers and Pogel 1982: 273). The genre of science-fiction (discussed in the following chapter) expanded, and so did children’s and juvenile literature. As Julia L. Mickenberg pointed out, children’s literature played a significant role during the Cold War, but already in the politicized climate of the depression, it was increasingly viewed as a way to influence the future of the country. It included such books as *Popo and Fifina: Children of Haiti* (1932) by Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, which beautifies the persistence of the Haitian poor.

THEATER

Theater at a Time of Crisis

Inevitably the collapse of the American economy with the Wall Street Crash 1929 and the Depression had a profound effect on theater throughout the 1930s. Theater, Christopher Bigsby avers

was the immediate heir to the break-up of the liberal synthesis. The small town had given way to the anonymous city; the independent farmer to the industrial worker. Historicist convictions seemed to have foundered on the reality of geo-political conflict. The spaces, physical and social, which the nineteenth-century theatre in America had celebrated, had now disappeared. [...] Modernity, once welcomed as kind of pure energy which could be converted into dynamic motion, into technological marvels or into a sustained pressure against the boundaries of the possible, was now regarded as an entropic force. (Bigsby 1985: 122, 123)

Although O'Neill's work in the 1930s shuns direct political engagement with these new realities, then much of the other work produced throughout the decade did not. Indeed, 'the dramatic literature of the 1930s reverberates with sociopolitical commentary' (Fletcher 2005: 106), and the pulses of opposing ideologies are strong. The growth of black theater in the 1920s (associated with the Harlem Renaissance and a number of highly successful Broadway musicals) continued in the 1930s with plays by Langston Hughes (1902-1967) like *Mulatto* (1935), musicals like *Porgy and Bess* (1935), and the greater visibility of black performers. Additionally, the vast numbers of immigrants from Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe, who had flooded into the United States between the 1880s and 1930s, gave rise to theaters that catered to their specific communities. The most prominent among these was the Yiddish Theatre in New York, although the assimilation of immigrant Jews into American life, suburbanization and the mass murder of the Jews in Europe during World War II lead to a decline in the Yiddish Theatre after the war. Perhaps more importantly, Jewish Americans play a central role in the performing arts in America from this period onwards, as playwrights, directors, actors and filmmakers.

The period is defined by the emergence of a number of significant playwrights, as well as several schemes that were to prove influential for American theater's identity and future trajectories. The Group Theatre was to fuse interests in Russian theories of performance with a commitment to actor training. The Federal Theatre Project was a unique Depression era experiment that gave rise to some extraordinary productions; historically the Federal Theatre Project crystallized radically opposed notions of the arts and of freedom of speech. Both will be discussed in further detail below before turning to some of dramatists of the era.

The Group Theatre (1931-1940)

The Group Theatre was formed by theater director and drama critic Harold Clurman (1901-1980), actor and director Lee Strasberg (1901-1982), and producer and director Cheryl Crawford (1902-1986). The group wanted to found a company with a professional and political direction. All three had worked in some capacity with the Theatre Guild and were discontented with it. However, their first production of Paul Green's *The House of Connelly* (1931) was mounted in 1931 with the co-operation of the Theatre Guild. Clurman was to boldly, though not completely accurately, assess the situation in American theater as follows:

We have, on the American stage, all the separate elements for a Theatre, but no Theatre. We have playwrights without their theatre-groups, directors without their actors, actors without plays or directors, scene-designers without anything. Our theatre is an anarchy of individual talents. (qtd. in Smith 1990: 5)

Their goal, to develop an ensemble and ensemble acting is clear from their first activity. Along with Strasberg and Crawford, Clurman assembled a group of actors, among them Stella Adler (1901-1992) (daughter of the famous Yiddish actor Jacob Adler) and Sanford Meisner (1905-1997), and launched an intensive training program for actors during the summer of 1931. Following the successful production of *The House of Connelly*, and a definitive break with the Theatre Guild, the Group Theatre was born. They declared themselves 'an organization of actors and directors formed with the ultimate aim of creating a permanent acting company to maintain regular New York seasons' (Bordman and Hirschak 2004: 279).

Strasberg honed a system of actor training that became known as 'The Method.' Derived from the practices of Konstantin Stanislavski, it involved a combination of improvisation and 'exercises in affective memory' (Bigsby 1985: 160). The focus was upon honesty and authenticity. While the actors of the Group pursued the truth of performance, a

concern for political and social truths was never too distant. Bigsby argues that Clurman was not really political, however many of the plays the produced were overtly leftist or pacifist, like for instance Clifford Odets's *Awake and Sing* (1935), *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), and *Till the Day I Die* (1935), or the anti-war musical by Paul Green and Kurt Weill, *Johnny Johnson* (1936).

The Group Theatre survived for a decade but was never financially self-sustaining. It finally split up as a result of financial pressures and personal disputes concerning 'The Method.' Stella Adler then founded the Stella Adler Studio, while Cheryl Crawford, Elia Kazan, Robert Lewis, and Anna Sokolow founded The Actor's Studio. They were later joined by Strasberg, who became the Studio's director in 1951. Method acting and its spin-off forms have had profound influence on American acting techniques ever since.

The Federal Theatre Project (1935-1939)

The Federal Theatre Project was, without doubt, a most remarkable and ambitious governmental project. Barry Witham's history of the Federal Theatre describes it as 'a unique and influential experiment in American theatre; not just for its outspoken politics, but because it reimagined the very way that theatre was produced' (Witham 2003: 1). Begun in 1935, this New Deal National initiative was designed to give work to artists and theater personnel, who had been hit by the Depression, across the United States. Theatre professor Hallie Flanagan was selected to lead the project by the Works Project Administration. It supported a range of dramatic and theatrical activities including African American theater, experimental theater, and a venture that was to become its controversial nemesis--The Living Newspaper.

The Living Newspaper concept began in Russia at the time of the Bolshevik Revolution (as *Zhivaya Gazeta*) and was from the outset grounded in political critique and a call to action. Its American incarnation sought, in the words of Flanagan, 'to dramatize a new

struggle--the search of the average American today for knowledge about his country and his world; to dramatize his struggle to turn the great natural and economic forces of our time toward a better life for more people' (qtd. in Cosgrove 1982: 238). Yet when productions such as *Triple-A Plowed Under* and *Injunction Granted* (both 1935) scathingly criticized government policy, lampooned influential businessmen, and openly espoused left-wing militant action, the project was criticized by many in power. The aim to support a 'free, adult, uncensored theatre' (Bordman and Hirschak 2004: 220) foundered as anxieties about the spread of Communism and political disloyalty to America rose at the close of the 1930s. Following an investigation carried out by the newly formed Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), and accusations of disseminating propaganda, Congress abolished the Federal Theatre Project in 1939. The Federal Theatre Project was, however, remarkable in what it had achieved during its brief existence, supporting a vast range of performances across the country and a generation of theater practitioners and writers including Orson Welles, Arthur Miller, Elia Kazan, and Mark Blitzstein.

Playwrights of the 1930s and Early '40s

Elmer Rice (1892-1967) is a writer whose dramatic work spanned the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. Hugely popular in his day, he wrote over fifty plays, four novels, as well as books on theater. As mentioned earlier, his play *The Adding Machine* (1923) is a striking modernist satire. In the following decade he produced a sequence of works (generally not very well received) with strong socio-political motifs and themes; these include, the socially didactic *We, The People* (1933), an anti-fascist play, *Judgment Day* (1934), and *Between Two Worlds* (1934) in which American and Soviet ideologies are debated. Rice is sometimes compared with the playwright Clifford Odets (discussed below), but despite apparently shared interests at this point in their careers in contrast to the latter writer, Rice was not so much a radical than

a voice of nostalgia expressing ‘a desire for the restoration of American idealism, for liberal principles undermined by urbanism and industrialism’ (Biggsby 1985: 126). In this respect he might be considered in relation to another playwright of the day--Thornton Wilder. Rice was both a strong critic of the Theatre Guild and was the first director of the New York office of the Federal Theatre Project. He resigned in 1936 in protest over the censorship of one of the Living Newspaper productions which satirized Mussolini’s Italian forces.

Of the new playwrights to appear during the 1930s, Clifford Odets (1906-1963) was one of the most successful voices of leftist polemical drama. He had first become involved with the Group Theatre as an actor, but was to contribute much more to the Group as a playwright. And although much of what he produced has been criticized as mere agit-prop, two plays stand out, not only as vibrant instances of the political theater of the 1930s but also as works that continue to be revived.

Waiting for Lefty (1935) is fine example of a drama geared to a specific moment and problem. A one-act play, composed of seven short scenes, it stages a confrontation between workers (taxi drivers) and union leaders. It concludes with a rousing appeal to the ‘Workers of the World’ to fight for their rights and the chant of ‘Strike! Strike!’ The play used non-naturalistic techniques that collapsed the distance, or fourth wall, between actors and audience. According to accounts of the premier, the audience was so roused by the plight of the beleaguered workers that it spontaneously joined in the final chant, stamping and shouting long after the play had ended. Subsequently, *Waiting for Lefty* toured the country and played in one hundred and four cities, and was banned in seven others as Communist propaganda (Weales 1985: 39). Clurman ecstatically declared the play to be ‘the birth cry of the ’30s’ (Clurman 1957: 139) and certainly it typifies the spirit of the age. Since it was a short work, *Waiting for Lefty* was twinned with another play by Odets called *Till the Day I Die* (1935). Biggsby describes *Till the Day I Die* as ‘one of the first serious anti-Nazi plays to reach

Broadway,' but also questions its 'painfully naïve endorsement of the move towards consensus left-wing politics' (Biggsby 1985: 164). Regardless of its flaws, what is clear is that the shadow of the political turmoil in Europe had already begun to fall across the American stage.

Awake and Sing! Odets's other success that same year was in fact written before *Waiting for Lefty*. Initially entitled *I Got the Blues*, it was at first rejected by his colleagues in the Group Theatre who disliked its social realism and Jewish subject matter. The action is centered in the domestic space of a Depression-era Jewish-American urban family, the Bergers, each of whom longs to escape their physical and spiritual impoverishment. The play is a solid piece of social drama, deploying none of the experimental techniques of *Waiting for Lefty*, and is actually much more typical of Odets's work. What is shared, however, is a call to action--although the nature of the action required is rather unspecified. As Anne Fletcher observes, Odets's plays tend towards sentimentality, but they also 'encourage audience identification with protagonists who seek solace from their discouraging economic, social, and political conditions, aspiring to 'awake and sing'--individually and collectively' (Fletcher 2005: 114). This fusion of sentiment and social commitment was to make Odets one of the most promising and popular new dramatists of the 1930s. In the 1940s he was to turn his attention to screenwriting for Hollywood, but though a prolific writer he never attained the success that seemed his due in the '30s. His contribution to American theater lies in the manner in which he, along with a younger generation of writers, including Lillian Hellmann, 'influenced the general shift to a more polemical tone' in the theater of Broadway (Murphy 1987: 176).

Like Odets, Lillian Hellmann (1905-1984) was another prominent critic of the malevolent effects of capitalism. Yet, in contrast to Odets's best work, most of Hellmann's now seems rather dated. Thomas P. Adler considers her status at length in 'Lillian Hellmann:

Feminism, Formalism, and Politics' (Adler 1999: 118-133), and lends substance to the claim that both Hellmann and her work remain of consequence within the historical context--she was the first woman playwright to win a place in the male dominated canon of dramatic literature. Her play *Days to Come* (1936) tackles the subject of strikes and strike breakers, but compared to *Waiting for Lefty* it is rather unwieldy and didactic. Similarly, *The Little Foxes* (1939), a play that was a box-office hit, explores the destructiveness of greed. *The Children's Hour* (1934) stands somewhat apart from this genre of political subject matter, but was nonetheless hugely controversial since it deals with the theme of lesbianism. Hellmann creates a superbly evil gossiping schoolgirl who destroys the lives of her school headmistresses with the suggestion that they are lovers. Undeniably the play is flawed, ending with a moment of glaringly over-determined melodrama, yet it is significant in its engagement with a sexual taboo untouched by her contemporaries at this time.

By the 1930s Thornton Wilder (1897-1975) was already a novelist of some renown--*The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927) being his most successful novel. Although he penned ten full plays and numerous short dramas between the 1920s and 1960s, he is best remembered for two plays. Both *Our Town* (1938) and *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942) were awarded Pulitzer Prizes and of these two *Our Town* is his most enduring dramatic work--it remains one of the most regularly performed works of the America dramatic canon. Wilder deliberately distances himself from the political tendencies manifest in the work of many of his contemporaries. As mentioned above, like Rice, he is a playwright who seems to be in pursuit of old-fashioned American values, though his methodology is vastly different.

Wilder had been accused as early as 1930, of being a 'poet of a small sophisticated class ... our genteel bourgeoisie' (Mike Gold qtd. in Bigsby 1985: 256), and of ignoring the realities of American life. *Our Town* is both an answer this charge while at the same time parodying the concern to represent the political in drama--at the beginning of the play a

character asks: 'Is there no one in town aware of social injustice or industrial inequality?' The answer, that 'we do all we can to help those that can't help themselves and those that can we leave alone' (Wilder 1957: 17), represents, as Bigsby notes, 'the kind of cracker-barrel philosophy' that had so inflamed Wilder's critics at the time (Bigsby 1985: 260).

Our Town is a curious combination of formal experiment and thematic conservatism. Through the device of a Stage Manager who introduces the characters, fields a discussion about the play and its setting with (actors planted in) the audience, organizes the action on stage, Wilder denies any recourse to naturalism. The sentimentality of the story of happy families, adolescent love, marriage, and premature death--humble American existence as it is experienced in Grover's Corners, New Hampshire--is undermined by the interventions of the Stage Manager figure, but is never subjected to critique or cynicism. The result is a play that elevates parochial experience and folk wisdom to the status of eternal truths in a context that is sociologically and historically vague at best. As such it stands in opposition both to the politicized drama of the day and to the tragic theater of Eugene O'Neill. In Bigsby's view the outcome is ultimately problematic:

Wilder domesticates the metaphysical, reconciles the individual to his fate, closes the gap between spirit and fact. [...] Where the tragic spirit regrets the victory of the timeless and the universal over the individual, Wilder celebrates it [...] There is no individual sensibility which focuses the moral action. It is a drama without conflict. His characters struggle neither with fate nor with history. They transgress no code and hence are required to offer no atonement. The arbitrary is effortlessly accommodated. Submission is presented as a primary virtue. (Bigsby 1985: 268)

Such criticisms have had little effect on the popularity of the play, but they certainly cast Wilder's spiritual confidence and universalizing humanism in a less sympathetic light.

The escalation of World War II also affected American theater. Wilder's allegorical play *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942) is perhaps the most aesthetically adventurous in its surrealistic survey of human folly from the Ice Age to the present via the characters of the Antrobus family. Other plays that treat the subject more directly consider the need to act against fascism and the debates around interventionism. Robert E. Sherwood's (1896-1955) *There Shall Be No Night* (1941), Maxwell Anderson's (1888-1959) *Candle in the Wind*, and Lillian Hellman's *Watch on the Rhine* (1941) all argue for the necessity of active resistance to the threat of fascism, while Hellman's *The Searching Wind* (1944) examines 'the moral failure of left-leaning intellectuals who fooled themselves about historical events' leading up to the war (Adler 2005: 160-161).

Meanwhile two playwrights who later become central among the postwar generation of dramatists were just beginning their careers. Arthur Miller (1915-2005) had been involved in the Federal Theatre Project in 1938, wrote *The Man Who Had All the Luck* in 1940. Its first production on Broadway in 1944 ran for only four performances, almost scuppering Miller's playwriting career at its outset. Similarly, Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) began writing in the mid-thirties. He unsuccessfully attempted to persuade the Group Theatre to produce *Not About Nightingales* in 1938 and sent his second long play, *The Fugitive Kind* (1937), to the Federal Theatre Project for consideration. It was never produced, but Williams's breakthrough came soon after with *The Glass Menagerie* (written in 1941, first staged in Chicago in 1944 and on Broadway in 1945).

War and the Costs of Political Allegiance

By 1945, America was on the cusp of a new era marked by a burgeoning pride and cultural confidence coupled with an intolerance of political difference. As Adler describes, the ‘nature of American experience in the 1940s and 1950s’ was ‘bipolar or bifurcated.’ The unity of purpose in defeating the enemy outside--the Nazis, later Communism--folds back worryingly into a paranoia about the enemy within--race politics, anti-Semitism, Japanese Americans, and, finally, communists at home (Adler 2005: 159). As will be evident in the following chapter, many of the writers and artists who were moved by social injustice and leftist politics in the 1930s were to be targeted and punished in the 1950s for their earlier political allegiances.

Finally at the end of the war a number of tendencies in American theater might be observed. John Bell sums up two of the most prominent as follows--in the realm of the popular and commercial ‘Broadway theater’ s persistent traditional strengths were refracted through the cultural lens of its five years of wartime service as the United States’ live, patriotic representation of Anglo-American culture’ (Bell 2004: 112). Simultaneously, more ambivalent reflections upon existence within this swiftly changing American cultural landscape are dramatized by a new generation of playwrights. And in this respect Tennessee Williams’s *The Glass Menagerie* may be perceived as heralding a new sensibility, ‘set[ting] the tone for the postwar American drama by combining an interest in realism [...] with an introspective, almost psychoanalytic focus on the depths of individual consciousness tortured by the day-to-day struggles of American society’ (Bell 2004: 113).

POETRY

Periodization

Chronology is a problem for poetry in this period. The poets discussed below are usually grouped with T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound as Modernist, as most came to creative maturity in

the 1910s and 1920s, and thus are not particularly associated with the period of this chapter. Yet, by 1930 Stevens had only published one collection and Moore one and a half (the second reprinted many of the poems in the first); and while Williams, in contrast, had already published nine books of poetry and prose, he would publish almost twice that amount again from 1930 to his death. The second reason for arranging these poets thus is that Eliot and Pound had immediate effect on poetry of the 1920s (*The Waste Land* became the definitive poem of the decade, and Pound, through Imagism and his other poetry of the period 1910-1930, established the taste of a generation--two facts that irritated Williams in particular); whereas the influence of Stevens, Moore, and Williams is only to be felt later in the century. The third reason is that the arrangement also serves to articulate, or perhaps disrupt, the narrative of Modernism discussed in the previous chapter. It allows us to see Stevens, for instance, as a late Romantic rather than a rebellious Modernist, in stark contrast to, say, Eliot who had little time for Shelley, Keats, and Wordsworth.

Marianne Moore

The poems of Marianne Moore (1887-1972) appear both experimental and conservative. Often employing a syllabic system over syllabotonic or composing in the musical phrase (as Pound had it), her lines twist and snake over the page in repeating stanzaic patterns. While her rhymes are carefully concocted they often, because of irregular enjambments, are available to the eye and not the ear. The poetry is at times extremely obscure, and this is usually caused, paradoxically, by the extreme precision--both factual and stylistic--that Moore brought to her art. And yet in their probity, scientific accuracy, and occasional mordant political observations, they seem like the products of the Victorian era. The radical idiosyncrasy of her poetry persuades us that she would have written thus no matter what era she was born into; she found an audience in the twentieth century because taste had been transformed. Certainly,

Marianne Moore would not have transformed herself to accommodate taste: she was *sui generis*.

She was raised in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and attended Bryn Mawr outside Philadelphia. From 1920 she was a regular contributor to the *Dial*, and in 1925, became its editor, until it folded in 1929. The magazine was one of the most influential of the time (it provided the first American publication of Eliot's *Waste Land*), and, as her correspondence shows, Moore was a gifted editor, who despite her fragile and ladylike appearances had no difficulty tussling with the occasionally ferocious attacks of the young men of the avant garde. As a reviewer, she was quick to recognize the talents of Stevens and Williams, among others, and the fairness and insight of her criticism won her many admirers.

It is both easy and difficult to say what her poetry is *about*. Sometimes the subject is announced clearly by the title ('The Pangolin,' 'The Steeple-Jack,' though 'An Octopus' is about a glacier), but even then the trajectory of the poem will move in surprising ways. Just under half of 'The Pangolin' furnishes a precise description of appearance and habits of the animal, but what engages most is the inventive turns that Moore introduces to that material. Having twice referred to aspects of the animal as 'graceful,' Moore then ponders:

To explain grace requires
a curious hand. If that which is at all were not forever,
why would those who graced the spires
with animals and gathered there to rest, on cold luxurious
low stone seats--a monk and monk and monk--between the thus
ingenious roof supports, have slaved to confuse
grace with a kindly manner, time in which to pay a debt,
the cure for sins, a graceful use

of what are yet
approved stone mullions branching out across
the perpendiculars? A sailboat

was the first machine. Pangolins, made
for moving quietly also, are models of exactness,
on four legs; on hind feet plantigrade,
with certain postures of a man. Beneath sun and moon, man slaving
to make his life more sweet, leaves half the flowers worth having,
needing to choose wisely how to use his strength;
a paper-maker like the wasp; a tractor of foodstuffs,
like the ant; spidering a length
of web from bluffs
above a stream; in fighting, mechanicked
like the pangolin; capsizing in

disheartenment. Bedizened or stark
naked, man, the self, the being we call human, writing-
master to this world, griffons a dark
'Like does not like like that is obnoxious'; and writes error with four
r's. (Moore 2003: 225-26)

She moves to the image of a cathedral: this is visually similar in some respects to the armor of the pangolin (the vaults of the roof) and the gargoyles are at least as strange as the pangolin. The cathedral is connected with the value of grace, as part of Catholic theology and ethics.

The meditation then considers humankind in general and its work, but not before declaring gnomically, ‘A sailboat // was the first machine.’ Moore’s own notes to the poem refer us here to a book entitled *Power: Its Application from the 17th Dynasty to the 20th Century* (1923). This perhaps makes us think of humanity’s close relationship with machines, and the pangolin himself, armored and metallic, has a ‘machine-like / form’ (Moore 2003: 225), Moore tells us elsewhere in the poem. This does not amount to argument, but rather it is a constellation of references which brings us further into the preoccupations of the poem. We often draw a boundary between the natural world and machines: Moore however instructs us about their similarities, while also suggesting the long course of history, stretching back to the Middle Ages (the cathedrals), and ancient Egypt (the 17th dynasty), during which humans have been at work on these machines and ethical systems. Moore’s nature then is not romanticized, rather it is the scene of personifications and precisions, as the poet by times entertains the ways that humanity projects its own emotions on the natural world, and by times corrects these distortions by accurate observation and research. Quite often the natural world stares back at humanity, somewhat threateningly, as the sea does in ‘A Grave,’ or redemptively as at the end of ‘The Rigorists.’

An important aspect of her method of composition is her use of quotation. Some of her poems are centos of a kind (the most extreme example is ‘An Octopus’), stringing together quotations from a wide range of sources into a single text. The effect is not unlike the use of sampling in a lot of popular music of the last few decades. Although one does not recognize Moore’s sources as, say, one recognizes Dido in ‘Stan’ (2000) by Eminem, or Serge Gainsbourg in ‘Nouveau Western’ (1994) by MC Solaar, one senses a new tonal texture (sometimes from an overheard conversation, a scientific treatise, a sports column), and that changing texture of the poems is one of their primary attractions. Rather than one lyric voice leading the reader through the poem, we have a polyphony. The inimitable style of Moore is

to be found then not in the expression of her own emotions or ideas, but in her position as Master of Ceremonies, ushering other people's ideas and emotions in and out of her complex stanzaic forms.

William Carlos Williams

As one surveys poetry in the English language in the first three decades of the century, it becomes clear that most of the leading figures (with the exception of the Irish poet, W. B. Yeats) are American. Attempts have been made by some critics and editors to adopt this phenomenon to notions of literary nationalism (a good case in point being the tendentious selections from Pound's poetry in the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, which suggest that Whitman had a greater influence on Pound than all the troubadours of Provence and the poets of China). This occludes the non-American elements in his poetry. However, it is no distortion to say that the poetry of William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) is good material for any literary nationalist.

Williams loudly proclaimed himself the enemy of everything that Eliot stood for, asserting that *The Waste Land*, with its pseudo-scholarly notes and arcane references, set poetry back twenty years. The poem was the opposite of what Williams conceived of as an autochthonous American art, that is, an art that was *of* the land of America, *of* its people and, most importantly, *of* its language. His was an insistently local art in the same way that William Faulkner's was. For Williams, as for Faulkner, the experimental strategies of Modernism did not alienate the poet from his place (as in the case of Eliot in the city) but ideally brought him closer. The critic Joseph Riddel formulates it thus:

Williams saw the American poet as blocked from his origins by the authority of history, the tradition. Language had become knowledge, had accumulated a

semantic destiny which separated writing from its origin. Symbolism was only the most recent instance of this rupture of words and things. The search for some new measure meant having to overthrow the authority of history, and of the literary tradition, which placed the center of measure in an origin somewhere in the receding depth of the past. (Riddel 1974: 34)

So, as with Pound's Imagist manifesto, the central gesture here is of elimination of stagnant literary rhetoric, which is also a search for origins--be they social or literary (as opposed to the Postmodernist approach which problematizes the very idea of 'origin'). Indeed, what characterizes a lot of Williams's poetry and prose is a feeling of impatience and sometimes anger that this elimination is not occurring at a fast enough rate. (In *Spring and All* [1923], he suggests that some sort of apocalypse might profitably speed the process along.) In this he resembles Pound (a lifelong friend), but what should be stressed is his insistence that the ground where this will take place--that is, the recapture of origins, the renovation of language so that it is once more in touch with things, the consequent renovation of sight, in other words, Modernism itself--is America and not the ateliers and cafés of the decadent Old World.

Williams spent most of his working life as a doctor in the town of Rutherford, New Jersey, and as I mentioned earlier, his poetry displays a firm commitment to the local. The greatest expression of this is the long sequence of over two hundred pages, *Paterson* (1946-1958) set in the eponymous town in New Jersey, near Rutherford. The technique employed by Williams in this poem is collage: short lyric sections describing the land- and city-scapes alternate with prose accounts of the history of the town, extracts from newspapers, personal letters to Williams himself (among them a few from Allen Ginsberg). Its disjunctions of voice and angle of vision make it a difficult work--in some respects more demanding than *The*

Waste Land--but certain themes and motifs persist. The doctor-poet promenades through the city and is, as masculine principle, identified with it. The Passaic river and the surrounding natural landscape are identified with the feminine principle:

A man like a city and a woman like a flower
--who are in love. Two women. Three women.
Innumerable women, each like a flower.

But

only one man--like a city. (Williams 1992: 7)

Reviewers of the poem were hesitant to confer upon it the canonical status that Williams was so clearly seeking, and even many decades later when readers have long become accustomed to Modernist collage techniques, the poem remains obscure in many places. Nevertheless, once Williams had completed it, he went on to write some of his best and most memorable poetry, for instance, in *Pictures from Breughel* (1962).

Wallace Stevens

Like Williams, Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) also felt the impulse to see with, as he says in one poem, 'an ignorant eye.' In 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction' (1942), he begins by instructing a pupil ('ephebe') to see past the old symbolisms and get back to the essence of things. Here Stevens looks at the sun, an object that is rich with symbolic meanings:

Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea
Of this invention, this invented world,

The inconceivable idea of the sun.

You must become an ignorant man again

And see the sun again with an ignorant eye

And see it clearly in the idea of it. (Stevens 1954: 380)

For Stevens, unlike Williams, such a desire for pure, unfettered vision is only the starting point of his meditation on human imagination and reality. As the poem progresses, he begins to realize that this desire for origins is a nostalgia of a very sophisticated culture (just as the European art world at the beginning of the twentieth century was infatuated with ‘primitive’ art). There is the constant desire to see purely, to get at the origins of all human making, but this is constantly frustrated. The poem itself then becomes a means of mediation between origins and ends, reality and the imagination, emotion and thought, primitives in caves and sophisticates in apartments: ‘We move between these points,’ he tells us,

From that ever-early candor to its late plural

And the candor of them is the strong exhilaration

Of what we feel from what we think, of thought

Beating in the heart, as if blood newly came,

An elixir, an excitation, a pure power. (Stevens 1954: 382)

Stevens was born in Reading, Pennsylvania, of Dutch-German stock, and after attending Harvard University, went to New York, intent on a career in literary journalism.

When the difficulties of this choice became apparent to him, he turned to the study of law, and was admitted to the Bar of the State of New York in 1904. In 1916 he moved to Hartford, Connecticut, to work in the area of legal insurance, a complex area of a complex business. He remained in this profession till his death in 1955, eventually rising to the position of Vice-President of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company, one of the largest insurance companies in the US (its present incarnation as The Hartford was on the Fortune 500 list for 2008). His professional achievement, while outstanding, was not unusual among writers of the period (other examples include Eliot in international banking and editing; Charles Ives and Franz Kafka, again, in insurance; Williams as a doctor; Edgar Lee Masters as a lawyer).

His time in New York (roughly 1900-16; but he was never too distant while in Hartford) was crucial to his development, as it exposed him to many of the avant-garde movements in literature and the visual arts. (Stevens would remain a keen art collector for the rest of his life, and he purchased two paintings by the Czech artist, Cyril Bouda). He began writing the poems that would make up his first book, *Harmonium* (1923), some of which experiment in the mode of *chinoiserie*, which Pound had popularized at this time, as well as writing a kind of Cubist poem ('Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird'). But many of his abiding themes engage with the preoccupations of Romantics such as Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley, that is, the relations between the human mind and the natural world.

Much of Stevens's poetry is concerned with the fictions that the human imagination invents in order to explain the world and their subsequent failure. Perhaps the most important of these is religion, and Stevens, following Nietzsche, believed that the images and stories of God that Western civilization held sacred for centuries are nothing more than projections of the human imagination ('God and the imagination are one' [Stevens 1954: 524]).

Nevertheless, he recognized that human beings need beliefs and he answers this by saying

that the greatest thing is to believe in a fiction you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else.

In his early poem, 'Sunday Morning' (1915), written in luxuriant Keatsian blank verse, Stevens marks the passing of the Christianity. The protagonist of the poem is a woman at her breakfast who rejects '[t]he holy hush of ancient sacrifice' of Palestine. 'Why should she give her bounty to the dead?', Stevens asks in the second verse, and continues:

Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,
In pungent fruit and bright green wings, or else
In any balm or beauty of the earth,
Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven? (Stevens 1954: 67)

This very Emersonian turn to nature is one that he spent the rest of his career exploring, always enlarging its implications for the poetic imagination and humanity in general. Some critics saw this as a kind of hedonism, which was paralleled by the poet's obvious enjoyment of pure sounds and exotic imagery in his first collection, *Harmonium* (1923). The later collections, however, shed the bright colors and hypnotic cadences in favor of a spare, meditative tone.

One of Stevens's major preoccupations is the public aspect of the imagination's tropes. Taking this further, he is often more interested in how the imagination of a particular community or nation works than in that of the individual. 'Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz' is about how collective emotion changes and creates new forms of music to answer new social conditions. He is, it is true, interested in how figures of capable imagination (say, the rabbi or the captain--both versions of the major man) can affect transformations in culture and society, but frequently their speech, which situates a community in the world, is part of a dialogue and

not monologic preaching; moreover, the ultimate significance of their speech has less to do with the satisfactions it affords their own imaginations than with the 'true reconcilings' they provide the community. Theirs is an art that takes cognizance of public emotion and thought at any particular moment and speaks in reaction to that, as reflection and redirection, and that the community recognize it as such is its ultimate justification for Stevens.

After the publication of *Harmonium*, Stevens wrote little poetry for several years, concentrating instead on consolidating his position within the Hartford. *Ideas of Order* (1935) struck a very different note in its first poem, 'Farewell to Florida,' in which he abandons the South with its 'pine and coral and coralline sea [and] ever-freshened Keys' (Stevens 1954: 117), in favor of the North, which he describes in the last verse:

My North is leafless and lies in a wintry slime
Both of men and clouds, a slime of men in crowds.
The men are moving as the water moves,
This darkened water cloven by sullen swells
Against your sides, then shoving and slithering,
The darkness shattered, turbulent with foam.
To be free again, to return to the violent mind
That is their mind, these men, and that will bind
Me round, carry me, misty deck, carry me
To the cold, go on, high ship, go on, plunge on. (Stevens 1954: 118)

This depiction is so negative that one wonders why he wishes to abandon the South for the North. Amidst the slime, shoving, slithering, the sullen swells, the only positive element is the promise that he will be free again. This implies his time in Florida, with its rich flora and

fauna, its subtropical climate, and sensuous abundance, was somehow an enslavement. Like Keats, Stevens is drawn to sensual pleasure (many of his later poems are punctuated with expressions of physical joy), but this is tempered by a belief in balance: the true rhythm of human life moves between such pleasures, and their denial. The same pattern can be found in his accounts of the imaginative life, as fictions, polities, religions are built and destroyed. They rise in their grandeur and promise and then fall, 'as a necessity requires' (Stevens 1954: 503).

Many of Stevens's poems of the 1930s are invaded by the image of crowds of men, in an obvious reflection of the economic state of the country. Indeed, Stevens conducts an intense imaginative debate with critics of the left during the period, as evidenced especially by *Owl's Clover* (1936), which responds at length to the left-wing critic, Stanley Burnshaw. His final period is constituted by *Transport to Summer* (1947), *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950), and the final section of the *Collected Poems* (1954), entitled 'The Rock.' He wrote several fine long poems at this time, among them, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,' 'The Auroras of Autumn,' 'Esthétique du Mal,' and 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.' These poems do not develop by narrative, instead they meditate on their subjects. In 'The Auroras' a man is confronted by the serpentine beauty of the aurora borealis, and this provokes him to ask, yet again, familiar questions: what is the world he lives in? How much does my imagination create the world? How much does my imagination receive the things of the world? To what extent to the structures of my upbringing--family, community--condition how I see the world?

It is a theatre floating through the clouds,
Itself a cloud, although of misted rock
And mountains running like water, wave on wave,

Through waves of light. It is of cloud transformed

To cloud transformed again, idly, the way

A season changes color to no end,

Except the lavishing of itself in change,

As light changes yellow into gold and gold

To its opal elements and fire's delight,

Splashed wide-wise because it likes magnificence

And the solemn pleasures of magnificent space. (Stevens 1954: 416)

The description of the auroras as a kind of theatre suggests a deliberate mixture of natural phenomenon and human construction. It further suggests that it is impossible to disentangle the human imagination from the world around it (just as it was impossible in Moore's 'The Pangolin' to say whether machines are artificial or natural). This is an answer to many of the questions the poem raised earlier, and now the poet's attention turns to describing the beauty of change--natural and human--and he luxuriates in the patterns, colors, and movement, as well as in the grand force apparent. The autumn of the poem also suggests the autumn of human life (Stevens himself was around seventy when writing the poem), a time when sensual awareness of the world is troubled by illness, weakness, and apathy. The resulting meditation **takes** on the very magnificence, power, and solemn pleasures of the auroras themselves.

In his last period, Stevens wrote many brief lyrics, mostly to be found in 'The Rock,' but some remained uncollected until published in *Opus Posthumous* (1957, 1989).

Straightforward and pellucid, poems such as 'The Plain Sense of Things,' 'The Planet on the Table,' 'A Quiet Normal Life,' 'Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour,' 'Of Mere Being,' and 'The Course of a Particular' offer brilliant summations of a complex *oeuvre*, one of the most significant and influential of the century.

PROSE FICTION

William Faulkner and Southern Literature

William Faulkner once remarked that 'The past isn't dead and buried. In fact, it isn't even past.' His Southern ladies and gentlemen, as one of his characters so memorably said, 'outlived themselves,' and he also witnesses the rise of a new generation of materialistic rednecks. And while his typical palefaces, e.g., three of the four children in the Compson family from *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), end up idiots, suicides, or moral derelicts, he shows no sympathy for the new era either: The Snopeses from his later trilogy *The Hamlet* (1940), *The Town* (1957), and *The Mansion* (1959), along with Jason from *The Sound and the Fury* are portrayed as extremely narrow-minded and cruel. Quite often, tragic family history is connected with race and, to a lesser degree, incest. For instance, *Go Down Moses* (1942), Faulkner's revision and union of existing stories, concerns the efforts of Ike McCaslin to cope with his grandfather's siring of a child on his own mulatto daughter. (For race, see also *Absalom, Absalom!* [1936] and *Light in August* [1932]; and for incest, *The Sound and the Fury*).

The past is painful for almost everybody, whether personally, as is the case of Quentin in *The Sound and the Fury* with his numerous attempts to defend what he believed was his sister's honor, or historically in *Absalom, Absalom!*, where racial hatred and intolerance becomes the source of tragedy. The only characters for whom it does not present difficulties seem to be idiots (for instance, Benjy in *The Sound and the Fury*), or simple-minded

characters like Lena in *Light in August* or Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury*, who try to keep the families going despite adverse circumstances.

Faulkner not only breaks with traditional chronological structure insofar as most of his characters are obsessed by the past, but he also destroys the linear development of a detective story in his predominantly Gothic novel *Sanctuary* (1931), and lets each of his heroes experience their own, that is subjective, sense of time. Objective mechanical time measured by clocks is gone, and when Quentin destroys his watch, he is in a way rebelling against the inexorable nature of mechanical time. Associated with this new philosophical concept, of course, are new narrative techniques: Faulkner successfully works both with the stream-of-consciousness method and with the variation of points of view. The most challenging experiment in this manner is perhaps his attempt to enter the mind of the idiot Benjy in *The Sound and the Fury*. (The author also experimented with counterpoint, cf., *The Wild Palms* [1939] which has alternating chapters of two discrete narratives.)

History implies geography. An important question is exactly where the South begins and ends. The eleven states that formed the Confederacy--that is, the states that voted for Jefferson Davis in 1861--are clearly Southern. Sometimes also certain border states, particularly Kentucky and Missouri, are included. However, one should see the South for what it is--beneath its apparent and occasionally real unity it is a contradictory place, the northern limit of which is a zone of land, a gradually altering geography, society, and consciousness, rather than a definite line.

In terms of Southern geography, there is perhaps just one real city, that of New Orleans. Thanks to its mixed architectural and cultural heritage--predominantly French and Spanish--it has a unique atmosphere, which has attracted not only many avant-garde writers and bohemians, but also various criminals and semi-legal activities. Both Tennessee Williams and Truman Capote encountered a homosexual underworld here, which proved a liberating

influence on their personalities and writings (cf., the short story 'Angel in the Alcove' by Tennessee Williams or the short story 'Dazzle' by Truman Capote), but the city was perceived as a destructive force as well (Eudora Welty in the short story 'Purple Hat' calls it a place of 'ready-made victims').

The degree of attachment different authors felt to their homeland is not, of course, identical. The case of William Faulkner is, in this respect, unique. Through his most prolific years he remained in the South on his farm Rowan Oak and only for brief periods left for either Hollywood (where he worked as a scriptwriter) or New York City (where all the publishers, editors and literary agents were). In his imagination he created a whole fictitious region, the Yoknapatawpha County with its capital Jefferson, which is very much based on the real Lafayette County and its capital Oxford; and this mythical tract of land is present in all of his major works. (Later, he himself even drew various maps of this area, and some of them were published as an appendix to his novels). The impetus for this extraordinary idea came in *Sartoris* (1929), when Faulkner, on the advice of Sherwood Anderson, decided to concentrate on his home soil. After this, he left it only once in his writing--in *A Fable* (1954), a retelling of the birth of Christ in France during World War I. At that time, the writer felt a huge responsibility to write moral fiction, but this elaborate allegory borders on didacticism and only occasionally reaches the usual author's eloquence. His final book, *The Reivers* (1962), is thus a nostalgic return both to Yoknapatawpha and to childhood.

Like Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren (1905-1989) also chooses specific places in Southern geography, and focuses on traditional Southern values--honor, responsibility and ethics could serve as a key to all his works. Thus in the earlier fiction, e.g., *Night Rider* (1939), he focuses on the fight between factory owners and tobacco growers in Kentucky, and in *At Heaven's Gate* (1943) he portrays a ruthless financier from Tennessee. The novel that

follows, *All the King's Men* (1946), is now considered his masterpiece, while among the later prose just *Meet Me in the Green Glen* (1971) stands out:

[L]ike William Styron in the novel *Lie Down in Darkness*, as if Warren consciously tried to challenge the standards of quality set by William Faulkner's works.... In this variation on crime and punishment one can trace the echoes of *Light in August* very clearly. (Nenadál 1977: 32; my translation)

The character of Willie Stark, the protagonist of *All the King's Men*, is based on a real historical figure--Huey Long, the former governor of Louisiana, was an equally despotic political dictator as the fictitious 'Boss.' The narrator, young journalist Jack Burden, starts to work for Willie Stark, for whom he feels both admiration and disgust, and is given a highly unpleasant dirty task. Even though the action ends in bloodshed and death and thus in tragedy, Jack survives and finally gets rid of the influence of his boss. He thinks about the governor's past as well as his own, but also accepts the past and analyses it deeply, which means that the resulting vision is much more optimistic than that in Faulkner. Nevertheless, the novel should also be read on a universal level--the story of a clever, charming individual who is corrupted by power into a scheming, tricking monster resonates in any locality, at any time.

Eudora Welty (1909-2001) also spent most of her life in the town of her birth, Jackson, Mississippi. She studied in the North, but immediately after receiving her diploma returned to Mississippi state, where she traveled widely in the 1930s and took photographs on an assignment from one of the federal programs of that time. Afterwards, she accepted several invitations to deliver lectures either in the US or in Europe, but never left home for a considerable time, and the settings of her stories reflect this and are never far removed from the Southern communities she knows so well. In her last collection of short stories, *Golden*

Apples (1949), she also tried to create a mythological town, Morgana, but her genius fell short of Faulkner's in this, and nowadays her earlier collections, *A Curtain of Green* (1941) and *The Wide Net* (1943), are considered her most original works.

As for the old agrarian tradition, the so-called old aristocracy in Faulkner had already lost its plantations and was just desperately clinging to what remained of them--Benjy's pasture in *The Sound and the Fury* must be sold so that Quentin may go to Harvard, and this moment is often talked about from many different perspectives. Ambitious Thomas Sutpen from *Absalom, Absalom!* longs for a huge piece of land (which he later names Sutpen's Hundred) and the social standing it brings (this is his 'great design') so much that it finally destroys him. And it is not just the aristocracy, both old and new, which feels this profound attachment to land. Also the old sharecroppers are not willing to leave their allotment, though it is far from being profitable, and have no desire to move to the city (the best example is in Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* [1932]). The plantation way of life became a myth, but regardless of the fact that many Southern literary heroes want to return to the place they were born and start a new, quiet, natural way of life there (when Stingo in *Sophie's Choice* escapes with Sophie from New York City, they head south and Stingo dreams about their future farm). The plantation myth is, in a modified way, still alive, with all its codes of behavior (see Amanda from Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, who is constantly talking about her 'gentlemen callers' and entertaining conversations in a saloon, and who expects the same for her crippled daughter Laura).

In the South, there is a strong tradition of storytelling. The story is told for its own pleasure, not for a didactic point or wider social messages. Therefore, in Southern fiction social context is largely missing, and Southerners would be annoyed if somebody looked for it. Oral folklore with its legends and fairy-tales plays a very important role in the structure of

many literary works (the most obvious example being probably McCullers's *The Ballad of the Sad Café*).

This passion for storytelling is a dominant characteristic of many literary heroes, too, and very often it borders on talk-therapy (e.g., the half-crazed monologues of 'My Side of the Matter' by Truman Capote or 'Why I Live at P. O.' by Eudora Welty). Sometimes it is quite enough if a writer sits down and listens, and puts down what he or she had heard. The result is a narrative method of a spontaneous dialogue one can see, for instance, in Eudora Welty's 'Petrified Man.' At the same time, great respect is paid to both the written and spoken word, and once the words start to lose their meaning (as they do for Addie in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* [1930]) or mean different things for different people (as for the main characters in Flannery O'Connor's *Good Country People*, where the meaning of the very title of this short story is being questioned), a disaster of some sort is bound to happen.

Eudora Welty treats the church as a social organization. In her communities, there is always a Methodist church and a Baptist church, the leading personality being a minister's wife (e.g., 'Lily Daw and Three Ladies'). There is no real tension or conflict between God and man or church and man, and the overall atmosphere in her works is that of friendliness. While McCullers and Capote never deal explicitly with God or faith, Tennessee Williams does draw a few religious pictures--there is a Christ figure in his short story 'One Arm' or an almost maternal figure of a Madonna in 'Angel in the Alcove.' It is quite interesting that as in O'Connor's works, Williams's depictions of sex and religion are virtually mixed.

Responsibility to family in the traditional sense of the word is rather rare--the unprecedented example of true family devotion is, of course, Lena in *Light in August*, who desperately searches for the father of her child, or Dilsey from *The Sound and the Fury*, who takes care not only of her own family, but also of what remained of the Compsons. A very perverted responsibility for the good name of the family can be observed in both the

extremely idealistic Quentin and the extremely materialistic Jason from the same novel. In the end, the only children who did not run away from their home are Benjy and Jason. While Benjy is not able to feel any responsibility, for Jason home more or less equals house, its material substance, while the notion of a family means nothing to him.

Social Themes

The 1930s are primarily characterized by the Great Depression with its attendant massive unemployment and poverty. It took some time for the nation to awaken, and Franklin D. Roosevelt's government to introduce New Deal with all the accompanying projects (such as Works Progress Administration) aimed at that one third of the population that was, in the words of the President, ill-clad, ill-housed and ill-nourished. One of the side-effects of the economic crisis was also escapism that manifested itself in various forms:

[B]orrowings at public libraries increased by forty per cent, while the demand was mainly for historical romances, and sensational magazines publishing articles about crime, love, and sex almost doubled their circulation. Probably the most persuasive false image of life was, however, presented by movies--the darkened cinemas blunted the sense of reality and offered cheap narcotic dreams [...]

(Hilský 1993: 161; my translation)

Quite a few fresh literary voices emerged in this decade. Since it is impossible to list them all and some authors are mentioned elsewhere, we will focus instead on a more detailed analysis of the relevant works of four of them: John Steinbeck, Nathanael West, Henry Roth, and Zora Neale Hurston.

John Steinbeck

John Steinbeck (1902-1968) was born in Salinas, a small town in California; this region would become the setting for his fiction. The action of his first important book, the collection of stories *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932), takes place here, and some of his dominant themes appear for the first time, too--celebration of countryside and nature, which often borders on cult and adoration, and the irony of fate. His next novel, *To a God Unknown* (1933), follows roughly the same pattern (like the later huge volume *East of Eden* [1952]), but received little attention. Fame arrived no sooner than 1935 with the publication of *Tortilla Flat*. The lives of *paisanos*, that is people of mixed Spanish, Mexican, and native Indian blood, in and around Monterey were portrayed as both exotic and humorous, full of 'beautiful sins'--the heroes lie, steal and play tricks on one another in order to do good. Slang and bookish language are mutually intertwined in their speeches, which results in a very special type of a linguistic wit, and human existence is seen as a fairly enjoyable and pleasant thing. (Steinbeck wrote free continuations of this idyllic picture of underprivileged men in the following decades as well: *Cannery Row* [1944], and *Sweet Thursday* [1954].)

Soon, however, the author became interested in social issues, motivations and responsibility. In 1937 he finished the prose version of *Of Mice and Men*, a major achievement, which he shortly afterwards himself dramatized, and it enjoyed great popular success. The title is taken from Robert Burns's poem, and many parallels between those two works can be found. There is the figure of Lenny, a mentally retarded well-meaning giant, who constantly dreams about a farm with lots of rabbits, and thus is quite happy, and his friend George, who decides to take care of him. Both long for a piece of land they can call their home, but George is, of course, much more realistic in his expectations. They move from ranch to ranch in search of work and also of some sort of a meaningful existence, until Lenny kills the coquette wife of the owner's son by accident. Consequently, George shoots him,

which is an act of mercy and love--he does not want Lenny to suffer, and Lenny dies with this naive vision of rabbits. At the same time, however, George kills not only his sole companion, but his own American dream as well. His disillusionment with the past, present and future is thus completed.

In 1939, *The Grapes of Wrath* appeared, the publication of which has been called 'a national event' (in its impact comparable probably only to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or Upton Sinclair's *Jungle*). Attacked as propaganda and praised as the highest art, widely read and occasionally banned, awarded the Pulitzer Prize, it is now seen as a major American epic chronicle. John Steinbeck was intimately familiar with the plight of the Okies, who stood at the center of his attention here (this pejorative term applies to all the outcasts of that time and place, not necessarily just from Oklahoma). In 1936, the novel *In Dubious Battle*, frequently called 'America's best strike novel,' established him as the literary voice of both the California migrants and bad American conscience. In the autumn 1937 the author followed the trail of the migrants from Oklahoma to California, and lived with them in their roadside camps. On the basis of this experience, he wrote an epilogue to his earlier newspaper reports, and the collected texts were published in 1938 as a pamphlet entitled *Their Blood Is Strong*. Thus, he was well-prepared and equipped for his masterpiece.

The hero of *The Grapes of Wrath* is the Joad family, proud and stubborn descendants of the pioneers. Unlike many dispossessed tenant farmers from the Deep South who settled in large cities to vegetate, they were looking for work on an 'unspoiled frontier' in the West, and movement to them traditionally meant opportunity. They still believed that a land of plenty lay there for the taking, and therefore full of hope headed for Highway 66. Nevertheless, they became cruelly disappointed. The son of the family, Tom, turns into a fighter not because he is trying to pick a fight, but because without fighting he cannot remain a man, while his mother, Ma Joad, just desperately wants to keep the family going, and her daughter Rose of

Sharon in the final moving scene attempts to save bare life of a similarly poor stranger. Thus, for the characters the measure of the man is the dignity of human life, in spite of the property-minded, profit-obsessed America. The invisibility and omnipresence of those powerful institutions that exercise control over human affairs and exploit human beings can be illustrated by the following dialogue between the hired driver on a tractor and a tenant, whose land and house are being taken away:

--'It's not me. There's nothing I can do. I'll lose my job if I don't do it. An
look-suppose you kill me? They'll just hang you, but long before you're hung
there'll be another guy on the tractor, and he'll bump the house down. You're not
killing the right guy.'

--'That's so,' the tenant said. 'Who gave you orders? I'll go after him. He's the
one to kill.'

--'You're wrong. He got his orders from the bank....' (Steinbeck 1976: 49)

Although John Steinbeck later became an ardent supporter of the Vietnam War and a sharp critic of radical youth in the 1960s, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1962. The Academy stressed his realistic and imaginative writings, as well as his humor and social awareness. Which is the way he should be praised and remembered.

Nathanael West

Nathanael West (1903-1940) presents a similar perspective on the United States of the 1930s, and yet in many aspects it is different. Born in New York to a first generation Jewish family that really 'made it' and therefore did not question the validity of the American dream, he soon started to perceive the discrepancy between the American phrases and everyday reality.

Although he completed his studies at the prestigious Brown University, in 1926 he adopted a new name (instead of Nathan Weinstein, he chose Nathanael West) and left, rather belatedly, for Paris. Next year he returned home only to find his father in serious financial straits. On Black Friday 1929, the New York Stock Exchange collapsed.

West's first work, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* (1931) is, however, still heavily influenced by the intellectual bohemian wit of the 1920s. The poet-to-be Balso Snell enters the guts of a Trojan horse and on his bizarre journey meets lots of *soi-disant* literary masters who want him to read their works. Thus, West creates the structure of a story within a story etc., a Joycean parody based on clichés. Indirectly, he captures the atmosphere of the American community in France in its twilight, where pseudo-artists meditate on religion, madness, suicide, sex, and--since surrealism is at its peak--on dreams. And while here the border between dreams and reality disappears, the real American dream becomes the theme of West's next book, *A Cool Million, or the Dismantling of Lemuel Pitkin* (1934).

Lemuel Pitkin is a picaresque hero who decides to pursue success. Nevertheless, all his efforts follow the same pattern--after a model--like a streak of luck, there is always a disaster waiting that also results in the loss of a certain body-part of our protagonist. Besides, Lem is haunted by a ghost-like figure of Shagpole Whipple, a former American president and a bankrupt banker, who starts to organize American Nazis. Lem ends up trying to become the so-called revolutionary speaker, but is shot dead in the attempt. The Nazis win, and the protagonist's life then turns to legend. The circle from the myth of the American dream to the legend turned upside down is thus closed. Language is seen as a dangerous tool, since it is through words that human beings formulate destructive ideas.

It is in the next two novels, though, where West's mastery culminates: *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933) and *The Day of the Locust* (1939). *Miss Lonelyhearts* is the story of a conscientious man hired by a newspaper to give advice to the lovelorn. In the opening scene,

we see him sitting at his desk and working on his letter, trying to meet the deadline and staring at a prayer printed by Shrike, the cynical feature editor. And this is what he produces: 'Life is worth while, for it is full of dreams and peace, gentleness and ecstasy, and faith that burns like a clear white flame on a grim dark altar' (West 1959: 5). Soon, however, he finds it impossible to continue. He discovers that the majority of the letters he receives are profoundly humble pleas for moral and spiritual advice, and also inarticulate expressions of genuine suffering. And, what makes things even worse, his correspondents take him seriously. He alternates between self-pity, ineffectual love-making, clinical disgust, and the hopeless effort at a decent life. The mixture of such contradictory emotions charges the narration with an almost hallucinatory fever.

In *The Day of the Locust*, West is primarily a sociological writer, moved by the horrible emptiness of the lives of the masses. He wrote this novel after he had been in Hollywood for three years, but is not interested in film stars here. For West, Hollywood is exemplified by hangers-on, fighting unsuccessfully for a little limelight, people who had slaved at some kind of dull, heavy labor. Their boredom becomes increasingly terrible, and they realize that they have been tricked by an illusion of security. Each day their reactions are dulled by lynchings, murders, explosions, fires, and miracles projected onto the 'silver screen,' and only the drug of mob action has the power to stimulate them. The author thus explores the secret, dreamy life of an anonymous crowd at its harshest. Unlike *Miss Lonelyhearts*, there is no savior, or pseudo-savior, to speak of, and the whole novel ends in the apocalyptic picture of hopeless uncontrollable violence:

He [Tod] was carried through the exit to the back street and lifted into a police car. The siren began to scream and at first he thought he was making the noise himself. He felt his lips with his hands. They were clamped tight. He knew then it

was the siren. For some reason this made him laugh and he began to imitate the siren as loud as he could. (West 1957: 220)

Nathanael West died at the age of 37 in a car crash. Yet, in many respects he predicted the development of what would later be referred to as postmodern society and culture. His reputation in the US, however, still does not adequately reflect his innovations. Perhaps he remains hard to accept because he showed the whole political and economic racket to be so undisguisedly meaningless.

Henry Roth

Henry Roth (1906-1995) was an important predecessor of Isaac Bashevis Singer, Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth in the canon of Jewish-American literature (dealt with in the next chapter). With his novel *Call It Sleep* (1934, reissued 1964), the Jewish-American literary imagination began to depict its characters in--and not necessarily apart from--a Christian world-view. The book not only tells the story of an immigrant family (of a warm, protective mother, of a tyrannical, paranoid father, and particularly of their son David and his ghetto childhood), but also describes the inner disintegration of the Jewish-American community (the collapse of paternal, divine, and communal authority). The main themes are introduced in the prologue describing the American reunion of the three heroes in May of 1907: identity, deception, and the varieties of salvation that America makes possible.

As the two-year-old David grows, his need for order becomes imperative. His everyday experience (a traumatic sexual initiation, violent family life, and poverty) is too broken and incomplete to make any sense; the imposing and often conflicting forces, values, and people in the tenement district create a totally chaotic universe. The book is thus a

psychological portrait of a child's mind in terms of both knowledge and self-awareness, and a poetic account of Jewish life in New York at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Zora Neale Hurston

The Harlem Renaissance, discussed in chapter 16, was the epicenter from which a major literary change spread in the twentieth century. Its debates defined the salient features of African-American writing, and consequently, as we move into the period after World War II, American writing in general. One of its most important novelists was Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960), and the posthumous fate of her masterpiece, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), tells us much about the cultural politics of the Renaissance, and African-American culture. Although it enjoyed initial success, the novel was neglected through the 1950s and '60s, and Hurston herself fell afoul of African-American intellectuals for her seeming endorsement of segregation. Moreover, for many readers her work was not strong enough in its advocacy of black social issues, as was, for instance, Richard Wright's.

Born in Alabama, Hurston was raised in Eatonville, Florida, an all-black town which would play an important role in her fiction. In 1925, she arrived in Harlem, and attends Barnard College, where she studied anthropology. The choice of this subject would prove fateful. In the introduction to her book *Mules and Men* (1935), she remarked, 'I was glad when somebody told me, "You may go and collect Negro folklore"' (Hurston 1935). This permission was given to her by the German anthropologist, Franz Boas, under whom she studied. It was liberating because it allowed her to see the oral traditions of her childhood as equal to those which American culture had inherited from Europe. However, it also confronted her with a technical issue: how should these stories be presented? As part of her own fiction? As part of an academic text with full scholarly apparatus? In *Mules and Men*, she

finds a middle ground: she narrates her return to Eatonville, and frames the folklore with accounts of the social context. Here she is arriving in town:

‘Hello, heart-string,’ Mayor Hiram Lester yelled as he hurried up the street.

‘We heard all about you up North. You back home for good, I hope.’

‘Nope, Ah come to collect some old stories and tales and Ah know y’all know a plenty of ’em and that’s why Ah headed straight for home.’

‘What you mean, Zora, them big old lies we tell when we’re jus’ sittin’ around here on the store porch doin’ nothin’?’ asked B. Moseley.

‘Yeah, those same ones about Ole Massa, and colored folks in heaven, and oh, y’all know the kind I mean.’

‘Aw shucks,’ exclaimed George Thomas doubtfully. ‘Zora, don’t you come here and tell de biggest lie first thing.’

‘Who you reckon want to read all them old-time tales about Brer Rabbit and Brer Bear?’ (Hurston 1935)

Hurston, as anthropologist, is obviously deeply embedded in the group she is studying; from a literary point of view, it is also clear that she is exploring ways of representing her community--dialect in the dialog as well as the very structure of dialog.

Two years later she wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in just seven weeks. It is about the life of Janie, the female protagonist, who is married three times, and travels widely through the South. It is a traditional *Bildungsroman*, as she moves from childhood to middle-age. But it was revolutionary, first, for the particular way that it used dialect; second, for its depictions of female sexuality and gender politics; and, third, for the deft way it deals with the race question in the US.

To take the first of these: dialect was seen as a dead-end by many black writers in the period as they believed that it perpetuated an idea of blacks as somehow primitive and incapable of sophisticated expression. (Thus we have the polished cadences of James Weldon Johnson for example.) However, as Henry Louis Gates Jr., points out, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* explores the middle ground between dialect and the traditional voice of the educated narrator, common throughout the nineteenth century. He calls this the 'speakerly text' (Gates 1988: 174).

To take the second: Janie fails to find fulfillment in her first two marriages. In the first, her husband tries to treat her like a work horse on the farm; in the second, her husband, the mayor of an all-black town, tries to turn her into a trophy wife who must put up with his foul-mouthed comments. In the end she finds Tea Cake, a happy-go-lucky farm laborer, who gives her an unprecedented amount of freedom. He contracts rabies when a tornado hits Florida (this episode, in its grandeur and intensity is comparable to the storm passage towards the end of *David Copperfield*). He subsequently goes mad, and Janie has to kill him to save herself. The events of her subsequent trial offer a complex representation of race and gender relations (which covers the third point above). The literary subtlety she demonstrates here was mainly lost on her contemporaneous readers, and it was not until Alice Walker's advocacy of Hurston in the 1970s that she once again reached a wide readership.

20. EXPLOSION, 1945-1970

INTRODUCTION

The Tranquilized Fifties and the Swinging Sixties: these are the historiographical clichés of the period dealt with here. Like many clichés, they are both helpful and misleading, for the way they describe both US history during this time, as well as its culture. One of the finest descriptions of the tranquilization is to be found in Richard Yates's novel, *Revolutionary Road* (1961), which depicts a middle-class American family that is suffocated by its own cowardice as well as by social convention, unable to find a way out of the nice house, modcons, good job, and fine highways stretching out from the large city to the leafy suburbs. 'Swinging' contains ideas of both sex and rock 'n' roll, and these along with the middle term of drugs, exploded into American society during the decade, bringing many new sounds, colors and modes of behavior. Accompanying this was a tendency of mainstream writers to expand the boundaries of their art--both thematically and formally.

The clichés are misleading because they pass over, first, the great experiments of the 1950s (for instance, in literature the Beats and the New York School; in jazz Be-Bop; in art, Abstract Expressionism), and second, the vibrant conservatism of the 1960s (for instance, in music, the folk revival; in literature, the work of John Updike, Richard Wilbur, and Elizabeth Bishop; in art, the late paintings of Edward Hopper, and, of the younger generation, of Richard Diebenkorn, Wayne Thiebaud, and the Americanized David Hockney, among others).

The tensions and stand-offs between the USSR and US, which came to be known as the Cold War, were the defining elements of postwar history, both on the home and international fronts. Domestically, it emphasized the importance of political conservatism, with little toleration for individuals whose views diverged too much from the mean (whether in matters of sexual behavior or party affiliation). The economic prosperity of the time encouraged a

confidence in the nexus of democracy, individualism, and consumerism, as well as the superiority of US values over those of Communism. Facilitated by Eisenhower's highways, the white middle class was able to move from inner-city areas for the better schools and social monoculture of the suburbs (a phenomenon known as 'white flight'), leaving in its wake underserved zones, often black, which began to drift towards violent crime. '[I]t was a decade of rising expectations, the emergence of youth culture, and the unprecedented availability of cultural products' (Halliwell 2007: 2). American middle class comfort and values were in the ascendant, individualism and consumerism were among the prevailing trends, while pride and confidence in American superiority seemed widespread.

American capitalism clashed with Soviet communism in a new geopolitical arena, and anxieties were heightened by the stunned recognition of the destructive capacity of atomic weapons. The Korean War during the early 1950s only served to confirm the battle lines of the nascent Cold War period. So, concomitant with a surge in pride, prosperity and confidence is a period of intense national self-interrogation and paranoia. 'Communism' Stephen J. Whitfield contends, 'became more loathed than organized crime, exacerbating fears that were to distort and enfeeble American culture throughout the late 1940s and the 1950s' (Whitfield 1996: 2). Acute attention was paid to the enemies of the American way of life and threats seemed to proliferate, both outside the country and from within it. And as will be discussed below, many of America's perceived internal foes were 'discovered' in the literary, theatrical and entertainment communities. Senator Joseph McCarthy established the House Un-American Activities Committee, which flourished after the war and through the 1950s and aimed to remove Communists, or their fellow travelers, from positions of power and influence in US society. Internationally, the policy adopted was one of containment of Communism, which often resulted not in direct confrontation with the USSR, but war through proxy countries, such as Korea, Vietnam, and, in the 1970s and '80s, Latin America. One

facet of this policy was aid to Europe, which had been the main theater of World War II, and this was referred to as the Marshall Plan. In the field of culture and education, the Fulbright Program encouraged the exchange of scholars between the US and abroad.

The largest social movement in the 1960s is inarguably Civil Rights, which sought to push back the laws and practice of segregation, which had persisted in the South from the time of Reconstruction. Lynching, often unpunished, continued into the 1950s, and institutionalized discrimination was to be found in education, in employment, and even in the exercise of the vote. The case of *Brown v. the Board of Education* (1954) ruled that segregation was inadmissible in public schooling, and it is noteworthy that the history of Civil Rights is in part a history of court rulings, as activists attempted to tap the suppressed freedoms within the founding documents of the United States. In many respects, the race issue in the US is exceptional for its violence, severity, and endurance, and the history of the country could be written purely as a history of race relations, so central has it been to politics and culture.

In 1954, Malcolm X, formerly Malcolm Little, a Harlem racketeer known as 'Big Red,' was installed as minister of Black Muslim Temple No.7 in Harlem. He became a spokesperson for America's greatest Black separatist cult and his racial militancy acquired a large following, mostly among Black youth. Then, at the end of 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white person, which was proscribed by Montgomery's segregationist city authorities. After she was arrested, a series of nonviolent boycotts brought to prominence a relatively unknown Baptist minister, Martin Luther King. His philosophy, influenced in part by the ideas of Henry David Thoreau and Gandhi, was based upon Christian brotherhood and redemptive suffering. In spite of the numerous civil rights acts passed by Congress, not all the hopes raised in 1963 by the famous march on Washington, which he organized were fulfilled, and other leaders surfaced.

Both Malcolm X and Martin Luther King were assassinated in the 1960s, and the Student Non-violent Coordination Committee (SNCC), led by Stokely Carmichael, introduced the concept of Black Power, which was aggressive in comparison with the other movements. They recognized power as a crucial force in the struggle to be free, political and economic power being the determining factor. The international situation of that time seemed to suit their ideas--in 1962, the independent nations in Africa formed the Organization of African States. Those conferences bringing together intellectuals and artists from the African diaspora and the development of Afro-centric culture in the US strengthened the African American sense of pride. It was no longer necessary to pursue whiteness as a psychological goal. In such a context, the older concepts of Pan-Africanism or Negritude as a complex of values unifying all the blacks took on a wider meaning.

Many other political and social transformations took their lead from Civil Rights: most importantly, feminism in the late 1960s and '70s, the emergence of Native American and ethnic culture, and gay rights in the 1970s. Also, an integral part of the story of Civil Rights is the development of African-American literature, from the landmark novel *Invisible Man* (1952), to the emergence of James, Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and the rediscovery of Zora Neale Hurston.

The cultural achievements of African-Americans in literature were significant also in the field of popular music, where jazz and blues were the signal influences on the emergence of rock music; a further important influence was the folk revival, as pioneered by the likes of Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Joan Baez, and Bob Dylan. Rock music, however, was not merely an aesthetic pursuit, but brought political attitudes and engagements. For instance, Seeger and Baez were deeply involved in the Civil Rights movement, and all of the four singers, to varying degrees, were involved in labor rights and social protest. Rock, in some of its variants, was also integral to the hippie movement in the 1960s. Most of the Beats had

been writing since at least the early 1950s, and in the succeeding decade their work became more prominent as it connected with, and in part inspired, the hippie movement, which climaxed in the Summer of Love in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood of San Francisco in 1967. Among its emphases, was the embrace of hallucinogenic drugs for the way they loosened engagement with publicly accepted reality, allowing people to apprehend profounder levels of being. It is, then, difficult and ultimately undesirable to disentangle the many strands of politics, music, and drugs that animated much of the popular culture of the period.

Since our brief is literature, some effort must be made to isolate the art from its period so it can be examined more closely. Nevertheless, the literary works themselves keep bringing us back to the social and political spheres, as they frequently address these, without reneging on their allegiances to the prerogatives of their own aesthetic discourse. Allen Ginsberg provides an excellent example of a poet whose political engagements animated not enervated his work. His poetry contains much passionate social comment, but it is never reducible to agit-prop.

For a writer to become famous, arguably it is not sufficient that he or she write outstanding books. The contours of the oeuvre, and sometimes the life behind the oeuvre, must engage the larger contours of the public imagination. Both Philip Roth and Robert Lowell, novelist and poet respectively, do exactly that. Both began their careers writing in the more or less prescribed mainstream forms of their time. Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959) is a collection of short stories, all beautifully turned on irony, insight and sympathy, illuminating the complexity of the issue of Jewish-American assimilation. One of its finest stories, 'Defender of the Faith,' was published in the *New Yorker*, and the collection won the National Book Award. Similarly, Lowell's first book, *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946), influenced by his apprenticeship under the New Critical masters, John Crowe Ransom, and Allen Tate, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, which rarely goes to a debut publication. These prizes and

publications are major indices of mainstream success in this period. And yet both writers broke free from their early confines--Lowell with the Confessional work of *Life Studies* (1959) and Roth with the outrageously funny and sexually explicit *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969). Both writers, in the way that they pushed the formal and thematic boundaries of their respective genres, are emblematic of a society that was attempting to break with many of the strictures of the past--segregation, sexism, homophobia, etc.

POPULAR CULTURE

When the mathematician-musician Tom Lehrer sang in 1959 that 'we will all go together when we go / all suffused with an incandescent glow,' his muse may have lacked taste, as the *New York Times* lamented, but he did express the period's angst tellingly. The vicissitudes of the Cold War--from the tense conservatism of the post-war years to the turmoil of the 1960s--combined with economic prosperity were fecund ground for popular culture. One could start with the politicization of sports and end with blue jeans, a symbol of revolt and possibly 'the nearest thing that America had to a folk costume' (Maltby 1990: 131), but four aspects of the era's popular culture cannot be left without comment: television, film, music, and science-fiction.

In 1947, there were more cinemas in the United States than there were televisions; by 1960, nearly every American home was literally arranged around a TV-set. Unlike the radio, television was designed to entertain, and the schedule consisted largely of comedies and westerns, such as *Hopalong Cassidy* (1948). Social, political, even philosophical and theological issues were addressed within the framework of commercially-segmented entertainment. One of the first televangelists, for example, the Emmy Award-winning Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, brought religion to the masses convinced that 'radio is like the Old Testament, hearing wisdom, without seen; television is like the New Testament because

in it the wisdom becomes flesh and dwells among us' (Starr 1987: 165). Nevertheless, television also worked for the advancement of Civil Rights and helped turn the nation against the war in Vietnam.

Cinema remained more contradictory. Especially in the early days of the Cold War, the film industry suffered from anti-communist paranoia that damaged more than the infamous 'Hollywood Ten.' At the same time, subterranean anxieties of the era produced film noir. Teenage confusion and rebellion surfaced in numerous works (e.g., *Rebel Without a Cause* [1955]), although these sentiments found their greatest expression in music: rock'n'roll and during the 1960s, folk-rock. The concerts of Bob Dylan, Janis Joplin, or Jimi Hendrix, culminating in well known festivals, e.g., Woodstock in 1969, were not without problems; nevertheless, they represented a resurgence of youthful idealism with which the decade came to be associated.

Despite the power of television and music, popular literature thrived under the continual impact of the paperback revolution, which made accessible to the wider public texts ranging from James Joyce's *Ulysses* to such scholarly works as *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) by David Riesman, et al. Politically marginalized writers such as Howard Fast channeled their struggle for social justice into children's literature, but the greatest success story of the era were Harlequin Books, which specialized in romances from 1964. That the upsurge of this particular genre coincided with the rise of the women's movement spurred various studies that concerned the nature of desire, the backlash against feminism, or more optimistic reader-response criticism.

Finally, the Cold War helped science-fiction. The genre was formalized only in 1926, when the term 'scientifiction' was introduced by Hugo Gernsback in his *Amazing Stories*, the first magazine devoted solely to science-fiction (closely followed by *Science Wonder Stories*, *Astounding Stories*, *Startling Stories*, etc.) Although favorite themes at this time included

future galactic warfare and a takeover by technology, science-fiction tended to have happy endings, as in the first of E. E. 'Doc' Smith's Skylark space operas, in which the brilliant scientist Seaton triumphs, becomes the overlord of Osnome, and saves his abducted 'Dottie Dimple.' The second major editor of the interwar years, John W. Campbell (*Astounding Science Fiction*), pressured his contributors to write for, and as, 'technically trained, mature men,' avoiding mysticism, and the early work of such future stars as Robert A. Heinlein or Isaac Asimov emerged shaped by Campbell's influence.

In the course of the 1950s, much science fiction moved from magazines to novels. As Asimov put it, the bomb made the genre respectable, and countless texts speculated about post-mushroom cloud futures. 'There Will Come Soft Rains,' a story from Ray Bradbury's classic collection *The Martian Chronicles* (1950), for example, features an automated household that functions long after its inhabitants turn into ashes. Philip Wylie, Poul Anderson, Frederik Pohl, and Cyril Kornbluth stirred the era's anxieties about nuclear destruction, technological and military control, commercialization, and emotional sterility, often--although not always--vilifying the Soviets. In Jack Finney's 1955 novel *The Body Snatchers* (filmed a year later by Don Siegel) the provincial Santa Mira is taken over by extraterrestrials. They turn the town's citizens into vacuous automatons who, alas, look just like us, so a part of the game is to identify them. While Finney's novel need not be read as a parable of the Red menace (although it has been), other works were more specific: in Jerry Sohl's *Point Ultimate* (1955), for example, the Russians dominate the Americans through plague bacteria.

Although early Cold War science fiction still hinted at redemption (in Sohl's case, it appears in the form of an underground resistance movement of scientists who secretly ship pregnant women to Mars; in a more substantial work, Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* [1960], hope comes from the monks) the overwhelming somberness of the genre

cleared space for the New Wave: writers from the mid-1960s who were more experimental both in terms of style and contents. Works like Alfred Bester's *The Demolished Man* (1953), which probes deranged psyche; Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), which brought free love into the genre; Theodore Sturgeon's *Venus Plus X* (1960), the characters of which are hermaphroditic; or Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965), where drugs enhance longevity and psychic powers--each brought an aspect that the New Wave writers Pamela Zoline, Norman Spinrad, Samuel R. Delany, Thomas M. Disch, or Ursula K. Le Guin explored in more depth later on.

THEATER

Postwar and Cold War Contexts

The consequences of the historical developments discussed in the introduction were felt in theater in various ways. While the space for drama shrank on Broadway, musicals continued to be popular. The period between 1940 and 1960 is often referred to as musical theater's 'Golden Age.' *Oklahoma!*, by Richard Rodgers (1902-1979) and Oscar Hammerstein II (1895-1960), is an archetypal example. The show opened on Broadway in 1943 produced by the Theatre Guild and ran for a record 2,212 performances. It also traveled to Britain where it received enthusiastic reviews and ran for well over 1,000 performances in 1947. Notably, musicals rarely challenged the increasingly conservative values of the middle class status quo.

Yet even popular theater was not immune to the radical social transformation wrought by the debut of a machine that was to revolutionize American society--television. As discussed in the section on popular culture, televisions suddenly became part of everyday American life in the 1950s. As a medium for popular entertainment, television exercised extraordinary influence, subtly, and not so subtly, proposing modes of being, values, and images of normality--right in peoples' homes. It had an immediate and tangible effect on theater, cinema

and radio, as well as on newspapers and magazines. Cinemas and theaters across the country were forced to close. Even Broadway, its safe and populist menu notwithstanding, steadily declined as costs rose and audiences diminished (Bush Jones 2004: 161-162).

If American theater and drama in the 1930s had often been politically attuned, then from the mid-1940s to the early 1960s, American culture generally became politicized in a new manner, displaying as Douglas Field suggests, 'an increasing anxiety over manifold boundaries, whether racial, sexual, political or cultural' (Field 2005: 7). As remarked in the introduction, Senator Joseph McCarthy was to become the infamous face of this new era of anxiety, catalyzing a sense of unprecedented paranoia about Communist infiltrators. In 1950, in a speech given at the Republican Women's Club of Wheeling West Virginia, McCarthy claimed that the State Department was 'infested with communists' (Phillips 2001: 65, Griffith 1987: 47-114). The 'Red Scare' had begun.

McCarthy was not involved directly in the unmasking of Communists in the arts world--this task fell to the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), which in 1947 began to investigate the film industry in Hollywood, implicating writers and playwrights across the country, many of whom worked both in theater and for cinema. More than 300 Hollywood artists (actors, directors, and screenwriters) were affected, many were never to re-enter the industry. Though blacklisting did not happen in Broadway and Off-Broadway, 'being branded a Red generally had a negative effect at the box office' (Murphy 1999: 2). Many theater practitioners were called to testify, including Lillian Hellman, Clifford Odets, Elia Kazan, and Arthur Miller. And indeed, many had been involved either in American Communist organizations in the 1930s or had been politically left-leaning; few were the gross political traitors they were supposed to be. A culture of inquisition encouraged informing on others; Kazan and Odets named names, Hellman and Miller refused. Friendships, working relationships, and careers, as a result of such practices, were often destroyed. As Brenda

Murphy's *Congressional Theatre: Dramatizing McCarthyism on Stage, Film, and Television* reveals, the drama of the decade deployed multiple strategies in response to this context, some of which will be discussed below.

Playwrights of the Late 1940s and 1950s

Although it has been argued the drama of the 1940s and 1950s becomes introspective, attention to specific plays suggests a more complex picture. An exploration of 'the human costs of postwar industrial capitalism and the contradictory nature of the American dream' (Saddik 2007: 40) is shared by the three playwrights considered below: Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and Lorraine Hansberry. Similarly, while postwar American drama is often regarded as tending toward realism, perhaps as John Bell suggests, 'partial' or 'compromised' realism is a more appropriate designation (Bell 2004: 115). In particular, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams--the two major playwrights of the period--advance an aesthetic that fuses social realism with 'non-realistic elements that blatantly call attention to the artifice of the stage' (Bell 2004: 115).

Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) wrote over twenty nine plays, two novels and numerous short stories between the 1930s and 1983. His first Broadway success was with *The Glass Menagerie* in 1945. Although stage notes stress the fact that this is a memory play, Tom Wingfield's opening monologue firmly locates the action in the politically turbulent pre-war 1930s. Much of the play seems modeled on Williams' own family background and the impact of his sister's mental illness and lobotomy. Each member of the Wingfield family is alienated from the world around them. Amanda, Tom's mother, deals with the disappointments of impoverishment and marriage breakdown by living in the past, the past of the old American South, of gentility and 'gentlemen callers.' Laura, Tom's sister, suffers from a debilitating shyness; her response to the world around her is to withdraw from it entirely and to assemble

a collection of glass figurines. Tom longs to escape his family and dead-end job, at first seeking solace at the movies and finally joining the merchant marines. Guilt and failure permeate the play's delicate psychological texture. As Annette J. Saddik remarks, 'The personal merges with the social in this play as all the characters are engulfed by the alienating powers of the American capitalist system in which they are expected not only to survive, but to thrive and find happiness. Instead [...] the protagonists find themselves subjected to the overwhelming powers of a ruthless, changing society' (Saddik 2007: 43).

A Streetcar Named Desire (1947) also presents a society defined by cruelty and callousness, but was much more controversial due to the sexual energy that drives the plot. As Felicia Hardison Londré describes, *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a far cry from the nostalgic innocence of *The Glass Menagerie*, and, as in some of Eugene O'Neill's work, sexuality conditions each of the main characters (Hardison Londré 1997: 48). It stages a confrontation between Blanche Dubois, a damaged emissary of the Old South, and Stanley Kowalski a Polish American working class man of New Orleans. Blanche has been stranded in a cul-de-sac of dying graces, aristocratic fantasies and romantic self-delusion. Her intrusion into her sister Stella's new life aggravates the latter's husband, Stanley, who exerts his authority first verbally, and then physically when he beats his pregnant wife and later rapes her sister. Blanche's self-deceptive dreaming and final madness is counterbalanced by Stanley's brutality and materialism, as he attempts to lay claim to his wife's share of a non-existent fortune while aggressively asserting his American identity and male superiority. The play concludes with the searing image of the Kowalski family restored as Blanche is led off to a mental institution.

Williams wrote other important plays in the 1950s, including *The Rose Tattoo* (1951), *Camino Real* (1953), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), *Baby Doll* (1956), *Orpheus Descending* (1957), *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1958), and *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959); he was almost

equally prolific during the 1960s. However, the works after *The Night of the Iguana* (1961) were rarely as successful. Gerald Bordman and Thomas S. Hirschak suggest that '[h]is preoccupation with social degeneracy and homosexuality, which had heretofore been contained by his sense of theater and poetic dialogue, overcame these saving restraints and lost him a public for the newer works' (Bordman and Hirschak 2004: 664).

Arthur Miller (1915-2005) began writing for theater in the late 1930s, his last play *Finishing the Picture* (2004) was staged just a few months before his death. Two of his most enduring works, however, date from this period. *Death of a Salesman* (1949) and *The Crucible* (1953) provide rich insights into the dilemmas of American identity in the mid-century. *Death of a Salesman* recalls Eugene O'Neill's fascination with tragedy, yet the foundation of the tragic structure is an ordinary man who is a self-deluded failure. Though Miller defends the 'personal dignity' of Willy Loman, critics and scholars have long been divided as to whether the play achieves tragic stature. Matthew C. Roudané provides a concise overview of some of these various perspectives on the play in his essay '*Death of a Salesman* and the Poetics of Arthur Miller.' What is certain is the mesmerizing way in which the play 'presents a rich matrix of enabling fables that define the myth of the American dream' (Roudané 1997: 60). Willy Loman, the salesman whose demise is traced, is stranded in a materialistic world that no longer seems to have space for him. Such shrinking space is indicated by the set design too--the Loman's home is enclosed by urban development. The action of the play skips between past and present, events and people seen principally from Willy's perspective. Willy's worldview is based upon the conviction that appearance and popularity are the magic keys to success. Despite his best efforts, the affluence and professional respect he believes are his due elude him. Rather than admit defeat he chooses death. Through the plight of the character of Willy Loman, Miller advances a stinging critique of the American dream. Willy 'embraces facile American promises that prove to be illusory

for him, and he is left behind in a changing technological world that ruthlessly emphasizes profit' (Saddik 2007: 57).

The Crucible was also to tackle hypocrisies in American society of the day. The play engages with the grim realities of the McCarthy era by means of analogy and allegory. As Brenda Murphy explains, the analogy between the witch trials of Salem in the seventeenth century and the anti-Communist investigations of the late 1940s and 1950s was already suggested in Marion Starkey's *The Devil in Massachusetts* (1949) (Murphy 1999: 133-136). Miller's reading of this book marked the beginning of his research on the historical material that would be transformed into *The Crucible*. Also instrumental was the revelation by Miller's close friend and colleague, Elia Kazan, that he intended to name names so as to avoid being blacklisted in Hollywood by HUAC. Unsurprisingly, *The Crucible* was an emotionally charged piece of theater. Depicting the fever of hysteria that swept through Salem in 1690s with devastating effect, the play traces the destructive spiral of paranoia, superstition, and spite set in motion by Abigail Williams, partially because of her anger at being sexually rejected by her employer John Proctor. Proctor ultimately stands up to the forces of hysteria by refusing to inform on others or to publicly confess to alliance with the devil. He pays for his moral protest with his life. The parallels with the present were obvious to contemporary audiences and reviewers in 1953, though not all were impressed. Murphy documents how reviewer Robert Warshow condemned Miller's dramatic premise and argued that the play 'offers us a revealing glimpse of the way Communists and their fellow-travelers have come to see themselves' (Murphy 1999: 155-6).

Lorraine Hansberry (1930-1965), in contrast to the canonical figures of Williams and Miller, is remembered primarily for a single play, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1957). Hansberry's potential was tragically curtailed by her death from cancer at the age of thirty four. She wrote two other plays, *The Drinking Gourd* (1960) on the subject of slavery (written for television

but never produced because deemed too controversial) and *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* (1964)--several other works were published posthumously. Hansberry is remarkable because she was the first black playwright to win the New York Drama Critics' Circles Award, she was also the first black woman to have a play on Broadway (notably she was only the fifth woman to do so).

Born in Chicago, Hansberry's background was middle class and educated; her parents were activists in the Civil Rights movement and protested against segregation in housing. Hansberry was also to become an articulate and intellectual advocate of African-American identity and rights. Indeed, simultaneous with the eruption of anticommunist fervor is a growing turbulence around discriminatory racial policies in America. Legally successful challenges in the early 1950s to the segregation of students in schools as unconstitutional heralded the beginning of a new era of activism. Rosa Parks's famous refusal to conform to racially segregated seating on a public bus sparked a historic boycott of the system that led to the end of this policy. The African-American Civil Rights movement was to gather force and momentum throughout the remainder of the 1950s and 1960s and it is against this backdrop that Hansberry's achievements must be evaluated.

The title of *A Raisin in the Sun* is drawn from a poem by Langston Hughes entitled 'Harlem' that consists of a series of rhetorical questions: 'What happens to a dream deferred?/ Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?' The play revolves around the realistic depiction of a black working-class family, the Youngers, who are awarded a \$10,000 life insurance payment. The family matriarch, Lena, wishes to invest in a family home, not insignificantly, in a white neighborhood. Her son Walter wants to escape his job as a chauffeur and start his own business. Other members of the three generation family confront the harsh realities of their environment and in various ways struggle for survival or self-realization. Most notably Beneatha, Walter's sister, combines her medical studies with a growing identification with her

African heritage expressed through clothing and hairstyle. When Walter is swindled out of the inheritance the family, must come to terms with the disappointment. A commentary on materialism is implicit. Margaret B. Wilkerson comments on how, 'Hansberry deftly uses this narrative [of the newly discovered and soon lost fortune] to contrast the materialism of the American dream with its humanistic alternative. Lena speaks of her generation's victories over segregation, while Walter argues that the power of money is more important' (Wilkerson 1999: 141). The domestic realism of the play, the characters' humor and endurance, the expression of divergent attitudes to self-fulfillment and success, recall Clifford Odets' *Awake and Sing!* Yet, due to the racial dimension of the work, it was initially thought too great a commercial risk for Broadway, and first toured on the East coast and in Chicago before securing a production in New York. While Hansberry stresses the strength of the human spirit, the play's conclusion is carefully poised between hope and anger and as Thomas P. Adler observes, 'rather than naively support integration or allow its white audiences to applaud, and thus escape, protest directed against them, [the play] makes a more subversive statement--leading directly to the dramas that will respond to the social upheavals of the 1960s' (Adler 2005: 174).

Alternative Energies of the 1960s

As the introduction remarks, the 1960s and early 1970s were distinguished by multiple social upheavals, in particular the Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam War. The nonconformism of the hippies, the ecology movement, black activism, feminism, gay activism all challenged the conservatism of the previous decade. Broadway continued to decline, but new forms of theater were to flourish in countercultural and alternative contexts. In New York, the Off-Off-Broadway phenomenon developed around Caffe Cino, Judson Poets' Theater, La Mama, Theatre Genesis (Bottoms 2004: 1-15). Additionally, new theater

groups proliferated. One of the earliest of these was the Living Theatre founded in 1951 by Julian Beck (1925-1985) and Judith Malina (b. 1926). From 1964 on (the group continues to the present) they became increasingly committed to ‘an anarchist-pacifist political view’ (Shank 2002: 8). The Open Theater (1963-1973) formed by Joseph Chaikin (1935-2003) focused on non-realistic and improvised performance--their first full play *Viet Rock* was developed through improvisation and performed at Café La Mama in 1966 (Shank 2002: 38). Organizations like the Performance Group (1967-1980) led by Richard Schechner (b. 1934) and the Bread and Puppet Theater (1961-) started by Peter Schumann (b. 1934) explored uses of the theater environment, space, and communal experience. Other groups were either implicitly or explicitly politically engaged like the San Francisco Mime Troupe (1959-) or El Teatro Campesino (1965-). One of the most influential organizations was the Black Arts Movement founded by LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka [b. 1934]), which gained urgency and purpose following the assassination of Malcolm X. Associated with BAM was the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (BARTS) formed in 1965, which proved influential in the development of the ‘Black Aesthetic’ (see Sell 2008: 217-242). Many of these groups foregrounded non-text based performance and collaborative practices, some produced plays, and to emerge from this environment were several dramatists of significance.

New Playwrights of the 1960s

Edward Albee (b. 1928) playwriting career began when *The Zoo Story* (1958) appeared in an Off-Broadway venue in a double bill with Samuel Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape* in 1960. His subsequent major plays in the 1960s included *The American Dream* (1960) and *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1961). Recently, *The Goat-or-Who is Sylvia?* (2002) and his rewriting of *Zoo Story* in 2004, have won him renewed critical and popular attention. Albee’s work is

often discussed as absurdist, largely on the basis of his debut work. The play was, as Bottoms describes,

so popular with audiences that it was remounted eight times over the next six years, becoming the defining off-Broadway play of the era. [It] revived, almost single-handedly, the American little theater tradition of the self-contained one-act drama, and did it by fusing a distinctly American urban realism with new ideas derived from the European 'theater of the absurd.' (Bottoms 2004: 21)

Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961) is the key critical text here. Esslin created the term in an attempt to analyze the tendencies he found in the work of a number of European playwrights whose work appeared in the postwar period. While the first edition of the book dealt primarily with Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet, and Arthur Adamov, later editions added other writers including Harold Pinter, Jack Gelber, and Albee himself. Esslin asserted that

[t]he hallmark of this attitude is its sense that the certitudes and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away, that they have been tested and found wanting, that they have been discredited as cheap and somewhat childish illusions. The decline of religious faith was masked until the end of the Second World War by the substitute religions of faith in progress, nationalism, and various totalitarian fallacies. This was all shattered by the war. (Esslin 1968: 23)

Absurd drama 'strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and

discursive thought' (Esslin 1968: 24). Doubtless some of this spirit infuses Albee's early work, but as Bigsby and others have cautioned, the context from which Albee's drama derives is fundamentally different from that of post-war Europe.

The Zoo Story portrays a charged scene in a city park where two strangers, Peter and Jerry, argue over a bench. Peter is middle class, married with children and pets, a recognizably functional member of society, Jerry is a lonely social outcast who lives a peripheral alienated existence. The play consists of Jerry's verbal sparring with the unsuspecting and increasingly uncomfortable, Peter. Albee plays with the boundaries of polite speech and aggressive verbal performances to unfold a drama with allegorical intent. Peter and Jerry might easily be read as representations of two experiences of contemporary America. Jerry's taunting presence destabilizes the sense of privilege and comfort suggested by Peter's character and ultimately has the power to destroy that stability.

The American Dream similarly deploys an allegorical method. The play obviously solicits reference to *Death of a Salesman*, yet has little of the heightened realism of its predecessor. Significantly the tone of the play is grimly satirical. The stock nature of character is underscored by their names: Mommy, Daddy, Grandma, and the Young Man. If the domestic setting seems familiar it is soon rendered bizarre by the disjointed exchanges between the characters. Mommy's disquisition on her purchase of a hat is both painfully humorous and ruthlessly critical of consumerism. The emasculation of the father figure is absolute, while Grandma's explicit appraisal of the Young Man as 'the American Dream' (Albee 1963: 108) is brutally inflected by the description of him as physically perfect but 'in every other way ... incomplete' (Albee 1963: 113).

Both these plays and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* advance a critique of modern America and the cherished illusions of its inhabitants. The social underpinning of his work sets it apart from the European Theatre of the Absurd and aligns it with an American set of

concerns, despite his use of some of the nonnaturalistic techniques associated with absurdist theater. The illusions or self-deceptions his early plays attack are, for Albee, absurd, a flaw at the heart of the system which is simultaneously intrinsic to it. And it is precisely this attitude that distinguishes his work from that of his precursors Miller and Williams for whom those self-deceptions have a tragic and lyrical dimension.

Jean-Claude van Itallie (b. 1936) is among the most innovative of the new playwrights of the 1960s. Author of more than thirty plays, van Itallie has experimented throughout his career with a variety of forms including 'farce, satire, musical performances, monologue, realism, ritualistic theater, revues, Oriental drama, surrealism, expressionism, and Theatre of Cruelty' (Plunka 1999: 13). The trilogy, *America Hurrah* (1966), composed of 'Interview,' 'TV' and 'Motel' and developed with Joseph Chaikin and the Open Theater was the first of van Itallie's works to attract widespread attention. The play was greeted enthusiastically as a pivotal work and as one of the foremost dramatic responses to the Vietnam War.

Finally, the radical writer Amiri Baraka (b. 1934, and also discussed under African-American literature) was crucially influential in shaping African-American revolutionary theater in the 1960s and 1970s (see Elam 2001). Everett LeRoi Jones (he later took the African name Amiri Baraka) first came to fame with a play called *Dutchman* in 1964 which appeared first in a double bill with Albee's *The American Dream*. As David Krasner notes, the play is centered on attack, first verbal then physical (Krasner 2006: 69). A provocative allegorical play about race in America, it depicts a young black man who has assimilated into white culture. He is taunted by a white woman on the subway and when he articulates his anger, she kills him with the assistance of the other passengers. The play concludes with another black man entering the train and the process begins again. Baraka's play is also an attack on perceived African-American complacency as he 'critiques middle-class African Americans all too willing to abandon their heritage and cater to liberals' (Krasner 2006: 69).

Baraka's work has developed in an overtly political manner and with the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (BARTS) he devoted himself to writing for and about black people (Elam 2001: 2). His Black Revolutionary Theatre is one of the most uncompromising and controversial forms of social protest theater in the 1960s and early 1970s. However, as Errol Hill and James Vernon Hatch relate, BARTS policies of self-segregation combined with Baraka's militancy caused problems within the African-American arts community and BARTS closed when its funding was cut (Hill and Hatch 2003: 390).

PROSE FICTION

Southern Literature

Some of the main themes of Southern literature were dealt with in the previous chapter in relation to the fiction of William Faulkner. He was followed by another generation of talented writers, foremost among them Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964). She was from Georgia, and she remained there for most of her life, although not completely voluntarily--she suffered from *lupus erythematosus*, a chronic inflammatory disease, as a result she walked on crutches and towards the end of her life could not move at all. As a Roman Catholic she made a pilgrimage to Rome and also attended a few literary events, but mostly lived with her mother on her farm surrounded by peacocks. Her two novels, *Wise Blood* (1952) and *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960), take place in the South, and so do the majority of her short stories (with the exception of those whose heroes have moved elsewhere but in their minds have remained in the South, as for instance in 'The Judgment Day').

Religion stands at the center of O'Connor's works. She herself was an outsider in several respects--not only was she a physically handicapped woman, but also a Roman Catholic in the predominantly Protestant South. Several of her heroes are preachers of some sort, especially in her two novels, and some of the titles of her short stories have religious connotations (e.g.

'The Judgment Day' or 'Revelation'); and all of her works entertain the possibility of religious explanation. Moreover, religion in her works is often closely connected with sex, which is one of the reasons for the ambiguity inherent in the texts themselves. There are some short stories which as yet no critic has proved capable of interpreting fully (e.g., 'Parker's Back').

O'Connor also treated black characters in her prose as symbols. Good examples of this are provided by the short stories 'The Artificial Nigger' (the title itself is suggestive), 'The Judgment Day,' and 'Everything That Rises Must Converge' (which is the title story of her second collection [1965], the first being *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* [1955]). Through a series of encounters with blacks, a certain revelation comes to the protagonists. It is the shock of recognition that they experience, a deeper recognition of themselves with all their weaknesses, faults and even sins.

If not the determining, then certainly the all-penetrating feature of Southern literature is a sense of the grotesque. However, it is difficult to define Southern grotesque with any degree of accuracy. If one paraphrases Flannery O'Connor, in the North everything which comes from the South is considered grotesque, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is considered realistic. Just as there are basically three kinds of humor, namely character humor, situational humor, and purely linguistic humor, one can subdivide the grotesque into roughly the same categories.

The grotesque quality of a character somehow goes hand in hand with the frequent occurrence of handicapped people both in Southern life (since the retarded were not sent to asylums) and in Southern literature. For example, in Eudora Welty's 'Petrified Man' one reads a very colorful description of a real freak show, but at the same time realizes how grotesque the protagonists of this short story are--it is the same quality to a different degree. In general, Southern grotesque characters are quite frequently labeled as 'misfits,' i.e., people

who have no fixed place in society, despite their attempts to conform (the most obvious examples here being all the protagonists of Carson McCullers [1917-1967]).

Situational grotesque usually stems from the discrepancy between words and actions, between ideals and reality. Because of the abovementioned discrepancies and lapses in memory, Quentin in *The Sound and the Fury* ends up fighting his schoolmate believing him to be his sister's lover, and many other examples could be adduced. The ultimate master of situational grotesque was probably O'Connor, whose heroes quite often die in a funny way (e.g., Julian's mother in 'Everything That Rises Must Converge').

Pure linguistic grotesque is rare--it usually co-exists with either situational grotesque or the grotesque of a character. One may find a dominant ratio of a linguistic grotesque in a conversation Joy/Hulga leads with her mother or Mrs. Freeman, where she is able to twist meanings by taking words at face value, or in the very act of renaming oneself (which is what Joy did), or in the actual references of the very title to actual events. The title of O'Connor's short story being 'Good Country People,' one would expect to meet some of that kind--however, the exact opposite turns out to be the case.

Another important Southern Catholic writer is Walker Percy (1916-1990), who lost both his parents in early childhood and was adopted by a distant relative William Alexander Percy, a soldier, farmer, lawyer, teacher, poet, civic leader and gentleman. Under the influence of existential philosophers (Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Camus), he made three key decisions: he converted to Catholicism, got married, and gave up medicine in order to become a writer. He is the author of numerous essays on science, faith, philosophy, language, and semiotics, and six novels: *The Moviegoer* (1961), *The Last Gentleman* (1966), *Love in the Ruins* (1971), *Lancelot* (1977), *The Second Coming* (1980), and *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987).

Percy's hero is always an upper-middle class white man from Louisiana, who like a pilgrim sets on a journey with one aim: to find some meaning to his life. In *The Moviegoer*,

Jack Bolling, one of the last scions of a traditional aristocratic family, spends his days flirting with secretaries and at cinemas, fully submerged in the artificial world on the silver screen. Only at the end, touched by omnipresent death, does he engage in actual relationships with other human beings. In *Love in the Ruins*, the protagonist Thomas More is named after his famous Renaissance ancestor, but the novel is, in fact, anti-utopian. It explores the tensions between whites and blacks in connection with the exploitation of faith and religion, and touches upon the general state of American society as well. Given the hostility of the surrounding world, the only thing that makes sense is again love, marriage, and children.

Carson McCullers, Tennessee Williams (1911-1983), and Truman Capote (1924-1984) decided not to live in the South permanently, although they paid frequent visits to the country of their childhood, both in reality and in their fiction. They stayed for considerable periods at different places in the US and also in Europe, but their writing remains, in more than one respect, distinctly Southern (only one of their major works, Tennessee Williams's novel, *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* [1950], is set abroad, the main reason probably being the influence of Williams's intimate friend of many years, Frank Merlo). Carson McCullers's masterpieces--*The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941), *A Member of the Wedding* (1946), *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1951), and *Clock Without Hands* (1961)--are all set in the South; and so are Truman Capote's earlier works--*Other Voices*, *Other Rooms* (1948), *The Grass Harp* (1951), and many short stories from *A Tree of Night and Other Stories* (1949). In *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1958) the protagonist, although living in New York City, cannot escape her Southern origins, which is often the case with Southern literary heroes (e.g., William Styron's [1925-2006] Stingo from *Sophie's Choice* [1979] or Peyton from *Lie Down in Darkness* [1951]). Capote's non-fiction (e.g., *In Cold Blood* [1966]) cannot be treated within the same context.

McCullers dealt openly with racism in *Clock Without Hands*, which is, in artistic terms, certainly not her masterpiece. And as for the male writers of this generation, blacks in their fiction are marginal. While Capote pays virtually no special attention to them (for instance, there are some characters of secondary importance in *Other Voices, Other Rooms*), Tennessee Williams focuses on a black hero in just one of his short stories, 'Desire and the Black Masseur.' The most significant and also the most provocative book to date in this respect remains Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967).

Jewish-American Literature

In 1881, after the pogroms in Russia, Jews from Eastern Europe started to arrive to America in considerable numbers. They imported their own culture, and soon the first Yiddish newspapers were published, and the first Yiddish theaters opened. After Hitler's rise to power in 1933 leading scientists, artists and intellectuals began arriving in America: Albert Einstein, Marc Chagall, Hannah Arendt, and many others. In the 1950s, and during the first half of the '60s, the Jews played a major role in the fight for black civil rights--a role noticeably larger than any other white group. In part this was because they themselves had experienced the feelings of a subordinate minority not so long before. Nowadays, the Jews are united more on a historical and cultural than on a religious basis. They frequently intermarry, do not keep kosher kitchens, and do not observe many traditional holidays. They feel united, though, especially when the future fate of the state of Israel is in question--for example in 1967 from 23 May to 10 June they collected \$100 million for the fight for the Promised Land, which is unprecedented not only in the history of Jews, but also in the history of private philanthropy in the US. Thus, although they always longed for assimilation, at the same time they wanted to preserve their identity, and this became one of the major conflicts which was reflected in the prose fiction of Jewish American writers.

American literature has always found new sources of inspiration--whether in thematic or formal terms--in regions, subcultures and ethnic and racial groups. Those minority literatures become part of the great national cultural heritage only at that point when they manage to shake off the primitive tones of local color and to rid themselves of provincial self-centredness. Simultaneously, they should keep the strength of particular settings and all the specific features of a given language, while those very features serve as a basis for the magic of the word.

The literary critic Irving Howe once remarked that while Southern writing seems to be the most significant regional culture to break into national consciousness, a somewhat similar development, about two decades later (that is, mainly in the 1950s and 1960s) occurs among the novelists and short story writers who are called Jewish American writers. In those two decades, writers like Bernard Malamud (1914-1986), Philip Roth (b. 1933) and Saul Bellow (1915-2005) started to be widely published and read among both Jewish and non-Jewish writers, and they also drew a lot of critical attention. As is common with artists, almost all rejected the idea of being described as a 'school' or 'group.' Bernard Malamud especially is known to have made a few biting remarks on the frequent attempts to create a trio, or even a triumvirate, consisting of himself and his two peers Roth and Bellow. Nevertheless, both the works of the abovementioned three writers and, to a certain degree, of their predecessors as well, show major similarities and continuities. These are to be found mainly in settings, subject matter and tone in general.

Howe pointed out the five distinguishing features of Jewish American writing. First, they blend street energy with a high culture rhetoric. Second, the influence of Yiddish, not so much through the occasional use of a phrase or word as through ironic twists that transform the whole of language, the Talmudic structure of an argument, and Jewish humor. Third, a rapid, nervous, breathless tempo, like the hurry of a garment salesman trying to persuade a

customer. Philip Roth especially became famous because of his verbal dynamism--his heroes want to say everything at once, including each and every sexual thought they were never allowed to utter in the family home. Fourth, a deliberate loosening of syntax. Primarily, the first generation immigrants did not have time for American schools and learned English virtually on the hoof, that is in the street. Fifth, a deliberate play with the phrasings of plebeian speech, but frequently also that kind which vibrates with cultural ambition, seeking to penetrate the regions of higher thought.

In practice the Jewish American writer can follow, roughly, one of three alternate ways. He can, like Jerome Weidman and other authors of the 1930s and 1940s, exploit the Jewish background and concentrate on the depiction of the broken accents and mores of the Jewish immigrant in the US. A second possibility is to ignore almost entirely the Jewish background, like Nathanael West (1903-1940) and J. D. Salinger (b. 1919), who decided to create rather within an individualized or abstracted framework. There are also some authors, for example Joseph Heller (1923-1999), who use their Jewish background in only a few of their works, that is to say, they do not exploit it fully and in a systematic way (e.g., the novel *Catch-22* [1962] has no references to Jewishness and in its loose sequel *Closing Time!* [1994], there are only are some 'Jewish' chapters). The third choice, then, is to utilize the Jewish-American background as a fictional frame. One cannot, however, adopt the position of a local colorist--it is necessary to fuse the world of Yiddish folklore and Jewish life in America with the demands of modern fictional form. And precisely this is what Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, and Isaac Bashevis Singer did--each in his own way.

Malamud's characters usually live in a small, run-down apartment one floor above their equally small, run-down store, and they struggle to survive. (Max and Bertha Malamud, Bernard's parents, were hard-working Russian Jews who ran a Brooklyn grocery.) During the

course of their lives they learn to accept the meaning of suffering, and thus become--at least on the allegoric level--Jews.

Philip Roth decided to describe his Jewish characters as normal human beings with all their weaknesses and faults (e.g., in his first work *Goodbye, Columbus* [1959]) and was as a result frequently accused of anti-Semitism by orthodox rabbis. He defended his concept of Jews as sinners in a series of essays aptly entitled *Reading Myself and Others* (1975), where he successfully rejected the general view that after the Holocaust one must portray Jews as either heroes or martyrs. Apart from the title novella of *Goodbye, Columbus*, there are five short stories: 'You Can't Tell a Man by the Song He Sings,' 'The Conversion of the Jews,' 'Epstein,' 'Defender of the Faith,' and 'Eli, the Fanatic.' In Eli's story, the central theme is what it means to be a Jew in contemporary America with its stress on total assimilation, materialism, and secularism.

Ten years later, in *Portnoy's Complaint*, Roth moved away from the relatively sober realism of his earlier fiction, and Alexander's psychoanalytical confession, which is for the most part concerned with sex, on the couch in the doctor's office is a tour de force of verbal pyrotechnics. In his numerous later novels Roth is either reflecting on the atmosphere in the US in certain decades (as in *Letting Go* [1962], *When She Was Good* [1967], *Our Gang* [1971], *The Breast* [1972], *The Great American Novel* [1973], etc.), creating a hero-novelist whose experience parallels in important ways his creator's (the Zuckerman trilogy, *Zuckerman Bound* [1985], and its successor, *The Counterlife* [1987]), or meditating on himself (*The Professor of Desire* [1977], *The Facts* [1988], *Deception* [1990], *Operation Shylock* [1993], etc.).

In *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), Roth returned to his American voice and addressed typical American themes: hypocrisy and extreme offshoots of political correctness. His effort to point out the growing gap in between ideals and reality, as well as attack the Puritan heritage,

culminates in what is called the American trilogy. In *American Pastoral* (1997) he depicts racial riots, the anti-war movement in the 1960s, as well as the chaos and moral uncertainty of the decade. In *I Married a Communist* (1998) he deals with the stifling atmosphere of McCarthyism in the 1950s, while *The Human Stain* (2000) challenges the American myth of a new beginning connected with a new identity: his hero Coleman Silk, who decided to pass as white, does not gain freedom, but lives a lie.

After 2000, Roth increasingly meditates on illnesses, death, and dying, which is evident, for instance, in *The Dying Animal* (2001), *Everyman* (2006), and *Exit Ghost* (2007), the ninth and final novel of the Zuckerman saga. Unlike the American trilogy, Zuckerman is not just the narrator, but also the protagonist, expressing his views on the role of literature for the author, reader, and human experience as such, as well as touching upon the socio-political changes in America after 9/11. A parallel with the suppression of civil liberties and growing fear after 9/11 can be found also in *The Plot Against America* (2004), which falls into the genre of alternative historical fiction.

Saul Bellow focused in almost all of his novels on one type only, namely the disappointed Jewish intellectual. The protagonists are lonely, isolated, and self-absorbed, eternally questioning and hesitating. Therefore, there is little action and virtually no plot--his novels take place within a single consciousness. In Bellow's monologues on modern 'self-hood,' the self is in the midst of the masses, and therefore needs to be radically redefined. Even if the variations on his main character are minor, the main problem--the confrontation of the individual with American society--remains essentially the same (e.g., *Dangling Man* [1944], *The Victim* [1947], *Seize the Day* [1956], *Herzog* [1964], *Mr. Sammler's Planet* [1970], or any other of his novels).

Bellow's most-anthologized work is *Seize the Day* (1956). Tommy Wilhelm, the protagonist, is a man spurred by his father, persecuted by his wife, and victimized by a

confidence trickster, and his life is a sequence of errors. All around him, he sees the terrible power of money. Since he is a financial failure, his freedom is limited, but at least he is able to register the adverse effects of money on the world. At the end of the book, he is brought to a moment of transcendent vision and weeps at the funeral of a complete stranger, but it remains uncertain whether he will be able to sort out his relationships with his father and wife. Thus, although spiritually reborn, he is still 'a loser,' a more sophisticated and rather complicated version of a schlemiel, the traditional Jewish figure of an innocent fool. (It is worth noting that Bellow also translated the short story 'Gimpel the Fool' by Isaac Bashevis Singer into English. Gimpel is a fool in his tolerance and good nature and acceptance of everything, and thus becomes wise in his folly, and Bellow is obviously drawn to such characters.)

Isaac Bashevis Singer (1904-1991) cannot be unproblematically classified as a Jewish American writer. His works can be roughly divided into two groups: those which return to pre-war Poland and sometimes even previous centuries there, and those which take place in postwar America. In the first group, he uses fable and fantasy as structuring devices, although there are also some more realistic novels--e.g., the saga of *The Family Moskat* (published in book form in 1950). This novel is framed by the years 1911 and 1939 and captures the lives of three generations of Warsaw's disoriented Jews who find themselves torn not only between traditional Judaism and the twentieth century--i.e., between orthodoxy and secularism--but also between reason and flesh. New Jewish bohemians, socialists, Zionists, and orthodox Hasidim, are also hungry both for learning and for good food, sex, and wealth. Elsewhere, the main characters range from dybbuks (in Jewish folklore, a dybbuk is a demon or the soul of a dead person that enters the body of a living person and directs his or her conduct and can only be expelled through the ceremony of exorcism), to beggars, rabbis, atheists, saints, and

whores. The setting oscillates between Warsaw and the shtetl (e.g., *Satan in Goray* [1934], *The Magician of Lublin* [1960], *The Slave* [1962], *Shosha* [1978], and many other titles).

In the second group of his works Singer tries to answer the question of how to live in the US after the Holocaust, and, as in William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*, is able to see only a temporary solution, which is sex as an attempt to beat back death (see *Enemies: A Love Story* [1972]). The permanent solution, though, is only death, since 'death is the only Messiah and that is the truth,' as one of Singer's characters remarks.

An interesting alternative to the assimilation versus Jewish identity problem is provided in the works of Chaim Potok (b. 1929), a rabbi and doctor of philosophy. In his novels (e.g., *The Chosen* [1967] and *My Name Is Asher Lev* [1972]), he portrays the contradictory feelings of orthodox Jews in contemporary America. They are unable to reject their religious and cultural heritage fully, but at the same time they long for a different career--Daniel from the author's first book, *The Chosen*, wants to become a psychologist, while Asher Lev from his later works is a painter who dared to portray his own parents in his great piece of art 'Crucifixion.' All Potok's writing is, if not semi-autobiographical, then at least deeply confessional; his style is very simple, but he himself claims that this simplicity was his aim, while not wishing to abandon neither the world of the spiritual nor the secular.

African-American Prose

Instead of peace, the end of World War II brought a new era of struggle in the US--suddenly, 800,000 Black veterans with all their hopes and demands came flooding back home, and suddenly a Great Migration of 400,000 Blacks from the South invaded Northern and Eastern and Western urban centers. These changes forced white America to acknowledge the Black presence in a new way, or, as Ralph Ellison (1914-94) said in one of his essays in *Shadow and*

Act (1964), America, as at all crucial moments in its history, developed ‘a new moral awareness’ and rediscovered its Black minority (Ellison 1964: xxii).

In the years immediately after the war, the dominant author in black letters was Richard Wright (1908-1960). His great novel *Native Son* (1940) furnished a key to the writings of the entire decade, and the hero, Bigger Thomas, became a prototype for Black youth in urban ghettos. Wright’s autobiographical work, *Black Boy*, which appeared five years later, reinforced the image of the black man as a victim of his environment, who ends up, as the author himself, heading North, since he wants to protect his own mind. He grew up with poverty, fear and hatred--he learned to lie, steal, drink, and torture animals. The Jim Crow whites were either indifferent, sympathetic, or cruel; the blacks resented anyone who tried to rise above the common lot. He puts it thus:

Whenever I thought of the essential bleakness of black life in America, I knew that Negroes had never been allowed to catch the full spirit of Western civilization, that they lived somehow in it but not of it. And when I brooded upon the cultural barrenness of black life, I wondered if clean, positive tenderness, love, honor, loyalty, and the capacity to remember were native with man. (Wright 1966: 45)

However, by 1947 Wright had left for Europe. In the 1940s, the fight for full integration into mainstream American society was frustrating, even though the NAACP’s (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) civil-rights lawyers launched the most focused legal attack on segregation and racial bigotry ever recorded in American constitutional history. In African-American literature, there were several noteworthy events. In the early 1950s, the African-American colleges of the South produced quite a few young aspiring critics, who began to comment on the fiction, poetry, and drama of African-American

writers. After they received their education in Northern graduate schools, they strictly applied the critical standards of the white literary establishment. Black writers thus had both a popular and a critical audience.

Moreover, these academic critics believed that the aim of the Black writer should be full integration into the American literary mainstream. Thus, next to the literature of protest, there existed the literature of integration--one should create not as a 'Black,' but as an 'American,' and should create so-called 'raceless works.' This was the cause of a heated debate in 1949, when James Baldwin (1924-1987) wrote an essay for the journal *Partisan Review* entitled 'Everybody's Protest Novel.' While the older Richard Wright assumed that all good literature had to be protest literature, Baldwin argued that the best literature must deal with universals and rise above the level of social protest, since the protest writer's vision is necessarily narrow. This article, of course, led to other closely connected questions: Should the Black writer focus on his racial experience? Should one actually strive to keep a white audience? Does protest always fail as an art form?

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is an African-American work of such complexity and 'non-sectarianness' that it might fairly be said to be one of the single most important works of fiction written in post-1950 American literature along with the two fat ambitious encyclopedic novels by Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) and *Mason & Dixon* (1997). It is also a revolutionary work because it expands the discursive parameters of realistic fiction. For the novel incorporates various genres and modes of writing: surrealism, realism, stream-of-consciousness, fantasy, comedy, and tragedy in its own way. In this way the form of the book is part and parcel of its content. For the form endorses the idea of new verbal and genre combinations just as the content does in regard to notions of new combinations of selves.

The nameless black hero of this novel is a son of both the abovementioned Bigger Thomas and Dostoevsky's underground man. He is an eternal existential man, trapped in uncertainties

and meaningless absurdities, who can no longer hope for moral, religious, or social salvation--his only certainties are birth and death. At the same time, he, like the black writer, had played the various roles demanded of him by America--he was both a submissive boy and an aspiring student in the South, both a day laborer and a charismatic speaker for the communist or anarchist movement in the North, he was both fascinated and repulsed by white women. He discovered in time that each identity was false, based on certain cultural conventions and stereotypes, and ended up in total isolation. America was no longer a land of unlimited opportunities--it became the whole world full of negatives. The central metaphor of the book negates the visible, or more exactly, the way in which individuals are seen to differ from one another. The narrator declares:

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids--and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. (Ellison 1995: 3)

When they look at him, people only see a black man; they cannot see an individual. Ellison's maneuver in the novel is to arrogate the tradition of literary individualism in American literature (his own given name is from Emerson), depicting the obstacles in the way of an African-American who claims to be an individual. The book implicitly rejects an isolated African-American literary tradition, taking its inspiration from a wide range of sources--French existentialism, Dostoevsky, and predominantly, Eliot's *The Waste Land*. These influences play through the book on a par with influences from African-American oral culture.

Ellison published no other novel in his life time, though he continued to work on the book that would eventually be titled *Juneteenth* (1999). In this incomplete and planned multi-volume novel, Ellison sought to extend and resolve questions about selfhood and about national identity that had goaded his writing life. What we have is a work that occasionally surpasses *Invisible Man* but in the end probably should not even be compared with it, given that these two works, separated by nearly five decades, belong to different eras and to different positions in literary history.

This novel concerns the inter-ethnic friendship between Reverend Hickman and Senator Adam Sunraider. The friendship involves the enormously complex configuration of questions of ethnicity and bonding that informs notions of self and of national identity. As in *Invisible Man* the leading metaphorical matrix for this novel is jazz music. In the novel, Adam Sunraider is a racist senator who has been shot while giving a speech on the floor of the United States senate. At this moment of anguish Sunraider asks that his former African American minister, Reverend Hickman, be brought to his deathbed. The two have a conversation, which creates the narrative thread of *Juneteenth*. It is clear from the notes to *Juneteenth* that Ellison is fascinated by the question of power, its true sources, its various micro and macro flows and its custodians; in this regard Ellison writes:

Sunraider knows that the question of his having Negro blood isn't important, it is the fact that *he* himself can't be sure whether he has or not. Because he knows that many who think they don't, do. It is a matter flowing from the way society has been arranged, the power that flows from that arrangement. There is danger to his position because his own power depends upon his manipulation of race. As does the power of all politicians of any importance. That was the joke of it. The power was not biological or genetic, but man-made and political, economic [...] and

immoral as far as the American ideal has a religious component. (Ellison 1999: 361-62)

The last sentence in this passage reveals the stupidity of a certain kind of power for Ellison, insofar as power can be devoid of any moral vision despite what Ellison takes to be a good 'religious component' to 'the American ideal.' Ellison also employs the important new cultural form of the cinema to describe Bliss's (i.e., Sunraider's) plight. As Ellison's notes tell us:

Bliss's attacks on Negroes are a form of running away. He feels a guilt which he will not admit. His adventures with movie-making ditto. He is fascinated that the secret of film lies in the fact that most of the action which gives a movie movement lies between the frames, in the dark. Thus the viewer is manipulated in the dark and he is the manipulator. This carries into his politics, wherein his motives are hidden behind what appears as simple racial prejudice, but in his twisted way he sees himself as putting pressure on Negroes to become more powerful through political action. One of the implicit themes at work here is Hickman's *refusal* to act politically, his refusal to use politics as an agency for effecting change. And at this point we enter the historical circumstances of the fifties wherein the Negro ministers became overtly political through the agency of passive resistance. (Ellison 1999: 360)

Here we can see that Ellison is sensitive to the great twentieth-century cultural fact of film, something hardly surprising for a writer who has always been alive to the juices of artistic energy operating in American society. Bliss is interested in how he can manipulate others

through political subterfuge just as somewhat analogously film manipulates its viewers into thinking that what one sees achieves a sort of full presence and illumination but which in truth must be appropriated or manipulated by the viewer in order to give the illusion of a total cinematic presence in the form of a viewable frame.

The interest in biography and autobiography, two very important genres in black writing since the days of the slave narratives, deepened--popular entertainers, scholars, sports figures as well as the writers themselves told their stories. The most influential autobiographical essays are probably those collected in James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) and *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961). Those essays were written during Baldwin's time as an expatriate, and hence are a composite of many points of view. They explore not only the psychological and political dimensions of blackness, but also its metaphysical parameters, i.e., blackness becomes a symbol for more general alienation. Baldwin published his second novel, *Giovanni's Room*, in 1956. Set in Europe and centered around a young white American's homosexual relationship with an Italian, it strongly implies that not only blacks suffer from lack of identity. A homosexual, caught up in the pressures of an aggressively heterosexual society, can have similar identity problems. In 1953, even Richard Wright, living in Paris, wrote a primarily existential novel, which searched for some sort of sense in life in an absurd universe--although the protagonist is black, the very title, i.e. *The Outsider*, suggests a broadened concept of what it means not so much to be black, but to be 'the other.'

By the mid-1950s the Black literary climate began to undergo subtle changes, which brought about greater recognition by white critics as well. Ralph Ellison received the National Book Award for *Invisible Man*, and the most exciting poet to emerge during that period, Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000), won the Pulitzer Prize in 1950 for her second volume, *Annie Allen*.

A vital factor in the growth of black writing was the growth of publications edited by African Americans--there were both scholarly journals like the *Negro History Bulletin* and magazines of popular appeal like *Freedomways*, *The Liberator*, and *Ebony*. A considerable number of small magazines appeared and provided outlets for the rapidly increasing number of writers, such as *Journal of Black Poetry*, *Black Dialogue*, and *Soulbook*. The most important single periodical was probably *Negro Digest*, which in 1970 changed its name to *Black World*. In addition, publishing companies with a primary focus on blackness started up. Even white publishers began to hire black editors and broadened their offerings in black literature. Black Studies programs and later even departments were organized in colleges and at universities throughout the US.

Thus, unlike the Harlem Renaissance, the new literary awakening was not limited to Harlem--not only was it truly nationwide, but it also connected American blacks with the people of the Third World. Moreover, this new literary movement differed from the previous periods in two other crucial aspects. First, this literature is separatist, political, and revolutionary in tone and subject matter. Secondly, many of its authors reject fully and proudly all traditional or mainstream aesthetics and literary standards. Black writers portray their cynicism, bitterness, and disillusionment with all the Establishment institutions.

The poets are, like the Beat poets of the same decade, verbally direct and explicit. Their poems should be rather declaimed with incantations, dramatic inflections, gestures, and body movements than only read, and in that sense they resemble sermons. The message of the work becomes one with its delivery. Since the artists wrote for the blacks, they often abandoned the conventions of standard English, which they felt were the tools of the enemy. They not only associated in different ways, but also founded various schools and creative writing programs--for example, the Organization of Black American Culture in Chicago, or the Watts Workshop, a group formed after the riots in Los Angeles, produced quite a few significant new voices.

The most representative figure of this radical mood remains LeRoi Jones (b. 1934), who served as a spiritual and aesthetic model for many others. But it is not the LeRoi Jones who received his MA degree from Columbia University. It is a person who changed his name to Imamu Amiri Baraka after the Newark riot, during which he was jailed. For him, a Black poem is not just another aesthetic act, but a political statement. Both he and his followers like Nikki Giovanni (b. 1943), Sonia Sanchez (b. 1934), or Mari Evans (b. 1923) do not speak for themselves, but for a cause as well as for a black collectivity, since the masses are still inarticulate. As Nikki Giovanni put it, revolutionary discipline does not permit one to write 'a beautiful green tree poem' or a 'big blue sky poem,' and Imamu Amiri Baraka frequently stresses the same idea, as for example in the following lines: 'I am deaf and blind and lost and will not again sing your quiet verse. I have lost even the act of poetry, and write now for cool horizonless dawn' (Jones 1964: 47). For them, there was neither time nor need for confessions, private reflections or personal revelations.

The new militant poetry literally exploded in the 1960s, but some established writers published during that decade as well, and also encountered a huge response. Robert Hayden (1913-1980) wrote in traditional lyric forms, to be found in *A Ballad of Remembrance* (1962) and later his *Selected Poems* (1966); Langston Hughes in *Ask Your Mama: Twelve Moods of Jazz* (1961) repeatedly used musical forms and themes inspired by folk life; and Gwendolyn Brooks continued to exploit both lyric forms and free verse in *The Bean Eaters* (1960), while she continued writing strong, feminine poems. Also she became increasingly angry, as for example in her long symbolic poem about the murder of a ghetto child entitled *In the Mecca* (1968), and Hughes also collected his radical poems in *The Panther and the Lash* (1967), but the degree of their militancy is incommensurate with that of LeRoi Jones.

As for prose, several aspiring young short story writers appeared, but it is more interesting to observe how the older authors adjusted to the new social and literary climate. James

Baldwin's two novels from the '60s, *Another Country* (1962) and *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1967), can be considered representative examples of this phenomenon. In the first work, Baldwin portrays several characters of several races and from several regions, all of whom have an identity problem. The protagonist is a white Alabaman homosexual with bisexual leanings, who presently lives in New York. All the heroes are traumatized and fragmented and all of them are able to see only one solution, i.e. sex, which proves fruitless. Even though they cannot find any real way out of their crises, at least they are tolerant bohemians, whose avant-garde life-style does not allow for any racial prejudices, and the blacks and the whites not only cohabit, but also co-exist. With respect to the prevailing mood of the decade, that may be called, in a sense, progress.

Shakespeare's Hamlet said that in drama one finds 'the abstract and brief chronicles of the time,' and this is true of the plays by young black playwrights of the 1960s. Like the poets, they quickly responded to the drastically altered atmosphere, and wrote for primarily Black audiences. The plays predominantly look at ghettos, be they urban, rural ghetto, or small-town ghettos in the South. Every feature of life there is inspected: prostitution, drug addiction, thievery, etc. The message is always direct and revolutionary, and if one looks at the titles of LeRoi Jones's dramas like *The Toilet*, *The Slave*, *Black Mass* or *Slave Ship*, they themselves are very telling. The followers of LeRoi Jones, for example Adrienne Rich, Ed Bullins or Douglas Ward, no longer find appreciation for Lorraine Hansberry's (1930-1965) not so long ago extremely popular drama *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). Her Black family wants to achieve respectability which closely resembles the respectability of a white middle-class family, and that became unacceptable. Blackness in Hansberry's family is not beautiful, which was the motto of the members of the young generation, but burdensome, which for them was the limiting view of the past.

However, not only imaginative literature flourished during the 1960s. The essay took on new significance as black writers probed the complex questions of a new age. *The Fire Next Time*, two pieces written by James Baldwin in 1963, illustrate the new angry tone at its best. Other notable volumes by other important writers followed. Martin Luther King explained his theories in *Strength to Love* (1963), *Why We Can't Wait* (1964), and *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community* (1967). The basics of black power were expounded in *Black Power* (1967) by Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton. Malcolm X's speeches were also published (usually edited from the tapes of his public appearances).

Also important were the genres of biography and autobiography--the life stories of both unknown and prominent people were published. W. E. B. Du Bois's *Autobiography*, which came out posthumously in 1968, and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (written with Alex Haley), probably best recorded the black lives of that period, no matter how different the philosophies of the respective personalities are.

However, what remained missing was a female black perspective. For years, decades, and almost centuries black women in America suffered from what is called double oppression. They were suppressed by both whites and by their own men, who in that manner counterbalanced their own frustrations. They interpret reality in a distinctly female way--since they were closed at home and did not meet the outer world that much, they could explore the myths of their own culture to greater effect. Because of their traditional role in the family and community, they explore the deeply rooted sexism they find there, and because of what is referred to as their tribal memory, which is also partly based on certain customs, superstitions and folklore they above all kept alive, they can investigate all the versions of racism as well. In the 1970s, '80s and possibly also '90s it is precisely the emergence of their powerful voices that dominate American literature.

The Beat Generation

The term Beat Generation was reportedly invented by Jack Kerouac as early as 1948, while talking with John Clellon Holmes (b. 1926), who then became the first official critic of Beat writings. They discussed the meaning of the Lost Generation and Existentialism and Kerouac came up with this label, which many years he later defined for the Random House Dictionary in the following way: ‘members of the generation that came of age after World War II who, supposedly as a result of disillusionment stemming from the Cold War, espouse mystical detachment and relaxation of social and sexual tensions.’ Here, the term thus does not connect to anything literary, even though at the heart of this movement was literature.

When Kerouac was asked to characterize the adjective Beat, he said that it stood for ‘beatific’ as well as ‘down and out’ (the Czech translation falls short of the original as one must use two words, *blaženost* and *zbitost*, to encompass the meanings implied). For Allen Ginsberg, ‘Beatness’ meant ‘looking at society from the underside, beyond society’s conceptions of good and evil’ (Charters 1983: x). The conservatism of the period was outlined in the introduction: Beat writers tried to find ways to break this open. They helped to change the consciousness of many young Americans to such a degree that their books seemed a threat to the Establishment (Ginsberg, for a time, was on the FBI’s dangerous security list).

Beat writers must be seen predominantly within the American context--they heavily relied on the American tradition of individualism and transcendentalism going back as far as Emerson and Thoreau. Unlike the members of the Lost Generation, who lived as bohemians mainly in Paris and drew from European culture, the Beats also insisted only on American speech rhythms and American subjects for their writing.

Lawrence Ferlinghetti, himself a distinguished poet, also owned a small publishing company City Lights, and he decided to publish Ginsberg’s poem *Howl* as a volume in the Pocket Poets Series. In May 1957, copies of this book were confiscated by the San Francisco

police, and one of the most celebrated censorship trials ever started. A complaint alleged that Ferlinghetti did ‘willfully and lewdly print, publish and sell obscene and indecent writings’ (Charters 1983: x). The literary merit of the poem was defended by a University of California Professor Mark Schorer, and due to this scandal and the discussions that followed the poet became nationally famous. On 3 October 1957, Judge Clayton Horn of the San Francisco court ruled that *Howl* possessed ‘some redeeming social importance’ (Charters 1983: x), and in the same year Kerouac’s novel *On the Road* was published in New York City by the Viking Press. Those two titles officially launched the Beat Generation writers.

The poem, like the novel, was in many respects a portrait of the Beats themselves. Drawing on the formal structures of Walt Whitman, it stretches out the poetic line across the page in order to accommodate the sprawl, the horror, and the humor of American life in the 1950s. Ginsberg’s heroes cannot, or will not, fit in, and their skewed perspective becomes an opportunity to turn the Establishment upside down through the transgression of sexual mores and cultural counter-intelligence against the state, as is clear in the following passage. The first part of the poem begins with the declaration, ‘I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked,’ and goes on to say who those minds were and what they did.

who lounged hungry and lonesome through Houston seeking jazz or sex or soup, and
followed the brilliant Spaniard to converse about America and Eternity, a hopeless task,
and so took ship to Africa,
who disappeared into the volcanoes of Mexico leaving behind nothing but the shadow of
dungarees and the lava and ash of poetry scattered in fireplace of Chicago,
who reappeared on the West Coast investigating the FBI in beards and shorts with big
pacifist eyes sexy in their dark skin passing out incomprehensible leaflets...

[.....]

who howled on their knees in the subway and were dragged off the roof waving genitals
and manuscripts,
who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with joy,
who blew and were blown by those human seraphim, the sailors, caresses of Atlantic and
Caribbean love [...] (Ginsberg 1985: 127-28)

Although perceived as destructive, mindless, and in some ways unAmerican, the Beats were arguably trying to recover a lost sense of America, to find a way of re-energizing patriotism, as they believed that the country had erred from the correct path. Hence Ginsberg, in a poem of the same period, addressed the country thus:

America I've given you all and now I'm nothing.

America two dollars and twentyseven cents January 17, 1956.

I can't stand my own mind

America when will we end the human war?

Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb.

I don't feel good don't bother me.

[.....]

America this is quite serious.

America this is the impression I get from looking in the television set.

America is this correct?

I'd better get right down to the job.

It's true I don't want to join the Army or turn lathes in precision parts factories, I'm
nearsighted and psychopathic anyway.

America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel. (Ginsberg 1985: 146, 148)

Ginsberg's self-irony is sweet ('I'm nearsighted and psychopathic anyway'), but it should not distract from the robust patriotism of the last line. What would have seemed *unrobust* to many in the period is the adjective 'queer,' but Ginsberg is suggesting that an idea of America that excludes (Blacks, queers, Beats, Jews, etc.), is not as strong as one that includes.

If the initial response was so hostile, where, then, lies the historical significance of the Beat Generation? Reaching its peak between the years 1956 and 1968, it was certainly the shortest-lived generation in the literary history of the US. However, already Gertrude Stein observed in her lectures on America that a generation does not mean a fixed period of time. As she said, a generation can be anywhere from two years to a hundred years. The vitality and innovations of Beat literature extended into the 1970s and '80s--some older writers continued to have their works published, and some new names appeared as well. But there was a difference--Beat writers, as the counterculture gradually became just another culture, were no longer outcasts or exiles within a hostile country. In 1974, for example, Allen Ginsberg became a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters and won a National Book Award for *The Fall of America*; Gary Snyder's book *Turtle Island* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1975; Kerouac's *On the Road* was issued as a Penguin Modern Classic, etc.

The lives of certain Beat writers--most notably Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997), Jack Kerouac (1922-1969), and Neal Cassady, a Proust-reading speed-tripping railroad worker who became Kerouac's muse and a central image, William Burroughs (1914-1997), and Richard Brautigan (1935-1984)--personified certain myths, and also were taken by the readers to represent larger issues related to the exercise of freedom in American society. Numerous important problems were addressed: an alternative life-style to that of the prevailing materialism was looked for, while the means for obtaining personal liberty usually were either an interest in Buddhism or

in primitive religions; institutional power, particularly the production of nuclear weapons and the development of the American military-industrial complex was attacked; efforts to liberalize legal restrictions on homosexuality and drugs, especially marijuana, were intensified; and regard for ecological balance on the planet was particularly strong.

Just as *The Sun Also Rises* became a manifesto of the '20s, Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road* was, despite its publication in the late 1950s, iconic for the '60s. The heroes, that is a group of young restless Americans, whose only interests seemed to be fast cars, wild parties, modern jazz, marijuana, and sex, were described by the conservative voices as wild hedonists, freaks, both mental and moral imbeciles who could not think straight and therefore hated anybody who could. As the numerous variations of Kerouac's characters put it:

[...] and they said they were hitchhiking around the United States for the summer. 'We're going to LA!' they yelled.

--'What are you going to do there?'

--'Hell, we don't know. Who cares?' (Kerouac 1976: 25)

The idea of mobility was so powerful that in the film industry a whole new genre evolved--the road movie. In the author's eyes, though, this need for mobility was not a flight--it was a search. All the Beats were on a quest, and the aim of their quest was spiritual. Though they rushed back and forth all over the country, the real journey went inward, and if they trespassed most legal and moral boundaries, it was only in the hope of finding something on 'the other side.' Jack Kerouac insisted that the Beat Generation was primarily 'a religious generation,' and even today's critics use the term 'secondary religiousness.'

John Updike and Small Town America

The American middle class has sometimes seemed like an ethnic group, and sometimes like an endangered species. In its literature, it is mostly, but not completely, white and Christian (or at least of Christian background). During the 1950s, it would have been considered simply 'American,' i.e., the standard against which other groups--Beats, African-Americans, Jewish-Americans--were viewed as marginal. But with the transformations of the 1960s, the perception of the middle class shifted, and it became one group among others, often threatened by the profound social changes of the period. As we move to the end of the 1960s, and into the succeeding decades, we see the literature of the middle class expand to include other groups. For instance, although Philip Roth begins his career in the 1950s exploring questions of Jewish America, by the time he comes to write *American Pastoral* (1997), his characters are preoccupied with more general questions (the decline of American industry, the fallout of the 1960s for US society--and this from the point of view of a man from the New Jersey middle class). This means that the category of the 'middle class' in literature is only of limited use. There are some continuities with the fiction of Richard Ford and Don DeLillo in the 1980s and '90s, but these must be so qualified with several other narratives that ultimately the category becomes defunct.

The most important novelist here is John Updike (1932-2009). Updike was born in Shillington, Pennsylvania, but spent most of his adult life in small Massachusetts towns. His choice of domicile was intimately connected with his work as a writer, as crucial to him as Provence for Cézanne. After attending Harvard University, he lived in New York for a period, which he discusses below:

New York, in my twenty months of residence, had felt full of other writers and of cultural hassle, and the word game overrun with agents and wisenheimers. The real America seemed to me 'out there,' too homogenous and electrified by now to pose

much threat of the provinciality that people used to come to New York to escape. Out there was where I belonged, immersed in the ordinary, which careful explication would reveal to be extraordinary. These notions propelled the crucial flight of my life, the flight from the Manhattan [...] that I had always hoped to live in. There also were practical attractions: free parking for my car, public education for my children, a beach to tan my skin on, a church to attend without seeming too strange. (Updike 2003: xii-xiii)

The prejudice that Updike is silently answering here is that life of the middle class in the suburbs and small towns of America is inherently boring and unfit as subject for great literature. It is a compromise (in contrast to the Beats' daring); nothing happens there (in contrast to the Harlem riots of *Invisible Man*); extreme mental states are kept safely behind the white picket fence (unlike the unbuttoned ravings of Portnoy). Updike declares later that his 'only duty was to describe reality as it had come to me--to give the mundane its beautiful due' (2003: xvii). Certainly he was not the first writer to do this--Sinclair Lewis and Thornton Wilder come to mind--but he was, arguably, the most successful. The stories that he found there are often about marital infidelity and the implications of religious faith, but on occasions the view from the small town could take in the US in general.

Rabbit Angstrom, the protagonist of his Rabbit tetralogy, lives in a town based on Updike's own Shillington, which is distant from the metropolises of Philadelphia and New York. What can he see?

Running out of gas, Rabbit Angstrom thinks as he stands behind the summer-dusty windows of Springer Motors display room watching the traffic go by on Route 111, traffic somehow thin and scared compared to what it used to be. The fucking world is

running out of gas. But they won't catch him, not yet, because there isn't a piece of junk on the road that gets better mileage than his Toyotas, with lower service costs. Read *Consumer Reports*, April issue. That's all he has to tell the people when they come in. And come in they do, the people out there are getting frantic, they know the great American ride is ending. Gas lines at ninety-nine point nine cents a gallon and ninety per cent of the stations to be closed for the weekend. The governor of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania calling for five-dollar minimum sales to stop the panicky topping-up. And truckers who can't get diesel shooting at their own trucks, there was an incident right in Diamond County, along the Pottsville Pike. People are going wild, their dollars are going rotten, they shell out like there's no tomorrow. He tells them, when they buy a Toyota, they're turning their dollars into yen. And they believe him. A hundred twelve units new and used moved in the first five months of 1979, with eight Corollas, five Coronas including a Luxury Edition Wagon, and that Celica that Charlie said looked like a Pimp-mobile unloaded in these first three weeks of June already, at an average gross mark-up of eight hundred dollars per sale. Rabbit is rich. (Updike 1982: 7)

Each of the Rabbit novels covers one decade, from the 1950s to Rabbit's death in 1990. Updike's achievement is to pay close attention to middle-class lives while also giving an account of the social and cultural life of the US in the period. The grandness of the aim is contrasted with the modesty of the means. An earlier writer like Dos Passos had to resort to the clumsy narrative device of a 'camera eye' which floated over the American landmass; Updike remains closer to the grain of lived experience, but never forgoes the larger horizon.

Other writers that merit mention in this context are John Cheever (1912-1982) and Richard Yates (1926-1992). The former is best known for his short stories and the latter for his novel,

Revolutionary Road (1961). For both, American suburbia is a place of frustrated desires, with wives imprisoned in gleaming kitchens and husbands choked by their respectable neck-ties, as they set out on their daily commute. Escape is provided by infidelity, alcoholism, and suicide. In contrast to Updike, these writers can see little of worth here and their fiction is savage in its criticism, as it records the gestures and sounds of this controlled environment. In the following passage, Yates is describing a couple arriving on a visit their neighbors:

‘Hi!’ They called to one another.

‘Hi!...’ ‘Hi!...’

This one glad syllable, borne up through the gathering twilight and redoubling back from the Wheelers’ kitchen door, was the traditional herald of an evening’s entertainment. Then came the handshakings, the stately puckered kissings, the sighs of amiable exhaustion--‘Ah-h-h’; ‘Who-o-o’--suggesting that miles of hot sand had been traveled for the finding of this oasis or that living breath itself had been held, painfully, against the promise of this release. In the living room, having sipped and grimaced at the first frosty brimming of their drinks, they pulled themselves together for a moment of mutual admiration; then they sank into various postures of controlled collapse. (Yates 1961: 57)

The passage is at once beautiful and accurate, and it also hangs the characters out to dry: the implication here (confirmed by the rest of the book) is that these narcissistic people move from one pretense to the next; moreover, they are incapable of facing the reality of their own lives and making decisions on that basis. Yates’s title--*Revolutionary Road*--suggests a past in which heroism was possible, but this serves only as a foil for the cowards of the present.

POETRY

The New Critical Style

Perhaps the best way to introduce US poetry of this period is with a British poet, W. H. Auden (1907-1973). He lived for over thirty years in the US and was influential as an example, a teacher, and a prize-giver for the generation of poets born in the 1920s. His work displayed a remarkable technical facility with traditional form--his expression found its way elegantly and intimately through the most complex of stanzas. His work in this period (though not earlier) registered deep disillusionment with politics--in his view, one should not use poems to further political aims. Also, although a homosexual, he was not openly so in his published works (many of the foremost poets of this period were homosexual and took a similar course).

This young generation, for whom Auden was a kind of adopted uncle, for the most part eschewed the experimentation of their modernist forebears, writing what has been called in an 'academic style.' Nevertheless, in the 1950s poets reacted against this mainstream. For instance, Beat poets such as Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso (1930-2001) began writing poems that were at once explicitly autobiographical (recounting sexual experiences and drug-induced visions) and extensively political (in the 1960s Beat poetry was for the most part anti-Establishment and anti-Vietnam). Walt Whitman, with his long free-verse lines and prophetic stance, was perhaps the greatest influence on their work, but also significant was Zen Buddhism, which gave them a handle on mystical states of being. (See the section Beat Generation for a discussion of Ginsberg, and also a discussion of LeRoi Jones in the section on African-American Prose.) Another important development was the emergence of the poets who can be loosely called Confessional, among them Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath. Cognate with these developments were the Black Mountain poets, lead by the example of Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, who came together at Black Mountain College in the

1950s. This group would be associated with the name Projectivist Verse, from the essay of that title by Olson. The movement comes out of a tradition of organic form whose immediate precursors were William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound, but also reaches back to Emerson and Whitman. They rejected the rarefied diction and traditional forms of the academic style, preferring instead violent dislocations of line-break and verse-form in order to bring the word closer to the world.

During the 1940s and '50s, T. S. Eliot was considered the most influential in both the world of poetry and the English departments that had established themselves in universities. His poetry, along with Pound's, is best characterized as fragmentary in nature, investigating the cultural artifacts of the past and testing their suitability for inclusion in the modernist collage poem. This poetry is ambitious, proposing itself as the proper site for the revaluation of cultural and social values. It is all the more strange then to witness the severe narrowing of scope that occurred in the 1940s and '50s in American poetry. Not only was this work modest in its cultural aims but it also eschewed the formal experimentation that was the hallmark of so much modernist poetry in favor of a return to the traditional lyric, employing meter, rhyme, stanza forms. The early poems of the new generation are marked by detachment of tone, frequent use of irony and paradox, and an overall elegance of expression; the American poet of the 1950s had no wish to dirty his or her self with the mess of contemporary history.

In an effort to understand the sources for this change it is helpful to go back not to Eliot's poetry but to his criticism. In 1921, in a famous essay on the English Metaphysical poets, he begins by commenting on the difficulty of defining Metaphysical poetry but drops hints along the way as to how it can be characterized: it employs comparison followed by 'a development by rapid association of thought which requires considerable agility on the part of the reader' (Eliot 1953: 112)--in other words, the conceit; leading to intellectual complexity; elegance of expression; sentences with complex structures, leading to equilibrium, paradox, irony;

emphasis on the poet organizing fragmentary reality into new wholes (leading to highly formal work) into an aesthetic unity. This sounds very different from *The Waste Land* which Eliot published the following year. Eliot's description of seventeenth-century English poetry fits the poetry that would be written by the generation of poets after Eliot in America.

What should also be remembered is that during the 1940s English departments were trying to establish literature at universities as an independent area of knowledge. John Crowe Ransom's book *The New Criticism* (1941) proposed that literature provided knowledge that was fundamentally different in type from that provided by the other academic disciplines and so deserved recognition as a different field of inquiry. This led to a treatment of literature that excluded, at least in theory, all matters extraneous to the literary text itself, for instance, historical circumstance, the life of the author, psychological contexts, any consideration of the literary text as involved in politics. It is obvious that such a *cordon sanitaire* placed around the poem could not hold for long. It broke in the 1960s as the best poets grew frustrated with the limitations that the New Criticism placed on their work.

Robert Lowell

When Robert Lowell (1917-1977) won the Pulitzer Prize in 1946 for his collection *Lord Weary's Castle* he was the darling of the New Critics. Thirteen years later, however, he would disappoint them bitterly when he abandoned their aesthetic. While in some respects the poems of that book are untypical of New Critical poetry, in others they adhere closely: probably its best known poem, 'The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket,' employs a form that is close to that of John Milton's 'Lycidas'--iambic lines of irregular lengths and rhyming irregularly--and its marine setting and elegiac tone also recall the earlier poem. The poem is dedicated to Lowell's cousin, Warren Winslow lost at sea during World War II, but as it progresses it moves confidently beyond the confines of the personal elegy panning out to the wide expanse

of the world. Lowell's voice becomes stronger and stronger, taking on the grim tones of an Old Testament prophet as he views the coming apocalypse. The rhetoric is impassioned and visionary:

When the whale's viscera go and the roll
Of its corruption overruns this world
Beyond tree-swept Nantucket and Woods Hole
And Martha's Vineyard, Sailor, will your sword
Whistle and fall into the fat? (Lowell 2003: 16)

This section ends with the figure of Jonas Messias, a conflation of Jesus and Jonah, and possible savior of the world from the corruption of the whale. In the true New Critical style, the poet, while impassioned, nevertheless shows a stern restraint when contemplating the working out of the fate of the world. The aesthetic unity of the poem is provided by Lowell's employment of stories of the apocalypse. The work demands an intellectual effort from the reader, challenging his or her knowledge of history and mythology as well as the ability to follow complex arguments worked out in rhyme.

All this changed though with the publication of *Life Studies* (1959). When Lowell showed the manuscript of the book to John Crowe Ransom, the latter had such a low opinion of it he advised him not to publish. The collection is greatly different in tone and technique from *Lord Weary's Castle*. Where the latter is impersonal, achieving at times an eschatological breadth, *Life Studies* is openly autobiographical and for the most part avoids the intellectual fireworks of the previous volume. It is, as the title says, a series of studies from life, pictures of Lowell's family, childhood reminiscences, forthright descriptions of marital strife and mental illness. In

“‘To Speak of Woe That Is in Marriage’,’ a wife narrates the horrors she endures at her husband’s hands:

[...] My hopped up husband drops his home disputes,
and hits the streets to cruise for prostitutes [...]
[.....]
What makes him tick? Each night now I tie
ten dollars and his car key to my thigh. . . .
Gored by the climacteric of his want,
he stalls above me like an elephant.’ (Lowell 2003: 190)

There is little doubt that Lowell is inviting the reader here to view a particular scene from his own marital life. In other places the tone is much more low key, describing Lowell’s grief at the death of his parents, for instance, or his stay in prison when he was a conscientious objector.

The reason why Ransom was so shocked by the book was not the violence of its descriptions or even that it writes about mental illness and grief; rather it was that Lowell wrote about these things in such an *autobiographical* manner. Poetry should be impersonal, Ransom thought, and here was one of his brightest protégés going against this precept. The collection represents the first of Lowell’s breaks with a previous style in an attempt to make his poetry seem more authentic, closer to life and language as it is spoken. Of course, such an appearance of autobiographical authenticity is yet another stylistic choice.

Lowell suffered for many years from manic depression and it was not until the 1960s when the possibility of lithium treatment for this illness was offered did he have the opportunity to work for extended periods on his poetry. Previously, he wrote in spurts during periods of

sanity. He resolved then to write a poem a day and he chose the blank verse sonnet as his form. These poems were later published as *Notebook 1967-68* (1969) and *The Dolphin* (1973). They resemble diaries in which the poet discusses contemporary political events, his personal life, his family, the death of a film star, in short, whatever is on his mind that day. Again, one is struck by the honesty that Lowell displays in these poems. Anthony Hecht has commented that 'through his constant moral and artistic endeavor to situate himself in the midst of our representative modern crises, both personal and political, he has led, for the US--as it were, in our behalf--a life of Allegory; and his works are the comments on it' (1983: 30).

Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath's (1932-1963) poetry is difficult to read in two respects. The first is connected with the psychological intensity of her explorations of the dark areas of the human mind, which often leads to poems that are exceptionally bleak and depressing; the second has to do with the controversy that surrounded her death. In 1956 she married the English poet, Ted Hughes, and had two children by him. Both were up-and-coming poets, just beginning to attract attention in England and America. In 1961 they bought a house in Devon and the following year their second child was born; later the same year Hughes left Plath for another woman. Despite his continued contributions to the family finances, Plath found the pressure of being a single mother and a full-time writer too intense and committed suicide in February 1963. Controversy about the circumstances surrounding her death and Hughes's subsequent handling of her diaries still rages to this day, with Plath's many biographers taking one side or the other.

The unpleasant facts of Plath's life make for difficulties when reading her poetry because countless critics have refused to separate the life from the work, seeing her poetry about the dark and violent zones of the human psyche as intimately connected with the circumstances of

her death. In their eyes, she becomes an icon of female creativity silenced by patriarchal hegemony. And yet Plath's work is not openly 'confessional.' Like other great writers such as Nabokov, Joyce, and Proust, Plath employs autobiographical material in her work, but transposes and reconfigures it so that it becomes impossible to read the resulting poetry purely as autobiography. Indeed, unlike other confessional poets Plath apprenticed herself assiduously to poetic craft: the pages of her juvenilia and early mature work are littered with villanelles, sonnets, *terza rima* and Metaphysical verse forms. In these poems she cultivates the proper tone of the 1950s, which I have discussed already--ironic, witty, elegant, and detached even when writing about psychologically disturbing subjects. Even in this work of her mid-20s she displays a dazzling mastery of poetic language and none of her poems, not even those undertaken as exercises, is without interest.

On her move to Cambridge on a Fulbright scholarship in 1955, she was exposed to a very different poetic atmosphere. Hughes, under the influence of Dylan Thomas and Gerard Manley Hopkins, was writing poetry that attempted to incorporate the primitive forces of nature within the bounds of the traditional English lyric. Stocked to the brim with images of landscape and the various beasts that inhabit it, this poetry, in the exuberant violence of its transitions and prosody, attempts a different epiphany to that sought after by the elegant poems which were appearing in the *New Yorker* magazine at that time. However, it did not entail an abandonment of poetic form--if anything this is employed and pushed to breaking point with sheer natural energy.

In this environment, Plath plunged into explorations of mythology and began struggling to abandon the detached tone of her early work. This came gradually. The breakthrough occurred in 1962 with the poem 'Elm,' which took twenty-one work sheets. In the earliest version, Plath considers the tree standing on the hill and describes the way it disturbs her

feelings; in the final version such distancing is discarded and the tree itself addresses the poet directly and darkly:

I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root:

It is what you fear.

I do not fear it: I have been there.

[.....]

I am terrified by this dark thing

That sleeps in me;

All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity.

[.....]

I am incapable of more knowledge.

What is this, this face

So murderous in its strangle of branches?--

Its snaky acids kiss.

It petrifies the will. These are the isolate, slow faults

That kill, that kill, that kill. (Plath 1981: 192-93)

The 'murderous' face is that of the moon, connoting through the succeeding imagery the menstrual cycle; and the 'dark thing' that sleeps in the elm is almost like a child, but instead of being a sign of hope it is malign. The voice of the elm tree confronts the poet with a world in which even the rhythm of birth and death in nature is somehow perverted and leads to no re-birth; the concluding three iambic blows ('That kill, that kill, that kill') extinguish any residual hope.

After the voice and vision of 'Elm' were found, Plath was able in the last four months of her life to write what would later become the collection, *Ariel* (1965). Seamus Heaney comments:

The poems were written quickly and they transmit to the reader something of the unexpectedness of their own becoming. There is the pressure of absolute *fiat* behind them: a set of images springs into presence and into motion as at a whimsical but unignorable command. (Heaney 1988: 151)

Their subject matter was often as grim as 'Elm' but was mitigated by many moments of joy and playfulness, which is often passed over in assessments of Plath's work, not least by Heaney himself when looking at the poems written six days before her death. More particularly, on 5 February, Plath wrote 'Edge' one of her most stunning and depressing lyrics. Heaney, like a lot of other critics before him, reads this as a suicide note of sorts, and indeed the poem offers no escape route for the poetic ego:

The woman is perfected.

Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment [...]

[.....]

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,

One at each little

Pitcher of milk, now empty.

[.....]

The moon has nothing to be sad about,

Staring from her hood of bone.

She is used to this sort of thing.

Her blacks crackle and drag. (Plath 1981: 272-73)

Those blacks crackling and dragging across the stage of the poem seem inexorable, and in the intensity of their apathy toward human life ('She is used to this sort of thing') a kind of evil. And yet on the very same day, Plath wrote 'Balloons,' a poem equally beautiful, which is a humorous and witty observation of a baby bursting a balloon. The inventive metaphors, the playful tone, the delight in the magical transformations of the world as seen from the children's point of view, all gainsay the grim perfection of 'Edge.' Whereas in the latter poem Plath is appalled by the moon's blithe gazing on the dead mother and her children, here there is another gaze which is as strong an expression of familial love that we have in recent poetry, as the boy 'sits / Back, fat jug / Contemplating a world clear as water' (Plath 1981: 272). This must be put in the balance against 'Edge.'

Elizabeth Bishop

Lowell's *Life Studies* initiated what would later be called Confessional poetry. In poems of this school, the reader is informed in as lurid detail as possible about the trials and traumas of the poet's personal life. No scene can be too ghastly, no family background too embarrassing; in fact, the more awful and shocking the tale, the more authentic the poem is thought to be. Poetry of this type flooded the magazines in the next two decades, hardly any of it reaching

the levels of psychological pathos and poetic craft of Lowell. Of these poets, Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979), remarked in a letter to Robert Lowell:

In general, I deplore the 'confessional'--however, when you wrote *Life Studies* perhaps it was a necessary movement, and it helped to make poetry more real, fresh and immediate. But now--ye gods--anything goes, and I am so sick of poems about the students' mothers & fathers and sex lives and so on. (Bishop 1994: 562)

No stranger herself to painful experiences in her life, Bishop nevertheless, as the comment illustrates, favors ironic distance over lurid, self-indulgent autobiographical revelation. Her objection is not to the pain itself in the poems, rather it is to the idea that the direct expression of the pain authenticates art. Detachment and irony are present in her work not just because that was the fashion in the 1940s and '50s, but because they counter the poet's own urge to break down. Great grief held under humorous restraints are what characterize her best work. In the villanelle, 'One Art,' it feels as though the poem's form itself will break under emotional pressure, but it is maintained with grim determination right to the concluding line. In this poem Bishop grieves for her lover, Lota de Macedo Soares, an architect with whom she lived in Brazil from 1951 to 1966; up to that she lived in New York and Florida after graduating from Vassar College. She went to school in Massachusetts. Her childhood was spent in Nova Scotia and Worcester, Massachusetts, where she was born. After the death of her father when she was a small child, Bishop's mother went mad and was institutionalized for the rest of her life. This backward spiral through Bishop's life illustrates that there was no one place which she could call her home and this became an abiding theme ('One Art' is a good example of this). The formal mastery evident everywhere in her work is less a means of enshrining any absolute values of either subject or nation, rather it demonstrates their

moments of destabilization more clearly. Many other American poets would strongly disagree with this statement, believing that such destabilization can only come about by formal rupture, in other words by breaking the traditional lyric, with its personal voice, into a thousand pieces. Bishop remains on the brink.

Another important feature of her poetry is visual description. Inspired by the accuracy of Marianne Moore, Bishop in many of her poems simply describes the scene before her--be it a landscape, a petrol station, a dentist's waiting room. Some critics feel that this makes Bishop a very traditional type of poet, essentially decorative in nature, however, David Kalstone in his excellent study of Bishop remarks:

We are accustomed to thinking of Bishop's lively clarity, her openness to the world--attitudes she had mastered in her later poems--and forgetting that these blithe strengths were the product of tensions and fears. Her commitment to the *illusion* of physical presence--her hallmark--was hard won. She observed because she had to. (Kalstone 1989: 22)

Observation of the scene becomes a way of hanging on a world one might fall off at any moment and be lost in cold, blue-black space, as the poem, 'In the Waiting Room,' describes the sensation.

The trajectory of Bishop's oeuvre does not really fit that of confinement within the New Critical poem subsequently broken by experiment and thematic exploration, as in the case of Lowell. Patterns sketched through literary history help US get a general sense of an era, but never fail to exclude work of the highest standard; they should, therefore, be employed only when we keep a close eye on what they banish and not just what they applaud.

James Merrill

Recently, the critic Guy Rotella, writing about the achievements of James Merrill, looked back over American poetry in the last four decades in the context of social change:

Since the 1950s, such factors as the civil rights movement, various forms of youth rebellion, the political and social crisis of the Vietnam War, movements for women's and gay and lesbian liberation, the shocks of a series of assassinations, an intensifying distrust of institutions, and various demands for a society more responsive to multicultural differences all mark the failure or erosion of whatever consensus actually existed. They can also signify that Merrill's is a period in which no single version of literary practice, purpose, or attainment is likely to earn collective consent. (Rotella 1996: 3)

That is, the mature work of the poets who began to emerge in the 1950s cannot be grouped into some kind of 'mainstream,' with interesting figures experimenting in the margins. Any poets who deliberately seek peripheral status are now more likely to be characterized as 'central' to the era. Like Robert Lowell, some of the poets dealt with here more or less began writing the neatly bounded New Critical poem discussed above, and then in their subsequent careers proceeded to diverge from it in very different ways.

James Merrill was born in 1926 in New York City to the second marriage of the stock-broker Charles E. Merrill. He attended Amherst College, and wrote his final-year thesis on Marcel Proust. In 1951 his *First Poems* was widely recognized as an assured *début*, but some reviewers expressed the reservation that he was a master of technique, and nothing more. Indeed looking at these poems now, our gaze focused by his later achievement, they seem occasionally over-wrought, concentrating tensely on intricate verse-forms in their searches, as James Richardson points out, for Rilkean epiphanies. Merrill's first poems are intense

metaphysical filigree work with which he surrounds an object (a swan, an hourglass, a peacock, a willow-tree), all the time testing the purchase of his words upon it, attempting to arrive at its essence. We find in these poems the anxiety that the elaborate verbal skills that are deployed to bring forth an essence might finally serve only to obscure it. Their detachment, their use of irony, paradox and metaphysical wit all make them easily identifiable now as New Critical poems.

Nevertheless some of these early poems introduce themes that would stay with Merrill for his whole writing life. Often throughout *The Changing Light at Sandover* (1982), a long poem which consists of conversations with angels, gods, and dead friends through a ouija board, he stops to wonder if it is only make-believe, having no purchase finally on 'things as they are.' But these doubts, and their possible destructive energies, are incorporated within the poems as Merrill commutes between his subject and its fictive aspect. His feeling for rhyme and verse-forms approaches the sculptural. The effect is of a kind of dual-focus, so that at any one time his gaze encompasses, say, a lover or a childhood memory, and simultaneously the visual shapes of the verses he renders these in. This commutativity leads us to the brilliantly cadenced finale of 'Lost in Translation' (from *Divine Comedies* [1976]), which is a meditation on childhood. Merrill is most often characterized as the supreme poet of autobiography, but unlike Lowell, for whom the childhood memory is the destination, for Merrill it is only the beginning of further explorations--of continents, cosmologies, languages. David Kalstone called it 'symbolic autobiography' and said that it is 'Merrill's way of making apparently ordinary detail transparent to deeper configurations' (Kalstone 1977: 111). These details are often autobiographical events which, when Merrill takes them up, give access to visions and emotions that transcend the purely personal, but without ever disengaging it.

The sonnet sequence 'The Broken Home' provides an excellent example of this. In the following passage, Merrill is providing what might be called historical background, but this 'background' soon becomes 'foreground' as other perspectives are laced through it:

When my parents were younger this was a popular act:

A veiled woman would leap from an electric, wine-dark car
To the steps of no matter what--the Senate or the Ritz Bar--
And bodily, at newsreel speed, attack

No matter whom--Al Smith or José Maria Sert
Or Clemenceau--veins standing out on her throat
As she yelled *War mongerer! Pig! Give us the vote!*,
And would have to be pulled away in her hobble skirt.

What had the man done? Oh, made history.
Her business (he had implied) was giving birth,
Tending the house, mending the socks.

Always that same old story--
Father Time and Mother Earth,
A marriage on the rocks. (Merrill 2001: 198)

The last line detonates the whole sonnet and in one stroke it reverberates through three levels at once: the politics of the era, the mythologies of time and the earth, and the story of the break up of Merrill's parents.

Merrill, like many other poets of his generation, came out in the 1970s, openly writing about his own homosexuality. However, this did not mean that he abandoned the obliquity and archness which had become the hallmark of much of his poetry, rather this remained one of his central devices. He also wrote fine travel poems, about his longer residencies in Greece, and about briefer trips. 'Rhapsody on Czech Themes', about a visit to this country in 1993, is one of the better examples of this mode.

John Ashbery

If John Ashbery (b. 1927) is often thought of as the most avant-garde poet of the 'mainstream,' it is perhaps because he is the most obviously 'French'--which in Anglophone poetry means surreal, cerebral, experimental. He wrote his senior thesis at Harvard on W. H. Auden and began writing the poems that would later appear in his first collection, *Some Trees* (1956). Ashbery then moved to Paris where he worked as an art-critic for the *Herald Tribune* for around ten years. This gave him a chance to experience a different cultural atmosphere, which exposed him to Surrealism and to the work of Raymond Roussel. When asked now about the influence of Surrealism on his poetry, he quotes Henri Michaux, who stated that the movement was 'la grande permission'--in other words, it created a sense of artistic freedom even for those writers who did not adhere to its manifestoes and proclamations. Ashbery's next book, *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), is a good example of this new freedom. Most of the book is made up of 'cut-up' poems: Ashbery picked up sentences and pieces of sentences from American magazines available in Paris and arranged them as collages in the poems. Nonsequitur abounds; there are huge jumps in register; one has the sensation of listening to a radio as the tuning-dial is being turned rapidly. No sense can be made of what's being read, but the transitions are fascinating, even if they are, after a while, a little tedious.

While the book's reception was in general negative and while Ashbery himself would later distance himself from it ('It helped me at the time to get over my writer's block but I don't feel that those poems were successful' [Herd 1994: 34]), *The Tennis Court Oath* presents, *in extremis*, many of the devices and tones that would characterize his later poetry, that is, as I have already remarked, nonsequitur and jumps in register. What, however, Ashbery learnt to do in his subsequent collections is not to bore the reader too much with non-sense, but instead to offer him or her many moments along the way when it seems that all the confusion and chaos on the page will be explained. Here are the first few lines of 'Sortes Vergilianae' from *The Double Dream of Spring* (1970):

You have been living now for a long time and there is nothing you do not know.

Perhaps something you read in the newspaper influenced you and that was very
frequently.

They have left you to think along these lines and you have gone your own way because
you guessed that

Under their hiding was the secret, casual as breath, betrayed for the asking.

Then the sky opened up, revealing much more than any of you were intended to know.

It is a strange thing how fast the growth is, almost as fast as the light from polar regions

Reflected off the arctic ice-cap in summer. When you know where it is heading

You have to follow it, though at a sadly reduced rate of speed,

Hence folly and idleness, raging at the confines of some miserable sunlit alley or court.

(Ashbery 1985: 118)

The first four lines here evoke conspiracy theories of society, employing the kind of language used by radical political groups: 'they' are controlling your thought through the newspapers,

but you go along with it because you think you could get to the bottom of things at any stage in the process. The next line, though, subtly changes the context to a scene that could have come out of the Old Testament with God addressing humanity through a break in the clouds. In the fifth line, it seems as though the speaker has suffered instantaneous amnesia and is now just chatting amiably about some natural phenomenon; but at the same time, there could be a connection--you, the reader, just can't be sure. Should you search for an underlying sense or just take it that your interlocutor is insane? Then half-way through the sixth line it is as if your interlocutor has heard the question and answers it: 'When you know where it is heading / You have to follow it [...]' But *do* you know where it is heading? Maybe you do. At least you think you did a few lines back. Why don't you try reading it again and see? And so it goes on and on. At the very moment the reader wants to throw up his or her hands in frustration with the poem, the poem's speaker will say something like, 'I know it's tough, but just around that corner it'll all be explained. Come on, I'll show you.'

Some critics like to see all this as an attempt on Ashbery's part to be politically subversive, somehow deconstructing 'bourgeois syntax.' Ashbery himself, though, says he is completely innocent of any desire to change society, and is generally dismissive of poetics that place literature in thrall to political intentions (Herd 1994: 35).

If you stay with the poems, they will show you many strange land- and city-scapes, with many moments of nostalgia and melancholy. Writing of these very moments, Vernon Shetley comments: 'Again and again, even the most discontinuously organized of Ashbery's poems arrive at some traditional form of elegiac terminus: a phrase or image that seems to sum up the poem as a whole, a natural image, an epigrammatic reflection, or a gesture that suggests a return to beginnings' (Shetley 1993: 127). These provide resting points in the midst of the different voices and registers jostling for attention in the poems. The many books that followed (and still follow: he publishes a new collection nearly every other year), are for the

most part variations on the passage here from 'Sortes Vergilianae.' The poetry is stylistically repetitious, but Ashbery, for his earlier experimentation and his ability to maintain contact with the life of human emotions (viz., Shetley above), is unique in contemporary American poetry.

Adrienne Rich

No poet could differ more from John Ashbery than Adrienne Rich (b. 1926). Where Ashbery is oblique, Rich is direct; where he is humorous, Rich is serious; while he is filing his nails, she is at a political demonstration. But there has never been much point in criticizing her for letting politics spoil her poetry, nor in criticizing her for being partisan instead of objective, angry instead of ironic. Because Rich sees *belles lettres*--and especially the New-Critical type that glides 'in mid-air, innocent' of the human mess below--as dead letters. The main achievement of her career has been to make the lyric form responsive to political change, more particularly, changes in the social status of women. In her best work (from the 1960s and early 1970s) the lines tremor with the anticipation of transformation, both of the body politic as well as the bodies and minds of the people partaking of that change. Often the concluding revelatory lines of a poem seem to coincide with detonations of the social order, as in 'When We Dead Awaken' (1971) which ends with 'a blue energy piercing / the massed atoms of a bedrock disbelief' (Rich 1984: 152).

The devices employed by Rich range from allegory ('Diving into the Wreck'), to the romanticisation of some heroic female facing 'the age'; often poems pivot around revelations of the poverty and violence subtending suburban peace; and, associated with this, there are many attempts to sympathize with 'people under pressure.' She harbors the ambition--voiced in the book of essays, *What Is Found There* (1993)--to be the Cassandra of the United States. However, Robert von Hallberg has criticized her views of the marginalized for not revealing

any 'complications of the representations of identity one finds in the mass media' (Hallberg 1996: 203). She continued to publish prolifically throughout the subsequent decades, and if feminist poetry in the US has a doyenne, it is Rich.

21. AFTERMATH, 1970-2000

INTRODUCTION

Any attempt to delineate the main contours of post-1970 American cultural and literary history must take into account how in the 1970s and in the 1980s US-American culture swerved significantly to the right after the radical leftist explosions of the 1960s on college campuses, on the streets, and beyond. Also, in the American academy there was in the 1970s and in the '80s an effusion of leftist theory, a movement that some might argue reached a kind of practical fruition with the election of Barack Obama as US president in November 2008. (It has been a commonplace of American history to say that changes in the academy are realized in the world beyond roughly twenty to thirty years after the cultural fact of their fomentation on university campuses.) As such, the election of Obama could be said to formalize if not to instance a number of radical leftist theories in the academy from, *inter alia*, post-colonial studies and its recentering of questions of power and of its legitimacy to deconstruction and to its concomitant valorization and affirmation of difference (ethnic, religious, gender, age, etc.).

The 1970s opened with the notorious deaths of student protesters at Kent State University in May 1970 at the hands of the US National Guard, and it bore witness to the tail end of the Vietnam War (1959-75). The Watergate scandal surrounding the 1972 presidential election, which ended in the public disgrace of Richard Nixon, and his resignation during his second term in office in August 1974, must also be noted. Presidential politics after Nixon, and his successor Gerald Ford, Jr., saw the ascendancy in 1977 of peanut farmer Jimmy Carter to the land's highest office for a single term, and then the election of an avuncular if policy-wise not especially popular two-term American president, Ronald Reagan (1981-89), followed by George Bush (1989-1993), and in 1992 the emergence of Bill Clinton as twice-elected president (1993-2001), the first Democrat to achieve the presidency multiple times

since Franklin D. Roosevelt (elected four times, serving from 1933-45). All this collectively betrays a certain spirit (for worse or for better) of increasingly entrenched Americanism in multiple ways: from Carter's notorious boycotting of the 1980 Moscow Summer Olympics, to Reagan's talk of the 'evil empire' (the USSR) during the later period of the Cold War, to Clinton's self-serving imperial policies in a number of national theatres. Reagan's special contribution to what has been referred to as the conservative revolution in the cultural west cannot be underestimated for its long-lasting influence on his successors and on many other western nation-states. Clinton's largely popular tenure as president (a period of so-called peace and prosperity at home accompanied rather more clearly by familiar imperialist policies abroad) was for some rendered notorious due to the move to impeach him for private matters. In 2000, Al Gore, two-term vice president under Clinton, lost in a highly controversial election in which he won the popular vote but lost the electoral college one, causing the Democratic party to cede the highest office in the land to another member of the Bush clan, George W. Bush. The latter also prevailed in 2004 in a controversial election against Massachusetts Senator John Kerry.

While some commentators would diverge from the following views, under Bush's tenure many policies were implemented, including a controversial proactive war on Iraq for the ostensible, and further than this for many, highly questionable and unconvincing reason of weapons of mass destruction; this continues to have implications for perceptions of the US to the present day. Throughout this roughly forty-year period the pursuit of wealth, power, and security more or less continued unabated with each decade more and more attached to the official aforesaid program. This tendency was aided and abetted by the economic and cultural fact of a wealthy consumer society that reached the status of the world's lone superpower when the Cold War disintegrated in 1989 with the jolt of a shock dissolution of several Communist regimes in the former eastern bloc of Soviet satellite states, and officially of the

USSR itself, by the early 1990s, which only intensified the capitalist dynamic within the US and beyond. The World Wide Web was launched in 1991, which contributed to the newfangled mediatization; the same year saw the first Gulf War, and ten years later, at 8:46 a.m. on September 11, saw the first of two terrorist attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, as well as an attack on the Pentagon and a failed attempt to hit the White House, all of which ushered in a new era for many red, white, and blue Americans including the incumbent Bush administration.

As for the economic reality of the US, it needs to be comprehended that real wages for the individual laborer have gone down since 1973, which might prove a kind of simple example of the phenomenon considered as late capital; that is, the concentration of more capital in ever fewer hands. Nevertheless, larger homes and vehicles have been increasingly prevalent. Longer working hours, and households with at least two incomes have more than made up for the deficit of consumer spending power from the '70s when most households had only one income. The implications of a concomitant and increasingly intense focus on productivity for productivity's sake, and its correlate of consumption for consumption's sake, has underlined a certain amount of confusion if not welter in American social reality in the past four decades. The Americanization of both hemispheres in the world goes on apace. The period from 1970 to the present has seen great strides in America's contemporary digital and technologically advanced society even while a decisive problem in the domain of questions of meaning and of value for its citizens refuses to go away. The literary arts have for some observers also seen a certain kind of rollback due to the increasing prominence given to other media such as photography and to film; or, to the aesthetic unit of the image. Still, the sheer number of good writers of various ethnic stripes in the US gives one to think that the literary will transform its traditions to excellent effect and remain a form of fluid discourse able to take on board any number of discursive registers unlike perhaps any other

form of compositional work. Culturally interesting, provocative, and useful phenomena such as affirmation action, radical leftist feminism, and multi-pronged ethnicism that is increasingly global contain not a little glimmer of hope that things can be if not overturned then at least nuanced to capture the reality of the United States in the heady corridors of networks of American power.

As for literary history within the practical world of power sketched above, significant bodies of compositional work were engendered by the likes of John Updike, Toni Morrison, Thomas Pynchon, Gore Vidal, *inter alia*, during this somewhat staid if not out-and-out reactionary period of American history. The cultural form of film too saw the emergence of the likes of Terrence Malick with his early film, *Badlands* (1974), which was followed by *Days of Heaven* (1978), and then in a move that arguably reveals much about the moderately if not militantly conservative nature of American culture in the 1970s, '80s, and early '90s, Malick's next film was not released until 1998, *The Thin Red Line*, a film saturated with Hollywood stars. During such a reactionary period of cultural history it seems more attractive for some spirits of the aesthetic tradition to abstain from releasing their creations. In the case of Malick, the very idea of doing something for the big screen was rendered problematic itself by a Hollywood preoccupied with commodity and box-office success.

One may be optimistic that the best is, if not yet to come, at least still to reach evolutionary maturity. Here one may acknowledge the aesthetically revolutionary textual products of recent African-American, Asian-American, Latino/a, and Native American writers, which testify to the plurality and to the alterity of the US to itself ethnically speaking, and which are treated in what follows. Such literary ethnic groupings arose not least because of a need to give eloquent voice to the sorts of specific challenges such minoritarian populations encountered in a land wherein European Americans controlled most of the levers of power. These literatures addressed such problems as the composition of a self, of

community, of social and of economic justice, of slavery, of the family--domains of human attention that had their own highly variegated nature, insofar as such territories were in part encoded by the ethnic reality both written from and under view. Of course even these ethnic categories fail to do justice to the complexity of writers who are cultural hybrids (a category which itself is reductionist in trying to capture the complexity of individual ethnic and ontological realities), but they do point toward the gestation and maturation of a more inclusive and participatory democratic republic of letters in the US.

It remains to be seen what will become of the current new epoch in the US, but that does not prevent the literary works of the last forty years from attesting to the stellar talents of those on offer in a North American experiment in human engineering that involves immigration as its basic founding cultural principle and cultural strategy. What could speak more eloquently to that social fact and to that cultural heritage than the current charged political, literary, and economic situation?

One might do well to recall such asseverations as the following from two important dissenters from many American values (both of whom were nevertheless for a certain period of time American citizens), Henry James (1843-1916) and Theodor W. Adorno (1903-69). Here is James in his travel tome from 1907 (based on a tour he took of America in 1904 in which he gave respective lectures on the French writer Honoré de Balzac and on American speech), *The American Scene*:

The accent of the very ultimate future, in the States, may be destined to become the most beautiful on the globe and the very music of humanity (here the 'ethnic' synthesis shrouds itself thicker than ever). (James 1987: 99)

And here is Adorno, first introduced by David Jenemann:

Whereas Adorno was certainly Teutonic in his opposition to the American culture industry, in order to be at his most American, he had to return to Germany. In the 'Scientific Experiences' piece, which was initially broadcast over the radio, Adorno reflects on how America forced him to stand outside culture [he lived there from 1938-53], to criticize it as though he was both a part of it and apart from it. This experience was liberating, but even more so, he claims, was that promise of freedom that America offered its subjects, a promise whose materiality and human qualities he praises in a charming and arresting note of affection:

More important and more gratifying was my experience of the substantiality of democratic forms: that in America they have seeped into life itself, whereas at least in Germany they were, and I fear still are, nothing more than formal rules of the game. Over there I became acquainted with a potential for real humanitarianism that is hardly to be found in old Europe. The political form of democracy is infinitely closer to the people. American everyday life, despite the oft lamented hustle and bustle, has an inherent element of peacableness, good naturedness and generosity, in sharpest contrast to the pent-up malice and envy that exploded in Germany between 1933 and 1945. Surely America is no longer the land of unlimited possibilities, but one still has the feeling that anything could be possible. (Jenemann 2007: 184-85)

It is perhaps unusual to end with James and with Adorno, but maybe only such individual jewels in the big crown of American outsiders can have the sort of capacious perspective the land would need for any sort of penetrating if not prophetic critique for future-oriented cosmopolitan self-perceptions. It also prompts us to survey the twentieth century for other

outsiders who are helping define American literature. Perhaps the most famous of these was the Russian émigré novelist, Vladimir Nabokov; closer to our own day there is Jamaica Kincaid, born in Antigua, now resident in the US, and Tatyana Tolstoya, another Russian who spends much time stateside. Writers such as these, ostensibly outsiders, are integral to the tradition of American letters.

POPULAR CULTURE

In the period that stretches from the US defeat in Vietnam, the energy crisis and Watergate to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, and the subsequent war in Iraq, popular culture has continued to metamorphose. The new technologies of the 1980s, video and cable, affected the film and television industry, but the most radical invention of the past four decades has been computer technology (the Internet in particular), which has created unprecedented possibilities for entertainment, communication, education, and marketing. More collaborative and interactive than radio and television, computers have fostered new genres, like blogs and social networking, as well as transformed old ones (e.g. Obama's 'fireside chat' for which the White House partnered with YouTube).

Although modern technologies have historically marginalized the printed word, computers popularize literature through electronic publishing, digital libraries, and archives. The e-book revolution has brought the classics into the public domain, and it continues to benefit established genres like romance, detective fiction, and fantasy. Words most commonly used to describe the state of contemporary popular literature are heterogeneity and diversification. In detective fiction, for example, the hardboiled private eyes of Chandler and Hammett (and their successors, Ross Macdonald, Elmore Leonard, Michael Connelly, and Mickey Spillane) needed to accommodate the heroines from the works of Sue Grafton or Sara Paretsky, for whom crime and corruption are often gender-specific. The genre now features

previously uncommon protagonists as Kate Delafield (the lesbian police officer of Katherine V. Forrest's series), Walter Mosley's Ezekiel 'Easy' Rawlins, who speaks a black dialect, or Tom Ripley--Patricia Highsmith's courteous, self-conscious, but guiltless serial killer. Other works, like Paul Auster's anti/detective *New York Trilogy* (1985-6), subvert the genre's quest for coherence and truth. Jonathan Lethem's *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999) is an example of how mainstream literary fiction can harness the narrative energy of the detective genre. And, on the other side, Dennis Lehane, a writer of detective novels and occasional scriptwriter on the HBO series, *The Wire* (2002-), is, with the publication of books like *Mystic River* (2001) and *The Given Day* (2008), making it difficult to see where the police work ends and the literature begins.

Contemporary sci-fi may be characterized in a similar way. Although the New Wave 'deposited its froth' (as Asimov wished would happen) in the 1970s, it left an impact on the entire field. The decade did conclude with the first episodes of George Lucas's megadrama *Star Wars* (1977-), but it also generated a revival of utopian literature in novels as Delany's *Triton* (1976) and Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974), which imagine ecological, non-exploitative societies. The greatest trend of the 1980s, cyberpunk--epitomized by William Gibson's dark and dreary *Neuromancer* (1984)--now exists along with more utopias (Octavia E. Butler, Kim Stanley Robinson), sword-and-sorcery, commercial fantasy like Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* (1990), and children's sci-fi as Disch's *Brave Little Toaster* series, in which heroic household appliances enjoy various adventures including a trip to Mars where they transform the bellicose PMLA (Populaxe Martian Liberation Army) into PEACE (Populuxe Exploratory Armada of the Civilized Earth). Through its many faces, science fiction continues to stimulate what Darko Suvin called 'cognitive estrangement,' speculating over the world's potentials, the nature of time, the mysteries of the human (and non-human) mind and body, parallel universes, imminent catastrophes, and the like.

The last four decades have produced further forms of popular culture. Paul Buhle, for example, noted the proliferation of flea markets in the nostalgic post-1960s atmosphere; in popular music, the icons of the youth movements like Hendrix, Joplin, and Jim Morrison died in the early 1970s, and they were superseded with the dance music of Madonna and Michael Jackson. The ubiquity of popular culture is undeniable, and its definition increasingly difficult to draw. The novels of Kurt Vonnegut, Don DeLillo, and Thomas Pynchon cross traditionally 'high' and 'low' literary genres. Neither sales nor royalties determine status: Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) was a best-seller, but is it a work of popular literature? Perhaps we can conclude merely by remembering that the infamous 'horde of damned female scribblers' (to use Nathaniel Hawthorne's words in a non-derogatory way) may be said to now include June Jordan and Lucille Clifton (and the myriad of other poets who write children's books), John Cheever and John Updike (is there anything more 'popular' than publishing in *Playboy*?), or the English Literature Professors Carolyn Heilbrun and Julie Tetel (the former wrote detective fiction alias Amanda Cross; the latter is a prolific author of romances).

THEATER

Disillusionment and the New Conservatism, 1970-1989

Like 1945, the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 is a watershed date in American cultural history. Faith in the government dwindled due to the cumulative effects of the war, governmental scandals, economic decline, and the energy crisis of 1973 and 1974. David Savran portrays these developments as follows:

If US society of the late 1960s was organized around a generational split between the counterculture and so-called straight culture, then the 1970s saw this rupture turn into radical fragmentation. For if nothing else, the '70s was a decade of crisis. Politically, it

witnessed the loss of the Vietnam War, Watergate, and the Iran hostage crisis. Three presidents--Nixon, Ford, and Carter--were brought down in disgrace. Economically, it marked the end of the post-war boom and the beginning of a serious crisis in Western capitalism. (Savran 1998: 163-4)

While on the one hand the attractions of hippie counterculture faded, on the other the principles of racial and gender equality began to gain wider acceptance. Generally, however, the tendency in the 1970s was away from the communal politics that energized many in the preceding decade, and towards a sense of disenchantment. Indeed, as Savran observes '[f]or many social theorists of the late 1970s, the political disasters of the 1970s coupled with the triumph of mass media culture became symptomatic of a precipitous moral decline in the United States and an ominous disintegration of American civil society' (Savran 1998: 166). This sense of disintegration seemed only to be confirmed by sociological facts of falling birth rates and soaring divorce rates but also, culturally, by the development of postmodernism. Following Fredric Jameson's definition of the term, Savran argues that postmodernity 'thereby testifies to the collapse of both mass-movement politics and a critique of capitalism in the early '70s, and signals a kind of depoliticized rebellion (or, more correctly, pseudorebellion) that would become more and more characteristic of US cultural productions during the '80s and '90s' (Savran 1998: 165). Postmodernism, with its erosion of distinctions between popular and high cultural forms, fascination with retro styles, eclectic 'transtextual practices' (Schmidt 2005: 40) and irony, emerges in an American context at this juncture and continues to play an incisive role across the spectrum of the creative arts.

With the inauguration of President Ronald Reagan in 1980, conservatism again took hold, often featuring a synthesis of evangelical Christianity and right wing political objectives. As Graham Thompson notes, Reagan himself became a synecdoche of American

values in this period (Thompson 2007: 3-4), but simultaneous with apparent conservative consolidation comes an increasingly fragmented and polarized set of debates pertaining to culture and identity. The conservative backlash against the liberalism of the 1960s and motivated by the crises of the 1970s, stimulated a conflict between right wing and left wing political and cultural perspectives in public and educational spheres widely referred to now as the culture wars. Often this conflict concerned different visions of American society and the perceived opposition of progressive and traditional narratives of American cultural identity. Emanating from such a context were the first responses to the outbreak of AIDS. Right wing public figures were to make some memorably homophobic and hysterical assertions about the disease and its victims: Pat Buchanan was to claim, in 1983, that '[t]he sexual revolution has begun to devour its children. And among the vanguard, the Gay Rights activists,' while the evangelist Jerry Falwell referred to AIDS as a 'gay plague' on live television (Thompson 2007: 21, 22). Finally, the end of Reagan's long term in office coincided with another major event in world politics, one that was to again transform America's role--the fall of Communism. Each of these developments can be traced in the theater of the period.

Political and Experimental Theater of the 1970s

American theater in the 1970s still reverberated with the political activism of the previous decade, with race and ethical issues prevailing. Groups like El Teatro Campesino, which began working in the mid-1960s with Mexican-American farm workers in California using a fusion of techniques including *commedia dell'arte* and Mexican folklore, continued actively in the 1970s. Luis Valdez (b. 1940), the founder of El Teatro Campesino, became the first Chicano playwright to have a play on Broadway with *Zoot Suit* in 1978. Similarly, María Irene Fornés (b. 1930) a Cuban-American, was to become America's best known Latina playwright with *Fefu and Her Friends* in 1977. Meanwhile Asian-American theater also

blossomed with formation of the East West Players (1965), the Asian American Theater Company (1973), and the Theatrical Ensemble of Asians (1974), the Pan Asian Repertory Theater (1977). Most controversially, the late 1960s and early 1970s marked the apex of black nationalism with figures like Amiri Baraka and Ed Bullins (b. 1935) continuing to advocate a radical rejection of white culture and its infrastructure. Subsequently Baraka was to turn to Marxist/Leninist philosophies of class struggle; among the plays he wrote during this phases are *The Motion of History* (1975) and *What Was the Relationship of the Lone Ranger to the Means of Production* (1979) (see Hill and Hatch 2003: 391).

The dominant and repeated focus of political theater during the 1970s and '80s was, inevitably, the Vietnam War. Arguably it is only displaced by the appearance of the AIDS crisis. As mentioned in the preceding section, already in the 1960s playwrights like Jean-Claude van Itallie and the Open Theater had produced plays on the subject. In 1967, the provocative rock musical *Hair* by James Rado/Gerome Rasni also revolved around the theme of the polarizing effects of the war. But the costs of the conflict only truly came into focus in the 1970s and '80s. Annette Saddik treats the theater of Vietnam War at length in *Contemporary American Drama*. She points out how '[i]n the Vietnam plays written during the 1970s and 1980s, the American soldier's 'performance' and actions in Vietnam are explored alongside the fantasy of an 'authentic' identity, or stable self, that existed before the experience of the war.' This experience becomes the crucible of an ontological crisis that cannot be rationalized through recourse to history or even expressed accurately in language (Saddik 2007: 176). One of the pivotal plays to address this topic is *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* (1969, 1971) by Vietnam veteran, David Rabe (b. 1940). Notably the play's form recalls many of the properties of the Theatre of the Absurd. As Saddik describes,

Pavlo Hummel presents a nightmare cycle of death in which Pavlo, a soldier in the United States Army who is killed at the beginning by a Vietcong grenade, must return to basic training and then to Vietnam. Once again, he fails to gain understanding, and is finally killed again, this time by an American grenade. Even his death, the ultimate experience of the body, is presented as unstable and impermanent, failing to end the chaos and bring meaning. (Saddik 2007: 180-1)

The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel retains significance for the ways in which trauma of Vietnam is revealed as a catalyst for a radical destabilization of American identity.

Experimental and avant-garde theater in the 1970s and '80s also highlighted such destabilizations through formal practices that have come to be viewed as postmodern. Of these the Wooster Group, created in 1975 by members of the Performance Group, and Mabou Mines, formed in 1970, have become important institutions in American avant-garde theater. Jean-Claude van Itallie, though remaining marginal to the American dramatic canon, has continued to develop a body of work that, as Kerstin Schmidt suggests, is a 'respon[se] to the gripping influence of postmodernism on the American cultural scene [...] dramatiz[ing] the sense of self in postmodernity, focusing on the impact of mediatization on culture at large and the self in particular' (Schmidt 2005: 126). Finally, testifying to another form of destabilization, the Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago formed in 1976 has gone on to challenge the dominance of New York with its support of playwrights, new writing, and actors such as Gary Sinise (one of the theater's co-founders), John Malkovich, and Laurie Metcalf.

The Drama of American Masculinity

One of the Steppenwolf Theatre's early successes was a production of *True West* by Sam Shepard (b. 1943). By 1983 Shepard was no newcomer to theater; he had first become involved in the 1960s when he moved to New York, performing and writing for the Off-Off-Broadway scene in Theatre Genesis, La Mama, and elsewhere. In the 1970s, Shepard was to adopt a more disciplined attitude to playwriting developing what Savran describes as a more 'self-consciously American (and mythic) mode of writing' (Savran 1998: 177). *The Tooth of the Crime* (1972), *Geography of a Horse Dreamer* (1974), *Suicide in B-Flat* (1976), *The Curse of the Starving Class* (1977), *Buried Child* (1978), and *True West* (1980) were to confirm him as a serious voice in contemporary American drama.

Shepard's work resists easy synopsis since it ranges from the experimental to the apparently naturalistic and stretches from the 1960s to the present. He is often, as Brenda Murphy remarks, identified as a postmodern playwright:

His stage reality is layered and fragmented, his characters sometimes intersubjective and transformational. He juxtaposes borrowings from and allusions to popular culture with those of history and high culture in an often free-form, playful way. (Murphy 2002: 123)

Yet, as Murphy points out, Shepard's view of the artist lacks the ironic distance of current postmodern practice, and his work is deeply concerned with questions of identity in a frame that is both distinctly American, and yet removed from immediate sociological or political observation. For Christopher Bigsby, Shepard 'is concerned with the way in which private and public myths interact at a pre-conscious level' (Bigsby 1985: 224). One such myth that has routinely surfaced in the drama of the twentieth century is that of the 'American Dream.' In an interview with Matthew Roudané, Shepard questions the definition of this myth and what it might mean to him as a writer, he asks:

What is the American Dream? Is it what Thomas Jefferson proposed? [...] Was it what George Washington proposed? Was it what Lincoln proposed? Was it what Martin Luther King proposed? I don't know what the American Dream is. I do know that it doesn't work. Not only doesn't it work, the myth of the American Dream has created extraordinary havoc, and it's going to be our demise (Roudané 2002: 69-70).

In his work since the 1970s, Shepard is clearly inspired by the failed or distorted myths upon which America is constructed. In plays like *Buried Child* and *True West* the locus of crisis is the collapsed family structure. Jeanette Malkin argues that as Shepard's work progresses there is a 'turn back toward the root-themes of more traditional American realist drama: homecoming, heritage, dynastic curse, and the intertwined fate of the clan' (Malkin 1999: 152). Violence emerges in each of these root themes, sometimes as the disinterred murderous past, sometimes as a thinly veiled threat.

As its title suggests *True West* tackles one of the foundational myths of American culture. When the brothers Lee and Austin encounter each other at their mother's home in Southern California, a conflict is sparked over the validity of various notions of the West--as desert, as suburbia, as Hollywood. And just as a stable definition of the West is elusive, absence is what defines the family in the play--Lee and Austin are antagonistic alienated siblings, their mother is a thinly sketched character who is on holiday in Alaska and appears only at the play's end, while their father who is only described is an alcoholic wandering in the desert and environs. Austin's attempt to sell his idea for a screenplay to a film producer is sabotaged by Lee, his vagrant brother, who proposes a story about the real West. A heated debate about the artificiality versus the authenticity of Lee's so-called modern western

escalates until the final scene when the brothers destroy their mother's house and teeter on the brink of fratricidal violence.

For Bigsby 'Shepard is drawn to the mythical world of heartland America and his characters act out mythic roles, the embodiment of a culture hooked on dreams' (Bigsby 1992: 196). Certainly, *True West* is emblematic of the type of masculine crisis of identity that animates much of Shepard's work and it gestures toward the recurrent figure of the cowboy in his drama. As Savran describes, in the 1980s as his career in films brought him greater renown, Shepard was to craft a 'cowboy mystique' characterized by a 'nonchalant [...] overt anti-intellectualism [...] and] considerable skill at using straight-shooting rhetoric (talking like a cowboy)' (Savran 1998: 179, 178). Yet as Savran goes on to argue, this confident masculine posture is belied by a strong sense of anxiety. It is an anxiety that also threads its way through the work of Shepard's closest contemporary--David Mamet.

David Mamet (b. 1947), in contrast to Shepard, broke into theater not in New York, but in Chicago, in the early 1970s. *Duck Variations* (1972), *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (1974), and *American Buffalo* (1975) are the plays that were to first win him serious attention, with *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984) and *Oleanna* (1992) among his most widely known later plays. Mamet continues to write for theater but since the 1980s has also been a productive screenwriter and film director. Like Shepard's, Mamet's work tackles myths--'the myths of capitalism, the loss of that spiritual confidence which was once presumed to underpin individual identity and national enterprise alike' (Bigsby 1992: 196). However, his work is also engaged with the performance of gender, and in particular masculinity, in this context. Mamet's dramatic worlds are spaces of vernacular virtuosity, of crippling stereotypes and of alienation.

Sexual Perversity in Chicago provides a taut but humorous early example of Mamet's work with sexual stereotypes. None of the four characters in the play can face the risks of

emotional honesty; all are lonely and adrift in an urban context that is hostile and frenetic. Bernard is unbearably macho and aggressively sexist while evidently suffering from a huge sense of insecurity, Joan is the voice of an equally uncompromising feminist sexism, while their friends Dan and Debbie fail to overcome these negative influences that finally destroy their budding relationship. The 'desensitized society' and 'subtle linguistic coercion' (Dean 2004: 5, 8) in the play prefigure elements that reappear in Mamet's subsequent work.

American Buffalo portrays such a world in more detail, and because the cast is all male the threat of violence only imminent in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* rises to the surface with explicit force. The energy of the play lies less in the plot than in the mounting tension and menace of expression channeled, primarily, through the character of Teach. Teach is an archetypal figure of the American male in crisis--vulnerable and violent. If Shepard gravitates towards the cowboy and notions of the West to explore this issue, then Mamet's trajectory leads to the small-time conman/businessman struggling to survive in the urban jungle. In *American Buffalo* the myths of the American past are flagged in the historic coin at the centre of the action, and the image of the extinct buffalo. But as Bigsby perceptively notes, in contrast with a playwright like Arthur Miller, for whom the past is 'holy' serving to 'redeem if not the characters then the idea of the moral self,' in Mamet's work characters are 'stranded in the present,' and the past provides no moral support (Bigsby 1994: 200).

Morality, ethics and gender clash spectacularly in Mamet's most controversial work, *Oleanna*. The two act play depicts a male university lecturer and a female student locked in a power struggle over an accusation of sexual harassment. Mamet drew upon the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas case to produce a work that embodies the ambivalences of the debate concerning political correctness in the 1980s. *Oleanna* stirred heated responses in 1992 and continues to divide audiences and critics.

Drama, Performance, and Diversity: The 1980s and After

No single woman playwright emerges in the 1970s or '80s to offset the force of Shepard and Mamet, however in the '80s and '90s a cluster of writers and performers begin to counterbalance the male-dominated theatrical canon. *'night Mother* by Marsha Norman (b. 1947) won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1983 and ran for eleven months on Broadway. In contrast to the male-dominated worlds of Shepard and Mamet, Norman's play unfolds a discussion between a daughter and mother about the daughter's intention to commit suicide. The play concludes with the debated suicide taking place offstage. Paula Vogel (b. 1951), active since the late 1970s, only received critical attention in the 1990s with *The Baltimore Waltz* (1992), a play on the subject of AIDS, *How I Learned to Drive* (1997), a Pulitzer Prize-winning play about incest, and *Desdemona* (1977, 1993), a radical rewriting of *Othello* from a female point of view. Bigsby devotes chapters to the work of Norman and Vogel in *Contemporary American Playwrights* (1999) in a positive step towards a more nuanced picture of American drama. Anna Deavere Smith (b. 1950) has pioneered a vivid form of social documentary theater with her monologue performances *Fires in the Mirror* (1993) dealing with the Crown Heights Riot in Brooklyn in 1991 and *Twilight: Los Angeles* (1993) concerning the Los Angeles riots in 1992. And Suzan-Lori Parks (b. 1963) is among the most important African-American dramatists to emerge in the last decade of the century with *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1990), *The America Play* (1994), *Top Dog/Under Dog* (2001).

As noted above, in the 1980s AIDS was to divide attitudes towards sexuality, and to homosexuality specifically. The AIDS crisis motivated a vast cultural response, however Tony Kushner's (b. 1956) *Angels in America. A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* is one of the most popular and high-profile responses to this theme. Kushner's work is on an epic scale-*-Part One: Millennium Approaches* opened (as a workshop performance) in Los Angeles in

1990, *Part Two: Perestroika* also opened in Los Angeles in 1992. The play transferred rapidly (first in its respective parts) to the National Theatre in London and then in 1993 on Broadway. In 2003 HBO Films produced a six-hour miniseries based on the play.

‘Defiantly theatrical, unabashedly sprawling, ambitious, provocative, poignant, and hilarious, *Angels* proposes visions of healing through community’ (Fisher 2002: 92). At a metatheatrical level the play attempts to foster such a community in the theater audiences who saw the play. At a thematic level, it weaves the several interconnected plot lines around the subject of AIDS, drawing together Jews, Mormons, homosexuals, and heterosexuals, African-American and WASP, Conservative, and Liberal to create moments of acerbic political commentary and humane comedy. To some degree Kushner’s espousal of a political theater recalls the drama of the pre-World War II era, yet in its plethora of American identities, ethnicities, beliefs, and orientations it is a consummately contemporary work. *Millennium Approaches* begins, as Saddik notes with ‘a sermon on the American dream and the problematic nature of American identity in this “melting pot where nothing melted”’ (Saddik 2007: 161). The movement commemorated in the Rabbi’s speech is from East to West, the migration of Russian Jews to America. *Perestroika* concludes at the beginning of 1990 with recent history and the reconfiguration of West and East in Europe. A group of the play’s protagonists debate the Fall of the Berlin Wall, the fate of Yugoslavia, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, while Prior addresses the realities of surviving with AIDS. As Kushner himself has stated, the end of the play ‘invokes this wonderful healing, hopeful myth and then reminds us that there is this tremendously difficult political specific to it that is absolutely worked into the fabric of it. [...] [T]he utopian [...] has to be concrete-knowing hope, it has to be hope that has been filtered through the most lamentable conditions of real existence’ (Kushner qtd. in Vorlicky 1998: 83). It remains debatable, nevertheless, whether a balance

between sentiment and realism can be achieved following such a heady cocktail of fantasy and convoluted plotting.

More modest and less utopian images of America come filtered through the work of some of the playwrights who have emerged since 1990. Among those of note tracing darker contours in American drama are Neil LaBute (b. 1963) (*In the Company of Men* [1992], *Bash: Latter-Day Plays* [1999], *The Shape of Things* [2001], *The Mercy Seat* [2002]), Rebecca Gilman (b. 1964) (*The Glory of Living* [1998], *Spinning into Butter* [1999], *Boy Gets Girl* [2000], *The Sweetest Swing in Baseball* [2004]), and Tracy Letts (b. 1965) (*Killer Joe* [1993], *August Osage County* [2007]).

By the end of the twentieth century American theater has developed not a single aesthetic but a cluster of qualities that are culturally distinct. Noticeably, by mid-century the direct impact of European theater practices and culture wanes, and American styles of performance and foci in dramatic literature prevail. Although Broadway still survives as a commercial center, and New York remains a significant hub, the progressive decentralization of theater in the United States has enabled a growing diversity in playwriting and performance. Above all, as this survey has attempted to demonstrate, American theater and drama throughout the twentieth century can be seen to reflect and refract major issues in American culture and society from the conceptual territories of modernity and postmodernity, to concrete debates around ethnicity, race, national myths, gender, and armed conflict.

PROSE FICTION

The Expanse of History

Many future American writers served in World War II: among the poets, Richard Wilbur, Anthony Hecht, and Donald Justice, to name just three. But the impact of this historical event was registered most strongly in fiction, as American novelists widened their purview to

encompass an international theatre of operations. It made them confront the European past, and the American imperial future; it prompted them to seek commonalities between life in the US and life beyond; in some cases it forced them to examine critically the social and cultural norms of American life. Among the novelists, Norman Mailer, Joseph Heller, and Kurt Vonnegut were significantly affected by World War II.

Norman Mailer's (1923-2007) first novel, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) is an excellent example of such expansion. It deals with the military campaign in the South Pacific, meditating on historical agency, chance, and knowledge, much in the vein of Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869). Mailer wants to know what creates significant historical change: is it a figure like the General, an excellent military strategist, who is also aware of the philosophical aspects of war; or random events that ultimately cannot be controlled? At the book's end, Mailer decides the latter, presenting a view of history that is ultimately chaotic and which constantly ironizes all human attempts at mastery. This is a conventional conclusion for a twentieth-century writer, but Mailer's gift is in the dramatization of human wills in the midst of these forces, and it works both on the level of thriller and intellectual meditation.

He wrote some twenty-one novels and published more than forty books, was an imposing presence on the American literary landscape for six decades from *The Naked and the Dead*, to *Barbary Shore* (1951), *The Deer Park* (1955), *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967), *Harlot's Ghost* (1991), and his last novel, *The Castle in the Forest* (2007). Yet his best work is perhaps prose nonfiction, especially *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History* (1968), which draws on his experience in a 1967 protest march against the Vietnam War on the Pentagon for which he was imprisoned. Mailer is well known for his capacity to turn existential experience into well-mined prose nonfiction or what is also referred to as New Journalism; another example of this would be his acclaimed publication *The Fight* (1975), which recounts the legendary Heavyweight Boxing Fight, the Thrilla in

Manila, between Joe Frazier and Muhammad Ali. Here Mailer almost seems at his explosive best in capturing the intense and memorable encounter between the two athletes on the world stage. The pugilistic theme also connects with Mailer's lifelong preoccupation with the crisis of masculinity in the world--violence is often the only way for his male characters to find expression.

A classic example of a novel of the absurd is Joseph Heller's (1923-1999) *Catch-22* (1961). Its protagonist, Yossarian, flees the insanity of war to his responsibilities as a rational human being. He finds himself, like Camus's hypothetical man, longing for reason in the face of the world's irrationality. The absurd is born of that confrontation, Camus says; it cannot exist if either element is absent. Irrationality and bureaucracy are omnipotent in *Catch-22*, and war is but an aspect of the greater absurdity, incorporating both elements--in execution and planning, respectively.

The themes in this novel parallel the idea of a shrewd fool, which immediately attaches to its picaresque hero. The repeated revelation of Snowden's death, the wonderful career of Milo Minderbinder, Orr's mysterious pact with the whore who beat him on the head with the heel of her shoe, the paradoxical nature of 'Catch-22,' and many other incidental elements maintain the novel's unique air. The paradoxical result is a comprehensible form which displays the incomprehensibility of the absurd.

Kurt Vonnegut (1923-2007) wrote some fourteen novels starting with *Player Piano* (1952) and ending with *Time-Quake* (1997); he is best known for his *Cat's Cradle* (1963), *Slaughterhouse-Five; or, the Children's Crusade* (1969), *Breakfast of Champions; or, Goodbye Blue Monday* (1973), *Slapstick; or, Lonesome No More* (1976), *Jailbird* (1979), and *Hocus Pocus* (1990). His collections of essays that made a splash include his *A Man without a Country: A Memoir of Life in George Bush's America* (2005) and *Armageddon in Retrospect* (2008), both of which show Vonnegut's leftist ideals at loggerheads with post-Clinton

America. Vonnegut is chiefly celebrated for his satire, dark comedy, and social critique. The critic Donald E. Morse writes sensitively that ‘Vonnegut’s fiction, overtly ethical in its treatment of the great moral, social and political issues of his time, attacks genocide, racism and the destruction of nature; defends first amendment rights and the sacredness of all life; advocates viable forms of human community; and accepts inevitable loss’ (Morse 1993: 3).

African-American Fiction

The most representative author in this category is Toni Morrison (b. 1931), whose first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, was published in 1970, and was followed by *Sula* (1974), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1989), and *Jazz* (1993). In that same year, besides the National Book Critics Circle Award for *Song of Solomon*, the Pulitzer Prize for *Beloved* and numerous other honors, she was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. *The Bluest Eye* established Morrison as one of the most important writers in America. The heroine is Pecola, a girl of eleven years, who had only one dream:

It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights--if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different [...]. If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too [...]. Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long, long time. Thrown, in this way, into the binding conviction that only a miracle could relieve her, she would never know her beauty. She would see only what there was to see: the eyes of other people. (Morrison 1972: 40)

Cholly is Pecola's father, who is almost always drunk, Mrs. Breedlove is Pecola's mother, who prefers to take care of white children rather than her own. When Cholly finally does look at Pecola, he rapes her and she soon bears his child, who is born prematurely and dies. Unsupported by her mother, Pecola gradually goes mad. Her story is told by two neighboring sisters, who cannot understand fully what happened. Nevertheless, they end up destroying white dolls, the dolls Pecola adored so much--for them, the future will be different, in spite of the fact that the final scene of the book describes the seeds two sisters had planted and that did not grow in summer:

I talk about how I did not plant the seeds too deeply, how it was the fault of the earth, the land, of our town. I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say that the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late. At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it's much, much too late. (Morrison 1972: 160)

Love transformed into hatred, morally responsible love, love gained and lost as well as self-love: these are the subjects of *Love* (2003), a novel which yet again questions the simplified, official version of both American and African American history. The hero Bill Cosey reminds one of both the biblical patriarchs and the Great Gatsby, but does not march with Martin Luther King during the civil rights movement, since he is economically dependent on segregation. The narrators, presided over by the ghost of L, are African-American women around him, and as the story develops, their dilemmas and perceptions move to the center of Morrison's attention.

Morrison's ninth novel is *A Mercy* (2008), which may be read as a companion piece to *Beloved*. It also focuses on the mother-daughter relationship and on the issue of slavery, but historically goes much further. Set in the 1680s, it tries to disconnect slavery from race, pointing out that not only Africans, but also native Americans were sold and bought, and neither was the position of indentured whites who came from Europe much better. Moreover, all women regardless of skin color were exploited, and thus, the American Eden was a false dream from the very beginning.

Other African-American female authors include Maya Angelou (b. 1928), who read her poetry at President Clinton's inauguration in 1993, and Alice Walker (b. 1944), whose work is concerned with the courage, creativity, and resourcefulness of black women of various ages and under different circumstances. Walker writes poetry (e.g., *Once: Poems or Revolutionary Petunias & Other Poems* [1973]), short stories (e.g., *In Love & Trouble: Stories of Black Women* [1973] or *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down: Stories* [1981]), and novels. Of the last group, *The Color Purple* (1982) is probably her finest work across all her genres. It is an epistolary novel, in which Celie, an oppressed woman from the deep South, addresses her letters first to God and then to her sister Nettie, who went as a missionary to Africa. Through her correspondence one can observe how her thinking develops--the influence of her husband's lover, the blues singer Shug Avery, is so profound that Celie ends up having her own home and running her own business. What is most fascinating, though, is to observe how gradually she finds courage and learns to laugh, to play, and, finally, to love.

An earlier novel, *Meridian* (1976), focuses on the civil rights movement of the 1960s, which Walker herself experienced in the state of Mississippi. She deals with the psychological problems of young men and women, black and white, living and working in the deep South during those intense times. Artistically, however, the book is a failure. Walker has also

written important critical work. Her landmark essay called 'In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens' contains a mixture of historical analysis, literary criticism, autobiography, and poetry, and has become a classic of feminist theory.

August Wilson (1945-2005) is perhaps the foremost African-American playwright of his generation. He focuses on the theme of healing (that is touching the body and the mind in pain) that occurs in almost all African-American folktales. Wilson calls the healer the spectacle character, but quite often his healing power is not acknowledged or is mistaken for mental disability by the community that has lost touch with its folk beliefs. Thus, the opportunity to be healed, i.e., through the knowledge of the past to understand the present and get on with the future, can be lost if African Americans do not adhere to their cultural memory and are not willing to accept the scars their minds and bodies have suffered as a result of their history. The search for self-authentication is possible only through the spiritual development of man and the whole African-American community.

August Wilson presented African American historical experience in the twentieth century US in a cycle of ten plays, each of them portraying one decade: successively from the 1900s to the 1990s, *Gem of the Ocean* (2003), *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988), *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984), *The Piano Lesson* (1990), *Seven Guitars* (1995), *Fences* (1987), *Two Trains Running* (1991), *Jitney* (1982), *King Hedley II* (1999), and *Radio Golf* (2005). With the exception of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, which is set in Chicago, all the plays of his 'Century Cycle,' or the so-called Pittsburgh Cycle, take place in the impoverished but vibrant Hill District of Pittsburgh, where Wilson was born and as a child listened to the voices of African-American working men and women. His characters, cabdrivers, maids, garbage men, and petty criminals, often belong to the margins of life and are caught between the traumatizing past and uncertain future; yet through them the playwright celebrates the richness of black American experience, bruising as it was. The major influence on his works

is the blues, which he describes as ‘the best literature African Americans have,’ because it spreads the cultural response of black Americans to the world in which they find themselves. Politically, Wilson mainly relies on Elijah Muhammad’s idea of self-sufficiency (in the late 1960s, he was involved in the Black Power movement) and African communal sensibility-- that is why he found the early writings of Imamu Amiri Baraka inspirational, even though he later rejected some of his thoughts.

Thus, African-American literature since World War II has been marked by ever-increasing literary activity of an unprecedented scope. The tempo of literary protest has gradually changed from the integrationist tendencies of the late 1940s and early 1950s to the revolutionary Black militant separatism of the late 1960s and recent female explorations of blackness from within. Nowadays, more young Black poets, novelists, dramatists and critics are writing than ever before. Although some skeptical conservative voices ascribe this fact partly to affirmative action and partly to political correctness, if one takes the primary test of quality of a given literary work, which should be, according to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., the magic of the word, the aesthetic beauty of certain works cannot be questioned.

Finally, we note that African-American literature both in the US and elsewhere is treated and studied separately as a minority literature. What constitutes a minority depends on one’s own definition--the basis of difference may be racial, ethnic, sexual, sociological, psychological, political, cultural, etc. Henry Louis Gates believes that African American literature must be examined first of all separately, that is at African-American departments or within special African-American Studies programs, since it reflects a specific historical experience. In that case, it is quite likely that soon one will encounter similar efforts in the cases of for instance Chicanos (who often write in Spanish) or various Asian minorities (the economic importance of which is growing rapidly) or Native Americans. Werner Sollors recently announced that non-English literatures in the US must be paid sufficient attention as

well, and how the future definition of American literature or the so-called canon will look like remains to be seen.

Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism was marginal to American society, culture, and education, at least up to the 1960s. Although the *Oxford English Dictionary* documents the first usage of this word occurring in 1941, it did not pass into general currency until roughly two decades later, and most examples occurred in Canada--which is hardly to be wondered at, since this country with two major languages and two cultures had supported minority European immigrant groups for some time. The earlier terms used to describe the same phenomenon, especially by James Banks, who dealt primarily with higher education, were until about 1986 'multiethnic pluralism' and still earlier 'cultural pluralism' or 'intercultural education,' and they referred to the same thing, that is, ways in which American society should respond to its diversity. Thus, multiculturalism is much more than a black issue; it also deals with other racial and ethnic groups.

There are several factors responsible for multiculturalists' victory in the 1960s, and their acceptance later by not only the academic world, but also by society in general: the rise of what is referred to as the new history of immigrants, minorities, women, gays, lesbians; greater sophistication with which we view the role of the US (the country is not all-powerful and can lose wars, as it did in Vietnam), the economic weakening of the country (in comparison with Japan during the 1970s), etc.

Multiculturalism, firstly, rejects assimilation and the 'melting pot' image viewing it as an imposition of the dominant culture, and prefers such metaphors as the 'salad bowl' or the 'glorious mosaic,' in which each ethnic and racial element maintains its distinctiveness. Nowadays, it rejects what is called 'additive multiculturalism,' which entails adding a few

elements to the existing structures, in favor of ‘transformative multiculturalism,’ which redraws the entire history and culture of the US as dominantly shaped by race and ethnicity. Here, one has to acknowledge extreme offshoots as well--namely Afrocentrism represented e.g., by Haki Madhubuti and his Independent Black School Movement and radical multiculturalism, that is uniting of different backgrounds on the basis of left-wing political causes. Finally, multiculturalists fall into two groups. Pluralistic multiculturalism has as its aim richer common culture, i.e. American culture any person can relate to, regardless of race, ethnic origin, or even gender. Then, opposed to that, there is particularistic multiculturalism which claims that no common culture is possible or desirable, or, as Bharati Mukherjee states, a mosaic theory of multiculturalism meaning an American culture divided by separate cultural entities, which leads to separatism.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, there was a brief explosion of revived ethnic assertiveness among white European ethnic groups. Moreover, in the 1980s and 1990s, fractures ‘inside,’ that is e.g. between foreign-born (FOBs) and American-born Asians appeared, as well as divisions within the Latino community in the US based on race, that is between the black Hispanics and white Hispanics. New White Intellectuals, such as the aforementioned Werner Sollors, the former chairperson of Harvard’s Department of African and African-American Studies, thus calls for a critical multiculturalism, which would explore the tensions and sometimes rather contradictory demands of multiple cultures, rather than only celebrating the plurality of cultures by passing through them appreciatively. He calls for a new, inclusive definition of the common culture, in which one race or ethnic group is no longer dominant. And since the rate of intermarriage--what was once crudely called amalgamation--increases year by year, and in the latest census almost one half of the Americans gave multiple ancestries, he seems to be almost predicting the future.

Some voices, like Filipino-American writer Jessica Hagedorn, even call for what she refers to as cosmopolitan literature, which would retain best parts of universalism and multiculturalism as well. Thus, she goes beyond Werner Sollors's description of ethnic characteristics inherited by American immigrant writers from their ancestors as 'descent' and the common characteristics adopted by them in the New World as 'consent' and does not mention the American element at all. Gloria Anzaldúa (1942-2004), then, chose a different direction: she countered all dualities, that is against the concept of either/or (for example either Chinese or American), as well as against hybridity (for example Chinese American), for she proposed that hybridity has exhausted itself. In her essay *Borderland/La Frontera* (1987), she points out the multiple borders and the multiple emergences she experienced as a Chicana, that is a Latina woman, and a lesbian at the same time. She uses the term hybrid in the biological context only and introduces the idea of sexuality instead. She believed that she chose her sexuality, i.e., lesbianism, and ideally one chooses ethnicity as well--that is to say decides how important it is for him/her (an interesting post-ethnic view).

As for Native American literature, it is important to realize that there were at least 500 original cultures in North America, that is, about 6 million people who spoke 500 distinct languages. Nowadays, there are, in the reservation idiom, about 700,000 full bloods or bloods in the US, and, of course, many more mixed bloods (i.e., those with parents from different tribes) and breeds (i.e., those who have one non-Indian parent). The working definition of 'red Indian,' though, says that one quarter Indian blood plus tribal membership is sufficient.

Also, one must stress that apart from the Mayans and the Aztecs, North-American tribal peoples evolved without written language: myths, rituals, songs, poems, tales, legends and parables were not put together until the 1960s, when various anthologies illustrated what was referred to as alternative cultural explorations. Moreover, oral tribal poetry was

anonymous, since native Americans believed that the songs had chosen the poets--or, in other words, language and names are primary and words make things happen.

Native-American literature made its first wide impact on mainstream readers with N. Scott Momaday's (b. 1934) *House Made of Dawn* (1968), which won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1969, and was the first book written by a native American to do so. On his mother's side, Momaday is a Cherokee (i.e., Appalachian agricultural people who endured removal from Georgia in the 1830s to forced acculturation on the Great Plains, where they became leaders among the Five 'Civilized' Tribes of the Southwest), on his father's a Kiowa (the Kiowas were a nomadic tribe of buffalo hunters who by the mid-18th century settled the lower Great Plains). He is aware that native American history was initially oral and therefore very fragile, because it depended on the continuity of generations. Thus he believes that a central role is played by memory, and since remembering happens mainly through language, he insists that he continually tells a single story that is repeated again and again.

In *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969), Momaday created a special kind of a collage, which was comprised of at least four different types of discourses: a tribal mode consisting mainly of myths (such as e.g. the myth of creation), a pictorial or visual mode (he is also a successful painter), a historical mode (that is the voice of Western anthropology), and a personal mode. He does not privilege one over the other, yet the fragments are so highly organized that they carry meaning (because the structure is so tight, many critics chose to label the book a sonnet, while others suggest terms like tragedy, vision, epic or even non-fiction). There is also a prologue and an introduction, where the author teaches us how to read his work. Here, identity is highly spiritualized, connected with the trauma of native Americans (as a consequence of the Removal Act and the Land Allotment Act) losing their land and the mourning that followed. The question for Momaday is how to heal the loss. The key elements are arrows, buffalos, boy-brothers and the grandmother figure, while the central

position is occupied by the sun (thus time is conceived as circular, from sunset to sunrise to sunset again, and not linear in a Cartesian sense). The final notion is that of geo-piety, which is explained as a re-affirmation of identity in which humans become one with the soil. While the book can be read as an extremely sharp accusation, it is at the same time very gentle writing, working with the idea that words are symbols and since symbols are sacred, words are not to be wasted.

Later, female writers come to the fore--works by Louise Erdrich (b. 1954) and Leslie Marmon Silko (b. 1948) belong to the 1970s and 1980s, while Susan Power with her impressive short story 'Moonwalk' (from the collection, *The Grass Dancer* [1994]) is perhaps the most representative voice of the 1990s. *Ceremony* (1977) by Leslie Marmon Silko can be read as a revision of American individualism as a dominant mode. The hero, Tayo, a half-breed excluded from full-bloods, moves from violence (represented primarily by war and drinking) to harmony, balance, and compromise, that is, to the community and its native philosophy and spirituality. In contrast to Christ who saves individual souls, for him everything that is solitary must be discarded, as he finally starts to adapt a holistic view of the world. However, just as sunrise is only a promise, ceremony is also an unfinished process, and there is even a suggestion that ceremonies also have to evolve.

Gerald Vizenor's *The Heirs of Columbus* (1991), drastically reinterpreted American history. He focused on the anniversary of the discovery of America and argued that to celebrate Columbus means to celebrate genocide, thus sparking off many heated debates. He also introduced two new terms which are of importance: 'crossbloods,' which is his term for mixed bloods, and 'survivance,' which means much more than just survival. It conveys the idea of keeping culture alive and sees, in contrast to the native-American principle of silence, storytelling as a means of healing. (Compare this to the Laguna tradition as viewed and inherently contradicted by Leslie Marmon Silko: you should not tell your stories to outsiders,

you should not know more than you have to. Thus, many native American professors may have an ethical problem teaching *Ceremony*, because they would be presenting sacred materials desacralized, and to outsiders.)

At present, in addition to the universities of Nebraska, Oklahoma, and New Mexico, which continue to publish literature both by and on native Americans, the prestigious mainstream publishing house Harper & Row has initiated a Native American Publishing Program. There is also a number of periodicals devoted to this field, such as *The Indian Historian*, *American Anthropologist*, *Ethnohistory*, and *American Indian Quarterly*. And, last but not least, several American universities (University of California-Los Angeles, University of Kansas, Montana State University, etc.) offer MA programs in native American studies. This marks the institutional acceptance of Native-American literature and culture.

Fiction after Feminism

Another important issue in contemporary literature has been identity politics. In order to define the identity of the nation precisely and fully, one has to insert the experiences of marginalized groups, and this trend once again started to gain power in the 1960s. In the early 1960s, a new feminism began to take shape, its most influential manifestos being Gloria Steinam's works and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Female writers soon changed the established ideas of what literature was, and the scope of themes of that time expanded rapidly--women wrote about their sexuality, childbirth, incest, abortion, and also lesbianism. They abolished the classical division between the private and the public spheres, and, in a slogan of the time, the personal became political. Along with a considerable number of female authors, feminist critics emerged, and many fruitful debates ensued about gender difference (the issues of job equality and motherhood were especially fraught). At present, feminists even talk about post-feminist feminism or ecofeminism. In fiction, the strongest

voices can be found among radical lesbians--Dorothy Allison with her short stories like 'River of Names' (from the collection, *Trash* [1988]) is perhaps the most powerful as far as radical multiculturalism is concerned as well, because she puts equal emphasis on sexuality and gender as she does on race and class.

A contemporary female author of amazing versatility, productivity, and range is Joyce Carol Oates (b. 1938), a poet, playwright, editor, critic and a teacher, but mainly a short story writer and a novelist. While she calls herself a feminist, she prefers to be considered 'a woman who writes.' On the one hand, she has been characterized as a realist and a naturalist, a social critic writing in the tradition of Theodore Dreiser. On the other, though, she is seen as a gothic writer or the dark lady of American letters, influenced by William Faulkner. She is fascinated by violence, and terrible things happen to her vulnerable--frequently, but not exclusively female--characters (for instance, in her frightening coming-of-age story 'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?' (1967), which appeared in numerous anthologies and is dedicated to Bob Dylan, or in 'Golden Gloves' (1987), a short story born out of her interest in boxing).

Oates's origins in upstate New York were Catholic, working class, and rural, and in *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1967), she persuasively depicts poor rural America with its migrants and automobile junkyards. Later, she lived in Detroit, and in *them* (1969), she portrays a slum family there. However, in *Expensive People* (1968), she also mocks the upper-middle suburban class, and in *Unholy Loves* (1979), she--in the tradition of campus novel--satirizes her own circles, that is university professors and resident artists. So far, Oates has produced over twenty novels and hundreds of short stories, and continues to publish under her own name as well as under two pseudonyms (mostly thrillers and psychological mysteries).

Marilynne Robinson (b. 1947) has earned her reputation primarily with three novels set in her native Idaho and her present-day home, Iowa. With a touch of humor and remarkable lyricism, she has expressed concern for family and community relations, the natural world, and theological speculations. As Thomas Schaub pointed out when writing about *Housekeeping*, unlike contemporary writers such as Thomas Pynchon or Don DeLillo, Robinson avoids parody and deemphasizes historical context. Her fiction may be seen as a ‘meditative resurrection of American romanticism’ (Schaub 1995: 310).

Housekeeping (1980) is a story of two sisters, Ruth and Lucille, who grow up with their unorthodox and transient aunt, Sylvie, in rural Fingerbone. Dominated by a large glacial lake in which the sisters’ mother and grandfather vanish, the town is nevertheless restrictive, and the girls are drawn to the openness, cruelty, and mystery of nature. Therefore as Lucille joins Sylvie and crosses the lake at the story’s end, she loses Fingerbone, but her choice of vagrancy is viewed positively.

After two decades devoted to the criticism of global capitalism, science, and modern thought, Robinson returned to fiction in *Gilead* (2004) and *Home* (2008). Both novels center on families of prominent ministers. (Robinson herself, besides working for the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, has served as a deacon in her church.) The Pulitzer-winning *Gilead* in particular has been praised for the eloquence with which the aging pastor John reminisces about his life. The placid and somewhat ornamental narrative is disturbed in moments when the good, religious man--and not merely his morally ambivalent godson Jack--is fallible to anger and infatuation. The acknowledgement of his own weaknesses allows him to finally forgive Jack.

Lydia Davis (b. 1947) is known in some circles not only for her rarefied fiction of short prose texts (some as brief as a single paragraph) but for her translations of French authors such as Maurice Blanchot and Marcel Proust, among others. She currently teaches at SUNY-Albany, has won a prestigious MacArthur Fellowship (2003) and her complete short

stories were published as *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis* (2009); she has written one novel, *The End of the Story: A Novel* (2004). The critic James Wood has remarked that ‘There is no gratuitous bulk, no “realistic” wadding. Davis’s pieces, often narrated by a woman, sometimes apparently by the writer herself, are closer to the soliloquy than to the story; they are essayistic poems--small curiosity boxes rather than large canvasses’ (Wood 2009: 88). Davis has the special capacity, rather like one of her translational objects, Blanchot himself, of combining a certain kind of philosophical, literary and lyrical-poetic discursive form in her prose styling even while homing in on the age-old concern for inter-human relations. This ability to meld these genres opens up new vistas for imagining what might be written in future exertions in prose writing from the United States; her background as a translator has put her in good stead as a result. Unlike Blanchot, however, Davis is acclaimed for her capacity for the comic, and also her texts are sometimes much shorter than that of one of her ostensible masters. In this way, Davis builds on a certain Franco-American tradition that has long haunted the American literary imagination.

Dirty Realism and Beyond

Dirty Realism (also referred to as Gritty Realism) is a movement in US prose during the 1970s and '80s. The writing is characterized by spareness and simplicity, and has blue-collar settings. The characters are not very successful at work or at home, and they often inflict great pain on each other out of ignorance or cruelty. The clearest precursor in the American context is Ernest Hemingway (primarily because of his prose style) and, beyond America, the Russian playwright and short-story writer Anton Chekhov (for his unsentimental view of humanity). Some of the main exponents of the style are Ann Beattie (b. 1947), Bobbie Ann Mason (b. 1940), Raymond Carver (1938-1988), Richard Ford (b. 1944), Robert Stone (b. 1937), and Tobias Wolff (b. 1945).

Carver is often viewed as the most important writer of this style, and is occasionally referred to as the 'American Chekhov.' He worked in a sawmill, as a cleaner and various other menial jobs, before attracting notice for his stories in the late 1960s. His main publications are the short-story collections, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976) and *Cathedral* (1983); and the poetry collection *A New Path to the Waterfall* (1989). His work is deliberately unsentimental--undecorated in his descriptions of the pain and violence that humans visit on one another. He is a brilliant anatomist of ignorance and stupidity--his characters often wish to do better in the world (in their jobs and relationships) but are frustrated by their own limitations. Carver sympathizes with them and never condescends. The title story of *Cathedral* tells the story of how a man's mind is changed and expanded by the visit of a blind man to his house. In the following passage, he describes how he is not looking forward to the visit, as Carver masterfully explores the contours of ignorance and prejudice.

This blind man, an old friend of my wife's, he was on his way to spend the night. His wife had died. So he was visiting the dead wife's relatives in Connecticut. He called my wife from his in-laws. Arrangements were made. He would come by train, a five-hour trip, and my wife would meet him at the station. She hadn't seen him since she worked for him one summer in Seattle ten years ago. But she and the blind man had kept in touch. They made tapes and mailed them back and forth. I wasn't enthusiastic about his visit. He was no one I knew. And his being blind bothered me. My idea of blindness came from the movies. In the movies, the blind moved slowly and never laughed. Sometimes they were led by seeing-eye dogs. A blind man in my house was not something I looked forward to. (Carver 1999: 199)

The narrator's justification for his hostility is negligible--he says he doesn't want to meet the man because '[h]e was no one I knew.' But Carver remains sympathetic, as he wants to describe how such a mind can open, even if only by the smallest measure, as indeed it does at the end of the story.

Richard Ford began his career in the same mode (blue-collar frustration in pared-down prose), but with the Frank Bascombe trilogy--*The Sportswriter* (1986), *Independence Day* (1995), and *The Lay of the Land* (2006)--he moved beyond the rubric of 'Dirty Realism.' Here are the first few paragraphs of the first book:

My name is Frank Bascombe. I am a sportswriter.

For the past fourteen years I have lived here at 19 Hoving Road, Haddam, New Jersey, in a large Tudor house bought when a book of short stories I wrote sold to a movie producer for a lot of money, and seemed to set my wife and me and our three children--two of whom were not even born yet--up for a good life.

Just exactly what that good life was--the one I expected--I cannot tell you now exactly, though I wouldn't say it has not come to pass, only that much has come in between. The child we had when everything was starting has died, though there are two others, as I mentioned, who are alive and wonderful children.

I wrote half of a short novel soon after we moved here from New York and then put it in the drawer, where it has been ever since, and from which I don't expect to retrieve it unless something I cannot now imagine happens.

Twelve years ago, when I was twenty-six, and in the blind way of things then, I was offered a job as a sportswriter by the editor of a glossy New York sports magazine you have all heard of, because of a free-lance assignment I had written in a particular way he liked. And to my surprise and everyone else's I quit writing my novel and accepted. (Ford 1996: 9)

The bareness of the presentation is integral to the effect. The opening paragraph resembles the declaration made by members of Alcoholics Anonymous (e.g., 'My name is Frank. I am an alcoholic'), and this likeness is not coincidental. Like a recovering alcoholic, Frank is trying to reconstruct his life after having lost his youthful romantic ideas about writing, and also trying to recover from the death of his son and his subsequent divorce. He wants the reader to think he is unillusioned, that he cannot be fooled by high talk or sentimentality. Frank is seeing the world in its most real form.

But reality, as it is depicted in the trilogy, becomes more and more complex, so that by the publication of *The Lay of the Land*, the tone is transformed, and is much more hectic, as Frank responds to the grand, intricate, and explosive phenomena of life in contemporary America. In the following passage, observe the huge accretion of detail (both geographical and commercial), and the way that Frank is in harmony with this.

Since there's no direct-est route to Parkway Exit 102N, where Wade's already fuming at Fuddruckers, I take the scenic drive up 35, across the Metedeconk and the Manasquan to Point Pleasant, switch to NJ 34 through more interlocking towns, townships, townlettes--one rich, one not, one getting there, one hardly making its millage. I love this post-showing interlude in the car, especially after my syncope on the dune. It's the *moment d'or* which the Shore facilitates perfectly, offering exposure to the commercial-ethnic-residential zeitgeist of a complex republic, yet shelter from most of the ways the republic gives me the willies. 'Culture comfort,' I call this brand of specialized well-being. And along with its sister solace, 'cultural literacy'--knowing by inner gyroscope where the next McDonald's or Borders, or the next old-fashioned Italian shoe repair or tuxedo rental or lobster dock is going to show up on the horizon--these together I consider a cornerstone of the small life lived acceptably. I count it a good when I can keep *all* things that give me the willies out of my thinking, and in their places substitute vistas I can appreciate, even unwittingly. Which is why I take the scenic route now, and why when I get restless I fly out to Moline or Flint or Fort Wayne for just a few hours' visit--since there I can experience the new and the complex, coupled with the entirely benign and knowable. (Ford 2007: 430)

Each of the books is set on an American national holiday--respectively, Easter, Fourth of July, Thanksgiving--and in this way, Ford gives Frank Bascombe's experience a wider resonance. It is clear by *The Lay of the Land* that Ford, perhaps more than any other living prose writer can, in Whitman's phrase, 'hear America singing.'

Postmodernism and the Return of Realism

Postmodern prose may be described as a multi-cultural, multi-generic and multi-disciplinary narrative form. It is difficult to define with an all-embracing concept: rather it is best thought of as prose discourse that incorporates various modes of narrative fiction. But we may tentatively propose that a general feature of the age is that contingency is a structure that organizes subject and object relations. Brian McHale, in his *Postmodern Fiction* (1987) suggests that the difference between modernism and postmodernism is a difference between epistemology and ontology. That is, modernism is epistemological in that it does not question the existence of publicly acknowledgeable reality; rather, Modernist writers explore the means of literary representation of that reality. Whereas for postmodernist writers, the existence of such a shared reality is problematic. One of McHale's examples is the career of Vladimir Nabokov, discussed below, as it moves from the early modernist works, with their unreliable narrators, and puzzling plots that can ultimately be worked out (for instance, *Lolita* [1955]), to the postmodernist works such as *Pale Fire* (1962) and *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969). The latter moves between various counterfactual fictional worlds, none of which has existential priority. It is ultimately impossible to say which is the 'true', 'real' world.

The structure of participative democracy in the writer-reader relation too traverses the postmodern (roughly 1950-present) even as it attempts to formalize and reflect on the commodified quality of experience in the ever more digital nature of this era of the spectacle, and of its concomitant saturation by the media and the image; all the while, prose narrative ruminates on the problem of experience within such parameters. Some argue that we have exited the postmodern, but equally we could say that we now have a more seasoned version, one that incorporates supple returns to the hard-headed actualities of a kind of epistemological realism. One example of this might be the realism of the McSweeney's generation which includes the prose of Jonathan Safran Foer and Dave Eggers. The genre of the fragment or

contingent angle of vision on the world, high-level semantic ambiguity, and as indicated above, a strong emphasis on the notion of dynamic participation from the reader are a few of the indices of this type of prose.

Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977) is a first example of this intercultural quality to the period under consideration: an artist who was born in Russia in the penultimate year of the nineteenth century, who was educated in England and who spent some fifteen years in Germany before making the United States his residence. Nabokov published his first novel, *Mary*, in 1926. Then came a series of eight more Russian novels until he composed and published his first novel in English in 1941: *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. From 1947 until his death in Switzerland in 1977 Nabokov published seven more novels, including *Invitation of a Small Creature* (1957), *Pale Fire* (1962), *Ada, or Ardor* (1969), and *Look at the Harlequins* (1974). Moreover, Nabokov published six collections of short stories, literary criticism, a memoir and also a considerable amount of translation work. (He translated all of his earlier Russian novels into English and he translated Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* in 1964, with extensive scholarly apparatus.) Nabokov should be stamped as a sophisticated and highly self-conscious writer who constantly reminds his readers that what they are reading may have nothing at all to do with what goes on in the so-called real or extra-textual world.

It is notable that while Nabokov is included in the 1994 fourth edition of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* he did not make the cut for the top forty post-1945 prose writers in the 1998 fifth edition of the same anthology, despite his international reputation. This omission is so intriguing and so charged with questions of cultural politics and so forth that it would take volumes to archive the complexity of this situation and of this editorial decision by Jerome Kinkowitz from the University of Northern Iowa. Nabokov did, after all, live, teach and write in the United States during the 1940s and the 1950s. Nabokov's most celebrated and well-received novel is *Lolita* (1955, 1958). In this classic text Nabokov

portrays the narrator Humbert Humbert's passionate lust and love for twelve-year-old Dolores Haze, and in so doing addresses a fairly radical subject for this time within American cultural history. (It is worth noting here that among the cinematic adaptations of *Lolita* is one masterful rendition by the American director Stanley Kubrick.)

Thomas Pynchon is one of the most challenging writers of the second half of the twentieth century. He is often compared to James Joyce for the complexity and for the beauty of his language. Both in his biographical narrative and in his work Pynchon embodies much of what can be called absolutely contemporary, postmodern or even post-postmodern, for it may even be argued that we are now beyond a post-modern age and sensibility.

Pynchon was born in Glen Clove, New York in 1937. He attended Cornell University, served two years in the US Navy, and then returned to Cornell from where he graduated in 1958. After that Pynchon turned down a job as a film reviewer for *Esquire* magazine in order to pursue a writing career. He has lived in Greenwich Village in New York City, Seattle, Mexico, California, and now is back living in New York City. His fiction also displays familiarity with many parts of Europe, enough to suggest that he has spent some time living in Britain and perhaps Continental Europe as well; yet this is speculation fueled by his novel *Gravity's Rainbow*, which is set in post-World War II Europe. The dearth of biographical information about Pynchon and the scarcity of photographs of him exemplify Roland Barthes's classic text 'The Death of the Author,' which champions the notion that the death of the tyrannical author-god will mean the birth of the reader who will henceforth be armed with new creative powers, creative privileges, and creative rights.

Pynchon published a collection of early short stories entitled *Slow Learner* in 1984 and has also published seven novels since the early 1960s, *V* (1961, 1963), *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965, 1966), *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), *Vineland* (1990), *Mason & Dixon* (1997), *Against the Day* (2006), and *Inherent Vice* (2009). *V* is about the search for a mysterious

female character named V who is somehow connected to all the catastrophes of European history in the twentieth century. *The Crying of Lot 49* addresses yet another paranoiac search in which the protagonist, Oedipa Maas, endeavors to unravel the significance of a secret postal system called the Tristero. There seems a worldwide conspiracy against Oedipa in her efforts to discover the meaning of the meaning of the Tristero system; alternatively it may just be a phantasmatic creation of Oedipa's. It is one of the special achievements of Pynchon's creative world that it deconstructs fixed, one dimensional, stable and univocal meanings and readings. One could even go a step further than this and argue that it is his contribution to literature to have taught us the imposture of mastery that literature can be controlled through the interpretive act. One simple textual example of the foregoing mentions would be the uninterpretable coda to *The Crying of Lot 49*, which remains radically open-ended and indeterminate in its status as a site productive of textual ambiguity as 'Oedipa settled back, to await the crying of lot 49' (Pynchon 1965, 1966: 183); which is to say, at least in part, the enigmatic Tristero.

While Pynchon is esteemed in some circles in others he is not, which is true of most good writers during their lifetimes. Pynchon is difficult in part because he demands new ways of reading texts; for instance, his work renounces traditional notions of literary authority in its self-abnegating narrative strategies, processes that make for painful narrative moments in which meanings and significations are frustrated. For instance, what precisely is the true content, nature, and essence of abovementioned 'the crying of lot 49'? It is difficult if not impossible to know. This aesthetic strategy seems a way for Pynchon to cajole his readers into different ways of thinking about the meaning of meaning itself. I would submit that this is a way for Pynchon to offer a moral reflection on our habits of reading. Pynchon's passion for writing makes him examine the relation between mobility and tasks of hegemony, i.e., interpretive endeavors that entail the will-to-power of the interpreter. (One example would be

the desire for a clear-cut answer or will to knowledge of what exactly the Tristero system is in *The Crying of Lot 49*.) Thus there is a kind of displacement in which Pynchon's novel is about its own narrative procedures as much as it is about its subjects and its contents.

Furthermore, in *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa Maas illuminates through the aesthetic power of the novel's narrative what it means to live in a postmodern world. Oedipa's journey poignantly illustrates how paranoia can be a good thing, for it enables you to see new connections and to have a more systemic understanding of what is going on around you. Also, there is a sense in Pynchon that paranoia has yet to be adequately understood and defined, for thought itself after all is definitionally paranoiac in its emphasis on connection-making. In one reading Oedipa's paranoia is completely just and thus perhaps not paranoiac at all, or is it?

To give a wider sense of the considerable sociohistorical and political dimension to *The Crying of Lot 49* consider the following extract from the critic Charles Hollander, who writes toward the end of his article entitled 'Pynchon, JFK and the CIA: Magic Eye Views of *The Crying of Lot 49*':

So *The Crying of Lot 49* is about Oedipa, her life, her loves, her mental states, and her curious quest to decipher the estate of Pierce Inverarity. And, by allusion, it is also Pynchon's meditation on the state of American affairs in the mid-sixties, about Russo-American relations during the American Civil War, about the fate of Jan De Witt during the founding of the Dutch republic. It is about the acrimonious U.S. elections of 1940 and 1944, and about the OSS in Italy during the Second World War. It is about Thurn and Taxis and its relation with the Rothschilds, and about the relations of the Rothschilds and the Morgans. It is about how certain American corporations and banks were instrumental in preparing Germany for war, and (by implication) about how those same corporations and banks were

instrumental in driving Pynchon & Co. into receivership. It is about how McCarthyism hounded lots of Yankees and Jews out of the government, about how Germany rebounded from the Second World War to become one of the world's richest nations, about how so many former Nazi officials went on to rank among the world's elite. It is about how the CIA got to be superordinate to the presidency in American *realpolitik*. It is about how mid-sixties America resembled Nazi Germany, the Dutch republic and the Roman empire at their worst, about the fear that the cessation of political and intellectual exchange would cause a new decline of the West. And all these meditations were triggered by the assassination of President Kennedy. (Hollander 1997: 100-101)

So, one can see that Pynchon in *The Crying of Lot 49* was able to deal with larger macropolitical and sociological concerns. (One may view Pynchon as a kind of realist, moreover.) Pynchon himself was implicated in the events of the 1960s, however much he tried to live a life of internal self-exile, for as Hollander points out: 'Natalie Robins has documented that Thomas R. Pynchon, Jr., was on the FBI's index, a list of people known to be unfriendly to government policies on whom the FBI kept active dossiers [...]' (Hollander 1997: 63). It is worth citing the coda to Hollander's forty-five page article:

If we stand to the novel as Oedipa stands to her experience, then the novel provides a means for us to uncover the secret mysteries of recent history as Oedipa executes the estate of Pierce Inverarity. Any historical name alluded to, literary name, corrupted name, place name, or pun on any of those may lead to a body of information that explains how we all got to be in this boat, this postwar America. Pynchon guides us through a history lesson [. . .] if we follow up on all

the leads, round up the usual suspects, in standard reference books (not necessarily classified documents); if we can keep our heads while those around us are losing theirs and blaming it on us, then we will wind up with a lot more than the overt narrative of *The Crying of Lot 49*. We may wind up with words we never wanted to hear, but we may become those who know. (Hollander 1997: 101)

Thus the notion that literature can give us a higher and more complex sense of reality arguably is presented by Pynchon, a writer who at the same time, interestingly, has had a long-lasting and intense engagement with questions regarding popular culture, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction.

Pynchon's next novel, *Gravity's Rainbow*, has been described as a late twentieth-century *Ulysses* and has been compared also to *Moby-Dick* in its encyclopedic nature. The novel itself is a dazzling blend of parody, satire, surrealism, realism, comedy, and tragedy. Many readers will find the price of admission to *Gravity's Rainbow* too high, because of its length and complexity. Many of the same issues that were discussed in *The Crying of Lot 49* reemerge in *Gravity's Rainbow* with redoubled force and complexity (*Gravity's Rainbow* is about five times the length of its precursor). It recounts the progress of its protagonist, Slothrop, in a kind of paranoid quest rather like that of the puzzling woman in *V* and like that of Oedipa in *The Crying of Lot 49*. Slothrop comes to realize the interconnectedness of everything in the world and how his life has itself been precisely arranged by agents other than himself.

Although Pynchon has eschewed publicity to a great degree and turned down many literary awards, someone did receive the National Book Award for *Gravity's Rainbow* in 1974 on Pynchon's behalf. Very little emerged by Pynchon after 1973 until the publication in December of 1989 of *Vineland*, a novel that annoyed many in the literary establishment with

its overwhelming incorporation of forms of popular culture. *Vineland* takes place in northern California in the 1980s and delineates the doings and travails of former 1960s generation hippies and their lives a generation later. *Vineland* was Pynchon's most traditionally plotted novel up to this time in his career.

After some twenty four years of composition Pynchon's next novel, *Mason & Dixon*, was published in 1997. Here Pynchon seems to have reached a kind of maturity inconceivable in his complex publications of the 1960s and the 1970s. The book is among his more readable, and yet it decidedly still is not easy. This capacious novel concerns the adventurous lives of the British surveyors Charles Mason (1728-1786) and Jeremiah Dixon (1733-1779), who together created the fateful boundary of the Mason and Dixon line that was to separate Pennsylvania from Maryland, and thus also the North from the South, the fault line that would of course prove momentous in numerous moments in American history. Pynchon imaginatively reconstructs their achievement and their shared lives and deaths to create an eighteenth-century novel about the age of reason for the last years of the twentieth-century and the first years of the twenty-first. So, one could say that these words from the French thinker Maurice Blanchot rather uncannily capture the 'future-past' that is our present history as explored in this peculiar late work from Pynchon:

Writing: an arrow aiming at the void--the anachronistic of the future past--and falling always too early, in the too-full weight of a weighty past, of a future with nothing to come or even worse, in the plenitude of a present that transforms everything into the written rich in resources and in life. (Blanchot 1992: 124)

Pynchon followed up in 2006 with a mega novel, *Against the Day*, whose 1000-page plus auto-referentiality seems to formalize and to parody that of the postmodern,

spectacularized digital and commodity age; the novel traverses the time of the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago up to the early 1920s. The text engages many of the subterranean aspects of culture in this period that would augur, even if unconsciously, World War I. The novel that followed, *Inherent Vice* (2009), constitutes a kind of semi-autobiographical text that recounts life in southern California from the era of 1969-1970 and as such it has a certain connection with the early-style Pynchon of *The Crying of Lot 49*. *Inherent Vice* is, compared to earlier work, a comparatively light if enjoyable read, and the most accessible of his prose pieces thus far.

Don DeLillo (b. 1936) is one of the greatest anatomizers of postmodern America, carefully analyzing and satirizing the way that everyday life is intercalated with media representation. His wit is, however, laced with religious nostalgia, as is evident from the ending of *White Noise* (1985). In DeLillo's view, the crisis of our age is lack of plot: we no longer have large narratives with which to understand our lives. Neither religion nor government can provide this, and we are left with the shifting simulacra of images and slogans. DeLillo's characters often seem like little more than appendages to their credit cards and medical histories, but unlike his close friend Pynchon, he adheres to a certain form of realist narrative, finding that weird enough in itself. In the following passage his protagonist, Jack Gladney is interacting with a cash machine:

In the morning I walked to the bank. I went to the automated teller machine to check my balance. I inserted my card, entered my secret code, tapped out my request. The figure on the screen roughly corresponded to my independent estimate, feebly arrived at after long searches through documents, tormented arithmetic. Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval. The system hardware, the mainframe sitting in a locked room in some distant city. What a pleasing

interaction. I sensed that something of deep personal value, but not money, not that at all, had been authenticated and confirmed. A deranged person was escorted from the bank by two armed guards. The system was invisible, which made it all the more impressive, all the more disquieting to deal with. But we were in accord, at least for now. The networks, the circuits, the streams, the harmonies. (DeLillo 1986: 46)

This is at once sad and intensely lyrical, as DeLillo leaves us with a sublime expanse of computer circuitry and information holding up all our lives. Other important work includes *Libra* (1988), which is about the attempt to construct a narrative out of the JFK assassination. *Underworld* (1997) is perhaps his most ambitious novel to date, that covers five decades of US history.

One of the white male authors often cited as a major force in contemporary American fiction is William T. Vollmann (b. 1959), a journalist, novelist, short-story writer and essayist. He calls himself a ‘hack journalist’ and his reportage is often carried out while researching his fiction or non-fiction projects, providing them with a hybridized feel: he introduces his personal experiences and then lets these interact with various other materials. He travels widely and finds turmoil everywhere: in Afghanistan, in Sarajevo, or in Cambodia, but also in the underside of life in San Francisco with its pimps, drug users and crime.

Like Thomas Pynchon, Vollmann seeks to encompass everything the fragmented world has to offer, as some of his titles--e.g., *The Rainbow Stories* (1989) or *The Atlas* (1996)--suggest. His subjects are war, violence, human compassion, poverty, violence and loss, and his protagonists remind one of Hemingway’s hero in *A Farewell to Arms*. While many critics admire his boldness and ambition, others find his work pretentious and egotistical, and a few even claim that his obsession with prostitution borders on fetishism, as the following example illustrates:

she [the prostitute] approved of how he smoked crack now; the best way to smoke crack is to suck it from the tube of broken glass as gently as you'd suck the crack-smoke breath from the lips of the prostitute who's kissing you. (Vollmann 1997: 174)

Though he had already published two novels, Jonathan Franzen (b. 1959) broke through with his epic of family life in America, *The Corrections* (2001). His previous novel, *Strong Motion* (1992), was also concerned with the dislocations suffered by an American family, but the book lacked focus. He provided this ingredient in *The Corrections* with the simple plot device of an ageing mother in the mid-west town of St. Jude trying to get her middle-aged children back for one final Christmas. The simplicity of this device at once gave Franzen structure and freedom, as we follow the fates of Chip, a failed cultural-studies lecturer, to Lithuania where he helps defraud American investors; Gary, who is in crisis as an affluent paterfamilias in Philadelphia; and Denise, a celebrity chef who is changing her sexual orientation. All three children think that they have outgrown the values and horizon of their mid-western childhood (the mother's pat morality, and the father's employment in a rail company), and this fuels the arguments and détentes of the family.

But Franzen's crisis after *Strong Motion* was not simply one of plot device; it was a lack of confidence about the role of the novel in American culture: 'At the heart of my despair about the novel had been a conflict between my feeling that I should Address the Culture and Bring News to the Mainstream and my desire to write about the things closest to me, to lose myself in the characters and locales I loved.' He set out to 'connect[] the personal and the social' (qtd. in Eakin 2001). The personal is brilliantly rendered in the account of the family relationships, and each individual family member in turn provides a view of a large tranche of twentieth-century American life. There is little experiment in the novel's structure--Sinclair

Lewis would have recognized every turn--and yet Franzen's realistic method is flexible enough to keep pace with the complex social metamorphoses. The prose style is not as burnished as Updike or Nicholson Baker--for the most part it wins us over with its sharp insights into family relationships and its cultural cynicism; and finally, the book succeeds as a better version of John Dos Passos's *USA* (1930-36), that is, as a panorama of the United States, but one that does forfeit representations of the individuals who live in it.

David Foster Wallace (1962-2008) was a novelist, short story writer, professor at Pomona College at the time of his death, and an essayist. His first novel was *The Broom of the System* (1987) and his second and most acclaimed work, *Infinite Jest* (1996) partly covers life in the elite Enfield Tennis Academy and the nearby Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House. The principal character in this narrative, which defies any plot summary, is Hal Incandenza from the widely delineated Incandenza Family. The book has been hailed as one of the most important post-Pynchon, encyclopedic works of American fiction for its critique of American social reality: it delineates the social facts and processes of rampant advertising, of the power of capital and commodity culture, of untrammelled consumerism, of supervening addictions and obsessions and of a certain quality of emptiness and yet also manic bumptiousness that lies at the core and haunts daily life. In his pop culture version of American experience, Canada, Mexico and the USA have united (the northeastern US has been ecologically devastated). His third and last novel, *Pale King* remained unfinished at the time of his death. Among his collections of essays is *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never do Again: Essays and Arguments* (1997) that includes two pieces that recount Wallace's fascination with tennis in 'derivative sport in tornado alley' (1990) which records his own background as a player on the tennis courts of Illinois.

POETRY

The Disappearing Mainstream

If there was a recognizable mainstream in American poetry into the 1960s, it disappeared in the subsequent decades. As the generation born in the 1920s expanded the rhetorical and formal resources of poetry, previously marginal figures began to take center stage. Some examples: Allen Ginsberg was increasingly recognized as central to ideas of American poetry; the experiments of Objectivism were explored by poets such as Robert Creeley, Carl Rakosi, and Charles Olson; A. R. Ammons's radical rearrangements of the formal parameters of poetry also received widespread attention. As a result of this, at present, there is no secure sense of a mainstream in American poetry, rather there is a dazzling diversity of styles and thematic preoccupations.

It is too early to identify definitively the main trends in American poetry in the period 1970 to the present. Literary history is still being made; critical judgments are still being formed and revised with each new publication; and the careers of those writers who emerged during this period still continue. Provisionally we can point to those changes in poetry which grew out of the social transformations of the 1960s, more particularly, changes in the social status of women and ethnic groups such as the Asian Americans, Native Americans, Chicano/as, and perhaps most importantly African Americans. A change in the world must at some level be represented in poetry. The immediate result was poetry like that of Adrienne Rich, arguing the case for radical feminism; of Amiri Baraka polemicizing for African Americans; and closer to the present the emergence of poets like Cathy Song of Asian-American background or Joy Harjo of Creek Indian background.

Much of this work gains attention because of its unassailable moral position. It attempts to be contemporary by striking politically correct attitudes (for instance, the representation of heroines facing repressive social powers, or the tribal drums beating in the work of some Native Americans). Nevertheless, these transformations are changing

conceptions of what poetry is and what it can address. These social changes draw attention to zones of experience that have not yet been represented in poetry or literature in general and the poet, if he or she is to be truly contemporary, must exert a pressure back against them that is not purely polemical.

More particularly, several African-American poets are turning away from the political arena, and re-examining the resources of the lyric tradition. These poets are not now considered first and foremost as ethnic writers but are part of the diverse 'mainstream.' An African-American poet like Rita Dove has won a Pulitzer Prize and will publish new poems in a middle-brow magazine like the *New Yorker* as easily as she will in a magazine like *Callaloo* that deals purely with African-American affairs. Reginald Shepherd, who was born in the Bronx projects, was gay, and African-American, would seem to have all the qualifications for a poetry of the angry disempowered, and yet it would be difficult to find a more lyrical and subtly intellectual poet in the US today. His avoidance of the predictable stances bears witness to the aesthetic strength of poetry under political and social pressures.

Dove is both a woman and an African-American and there is no doubt that she has benefited as much from the ground gained by a radical feminist poet like Adrienne Rich as from a radical black rights poet like Amiri Baraka. Rich, Baraka and others can best be thought of as enabling the more significant work of those who follow. Dove writes about her racial past with pride but the energy which those earlier poets spent on polemic is, in Dove's poetry, diverted to aesthetic concerns. It is perhaps in this second wave of poets that the most important poetry will emerge.

Formalism and Beyond

The career of Richard Wilbur (b. 1921) illustrates the difficulty of periodization and stylistic categorization. His first collection, *The Beautiful Changes and Other Poems* (1947), was in

the New Critical style described in the previous chapter: rhymed, metered, and restrained. Although many poets began their careers in the 1950s writing in such a style, they then abandoned it for formally wilder techniques. This bolsters the idea of some kind of stylistic progress. The career of Wilbur (and, as we shall see, Thom Gunn) gives the lie to this. For he continued writing in this mode for the rest of his career. Properly speaking, this style is not New Critical, but is inherited from Ben Jonson, Andrew Marvell, Alexander Pope, and Thomas Hardy: that is, the plain style of English poetry.

His main themes are love, landscape, and, more abstractly, the individual mind as it negotiates its ages and various zones of experience (war, orthography, social life, etc.). As a result he is often negatively characterized as a limited poet of the middle-class private life. However, his range is greater, as evidenced by a collection such as *Advice to a Prophet and Other Poems* (1961), where he engages with the widespread social movements of the 1960s, tactfully and forcefully presenting a vision of private and public:

When you come, as you soon must, to the streets of our city,
Mad-eyed from stating the obvious,
Not proclaiming our fall but begging us
In God's name to have self-pity,

Spare us all word of the weapons, their force and range,
The long numbers that rocket the mind:
Our slow, unreckoning hearts will be left behind,
Unable to fear what is too strange.

Nor shall you scare us with talk of the death of the race.

How should we dream of this place without us?--

The sun mere fire, the leaves untroubled about us,

A stone look on the stone's face?

Speak of the world's own change. Though we cannot conceive

Of an undreamt thing, we know to our cost

How the dreamt cloud crumbles, the vines are blackened by frost,

How the view alters. (Wilbur 2004: 258)

The prophet comes out of town, he is not a local, and the implication is that his visions and energy come from his rootlessness and inability to look at the immediate physical world around him. The latter is what Wilbur pitches against his huge cosmic and utopian visions. The poem forcefully counters large rhetoric with a resilient insistence on the things of this world, and it does so without pathos or sentimentality. This poetry is both politically engaged and attentive to the motions of the spirit. His output continues unabated into his eighties.

The first question that must be answered about Thom Gunn (1929-1954) is whether he belongs here at all. Born and educated in England he moved to California in 1954, where he remained for the rest of his life. English critics often think he belongs in the American context, and American critics similarly expect he will be looked after in England. He excelled in the plain style of Richard Wilbur described above, and wrote in it throughout his life. However, he also engaged deeply with the American experimental tradition of Objectivism and its followers, especially Robert Duncan. Thus, in any collection of poems by Gunn we are likely to encounter lyrics whose forms and themes would be familiar to Ben Jonson, and on the facing page a poem that tears apart syntax, orthography, and narrative in the mode of Language writing.

One poem from his final collection, *Boss Cupid* (2000) provoked controversy for its treatment of the serial killer, necrophile, and cannibal, Jeffrey Dahmer, whose victims were young males. The following passage is from 'Hitch-Hiker,' and in it Dahmer addresses his victim. He dies in the course of the poem, without ruffling the beautiful surface of what is a love poem, albeit of an extremely perverted variety:

Oh do not leave me now.
All that I ever wanted is compressed
In your sole body. As you turn to go
I know that I must keep you, and know how,
For I must hold the ribbed arch of your chest
And taste your boyish glow.
[.....]
I thought that you were gone,
But you are here and will remain with me.
Your long hair floods the pillow that we share
Across the mattress we lie quietly on.
I trust your mute consent in which I'm free
To strip your body bare. (Gunn 2000: 87)

The tenderness expressed here is counterpointed by the shocking violence which is undescribed and yet necessarily there. Gunn is exploring the border where love, or lust, mutates into murderous desire. A career such as Gunn's renders the categories of 'US poetry' and 'British poetry' redundant.

Robert Pinsky

Robert Pinsky (b. 1940) belongs to the visionary American tradition of poets such as Walt Whitman, Hart Crane and Allen Ginsberg. He is above all preoccupied with the possibilities that American democracy offers to individuals as they shape the spiritual, imaginative and material aspects of their lives. He is an autobiographical poet only insofar as the stories of his own life can be seen as illustrative of the larger patterns of American life, and he consistently places those stories beside those of other citizens of the democratic experiment, attentive to both the differences and similarities between them. He does not hark back to the ideology of the 'melting pot' (which would have generations of immigrants slough off their ancestral ethnicities and religions), but rather explores how these different peoples live together in the United States, and find new rhythms, songs, resolutions and ways of doing business. One of his most powerful images of this can be found in his poem 'Avenue,' where he surveys the different ethnicities all co-existing on the same street in New Jersey: 'Not shriven and yet / Not rent, they stride the Avenue, banter, barter. / Capering, on fire, they cleave the riven hub.' Arguably, much of Pinsky's poetry to date is a beautiful distillation of that bantering and bartering, an orchestration of the deeper harmonies that lie beneath so much of the diversity of America. In an essay on Philip Freneau, Walt Whitman and William Carlos Williams, he asks 'What is, or what would be, a democratic poetry?'; Pinsky own poetry is one of the finest answers to this question.

The title poem of his first book, *Sadness and Happiness* (1975), imagines these emotions 'crossing the dark spaces' between people, filling up and indeed animating the emptiness. The poem is striking for how it figures the ways that individuals connect with one another--how they 'fill the brown width of their tillable plains,' as another poem in the book has it--and how the aggregate of those connections can make a society. These spaces have a complex history in American culture, from Wallace Stevens's 'bare earth' to the paintings of

Edward Hopper which show the citizens of the US paused in reverie in the midst of the illuminated emptiness of cities and landscapes.

Pinsky's second collection was a book-length poem, *An Explanation of America* (1979). It picked up the disquisitional mode of 'Essay on Psychiatrists' in order to explain a large part of a large continent. We are told that the poem is addressed to Pinsky's daughter, as he imagines her when she is older. The tone is professorial and parental at once, with parts entitled 'Its Great Emptiness' and 'Its Everlasting Possibility,' and sub-sections on race, local politics, history and, perhaps most importantly, the war in Vietnam, which had recently come to an end. Indeed, Pinsky has remarked in interview that '*An Explanation of America* is a bit like an immense platform on which to write the Vietnam sections of it.' The tone shares nothing with the poems of an older generation who vigorously wrote in protest against US foreign policy. Pinsky's tone is more eirenic, and at one point he says that 'I think / That I may always feel as if I lived / In a time when the country aged itself: / More lonely together in our common strangeness... / As if we were a family, and some members / Had done an awful thing on a road at night.' What is striking about this passage is its implication of collective guilt, and the clear-eyed acknowledgement of its paradoxical consequences: Americans now are 'more lonely together,' and they now possess a 'strangeness' in 'common.' This is American exceptionalism of a very subtle kind.

In the same interview, Pinsky remarked that 'you couldn't follow *Explanation of America* with a book called (my wife and friends used to make up these titles) *The Real Truth About Everything Else* or *The Nature of the Universe*.' The two books that came after, *History of My Heart* (1984) and *The Want Bone* (1990), observe the ways that human desire is channeled through social structures and joins and flows with other desires. This, at least, is indicated in the very titles of these books and it produces a strange capacious autobiography. Whitman remarked in 'Song of Myself' that he contained multitudes, and so Pinsky, writing

in the same tradition, also contains multitudes of anecdotes, *aperçus*, epiphanies, pertaining to himself and other people. He shows the ways in which American autobiography is generous and voluminous, ultimately not centered on the self, but on the world around it.

A particularly fine poem in *The Want Bone* is 'Shirt.' It is an object poem, as Pinsky wonders about the provenance of the particular shirt that he wears: he thinks about 'The back, the joke, the yardage. Lapped seams, / The nearly invisible stitches along the collar.' But observing it in this way, he then wonders about the hands of the people who made it, what their lives are like. And from that he remembers the story of a shirt factory burning in 1911 and how one hundred and forty-six people died, and one particularly strange and puzzling detail of that fire: one man helped several women out a window on the ninth floor and then dropped them to their death before jumping himself (his shirt billowing with the racing air). It seems as though the poet can wander anywhere--and at one stage towards the end he humorously observes: 'George Herbert, your descendant is a Black / Lady in South Carolina, her name is Irma / And she inspected my shirt.' Rather than continue to paraphrase the beautiful errancy of the poem, I wish to remark how Pinsky, when talking of ordinary objects or scenes, searches out their weird provenances, unfolds the unusual human stories that are hidden with them. In *Gulf Music* (2007), he provides the etymology of the word 'thing,' which is in Old English an 'assembly, council, lawsuit, matter'; also a 'convocation or parliament of voices.' Thus Pinsky's desire for a democratic poetry leads him down strange paths, where the *demos*, or participants in democracy, turn out to be not just the registered voters of the US but its *things* as well.

This is the reason why one of the central devices of his poetry is the catalog, as things include other things and other stories, and these must be explored with some degree of thoroughness. As the associations become wilder or more imaginative, or even just rooted in his own autobiography, the poem as container for them all is stretched, sometimes to breaking

point. Syntax is put aside for parataxis. Different voices struggle to grab hold of the microphone. In *Gulf Music*, Pinsky explores this idea of the breaking point: one poem is entitled 'Poem of Disconnected Parts,' and another 'Poem with Lines in Any Order,' which is like listening in on the sound-bites of passers-by on a busy sidewalk. In this way, Pinsky implies, an extreme democratic poetry will not impose its structures on its *demos*, but will let the people and things breathe freely in its environs. 'El Burro Es un Animal,' from the same collection, is another example of such a disjunctive strategy, picked up, it would seem, from the experiments of Language poets such as Bob Perelman and Lyn Hejinian. The collection also opens with meditations on the nature of forgetting, as Pinsky remarks on his own age (sixty seven, on the book's year of publication). He loses further links as he forgets, but also thinks of ways in which forgetting is a natural social mechanism, which brings its ecstasies also. Thus Pinsky at once loves structures (verbal, political, geographic) and fantasizes their destruction.

Though he delights and finds imaginative force in these large panoramas, Pinsky is also a master of the brief, intense lyric, for instance in 'Rhyme' or the title poem of *Jersey Rain* (2000), which is a striking retrospective poem, as he asks himself: 'Now near the end of the middle stretch of road / What have I learned?' The answers are both truthful and amusing: 'Some earthly wiles. An art. / That often I cannot tell good fortune from bad.' The poem widens its gaze to consider the rain above the state of New Jersey, where he was born, and he remarks 'The Jersey rain, my rain, soaks all as one.' The voice here is different from that of many of his other poems, less public and more intimate at its moment of disclosure:

The Jersey rain, my rain, in streams and beads,

Of indissoluble grudge and aspiration:
Original milk, replenisher of grief,
Descending destroyer, arrowed source of passion,
Silver and black, executioner, source of life.

Here is yet another deft handling of the device of the catalog to bring us to the conclusion of the poem: we have a list of descriptions unmarshalled by verb, adverb or, in any larger sense, prepositions, as Pinsky, like generations of poets before him, rehearses his death, imagining a return to his home state. The poem is a further example from a body of work that in its variety and range has few equals in the contemporary period.

Jorie Graham

Jorie Graham (b. 1950) is an American poet writing in the meditative tradition which goes back to poets such as Ashbery and Wallace Stevens, so on the face of it much of the preceding discussion would seem not to apply to her. And yet we should not lose sight of the fact that she is a woman and is writing poetry that is unequalled in the US at the moment for philosophical and historical breadth. Marianne Moore has been criticized for the modesty of her ambitions. In Graham we see a woman poet who confidently writes a poetry equal in scope and persuasiveness to that of Eliot and Stevens. Graham writes about female experience without a feeling of transgression or that she must protest against gender relations in US society.

In 'The Geese,' hanging out the washing becomes a metaphor for making the world hang together, and Graham watches the way other creatures other than human are engaged in the same activity: the pattern of the geese across the sky; the spiders weaving webs. But Graham tells us the spiders 'imitate' the geese, that is, their patterning work is something they

copy because they are afraid that the fabric of the world will fall apart. Similarly the poet's domestic task of hanging out the clothes is making things hang together (a domestic routine, a life). In the middle of the poem, Graham balances between two possibilities: first, that no matter what patterns are created, 'things will not remain connected'; second, that a precarious order can be maintained ('Yet the small fears of the spiders/ binds and binds').

But then in the sixth stanza the poem turns toward a question that will be central to most of Graham's further poetry: 'And if these spiders had their way, // chainlink over the visible world, / would we be in or out?' The spiders are weaving a small part of the texture of the visible world, holding it together. Human perception of this world is wider (the spiders do not really 'imitate' the geese--it is just that the speaker sees it that way), and therefore perhaps less a part of the material world. By virtue of the fact that we have bodies, we *are* a part of the material world, but our mind separates us from it: this is the difference between a solid stone and the thinking skull. Graham remarks this separation: 'There is a feeling the body gives the mind / of having missed something.'

The poem ends with the paradox of the way humanity is both *in* and *out* of the material world: 'the real / is crossing you'--in other words, materiality passes through you but cannot be fully registered by your mind. And it is in that gap--'this astonishing delay' between what the body experiences and what the mind registers--that 'the everyday [] takes place.' Rather than leading her to a grand conclusion about civilization, the poem returns to everyday life. When paraphrased like this, a poem can sound more like a philosophical tract than memorable speech. What makes it interesting is Graham's handling of poetic line, the startling transitions from the everyday to metaphysics, and the tone.

The title of Graham's selected poems was *The Dream of the Unified Field* (1996). This field is a kind of supreme explanation of everything which erases all disjunctions between the different stories of the world as told by science, religion and individual

perception. And as the title indicates this is only a dream, something that is intimated, not achieved. That Graham is aiming for such expansive and unified vision makes her untypical of a postmodern age that avoids such monolithic ambitions in favor of an endless play of surfaces. Graham looks for the spirit that holds such surfaces together. Later work includes *The Errancy* (1997), *Swarm* (2000), *Never* (2002), *Overlord* (2005), and *Sea Change* (2008).

The first listed here contains especially rich explorations of the nature of the American democratic experiment. *The Errancy* was Graham's fifth collection and it is by no means representative of her whole career--no one of her collections is that, and she has said that '[f]or me, each book is a critique of the previous' (Graham 1992: 82). But it is (so far) her most intense engagement with the relations between the individual human spirit and the patterns of US imperialism. The title poem displays this preoccupation with the tiniest details of human perception and the grand narratives of democratic ideology:

The cicadas again like kindling that won't take.

The struck match of some utopia we no longer remember

the terms of--

the rules. What was going to be abolished, what

restored? Behind them the foghorn in the harbor,

the hoarse announcements of unhurried arrivals,

the spidery virgin-shrieks of gulls, a sideways sound, a slippery

utterly ash-free

delinquency

and then the subaqueous pasturings inexhaustible

phosphorous handwritings the frothings of their own excitements now

erase, depth wrestling with the current-corridors of depth... (Graham 1997: 4)

Graham is interested in capturing a strange mixture of amnesia and nostalgia for utopianism. After asking the question, she pans out to the surrounding sea-scape and city-scape with great attentiveness. Delinquency (etymologically, to fail in one's duty) is something which not only young people are capable of. That the gulls then are "delinquent" and that the noun is given a line to itself suggest that the community of the poem has failed in its duty. The community, the 'we' of the poem, can perceive no founding text in the midst of nature--there is nothing 'self-evident' here that might be chivvied up into a Declaration of Independence: the 'handwritings' are immediately erased by their own 'excitements.' In later books, this sense of relativism has fuelled her explorations of ecology and historical considerations of US engagement in European history.

Reginald Shepherd and New Lyricism

As discussed elsewhere in this chapter, identity politics left its mark on the literature of the United States, often precipitating the reevaluation of older writers and emphasizing directions in new writing. The work of Reginald Shepherd (1963-2008) demonstrates that literature is not reducible to its social coordinates. Born into a poor family in Brooklyn, gay, and black, he wrote poems which, in their lyricism and disjunctive beauty, flew by the nets of race and gender. This is not to say that his poems were not about his gayness and blackness--they often were--rather, that he could not have been less interested in using poetry to make political points. In 'The Other's Other: Against Identity Poetry, for Possibility,' he makes this point strongly:

I have always intensely disliked what I call identity poetics, the use of poetry as a means to assert or claim social identity. The impulse to explain poetry as a symptom of its author is

pervasive these days, including among authors themselves. But that has always seemed to me a form of self-imprisonment, neglecting or even negating the possibilities poetry offers not just of being someone else, anyone and/or everyone else, but of being no one at all, of existing, however contingently, outside the shackles of identity and definition. (Shepherd 2007: 41)

Like D. A. Powell's (b. 1963) sensuous disjunctive poems about love and the stylish trash of urban life, Shepherd's poems defy the category, 'African American.' The poems of his third collection, *Wrong* (1999), revel in sensual descriptions of bodies and the seasons, of bodies caught *in* the seasons; and this against a fleetingly realistic urban backdrop. In his last collection, *Fata Morgana* (2007), he looks back over his childhood, and also reflects upon life with his partner. But such bare statements convey nothing of the beautiful distractions and sensuality of the poetry, as exemplified here in 'Before':

Young men wait in their carnival bodies
for fireworks on the Fourth of July. They want
burning clocks in disarray, a music box
repeating *Sprich zu mir, Geliebter*, and other

first or last songs. The darkness hums its theme,
shadow of horizon line, then darkness
sings, evening slipping into dusk, the darker
share spilled out over lake altered to miles

of broken mirrors. (Shepherd 1999: 3)

The first line emphasizes the sexual physicality of the men--these bodies are meant for explosive play--but there is also a musical tenderness (viz., the German address); moreover, in the second stanza, Shepherd places the games against the horizon, intensifying the pathos of their activities, and subtly placing them *sub specie aeternitatis*.

Rachel Wetzsteon (1967-2009) was born and lived for most of her life in Manhattan, and her autobiographical accounts of love and loss often use the island as an urban backdrop. Wetzsteon's last collection, *Sakura Park* (2006), often drifts towards monotonous first-person narratives, but at her best she follows W. B. Yeats advice and packs this material in the salt of traditional form. For instance, 'Short Ode to Morningside Heights' describes her neighborhood as counterpoint to her private despair:

Ranters, racers, help me remember
that the moon-faced fountain's the work of many hands,
that people linger at Toast long after we've left.
And as two parks frame the neighborhood--
green framing gray and space calming clamor--
be for me, well-worn streets, a context
I can't help carrying home, a night fugue
streaming over my one-note *how, when, why*.
Be the rain for my barren indoor cry. (Wetzsteon 2006: 2-3)

Private tales of love and loss also animate A. E. Stallings's (b. 1968) best work. Born in Georgia in 1968, having studied classics at Oxford University, now living in Greece, she writes poetry that is marked by a preoccupation with Greek mythology, and also by the ways

in which those archaic themes collide with contemporary life. Some of her finest poems examine the travails and joys of modern love with an eye that is sometimes Ovidian in its indulgence and sometimes Horatian in its restraint. Although not exclusively formalist, she achieves many of her best effects within the confinements of rhyme and meter. Both these poets demonstrate the endurance of both autobiographical anecdote and traditional forms in contemporary poetry.

They can be profitably counterpointed by poets such as Karen Volkman (b. 1967) or Rae Armantrout (b. 1947), who have learned much from the way that John Ashbery (discussed in chapter 21) flirts with sense. Associated with the experimental movement of Language writing, Armantrout questions the idea of poetry as a vehicle for self-expression. Her poems are generally brief, with curt lines and disjunctive images. One must constantly ask what keeps them together as lyric units, and that interrogation is where they provide readerly pleasure. The usual glue keeping poems together, whether it is Tennyson's *In Memoriam* or Robert Lowell's 'Skunk Hour' is the speaking self. But Armantrout, like many poets of her generation, does not take that for granted and engages in a kind of brinkmanship. Asked in interview about her poetic identity, she responded:

I think identity is a kind of balancing act and part collage, part balancing act. I mean, we have all of these voices in our heads, our parents' voices, newscasters' voices, pundits' voices, you know, these voices on the radio, and so how much do we incorporate and how much do we reject? So it's a balancing act but someone has to be doing that balancing and I guess that's the self but it's tricky to, you know, pick out what is self and what is other, I think, or if there's--if that distinction even makes sense. (Armantrout 2009)

This teasing with the self emerges (or depends) on a teasing with sense, as she breaks down the prose elements in poetry, that explain, argue, and provide narrative connection. Some of her poems start with merely two words without syntactic connection (for instance, 'Oleander: coral' or 'Stomach: lonely' [Armantrout 2001: 52, 32]). This concision brings a lapidary quality to the poems that can be used for both humorous and solemn purposes, as the occasion demands. The poems are difficult to quote from as they resemble a set of vectors scattered across the page, and the reader's job, or pleasure, is to view them in their entirety. Viewed in isolation, one vector merely looks like an out-take from everyday life; viewed in aggregate, one catches glimpses of new ways of deploying the self in contemporary life.

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