

ROUTLEDGE CLASSICS



Richard Ruland
Malcolm Bradbury
From Puritanism to Postmodernism

From Puritanism to Postmodernism

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Malcolm Bradbury (1932–2000) was Professor of Literature and American Studies first at the University of Birmingham, UK (1961–5) and then at the University of East Anglia from 1970 until his retirement in 1995. Bradbury became a Commander of the British Empire in 1991 for services to literature and was made a Knight Bachelor in the New Year Honours 2000, again for services to literature. He is the author of many novels, including *The History Man*.

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Richard
Ruland

and

Malcolm
Bradbury

From Puritanism to Postmodernism

A History of American Literature

With a new preface by Richard Ruland and new foreword
by Linda Wagner-Martin



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Dedicated to the memory
of
Professor Malcolm Bradbury

These are the Gardens of the Desert, these
The unshorn fields, boundless and beautiful,
For which the speech of England has no name . . .

—WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT

Why should not we also enjoy an original
relation to the universe?

. . . America is a poem in our eyes. . . .

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

And things are as I think they are
And say they are on the blue guitar.

—WALLACE STEVENS

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PREFACE TO THE ROUTLEDGE CLASSICS EDITION

MY STORY OF THIS STORY

When Malcolm Bradbury told me about his plans for a short history of American literature, I was visiting the University of East Anglia as a Fulbright Fellow. The university had a strong American Studies program that Professor Bradbury had helped build, and he was well-known as both a widely-celebrated novelist and one of England's leading students of American literature. As we discussed the project, Marcus Cunliffe's well-established *The Literature of the United States* (1954) inevitably came to my mind. Because Cunliffe was British, an Oxford-educated historian, I had been wincing for years at the irony of recommending his survey to my American students as the best concise overview of their nation's literature then available. Recruited to lecture on American history at Manchester, Cunliffe had been asked – almost as an afterthought, he recalled – to include American literature as well. The notes he compiled in working up this unfamiliar material eventually became his very popular single-volume history of American literature.

That Cunliffe would be given this sweeping assignment in such an off-hand way, and that I and countless other American instructors would come to rely on his book, is actually not as surprising as it at first appears. The serious study of the nation's literary history is little more than a century old – the second university professor of American literature was appointed in 1918 (there is no agreement on who the first one was or when he acquired that title). During my own graduate school years, very few American universities

encouraged serious study of the national letters. Indeed, the not-quite-joking response to student interest in such study was commonly: “American literature? I didn’t know there was any.”

When thoughtful examination of the nation’s literary traditions did develop, it owed much to the growing nationalism nourished by two world wars and the Cold War efforts to define, defend and propagate American culture as a weapon against Communist ideology. During the first half of the century, several multi-volume anthologies and scholarly narratives appeared, but none was tailored for the undergraduate or general reader seeking an introductory account of the national letters. This is the void that Marcus Cunliffe’s volume filled, with remarkable popular success. This is what came to mind when Malcolm Bradbury described the new book he was planning, and this is what led me to remark, “It sounds like you are going after some of Cunliffe’s market.” He smiled and replied, “All of it.”

As an historian studying the United States for a British audience, Cunliffe recounts the history of the nation as he found it articulated in the work of its literary artists. He interprets literature as an expression of national character and experience, attending closely throughout to the problems faced by American writers as Americans in a vast landscape unfolding slowly towards the nation’s western shore. Cunliffe’s volume was a significant expression of the 1950s, of the burgeoning American Studies movement that owed much to Alexis de Tocqueville and to Vernon Louis Parrington’s *Main Currents in American Thought*. Our survey rests instead on the art-centered assumptions of the formalist textbook *Understanding Poetry* and the metahistorical thinking of Hayden White. Ours was from the first a determinedly literary approach. We strove at every turn to keep the artworks in the foreground, for it is these works, after all, that inspired us to record their history. We viewed this literary record as its writers envisioning their developing nation prior to the social and political actualities recorded in history books, as writing the meaning of America into being, to recall Malcolm’s phrase.

We agreed at the start that all historical narratives are subjective, that it is always, as Thoreau reminds us, the first person who is speaking. We could hope for no single, definitive account; we must content ourselves instead with a history of American Literature, with one version, our story – just as Cunliffe had told his story. Malcolm Bradbury and I strove to construct a narrative based on the understanding that two students of literature – one with a British, the other an American perspective – had formed during a lifetime of reading and reflection. We address a reader in the early stages of

curiosity about the national letters: What literary works come to mind? Why are they of interest as works of art and worth the reader's attention? What does knowledge of individual and national history contribute to understanding and enjoying these written materials? Why, in short, are they of value and therefore worth our efforts to come to know them?

During 1978–9, my year in Norwich, there was much talk and dozens of scrawls on large yellow pads, arrows and circles testing formal structures and assigning responsibility for parts of the book. In 1982, with help from a Guggenheim Fellowship, I returned to England for further discussion, and later in St. Louis there was a long airport meeting while Malcolm awaited his flight to somewhere else. Before the ease of computer communication, there were numberless trips to the post office to dispatch drafts, revisions, re-thinkings. During some ten years of cumbersome transatlantic collaboration, our careful early planning required adjustments to accommodate constant re-writings and efforts to reconcile two different prose styles. Eventually it became impossible to discern just who had written what; the parts came together and a voice emerged, a composite voice that speaks for both of us. Our story of American literature has been well received, frequently reprinted, and translated into Czech and Hungarian, with a version underway in the Georgian language. If Malcolm Bradbury were with us today, he would rejoice, as I do, to see our little book continue to breathe in this Routledge Classics edition.

Telling a story that spans several centuries in a single volume requires difficult choices of omission and inclusion. Our account begins before Columbus set sail and ends, short of conclusion as it must, near the close of the twentieth century. No final judgments were possible then, any more than they are now, decades later. Culture critics tell us we have been in a post-postmodern age for some time now, and the canon wars have a lengthy history of their own. New writers and artistic approaches have emerged as global currents continue to stir the *Zeitgeist* and we debate the meanings of artworks and their relevance to our personal and communal lives, what art is and what it is for – if indeed it must serve a purpose beyond the active process of its simple being. The Epilogue that concludes this volume carries our story a bit further, but what seems even more evident now than it did when Malcolm and I decided on closure is that our survey provides the serious student with a coherent introduction to the wealth of America's literary legacy. The writing that has followed after our final pages, like the writing that will follow these, rests firmly, inescapably, on the creative works

we have touched on in this brief account. An early student of the nation's literature, Van Wyck Brooks, urged American writers to construct what he called a usable past, a vital literary tradition that would nourish current and future literary artists and their readers. To the extent that it is possible in a single volume, this book undertakes to articulate such a usable past, an American literary tradition that has proven useful, has been used, and continues to live in the nation's imaginative writing.

Richard Ruland
Saint Louis, Missouri, 2016

FOREWORD TO THE ROUTLEDGE CLASSICS EDITION

American literature is here to stay. One of the now-classic studies that helped establish the study of United States literature, after decades of its being thought only a branch of British letters, is the Ruland and Bradbury *From Puritanism to Postmodernism*. The pairing of the American scholar Richard Ruland with the English novelist-scholar Malcolm Bradbury led to its success when it was first published in 1991, and that combination of two judicious viewpoints has allowed it to aid readers ever since. Rather than fight divisive wars about the dominance – or lack of dominance – of the English literary tradition within the development of American letters, these writers joined together in a journey of enrichment: yes, of course, writers the world over knew the British traditions. The greatness of any national literature, however, stemmed from the uses to which that British tradition was put. In today's theoretical terminology, *appropriation* was a compliment, whereas *borrowing* or *copying* was jejune. It took this paired perspective to set aright a number of misconceptions about the growth of American letters.

At the heart of any study of American literature rest the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. During those years of exhilarating freedom and forceful rebellion, colonists found little time for study and writing – yet the roots of literacy grew strong in the new country. Given over to the acknowledged power of poetry, as well as the competency of language in the essay and treatise forms, early Americans' efforts explained in themselves why the

newly-settled country was so promising. Ruland and Bradbury quote from J. Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur (his *Letters from an American Farmer*) to emphasize the traits of the “American”:

He is an American, who, leaving behind all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. . . . The American is a new man, who acts on new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas, and form new opinions (37).

Their central theme in *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature* is showing the myriad ways the literature of, first, the colonies and, later, the new republic illustrated these confidently-held beliefs.

Much of the book, of necessity, deals with the earlier centuries. Ruland and Bradbury manage to make the “Puritanism” sections of the study seem new, and they maintain the reader’s interest by including matters of sometimes controversial opinion. For instance, rather than stay focused on the religious tracts and sermons that comprise much of early American letters, they here segue into the poems of Anne Bradstreet, a writer who has often been relegated to footnotes:

Today we can still recognize the vigor of *The Day of Doom* and find it a useful mirror of seventeenth century dogma. Nonetheless Wigglesworth has been superseded as the exemplary Puritan poet by two other writers whose vastly greater complexity displays far more richly the texture of doubt and struggle the Puritan poetic imagination was able to express. One of these was Anne Bradstreet, perhaps the first major woman poet in the English language (19).

What makes their discussion of Bradstreet’s managing to avoid writing political poetry so interesting is that the authors stress the quality, the technique, of her art: literature’s relevance comes not only from its content, but from the manner of its expression. They also use biography in helpful ways: Bradstreet was first the daughter of a governor of Massachusetts, and then the wife of a successive governor; she lived in the hotbed of political activity, yet her deft poetry focused on family and children, religion as it was practiced rather than talked about, and the glories of nature – but the authors here praise her for her unique vision, her formal textures and languages,

rather than denigrating her for being “personal.” Readers will learn the factual basis for studying this poet, but they will also understand her as a part of a living yet difficult culture.

The authors are very good in discussing the role of nature as theme in the earliest American writing. I know of few critics who can assess other critiques comparatively without sounding harsh. This comment is typical:

Byrd’s writing also demonstrates that American nature itself was hard material for the mind to manage. American physical space was vast, its climate varied and often dangerous, its problems of settlement and social organization great. It was neither tamed nor enclosed, neither a garden to work on nor distantly sublime and enlarging to the visual and aesthetic imagination . . . It was not until the eighteenth century moved toward its end that the idea of America as a promising new pastoral came to accommodate its Revolutionary meaning (33–4).

Ruland and Bradbury give readers strikingly new insights, too, as they move to the vexed nineteenth century. Their sympathetic understanding of transcendentalism, for instance, supplements the usual critical tendency to chart its reliance on only a few figures. Instead, they make the movement appear central to the heart of striving Americanism. As they summarize in a style that moves rapidly yet does not create questions,

“The age of the first person singular” was Emerson’s name for the key period in American culture he so gladly announced and so proudly celebrated. These pre-Civil War decades were an age of the prophet and an age of the poet, and often the two seemed indistinguishable (126).

The authors are particularly strong, I think, in their discussions of Walt Whitman as the essential American poet. Too often treated as a sycophantic upstart, hungry for Emerson’s approval, Whitman almost single-handedly made the art of poetry key to the continued prominence of the most difficult of genres. (Because Emily Dickinson was virtually unpublished during her lifetime, Whitman takes the palm for making American readers understand that to be a new country demanded new literary forms. Whether in his poems or his journals – particularly his accounts of his hospital work during the Civil War – Whitman created his own way of voicing language, and readers learned from him what *innovation* truly meant.)

Ruland and Bradbury, unlike some scholars of American letters, also insist on the centrality of the short story and, particularly, the novel. These authors seem to cherish all elements of American fiction, including African American writings as well as works that speak for classes lower than the privileged. (Class was a somewhat new concept in the colonies – one that had been largely obscured in England because of the patriarchal society – so American writers had to chart new ways of expressing language and ideas relevant to the poorer members of their culture.) The authors' treatment of the development of the novel is extensive, and consistently accurate. For instance, they write,

Melville and Hawthorne posited a fundamental conflict between the pastoral world of mythicized history, the history of ideal nature, and the timebound world of the practical and the mechanistic; both perceived the changes in consciousness that would be required by the new cities of iron and alienation (172).

While commentary about individual writers is forceful and accurate, they do not shy away from large summary statements: "for a hundred years and more after the Revolution, the literary arts in the United States were to be served predominately by poets and, above all, by novelists." (73) They admit to the near absence of drama, but they also privilege the fiction writing that some chroniclers of American literature relegate to the "popular."

The authors are very good at making summary statements that lead the reader in new directions. (Some texts belabor points repeatedly; *From Puritanism to Postmodernism* is fast-paced. It treats its readers as though they too know the field, and can do with one or two illustrations rather than a half dozen.) As Ruland and Bradbury bring readers to the twentieth century, for instance, they note, "Imagism was to become a central theory of twentieth-century poetry primarily because it concentrated a general Modernist direction into a reasonably clear set of precepts." (236). What is significant about the authors' approach here is that, without belittling the short life of "Imagism," they give readers the means of assessing what the modernist principles were. Their summation serves a double purpose.

Since this book's publication in 1991, literary criticism has fought the canon wars. Some authors have fallen from favor; a great many others have found places within the traditional canon. Ruland and Bradbury were ahead

of this reconfiguration: the authors they chose to emphasize have remained within the focus of students and critics operating today. Their choices, and the reasons for their choices, remain current. They also have provided clear and sometimes differently-emphasized categorizations: their basic concept of “Puritanism,” for example, is less rigid and less socially based than some definitions (one might add in the work done by Toni Morrison’s recent novel *A Mercy*, her depiction of American life in pre-colonial times). And while discussing the twentieth century, they use the term “multigenre” to point to one of the real strengths of W. E. B. DuBois’s 1903 *The Souls of Black Folk* – a term that is usually applied only to Jean Toomer’s *Cane*, which was written more than twenty years later.

Ruland and Bradbury’s views of literature are generous. As they point out in their Preface, “Writers always seek to construct the history they would most like to have.” (xxii) Because both authors are effective writers as well as critics, the pages of *From Puritanism to Postmodernism* fly past for the reader. Even though the discussions are often necessarily complex, the writing itself remains consummate.

Linda Wagner-Martin

PREFACE

At the start of his book *A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writers* (1975), the American critic Hugh Kenner performs a characteristic and flamboyant act of critical magic. He links two elements in the history of the modern world that are independently celebrated, but not usually seen to be connected. One is the flight of the Wright brothers at Kitty Hawk in 1903, the first real powered flight and yet another demonstration of the way American technological know-how was rapidly changing the twentieth-century universe. The other is a work of fiction started the next year, in which the artist is portrayed as a modern flier, Stephen Dedalus. The book is, of course, James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, about a Modernist artist who soars on imaginary wings into the unknown arts, breaking with home, family, Catholic religion and his Irish nation in the process. We usually consider Joyce one of the great rootless, expatriate artists of an art of modern rootlessness, which we call Modernism. In fact one of the marks of modern writing, George Steiner has said, is that it is a writing unplaced and "unhoused." But Kenner has a different point, and suggests that Modernism did actually find a happy home. Linking American technological modernity and international Modernism, he sees a new kind of kinship being constructed. He says of the Wright brothers: "Their Dedalian deed on the North Carolina shore may be accounted the first American input into the great imaginative enterprise on which artists were to collaborate for half a century." The Wrights set the new century's modern imagination soaring; when it landed again, it landed in America.

As Kenner admits, the Modern movement did not at first shake the American soul. But a collaboration between European Modernists and American Moderns did eventually develop—first in expatriate London and Paris during the years before the First World War, then when American soldiers and fliers came to Europe to fight it, then again in the expatriate Paris of the 1920s. As European avant-garde experiments and America's Modern expectations joined, the point came when it was no longer necessary for Americans to go to or depend on Europe. Gertrude Stein said that Modernism really began in America but went to Paris to happen. Extending this bold act of appropriation, Kenner argues that, as an American renaissance flowered at home, a distinctive American Modernism grew up. Modernism's "doctrine of perception . . . seems peculiarly adapted to the American weather," he says, adding, "which fact explains why, from Pound's early days until now, modern poetry in whatever country has so unmistakably American an impress." The idea that all Modern literature is American, whether it is or not, extends through Kenner's fascinating book. On European soil, he is saying, the Modern movement was born, but it appeared unrooted. In the United States it found what it needed, a "homemade world," where it could grow in what William Carlos Williams called "the American grain." Then it could be re-exported to its origins as an approved twentieth-century product. Later history reinforced this exchange, as Modernist writers, painters and musicians fled to the United States from Nazism in the 1930s. So Bauhaus became Our House, or at least our Seagram Building, Pablo Picasso somehow translated into Paloma Picasso, and when something called Postmodernism came along everyone thought it was American—even though its writers had names like Borges, Nabokov, Calvino and Eco.

This appropriation of the new and innovative in art into an idea of American literature is not new. When the eighteenth-century Bishop Berkeley wished to celebrate the potential of colonial America, he told it that the arts naturally traveled westward: "Westward the course of Empire takes its way." A similar assumption dominated the thought of American thinkers in the years after the American Revolution. In *Pierre* (1852), Herman Melville saw Americans as history's own avant-garde, advancing into the world of untried things. When a hundred years ago Walt Whitman introduced later editions of *Leaves of Grass* with his essay "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads" (1889), he emphasized that since the United States was the great force of material and democratic change in the world, it therefore must create a great modern literature: "For all these new and evolutionary facts,

meanings, purposes," he explained, "new poetic messages, new forms and expressions, are inevitable." Gertrude Stein similarly declared the United States—with its historyless history, its novelty and innovation, its space-time continuum, its plenitude and its emptiness—the natural home of "the new composition." This was not simply an American idea: Europeans held it too. Philosophers from Berkeley to Hegel to Sartre to Baudrillard, poets from Goldsmith to Coleridge to Mayakovsky to Auden, novelists from Chateaubriand to Kafka and Nabokov, painters from Tiepolo to Picasso felt it. As D. H. Lawrence insisted in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, published in 1923 when not just Americans but Europeans were rethinking the American tradition,

Two bodies of modern literature seem to me to come to the real verge: the Russian and the American. . . . The furthest frenzies of French modernism or futurism have not yet reached the pitch of extreme consciousness that Poe, Melville, Hawthorne, Whitman reached. The Europeans were all *trying* to be extreme. The great Americans I mention just were it.

The idea that American literature was destined to become not only an expression of American identity but the great modern literature—and therefore more than simply an American literature—has long had great power.

The matters were never so easy. Just two hundred years ago, when Americans had just completed their Revolution and were proudly feeling their identity as the First New Nation, when the Romantic revolution was developing across the West, and when with the French Revolution the calendar itself seemed to begin again, there was American writing, but there was no American literature. What existed, in those fervent years when Americans began to contemplate a great historical and transcontinental destiny, was a desire for one—a novel literature that would express the spirit of independence, democracy and nationhood. "America must be as independent in literature as she is in politics—as famous for arts as for arms," announced Noah Webster, the great American dictionary-maker and patriot, expressing a powerful popular sentiment. But other voices sounded caution—not the least of them Philip Freneau, a poet-patriot who had fought in the Revolution and celebrated the "Rising Glory of America." He warned that political independence from Europe was not the same thing as artistic independence: "the first was accomplished in about seven years, the latter will not be completely effected, perhaps, in as many centuries."

A hundred years ago, a hundred years after Noah Webster's hopeful appeal to the coming of American literature was another revolutionary time; the ends of centuries, including our own, often are. The modern Industrial Revolution that had begun in the wake of the other revolutions a hundred years earlier was transforming all values, religious, scientific and political. A sense of modernizing change swept the Western world; in fact, this is the moment from which we can best date the modern revolution in arts and ideas, from the emergence of scientific principles of relativity, technological developments that generated new power systems like electricity and new communications systems like the streetcar and the automobile, new intellectual systems like psychology. Ibsen and Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Zola, Freud and Bergson were transforming fundamental Western ideas. Now the great transcontinental and industrialized United States was in an imperial mood, outstripping the production of Germany and Great Britain combined and looking confidently forward to the role of world power and technological superforce in the coming twentieth century, which many were already naming "the American Century." Like Webster before him, Walt Whitman declared that in this new world "new poetic messages, new forms and expressions, are inevitable." But where were they?

Between 1888 and 1890, Edmund Clarence Stedman and E. M. Hutchinson compiled their eleven-volume *Library of American Literature*, from colonial times to the present. It appeared comprehensive, and the contents made it clear what its editors considered American literature to be. It was nothing like the view we have of it today; indeed it was, as Longfellow had called it, a branch of English literature. Its major authors were Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, William Cullen Bryant, Longfellow, Lowell, Whittier, Oliver Wendell Holmes, a largely New England pantheon. Melville—he died in 1891—was all but forgotten. Whitman—he died in 1892—was granted small recognition. Poe was a morbid castoff of German Romanticism, Hawthorne wrote rills from the town pump, Thoreau was a misanthrope. The realist and local-color movements which had dominated American writing since the Civil War were hardly acknowledged. What was seen as American literature was effectively what came to be called "the Genteel Tradition." What, then, lay beyond the Genteel Tradition? In 1890 William Dean Howells, the "Dean" of American letters, having just moved to New York from Boston where he had edited the magisterial *Atlantic Monthly*, published his novel *A Hazard of New Fortunes*—a very '90s title. Henry James published *The Tragic Muse*, and his brother, William, the Harvard philosopher

and pragmatist, produced *The Principles of Psychology*, exploring many of the ideas about the importance of consciousness that would preoccupy modern minds. Thought, consciousness, James explained, did not function in a logical chain and therefore needed to be described in a new language: "A 'river' or a 'stream' are the metaphors by which it [consciousness] is most naturally described," he wrote, and so gave us a notion, a "stream-of-consciousness," which would help unlock our understanding of the modern fiction that was to come. William James wrote exultantly to William Howells: "The year which shall have witnessed the apparition of your *Hazard of New Fortunes*, of Harry's *Tragic Muse*, and of my *Psychology* will indeed be a memorable one in American literature." His words seem prophetic now, for the 1890s saw, in America as in Europe, a fundamental change of mood. But still there was no certainty about the direction of that eagerly awaited literature.

So we must look later yet for the coming of that imperial confidence about American literature that informs Hugh Kenner's book. By the First World War there was still searching doubt about the value of the American past or indeed of the American literary present. "The present is a void and the American writer floats in that void because the past that survives in the common mind is a past without living value," complained the critic Van Wyck Brooks in 1918; "But is this the only possible past? If we need another past so badly, is it inconceivable that we might discover one, that we might even invent one?" This invention of the American literary past was a significant enterprise of the 1920s, when American writing went through a remarkable modern flowering and made its international impact. Not only D. H. Lawrence but many American writers and critics undertook the task of devising a viable American literary tradition. The past that they constructed was a very different one—not a "Genteel Tradition" any longer (that was the enemy), but a literature that indeed went to the "real verge." Once-major writers became minor, and once-minor writers like Melville, Hawthorne and "our cousin Mr. Poe" became major. Writers seeking a new tradition, a fresh ABC of reading, as Pound called it, looked everywhere, at the American, the European, the Chinese and Japanese past and present. As the very American T. S. Eliot explained in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), tradition cannot be inherited; "if you want it you must obtain it by great labour."

Constructing a usable literary past for contemporary writers became one of the great projects of American fiction-making—and America's fiction included American criticism. During the 1930s, for obvious reasons in

a time of political activism, it was chiefly the socioeconomic past of American literature that critics reconstructed. In the 1940s, as war came and American ideals had to be reenergized, books like F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* (1941) and Alfred Kazin's *On Native Grounds* (1942) began to insist increasingly that there was an encompassing American tradition made on American soil which had passed beyond inherited forms to construct a novel American imagination. In the 1950s, in the age of rising American confidence as its role as world power increased, works like Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* (1950), Charles Feidelson's *Symbolism and American Literature* (1953), R. W. B. Lewis's *The American Adam* (1955), Richard Chase's *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957) and Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960) sought for distinctive American themes, myths, languages and psychic motifs with the means of modern criticism and the conviction that there was a major tradition to be recovered and explored. As American writers grew famous across a world that sought to understand American values, a very American literature rose from the interpretation of American beliefs and American dreams, American theologies and American democratic ideologies, American landscapes and American institutions, American ideas of mission and destiny, the achievements of what was now seen as unmistakably a "homemade world."

These, of course, were versions, critical myths. Leslie Fiedler described his *Love and Death in the American Novel* as itself an American novel, and so it was—a fine one. All literary histories are critical fictions. But, because the needs of the American present have so often dictated the interpretations of the American literary past, to make it "usable," American literary history is more fictional than most—one reason, perhaps, why the Modernist spirit with its own sense of being history-less in history found America such a natural home. As the critic Percy Boynton observed in 1927: "Criticism in America is implicitly an attempt by each critic to make of America the kind of country he [now we would add "she"] would like, which in every case is a better country than it is today." At present there is something closely resembling chaos again—creative chaos, we may hope. We live or have lately lived in an age of Postmodern deconstructions, in which more energy has been put into demythologizing interpretive myths than constructing them. Earlier canonizations have led to a rage for decanonization as the desire to challenge the usable past of the moderns has become dominant. Some of this energy comes from writers who are seeking, as they should and must, to construct a new history, often a multiethnic or a more fully gendered one.

Some comes from critics enjoying the lush fruits of an age of critical hyperactivity. The current flurry of theoretical debate suggests a Reformation revisited, not unrelated to the Great Awakening of the 1960s. Today there is no doubt that the map of the Postmodern world is itself changing fast. And so, of course, will its critical fictions.

As Hugh Kenner's book suggests, anxieties of influence, appropriations of tradition, have always abounded in American writing. Writers always seek to construct the history they would most like to have. Trying to do untried things, Herman Melville conferred Shakespearean powers on his recent friend Nathaniel Hawthorne ("Some may start to read of Shakespeare and Hawthorne on the same page"). A dedication to Hawthorne then graced Melville's own *Moby-Dick*—and so Melville appropriated the new Shakespearean heritage back to himself. Melville was soon to be forgotten but was recovered in the 1920s; he suddenly became a heritage again, for Hart Crane and so on to Charles Olson and many, many more. The transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, seeking the new American Poet, found Walt Whitman and hailed him "at the beginning of a great career." Whitman sought to be the grand encompassing poet of the new America that Emerson saw in prospect but found his reputation highest in Europe; he also died in relative neglect. It was not until the Modern movement that his "new messages" began to be fully read, and poets like Ezra Pound undertook their pacts with him ("I have detested you long enough"). Henry James made an antecedent of Hawthorne, though also of the great European realists like Balzac and Flaubert. Then Gertrude Stein, Pound and Eliot made an antecedent of James, just as later poets made antecedents of Pound and Eliot. Sherwood Anderson made an antecedent of Stein and led Hemingway, Fitzgerald and Faulkner to her. In the 1940s these three went through their own period of obscurity, until in the 1950s they too became antecedents, two of them with Nobel Prizes, fit to enter the boxing ring with Norman Mailer.

This constantly renewing search, this constructing and defacing of literary monuments, this borrowing and assimilating and intertextualizing, shows us one way in which literary traditions are constructed—from the inside, by writers themselves. The process resembles what Ezra Pound loved to call the *paideuma*, the cultural distillation the artist needs to create his work. Pound tried to write the *paideuma* into his modern epic poem *The Cantos*, his "portable substitute for the British Museum" (later American poets have usually used the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian). T. S. Eliot described this constructive process in a different way when he said:

The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; in order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered . . . and this in conformity between the old and the new.

These were the Modernist versions of what we have come to call (in Harold Bloom's phrase) "the anxiety of influence," the process by which writers both construct and deconstruct traditions for themselves, though of course in doing that they also change the views and values of contemporary critics.

American literature is indeed preeminently a modern literature, one reason why the many anthologies devoted to it are frequently divided into two volumes on different chronological scales—one dealing with the vast period since settlement in 1620, the second with the last powerful hundred years. This helps explain why, perhaps more than most literatures, American literary history is frequently dominated by the interpretations modern writers make of their predecessors. No wonder we can find so many variants of the history of American writing. A look back at older versions shows how elaborate the construct, and how massive the reversals, can be. In *The Rediscovery of American Literature* (1967) one of the present authors has illustrated how any discussion of American literature draws on long-standing speculation as old as the settlement of America from Europe itself, shaped by large questions about the nature of American experience, the American land and landscape, American national identity and the nature of language and expression in the presumed "New World." The heterogenous elaboration of literary theories collected in his *The Native Muse* (1972) and *A Storied Land* (1976) makes clear that literary discussion is never a continuous, steady flow, but an eddy of currents which shift us from one concern to another and back again in new weather with relit landscape. They also show how obsessive the idea of the "Americanness" of American literature has been; indeed few major literatures have been as preoccupied with the idea of nationality. Yet just as the question "What then is the American, this new man?" was troubling when Crèvecoeur posed it in 1782, so it remains ambiguous and above all arguable to this day.

If we are today in a period of high argument about American origins and directions, we contend as well about the whole philosophy of literary interpretation. What we have best learned to do is multiply our questions. Is American literature writing about Americans, or by them, or even, as in Kenner's book, literature whose very spirit makes it neo-American? Where

are the limits of that literature, the edges of writing, the suitable frames in which we can set it, the aesthetic values by which we judge it? What is a canon, what is a tradition, what is an intertextual sequence, and how subversive might these be of the idea of literary continuity? Is a reading of a literature simply the sum total of the readings that various selected texts (dubiously selected, many would say) have generated? What do we mean by American, by literature, by history? Literary history must always present a more tangled web than social, political or economic history, because in the end it is always bound up with complex subjective artistic judgments and with strong human and creative emotions. A political historian may know who was President of the United States in 1810 with far more certainty than a literary historian can “know” whether Ahab is mad or Whitman a great poet. Historians can analyze Lincoln’s presidency to establish his impact on the nation with far more confidence than we can present the writings of Melville or Twain as culturally central, demonstrative of their time or of lasting value to the imagination. The fact remains that we must go with some vision of literature and history or we will simply not go at all.

We are also in a time when contemporary American writers are especially conscious of the need to reconstruct traditions for themselves: when the different ethnic groups must recover their own origins, when women writers deconstruct male fictions in the quest for a female literary past, when Modernism is over and Postmodernism is slipping behind us as we move toward a turn of the millennium and an artistic phase for which we have as yet no name. We live too in an age of rapid communications and vast, indeed parodic, cultural assimilation, where the boundaries of nations are no longer the boundaries of taste, perception or ideas. The world map of influence is changing all the time. New technologies transform the conditions of writing, the nature and transmission of the sign; new historical aspirations shape our sense of an impending era, and scientific possibilities energize us to new types of thought and new models for artistic form. As American culture has grown ever more fluid and various, its historical singularity has diminished in a world which has ever-increasing access to many things once considered part of a purely American dream. The twenty-first century offers its own prospects and its own fears, and writers are already beginning to find language for them. The modernity of Kitty Hawk and Stephen Dedalus is now a long way in the past, and our imaginative fictions will have to define themselves afresh while at the same time making or holding to a guiding tradition.

Our own book is no less a fiction than any other. We have thought of it as a story in two senses—our own tale of a nation's literature, and the fable a country told itself as it tried to understand its own becoming in writing. The nation called itself America, and the rest of the world has called it America too, even though its land mass is only part of the northern section of the world's Western Hemisphere. For the authors, this book is one way to impose an order on 350 years of writing in what is now the United States, an order that enables a vast range of written material to stand on a single narrative continuum. It is also one version of the story that material tells, the America summoned into being by the numberless imaginations that have striven to find words and forms for new experiences or familiar experiences encountered during new times in a new landscape. Ours is an introductory version, but we have aimed to inform it with the view that art is to be defined broadly, with a complex existence in its social, ideological and historical situation. Equally important has been the value of maintaining an international perspective; American literature, despite all its endeavor for a native distinctiveness, has remained part of a broad Western tradition, from which it has drawn at least some of its usable past, to whose present it has always contributed. Now, by virtue not only of its quality but its modern resonance, and indeed America's own power of influence and distribution as well as its possession of a world language, American literature more than ever exists for more people than simply the Americans. It is part of, and does much to shape, the writing of literature through much of the contemporary world. That is part of its power and an essential part of its interest.

One of the advantages of a collaborated book is a width of perspective, a breadth of methods and interpretations, a mix of critical attitudes and a dialogic way of writing. The authors come from the two sides of the Atlantic, and offer, as it were, both an internal and an international view. Malcolm Bradbury is a novelist and professor of American Studies at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England, who has written widely on American literature; he initiated the project and in the first instance contributed much of the discussion of the Modern period and of the novel. Richard Ruland, professor of English and American literature at Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri, lectures and writes about American poetry, literary history and literary criticism; he initially contributed most of the discussion of the colonial period, nineteenth-century poetry, modern poetry and drama, and criticism. Dialogue, interchange and travel over the years created the final text, as did changing theories and events over the period of the writing.

Both of us have borne it in mind that the end of the twentieth century has been marked by a vast change in the ideological map, as many of the theories and attitudes fixed by the era of the cold war have begun to collapse and many modern critical assumptions have been, indeed still are, in process of transformation and dissolution. As we have said, there can be little doubt that the last decade of the twentieth century will be as transformative and revolutionary as the close of earlier centuries, in which patterns of thought and art changed radically. Writers' views of the world will change, as will reigning critical fictions. But, if our Post-Postmodern situation has served to remind us that there are never final answers, we will nonetheless continue to wonder what American literature is and try to construct some useful story of it.

The vision is ours. Of course it is also the sum of the experience won from the writers we have read and admired, the works that have stimulated and guided our sense of creative discovery, the accumulated readers who have used and so remade and rewritten those books, the teachers who taught us, the colleagues we have talked with, the students we have taught and learned from. We have both drawn as well, from time to time, on some of our previous discussions of American literature in various books and periodicals. Besides those who have worked with us in the general and ever-extending debate about the history and nature of American writing, we should acknowledge some very particular debts: to the Fulbright and Guggenheim fellowship programs that brought the American author to Britain for extended stays and to those who made him welcome and thus made this collaboration possible; to Janice Price (who first proposed this project), to Helen McNeil (who played a valuable part in the planning), Norman Holmes Pearson, Marcus Cunliffe, Alan Trachtenberg, Chris Bigsby, Daniel B. Shea, Ihab Hassan, C. Carroll Hollis, Howard Temperley, Eric Homberger, Dominic Belasario, Kay Norton, Richard M. Cook and Birgit Noll Ruland.

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Part I

**THE LITERATURE OF BRITISH
AMERICA**

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1

THE PURITAN LEGACY

I

A fundamental difference exists between American literature and nearly all the other major literary traditions of the world: it is essentially a modern, recent and international literature. We cannot trace its roots directly back into the mists of American antiquity. We need not hunt its origins in the remote springs of its language and culture, or follow it through from oral to written, then from manuscript to book. The American continent possessed major pre-Columbian civilizations, with a deep heritage of culture, mythology, ritual, chant and poetry. Many American writers, especially recently, have looked to these sources as something essential to American culture, and the extraordinary variety and vision to be found there contribute much to the complexity and increasing multiethnicity of contemporary American experience. But this is not the originating tradition of what we now call American literature. That came from the meeting between the land with its elusive and usually despised “Indians” and the discoverers and settlers who left the developed, literate cultures of Renaissance Europe, first to explore and conquer, then to populate, what they generally considered a virgin continent—a “New World” already promised them in their own mythology, now discovered by their own talent and curiosity.

The New World was not new, nor virgin, nor unsettled. But, arriving in historical daylight, sometimes with aims of conquest, sometimes with a

sentimental vision of the “noble savages” or other wonders they might find, these settlers brought with them many of the things that formed the literature we now read. They brought their ideas of history and the world’s purpose; they brought their languages and, above all, the book. The book was both a sacred text, the Bible (to be reinvigorated in the King James Authorized Version of 1611), and a general instrument of expression, record, argument and cultural dissemination. In time, the book became American literature, and other things they shipped with it—from European values and expectations to post-Gutenberg printing technology—shaped the lineage of American writing. So did the early records kept of the encounter and what they made of it. Of course a past was being destroyed as well as a new present gained when these travelers/settlers imposed on the North American continent and its cultures their forms of interpretation and narrative, their Christian history and iconography, their science and technology, their entrepreneurship, settlement practices and modes of commerce. We may deplore this hegemony and seek to reverse it by recovering all we can of the pre-Columbian heritage to find the broader meaning of America. The fact remains that the main direction of the recorded American literary imagination thereafter was formed from the intersection between the European Renaissance mind and the new and wondrous land in the West the settlers found—between the myths they brought and those they learned or constructed after they came.

This America first came into existence out of writing—European writing—and then went on to demand a new writing which fitted the continent’s novelty and strangeness: the problems of its settlement, the harshness and grandeur of its landscape, the mysterious potential of its seemingly boundless open space. But “America” existed in Europe long before it was discovered, in the speculative writings of the classical, the medieval and then the Renaissance mind. American literature began, and the American dream existed, before the actual continent was known. “He invented America; a very great man,” Mademoiselle Nioche says about Columbus in Henry James’s *The American* (1877). And so, in a sense, he did—except that Columbus was himself following a prototype devised long before, the idea of a western land which was *terra incognita*, outside and beyond history, pregnant with new meanings for mankind. This place that was not Europe but rather its opposite existed first as a glimmering, an image and an interpretative prospect born from the faith and fantasy of European minds. Out of the stock of classical and religious tradition, out of

vague historical memories and fantastic tales, an identity had already been given to the great land mass on the world's edge which waited to be summoned into history and made part of the divine plan. So, millenarian and Utopian expectations were already attached to this new land. Here might be found Atlantis or Avalon, the Garden of Hesperides, the Seven Cities of Antillia, Canaan or Paradise Renewed, great cities made of gold, fountains of eternal youth. Its wonders would be extraordinary, its people strange and novel. The idea of America as an exceptional place somehow different from all others endures to this day, but it is not a myth of modern American nationalism or recent political rhetoric. It is an invention of Europe, as old as Western history itself.

The America—to give it one of several possible names—that was opened up by exploration and discovery from the fifteenth century on was therefore a testing place for the imaginings Europeans long had of it. Columbus expected to find the East in the West and carried a complex vision to interpret what he found. It, in turn, confirmed some of his expectations and disproved others, in a process to be endlessly repeated as European exploration continued. There were wonders, cities of gold, pristine nature, strange civilizations, unusual savages, the stuff of Eden. There was also danger, death, disease, cruelty and starvation. Myth mixed with actuality, promise with disappointment, and that process has continued too. In effect, America became the space exploration program of an expansive, intensely curious, entrepreneurial and often genocidal era of European adventuring. It stimulated and shaped the direction and expectation of the Western mind, and also filled its treasure chests. It provoked Utopian social hopes, millenarian visions of history, new scientific inquiries, new dreams of mercantilism, profit and greed, new funds for the artistic imagination. "I saw the things which have been brought to the King from the new golden land," wrote the painter Albrecht Dürer in 1520, after inspecting the tributes from Cortés and Montezuma that Charles V displayed in Brussels before his enthronement as Holy Roman Emperor; "All the days of my life I have seen nothing that gladdened my heart so much as these things." Such wonders, such promises from the new golden land, entrenched it firmly in the European imagination, where it was to remain; very few travelers from Europe who afterward crossed the Atlantic were without some sense of expectation or wonder as they encountered the strange New World.

Because of this imaginary history, which preceded the real one and all but obliterated the history of those who had lived American lives before the

Europeans came, we will never really find a single demarcation point to show us where American writing exactly starts, and certainly not when it became distinctive or broke finally loose from European writing. The invaders came from many different European societies to lands that had indigenous and often highly complex native cultures and a continent spread between the two poles with every conceivable variety of climate, landscape, wildlife, vegetation, natural resource and local evolution. These were complex frontiers, but on them the power of force and of language generally proved to lie with the settlers. Records of these early encounters thus exist, in prodigious variety, in most European languages: narratives of travel and exploration, of religious mission and entrepreneurial activity, letters home, reports to emperors and bishops, telling of wonders seen, dangers risked, coasts charted, hopes justified or dashed, souls saved or lost, tributes taken or evaded, treasures found or missed. From the European point of view, these are the first American books. Often these are practical reports or exhortations to colonization, but at the same time the imaginary myths began to extend; there was, for example, Sir Thomas More's famed *Utopia* (1516), which drew on Amerigo Vespucci's recorded voyages to picture an ideal future world. In a Britain anxious about maintaining and developing its sea power and its outposts abroad, the stories of the English navigators, told by the Elizabethan diplomat and promoter of colonization Richard Hakluyt in his *Voyages and Discoveries* (1589–1600), created intense excitement. They were expanded by Samuel Purchas in *Hakluytus Posthumus, or Purchas His Pilgrims* (1625); and such books, all over Europe, fed contemporary mythologizing and shaped literature. They passed their influence on to Tasso and Montaigne, Spenser and Shakespeare, John Donne, Michael Drayton and Andrew Marvell, all of whom wrote of the wonders of the "brave new world," or the "Newfounde land." American images have constantly been refracted in European art and writing, and so have the images traded in reverse, of Europe in America. That is another reason why even to this day it is hard to identify a separate space for American literature which makes it distinct from the arts of Europe.

Even when there was an actual America, with firm settlement, the process continued. Naturally, the imaginary story now began to change, taking on specificity, definition, geographical actuality, a stronger sense of real experience. Early explorers' accounts of navigation, exploration, privation and wonder began yielding to annals, geographical records, social, scientific and naturalist observations. When the first permanent English settlement was

founded under difficult and dangerous circumstances at Jamestown in Virginia in 1607, it had its recorder, Captain John Smith. Both a practical sea captain and a romantic adventurer, a promoter of colonization forced to become savior of the colony, Smith told the tale in his brief *A True Relation of . . . Virginia* (London, 1608), which dispels some of the golden myths but develops others, not least some to do with himself. Smith emphasizes chivalry, adventure, missionary intention and the potentials of the rich American plenty; he also emphasizes practicality, privation and dangerous conflict with the Indians. Still, the story of his rescue from danger by the virtuous Indian princess Pocahontas—he made it yet more exotic in his *Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles* (London, 1624)—gave Virginia and North America its first great romantic tale in English, creating a version of the Noble and Remediable Savage that prospered freely in the European mind. Smith's mapping, both actual and written, of American possibilities continued. Sent by the Virginia Company to explore the coast farther north, he gave it the name "New England," attached British names to many of its unsettled areas and recorded it all in his influential *A Description of New England* (London, 1616)—a reasonably accurate annals about the practical problems of travel, settlement and husbandry, detailing coasts, terrain, climate, crops and prospects for cultivation. But Smith's book was also full of American promise, defining a heroic and even divine mission for those who would undertake plantation's great task: "What so truely suits with honour and honesty as the discovering things unknown: erecting towns, peopling countries, informing the ignorant, reforming things unjust, teaching virtue; and gain to our native mother country a kingdom to attend her."

As author of the first English book written in America, Smith influenced much to come. He shows us both the need to narrate the new and the problems involved in such narration. Introducing the word into new space, he tries to give plot and purpose to travel and the landscape. Like all early records, his is shaped by Renaissance theories of history, Christian faith in mission, patriotic ideas of settlement, moral notions of the value of plantation, cultivation and honest toil. The excitement comes in his sense of crossing the strange frontier between the Old World and the New. Smith himself could not be sure whether his story marked a genuine new beginning, but his successors were more certain, for the English colonies he speculated about soon multiplied: Plymouth Plantation in 1620 and Massachusetts Bay in 1630, following Smith's own maps of settlement; Maryland in 1634, Rhode Island in 1636, New York in 1664, Pennsylvania in 1681. Among

these settlers were some who truly believed this was the new beginning, a fresh start for history and religion, a millenarian enterprise. They were the Puritans, who, determined to maintain the purity of their separatist Protestant faith, did aim to begin anew and find in that process of erecting towns, peopling countries, teaching virtue and reforming things unjust a truly fresh start. The “Pilgrim Fathers” who—though hunting for Virginia—made landfall at Cape Cod in 1620 to settle Plymouth Plantation were following Smith, but with an urgent sense of independence. Like Smith, they chronicled all they did; indeed the larger colony soon to develop at Massachusetts Bay brought the technology of printing and soon produced an American book on American soil, the *Bay Psalm Book* of 1640. And, though they wrote first for themselves and their colonial successors, they also, like Smith, had in mind readers in Europe; they were still writing for English eyes, seeking to convert English minds.

What they wrote, prolifically, was another kind of beginning to the American story, another kind of narration that gave shape and significance to the process of plantation, settlement, social development. But now the voyager was not the explorer or the planter but the Pilgrim, entering new space and new history. The plot was providential; God guides these encounters between the traveler and the not yet written New World. The myth remains shaped by European sources, but now one source above all, the Bible, and especially its opening chapters, Genesis and Exodus, the tale of the Chosen People and the Promised Land. For the Puritans (different traditions shaped the narratives of the other non-Puritan colonies) the essential tale was a religious one of travail and wandering, with the Lord’s guidance, in quest of a high purpose and a millennial history. When Puritans wrote of the New World and the allegory of the Puritan diaspora, they were, by following out the biblical types, telling nothing less than the tale of God’s will revealing itself in history.

The Puritan imagination, it was acknowledged, was central to the nature of American writing. One reason for this was that it brought to the New World not only a Judaic sense of wonder and millenarian promise—the “American dream” that is still recalled in so much modern literature, not least in the famous ending of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* in 1925—but a vision of the task and nature of writing itself. Puritan narratives defined a shape for the writing of America, but they also questioned how and whether language could reveal the extraordinary experience. As a result, from the very beginnings America became a testing place of language and

narrative, a place of search for providential meanings and hidden revelations, part of a lasting endeavor to discover the intended nature and purpose of the New World. The Puritan millennium never did reveal itself directly, and so the task continued—long after early plantations evolved into permanent settlements, Puritanism turned into hard-working enterprise, relations with Europe and England became increasingly distant and estranged and the thirteen American colonies finally declared their independence and became the First New Nation. That New Nation then turned westward, to contemplate afresh the wide continent that continued to provide a sense of wonder and the promise of providential possibility. As it did so, the power and capabilities of language and narrative remained a central matter. Slowly, these historical turns created the modern, discovering writing that we now call American literature.

II

“I must begin at the very root and rise,” wrote William Bradford to begin *Of Plimouth Plantation* in 1630. A personal journal, much used by his contemporaries, it was completed by 1650 but not printed until 1856. Bradford was a leader of the Mayflower Separatists and governor of Plymouth for thirty years after its settlement; his account reveals his determination to set on durable record the entire pilgrim story—of departure, voyage, arrival, settlement, development and lasting dedication to God’s purpose in history. Of these events and intentions, it offers the most vivid and vital description we have, in part because both its factuality and faith are driven by a fundamental conviction about the nature of style and language. Bradford is, he says, determined to render his account “in the plaine style, with singular regard unto the simple truth in all things.” What the simple truth was was as plain to Bradford as to any other Puritan, whether one straining within the confines of the Established Church in Britain or forced abroad as a hounded Separatist for insisting on radical purification of religious belief and practice. That truth had special application, however, to those who had fled from the persecutions of British magistrates to the security of Dutch tolerance, only to realize they must flee once more if they were to preserve their religious and national identity. For them the voyage to New England was an act of faith, derived from the reading of providential signs in contingent events, and the “simple truth” was therefore nothing less than an account of the significant actions of God’s Chosen People, sent on a divine errand into the

wilderness. Their story sets them in a new land where history can be redeemed. The goal is the Christian millennium, and all events are signs.

Bradford's is a detailed, evocative annals, but behind it lay as type and meaning one of the greatest of biblical narratives, the story of the Promised Land found through the reading and following of providential intent. This was the essential Puritan vision of Bradford's book, and it shaped as well the account by John Winthrop, governor of the larger Massachusetts Bay Colony to the north founded ten years after Plymouth. Winthrop, too, kept his journal record, published eventually as *The History of New England from 1630 to 1649* in 1825–26. It was Winthrop who had declared in his famous ship-board sermon on the *Arbella* that "the eyes of all people are upon us" and that the Puritans were called to erect "a citty upon an Hill"—a city that would stand as lesson and beacon to the entire world. Both Bradford and Winthrop see the migrants as none other than new Israelites; both place their small bands firmly on the stage of cosmic history. Winthrop carefully reads every natural sign for meaning and like Bradford projects a drama rooted in time's beginnings, where God charges His people to confound the ever-vigilant machinations of Satan by building villages and lives that would embody and enact the divine will. For both, the arrival in the New World marks a specific point on a historical continuum which had begun with Creation and will cease only with the apocalyptic fullness of God's final judgment. In both books the facts are many and fully detailed, but beyond the facts are clear allegorical and transcendental meanings, evidence of God's participation in the successive stages of human history.

Nonetheless, as the millenarian process interweaves with daily events—the problems of harvest, troubles with the Indians, the hardships of founding a community—Bradford's diary-record must constantly amend and adjust. It eventually takes the shape of a "jeremiad," a primary type of Puritan writing. The writing that is more than a tale of woe or failure; it is an interpretative account of hardships and troubles and an anguished call for return to the lost purity of earlier times. Always the movement of history, the detail of daily event, demands scrupulous attention because these things partake of an allegorical mystery. The material of journals like Winthrop's and Bradford's is the stuff of millenarian epic, but it is epic without known outcome. Signs and meanings are always uncertain and satanic deception is always a possibility.

This is why the scrupulous simplicity and implied veracity of "the plaine style" that Bradford explicitly adopts seem to Puritan writers necessary to

represent the essence of their experience. But it is also why Bradford's and Winthrop's accounts show a falling arc, from admirable yet impossible millennial hopes to the growing sadness of undeniable failure. In the understated eloquence of "the plaine style," Bradford, as the years pass, must record that his people, though desiring a community of saints, remain men who have found no clear pathway to sanctity. Indeed in the end Bradford comes to see a dream gone wrong, a second generation not like the first, beginning to forget or reject the piety of the first settlers and their dreams of a perfect community. Ironically, the snare of Satan that Bradford perceives drawing men from their appointed path is exactly their success—in meeting the challenges of a dangerous nature and a hostile environment, in dealing with the Indians, in developing an economy. Daily and symbolic history divide; the Separatist aim, to be in the world but not of it, slowly erodes, as the settlers develop adequate shelter, sufficient stores and finally, with the settlement of Massachusetts Bay, a profitable and rapidly expanding market for their surplus.

If Bradford's part-journal, part-history has a climax, this is it, as his tone turns toward irony and scorn:

Corn and cattle rose to a great price, by which many were much enriched and commodities grew plentiful. And yet in other regards this benefit turned to their hurt, and this accession of strength to their weakness. For now as their stocks increased and the increase vendible, there was no longer any holding them together, but now they must of necessity go to their great lots. They could not otherwise keep their cattle, and having oxen grown they must have land for ploughing and tillage. And no man now thought he could live except he had cattle and a great deal of ground to keep them, all striving to increase their stocks.

The settlers scatter, "the town in which they lived compactly till now was left very thin and in a short time almost desolate," and the prospect of building a Heavenly City in the wilderness has to be amended. Bradford expresses the same poignancy in a comment he adds to an early letter he had written to describe the way the settlers are "knit together as a body in a most strict and sacred bond and covenant of the Lord." His later note observes the decaying of this faithful bond, for the

subtle serpent hath slyly wound himself under fair pretences of necessity and the like, to untwist these sacred bonds and ties. . . . It is now part of

my misery in old age, to find and feel the decay and want therefore (in a great measure) and with grief and sorrow of heart to lament and bewail the same.

Some two hundred years later, when that new acquisitiveness had come to seem the essential spirit of America, Ralph Waldo Emerson would observe that “The power of Love, as the basis of a State, has never been tried” and wonder whether a “nation of friends” might devise better ways to govern social and economic relations. The question is a natural one when the dream is of perfect community in a world where time dissolves the best that men can do. For here was a nation of friends indeed, united in a love for each other that they saw as a necessary emanation from the divine love that sheltered them all. But after a lengthy trial of communal ownership and labor, they reluctantly concluded that such were not the ways of the Lord.

The experience that was had in this common course and condition, tried sundry years and that amongst godly and sober men, may well evince the vanity of that conceit of Plato’s and other ancients applauded by some of later times; that the taking away of property and bringing in community into a commonwealth would make them happy and flourishing; as if they were wiser than God. For this community (so far as it was) was found to breed much confusion and discontent and retard much employment that would have been to their benefit and comfort. . . . Let none object that this is men’s corruption, and nothing to the course itself. I answer, seeing all men have this corruption in them, God in His wisdom saw another course fitter for them.

William Bradford’s *Of Plimouth Plantation* testifies repeatedly to the shortcomings of the sons when measured by the dreams of their fathers. As it sounds its call for a return to the primal vision and turns toward jeremiad, its lament for the gap between divine intentions and human fulfillment becomes a fresh assertion of divine selection. Despite their failings, the Puritans persist in writing for themselves a central role in the sacred drama God had designed for man to enact on the American stage, the stage of true history. In that recurrent conflict between the ideal and the real, the Utopian and the actual, the intentional and the accidental, the mythic and the diurnal, can be read—as George Santayana was much later to observe—an essential legacy of the Puritan imagination to the American mind.

From Edward Johnson's *A History of New England* (London, 1653), better known as *The Wonder-Working Providence of Sion's Saviour in New England*, to Cotton Mather's vast *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702), the formal histories of American settlement, like the personal diaries of the time, are presented as works of religious interpretation, tales of election, wonder-working intervention and divine meaning. Johnson's elaborate history gives positive shape and design to the daily events of New England by seeing everywhere God's careful attention. The Puritans were, after all, attempting to found a new order of society based on a new covenant of men and a new relation of religion and law. Everything was thereby made ripe for interpretation. For those charged with the quest, it seemed that the whole world watched as God and Satan contested the meaning of human time on the American shore. The writer's urgent task was to displace the traditional center of historical significance in Europe and direct it onto the small band of spiritual pioneers who, for the world's sake, had accepted God's injunction to establish His Kingdom in the wilderness.

As time went on, the process of typological interpretation grew ever more complex as the extending facts of American history became a long record of trials and proofs. Mather's *Magnalia Christi* marks the culmination of this process. Cotton was third in line of the Mather dynasty, which has come to seem the embodiment of American Puritanism, much as John, John Quincy and Henry Adams were later to manifest the New England legacy of Brahmin virtue and civic responsibility. He felt himself destined for leadership of both church and state; a man of great learning, with a major library that displayed the density of the culture New England had developed and its access to European thought and science, Mather wrote close to five hundred books, essays, sermons, verses and theological treatises. At the close of the seventeenth century, the *Magnalia Christi* looks back on the now distant story of New England settlement and celebrates its endurance and cultural richness, displayed in such things as the early founding of Harvard College. In its portraits of Governors Bradford and Winthrop and its biographies of sixty famous divines, it moves into hagiography, becoming a Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* for the Church of New England. But above all, it seeks to assert the presence of God's spirit in the colonies. "I write the *Wonders* of the Christian religion," his account begins, "flying from the Depravations of Europe, to the *American Strand*." Eighty years after settlement the story is now less jeremiad than epic; indeed, it draws not only on the Bible but the Vergilian tale of trials overcome in Rome's founding, the making of the great city. Once

again the aim is to underscore the essential Puritan version of history which placed the experience of a few transplanted Englishmen at the center of God's plan for the redemption of His creation.

III

"The plaine style," the millenarian expectation, the ceaseless search for the relationship between God's and man's history, between providential intentions and the individual conscience: these were the essential elements the Separatists brought with them when they left Britain to found their Bible commonwealth. Running through their concerned recording was a metaphysic of writing which endlessly sought meaning by separating the word from ornate and ceremonial usage to attach it again to good conscience and to revelation. The plain style, said Thomas Hooker, came from "out of the wilderness, where curiosity is not studied"—from the life of ministers, land-tillers and artisans. Only apparently was it naive or unshaped; rather it was a subtle rhetorical medium devised to win acceptance for what Bradford called "the simple truth." It was often studded with elements of high art—elaborate imagery, prose rhythm, complex metaphor and scriptural analogy—but with the end held firmly in view. In Puritan experience, writer and audience alike distrusted "tainted sermons," talk or writing striving for decoration or ceremonial. Unlike the devotional elegance of Catholic or Anglican writing, this was language resacralized by its own congregation, shaped by specific theological, social and political assumptions: "Writings that come abroad," Hooker cautioned, "are not to dazle but direct the apprehension of the meanest."

This was the lesson carried to America by Hooker's fellow minister John Cotton, the eminent English preacher who in converting to Puritanism sacrificed his famous eloquence to the spare utility of the plain style. When without preliminary indication he addressed his Anglican congregation in the plain words of his new faith, some were said to pull their caps over their ears, so great was the difference in utterance. Migrating in 1633 to the Bay Colony, he was soon one of its most important spiritual leaders, "indeed a most universal scholar, and a living system of the liberal arts, and a walking library," wrote his grandson Cotton Mather. He had much to do with the beginnings of the American book, being the supposed author of the famous preface to the *Bay Psalme Book* of 1640. In his journal of March 1, 1639, Governor Winthrop noted that there was a new press at Cambridge, and

"The first thing printed was the freeman's oath; the next was an almanack made for New England . . .; the next was the Psalms newly turned into metre." All were evident American necessities, but the remaking of the Psalms for ready comprehension and easy singing required some justification. In his preface Cotton speaks of the "common style" of most Old Testament books and notes that "If therefore the verses are not always so smooth and elegant as some may desire or expect; let them consider that God's Altar needs not our polishings"—perhaps the most famous dictum on language and art to emerge from colonial America. Yet the famous phrase itself displays the fact that the plain style did not eschew metaphor. Metaphor and typology are the shaping elements of Puritan writing.

Just as the new colony acquired its own printing press, it sought to establish its own literary style, and there was no shortage of opportunity for expression. The hundreds of journals, sermons, devotional works, histories, accounts of church and social polity and volumes of religious controversy indicate a remarkable vitality. The sermon was the essential native form, as well as a central event of Puritan life in a congregation where the minister was a key figure in the sustaining of the social and religious covenant. It was a form of providential communication and communion and a testing place of the word itself in its capacity to expound and interpret God's meanings. Leading preachers like John Cotton, Thomas Hooker and Increase Mather testify to the way in which the community saw itself locked in a single great struggle for salvation; the sermon was affective discourse, purposeful and inspirational speaking and writing designed to generate emotion and faith. It was to become the main instrument of that Great Awakening that, one hundred years after settlement, brought a renewed burst of religious fervor when the old spirit seemed in decline. Its central voice was Jonathan Edwards; his "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (1741) remains the most famous of Puritan sermons. In some ways this is a pity; it does not suggest the range of Puritan experience, and it does not fully represent Edwards himself, giving far too narrow a view of this extraordinary intellect, as we shall see. But it does demonstrate how the millenarian spirit was sustained through the ministry and how Puritan belief persisted in America.

Central to the Puritan's life was the question of individual election and damnation, the pursuit by each man of God's works, the relation of private destiny to predestined purpose. Besides the history and the sermon, there was the journal, the recording of the individual life. For each pious settler, personal life was a theater for an inner drama comparable to the history of

the community as a whole. Each day's experiences could be scrutinized for indications of God's will and evidence of predestination, and so the story of individual lives grew in the pages of diaries and journals in much the way historians shaped their accounts of historical crises and public events. What the aspirant to holiness sought as he read his life was a pattern of salvation—some indication, however minute, that he belonged to the predestined regenerate. This commitment to self-scrutiny and conscience gives us, in the many journals, a remarkable access to the Puritans' inward life, their balance of self and society. In journals like Bradford's and Winthrop's, the public account, the history, of America begins; but their record is not only of public but private and inward events, not only congregational concerns but domestic experience. History and theology merge with autobiography in the Calvinist way, and autobiography—especially spiritual autobiography—became an accepted Puritan form, often intended for public circulation, from the personal accountings of the Reverend Thomas Shepard to the *Spiritual Travels* of Nathan Cole. From such works we begin to sense the destiny of the Puritan self, and as time went on and colonial life took on greater secular complexity we begin to know its domestic world too. As we shall see, it is in some of the later diaries that we find this early American identity at its most various and complex: in the seven volumes by Cotton Mather; the detailed and much more secular record of Samuel Sewall, the most engaging account we have of Puritan domestic, social and commercial life; and the *Personal Narrative* of the great divine Jonathan Edwards. Such works created a legacy of self-scrutiny that was to shape later secular statements of individualism and conscience, like that famous gospel of the American Self, the *Autobiography* of the eighteenth century's best-known American, Benjamin Franklin.

IV

As all this suggests, the main part of the abundant literary expression we have from the Puritan period is not what we would now call imaginative literature. History, annal, travel record, scientific observation, the diary, the sermon, the meditation or the elegy—these were the central expressions of the American Puritan mind. Theater was condemned, and prose fiction, in the age when the novel was finding itself abroad, was deeply distrusted. Poetry, though important, had a rigorously defined place. But the fact remains that there was a complex Puritan imagination that, drawing on the

encompassing sense of allegory and typology, the Bible, and high notions of the transcendental and providential, opened up America and its new settlements to discovery through the word. No doubt the commitment of the Puritans to spiritual meditation and the “plaine style” cut their colonies off from the imaginative excitements of what in seventeenth-century Britain was a rich age of writing. The erotic and linguistic play of metaphysical poetry, the dark complexities of Jacobean tragedy, even the vast epicality of Puritan writers like John Bunyan and John Milton, whose *Paradise Lost* appeared in 1667, were not replicated in Puritan New England. Yet this intense British Protestant spirit had its own metaphysical and allegorical resources that marked early Puritan writing and later American literature. The Puritan view of the word as a potential revelation saw allegory and metaphor essentially as connective tissue linking humankind to divine truth and limited the larger play of the imagination but never totally denied it. Puritans considered many of the literary questions we still ask today; they answered them differently. Just as for the Renaissance Platonist the world’s matter came to life as a reflection of pure idea, so for the Puritan, word and world alike were a shadowing forth of divine things, coherent systems of transcendent meaning.

In this, Puritan thought anticipated many aspects of Romanticism, especially that brand of it we call transcendentalism and find notably American; much of this was born out of the Puritan heritage. But where Romanticism celebrated the imagination as a path to spiritual understandings, the Puritan mind required piety. Believing that they would find either salvation or damnation at life’s end, the Puritans demanded of all the arts they cultivated—pulpit oratory, psalmody, tombstone carving, epitaph, prose or poetry in general—that they help them define and live a holy life. That logically led to suspicion of pictorial, musical and verbal creations which served only for pleasure or distraction, but allowed for much metaphorical play, much witty observation, much gothic imagining constrained by the endeavor to comprehend spiritual life or their own destiny in the American world. As visible saints with the press of history on their shoulders, the New England settlers felt they had a special mission of interpretation. So they cherished moral and spiritual advice, valued the didactic and the pious, and set limits on other things. This reinforced their commitment to the familiar American doctrine of utility, the need to do or enjoy only what leaves us better for the experience.

So, to this day, the Puritan approach to the arts is typified by one of the most widely used books ever published, *The New England Primer* (1683?).

Frequently reissued, selling some five million copies, it led generations of children through the alphabet with a dogmatic set of mnemonic rhymes, from "In Adam's fall/We sinned all" to "Zaccheus he/Did climb a tree/His Lord to see." Its purposefulness and instructive intent is typical of the Puritan approach to verse and rhyme. When Cotton Mather gave advice to those preparing for the ministry in his *Manuductio ad Ministarium* (1726), he both commended poetry and warned of its dangers. A "devil's library" exists, he says, whose "muses . . . are no better than harlots," and he warns that

the powers of darkness have a library among us, whereof the poets have been the most numerous as well as the most venomous authors. Most of the modern plays, as well as the romances, and novels and fictions, which are a sort of poem, do belong to the catalogue of this cursed library.

A Mr. Bedford, he noted, had collected "near 7,000 instances" of pestilential impiety from the plays of the previous five years, a sign at least that such things circulated, as indeed Puritan libraries prove. But despite his strictures, Mather could say that

Though some have had a soul so unmusical, that they have decried all verse as being but a meer playing and fiddling upon words; all versifying, as it were more unnatural than if we should chuse dancing instead of walking; and rhyme, as if it were but a sort of moriscedancing with bells; yet I cannot wish you a soul that shall be wholly unpoetical. An old Horace has left us an art of poetry, which you may do well to bestow a perusal on. And besides your lyric hours, I wish you may so far understand an epic poem, that the beauties of an Homer and a Virgil be discovered with you.

Mather may have distrusted the "sickly appetite for the reading of poems which now the rickety nation swarms withal," but his own appetite for reading was substantial. He amassed a capacious colonial library of some two thousand volumes, drew on classical, contemporary and vernacular styles for the texture of his own prose, devoted himself to science, classics and the learning of seven languages and was elected to the British Royal Society in 1714. He was, as is evident from his observations, living in a society that welcomed crates of English books with every boat. And poetry was, in fact, an essential form of Puritan discourse. Much of it inclined toward useful doggerel, but verse anagrams, acrostics, riddles, epitaphs and