

SARAH TRYPHENA PHILLIPS LECTURE

## Revolution, Succession and National Identity in American Literature

STEPHEN FENDER

*University of Sussex*

MY TITLE does not cloak a deep theoretical proposition. By ‘Revolution, Succession and National Identity’ I am simply asking how a nation that thinks of itself as the result of a revolutionary break with its mother country, and which is made up of emigrants (and their children and grandchildren) who narrated the experience of their emigration as a fundamental, irreversible transformation of their personal and public circumstances, could also pose these new-found values as somehow transferable to generations succeeding them. How, in other words, was the communal narrative of the radical break to be converted into a permanent ‘tradition’ to be emulated by Americans born into the new dispensation?

The answer is, with difficulty. Evidence for the problem lies in an unresolved debate between what might be called radical and conservative discourses within the canon of American literature. But the problem also surfaces, as I want to suggest later, in the anxious intensity with which, from time to time, Americans have debated the canon itself: the special emphasis placed on the curriculum as a means of fixing and transmitting the values of the American republic.

And so that apparently transparent phrase in my title, ‘American literature’, also needs a gloss. Even as an expression of an academic specialty, the phrase does not signify in quite the same ways as do ‘English literature’ or ‘French literature’ in the educational cultures of England and France. Though slow to gain a foothold in the curriculum of American schools and universities American literature presented itself from the

Read at the Academy 5 November 1992. © The British Academy 1993.

beginning as both expressing and also promoting distinctively American political, social and even moral values.<sup>1</sup>

But what are those distinctive national values? Those historians and sociologists who believe in a unique 'American character' have usually listed open government, physical and social mobility, enterprise, individualism and the faith in future possibilities. Perhaps one could add the belief in a distinctive American character itself: the compulsion to search for such definitions in the first place.

Put the question another way. How do people born in other countries become American? They have to be willing to take risks; to husband meagre resources against the day when they uproot themselves and say goodbye to neighbours and friends (if not extended family) in the hopes of a life and fortune enlarged beyond the constraints imposed by their native polity: in short to hazard present comforts against future returns. This is why Americans are said to be one big middle class and why (as American characterologists have noted so often) the country offers such a discouraging environment for socialism, communism and other collectivist institutions. Because in order to get to America emigrants had either to be middle class already, or quickly to develop those entrepreneurial habits of prudence, individualism, deferring gratification, taking risks. Or at least that's how they told their stories that contributed to the synthesis of the American identity.

We tend to think of middle class values as conservative, focused on preserving one's property. But in the first generation they are radical too—or at least they were when contrasted to the broadly feudal dispensation in which British emigrants found themselves. And even more so when you recall that before keeping and guarding their property the emigrants had first to get it through risk, enterprise, hard work and good luck following a fundamental breach with the persons and habits of a (relatively) settled life. And certainly it is that radical aspect of the shared (or remembered or narrated) American experience that figures in the literature most frequently cited as characteristically American. After all, even after the American canon has been deconstructed there remain books, like *Moby Dick* and *Huckleberry Finn*, that just couldn't have been written by anyone other than an American. These are narratives of the unreconciled radical break from settled society, of lighting out, of risky travel registered as personal transformation, but denying the reaggregation with society usually offered as the fruit of such initiations.

<sup>1</sup> The role of 'American Studies' in American cultural politics is reviewed in Gerald Graff's thoughtful *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 13, 211–16.

In *Sea Changes*, published earlier this year, I argued that the letters emigrants sent home to their families gave an account of their experience that could be seen as both illustrating and constituting important aspects of that American identity also represented by the canon of American literature.<sup>2</sup> Typically at first the new arrivals are full of the material riches of the New World: the enormous quantity and variety of fruit and game to which they could help themselves or, more prosaically, the cheap prices of all sorts of food and household provisions that they couldn't have afforded at home, or on which they used to have to pay duty. So the ontogeny of the emigrants' letters recapitulated the phylogeny of those discovery narratives and settlement tracts that constituted American identity in the first place. In other words, the emigrants' letters followed in the rhetorical tradition of those earlier accounts which, almost without exception, were fleshed out with open-ended catalogues of animals, vegetables and minerals awaiting exploitation—as though fecund nature was rushing in to fill the perceived vacuum of cultural norms so far from the metropolitan centre.

Accompanying this celebration of New World nature in the emigrants' letters would be a sense of a fundamental transformation in their lives—a sort of second adolescence or initiation into a higher state of existence. They frequently wrote that their health had never been better, and that others who had gone along with them had been cured of longstanding ailments. As with all initiations, the experience was perceived as a one-way process. Though homesick, frequently begging families to write them more frequently with news of themselves and their old acquaintances, emigrants found it hard to imagine going back for any reason, and they held back-migrants in great contempt, ascribing their return to their lack of sufficient courage to make the transition to a new life, or of hard work to see it through. As for themselves, they were anxious to document a narrative of success. Sometimes their catalogues of natural bounty developed into inventories of goods, land and livestock accumulated through their enterprise and prudence. Often they would not write home at all until they had good news to report. Their letters themselves were a sign of their success, and were taken as such by their recipients.

Usually, as the emigrants became better assimilated to their new environment and the mother country became correspondingly more remote from their memories, the letters home began to tail off in frequency, then stop altogether. But just occasionally an archive turns up a run of letters covering enough of the emigrant's life in America to suggest

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Fender, *Sea Changes: British Emigration and American Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 1992).

that the process of lighting out, once imagined and experienced, not only could not be reversed but also went on being renewed throughout the emigrant's life in the New World. Let me take the time to illustrate the point with an outline of one such emigrant's progress not discussed in my book, because it illustrates this point so poignantly.

Richard Mighell (1813–90), emigrated from Brighton to Ohio in around 1831, at the age of eighteen. Later no fewer than four of his brothers would also go to America, although the family was far from impoverished, being prominent non-conformists who prospered as fishmongers, eventually moving into large scale property development in the Brighton area. Richard's first letter home follows the form exactly. He would have written sooner, had he been able to 'give a favourable acct, which I think I am now capable of'. He lists the prices of provisions with great enthusiasm (and at great length) 'Flour 3½ Dols. per Barl . . . Pork 2½ Dols for 100 lbs . . . venison 25 cts. per Qtr. fowels 6 cts. ea. Eggs 6 cts per Doz.' and so on. 'All kinds of Grocerey' are 'very cheap', as is 'Timbered or uncleared Land'.<sup>3</sup> Three years later he had become a steersman on a canal boat from Cincinnati to Dayton, Ohio. Already he was beginning to speak with a western American tang: 'Iam agoing down the river to New Orleans this fall', he wrote to his father and mother, and 'if nothing appins i think I shall come home the follown spring if not shall go futher west to see a little more of this country.' 'This is a fine country for a labring man', he added. 'I like this part of the country better than eny I ave been in yet.'<sup>4</sup>

When he got to New Orleans Mighell did indeed sail for home, signing on the American packet *Mount Zion* for Liverpool. But so powerfully did he feel that sense of the one-way passage of emigration that having got as far as Liverpool, he found himself unable to continue south to visit his family in Brighton. They must have objected to this, because in September of 1835, he wrote to them: 'I am very sorry that you want me to cum home before I return to america . . . I Shiped as an american and under american protesion and if I was to cum Home I should have to runaway from the Ship.'<sup>5</sup> Was this a viable reason for his failure to return? Well, having signed on as an American didn't stop Herman Melville's Wellingborough Redburn from leaving his ship in Liverpool to travel around England at

<sup>3</sup> Richard Mighell to 'D[ea]r Father & Mother' [Mr and Mrs R. W. Mighell], Zanesville [Ohio], April 26, 1831; East Sussex Record Office (ESRO) AMS 5575/35/1.

<sup>4</sup> Id. to id., [Cincinnati], Ohio, June 20, 1834; ESRO AMS 5575/35/2; the 'American tang' is not so much in Mighell's use of 'fall' for 'autumn' (the OED records this as English provincial usage as late as the same year in which Mighell was writing) as in the spelled-as-pronounced 'Iam', 'agoing' and 'follown'.

<sup>5</sup> Id. to id., Liverpool, Sept. 27, 1835, ESRO AMS 5575/35/5.

about the same time—or Melville himself, come to that. Nearly a decade later Mighell was in Liverpool again, this time able at least to promise a visit: ‘I shall cum to London if I can get a chance and cum and spend a few days with you’.<sup>6</sup> Whether he ever got that chance is unclear. Certainly none of his subsequent letters refers to having seen them again.

On his return to the States Mighell tried another venture, this time growing into something of a capitalist, owning and operating a small fleet fishing for oysters off the coast of Louisiana. But by 1847, as one of his brothers wrote home, he had lost three boats and become ‘quite a bankrupt’. His last letter home is dated 1856. By this time he had got as far west as he could go. Suffering from rheumatism, he sought out the hot springs near Los Angeles, where he stayed. He found it ‘the poorest place I ever was in in Calafrneia and I do not think that I was ever in a mutch worse place in mi life’. Once again he used the formula for the tardy letter: ‘I should have rote to you before but had no good new to [send?] you and I dow not licke to right bad new it is bad ennuf to have bad luck without righting about it’. And for all his bravely defensive expressions of independence, he reiterates a theme frequently found in his letters home, asking his family to write more often. As for old Brighton friends, though: ‘I cannot right enney thing to say to any old acuantance for i have forgotting all’.<sup>7</sup>

Mighell’s letters flesh out that generalization of Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* (1835): that once the emigrants make the initial break from their native country, they become addicted to a process of uprooting and can rest nowhere ever again.<sup>8</sup> But although forever lighting out from difficulties or failure or temporary disappointment, Mighell also registers a contrary, and equally typical, feeling of loss, begging for news from home—four times even in that last letter to his family—for signals of and from those whom he had largely forgotten. He can’t go home; he can’t even remember much about it; yet he can’t stop thinking about it.

In more sophisticated texts, the conservative discourse could be extended beyond a mere confession of homesickness to confront the radical thesis much more powerfully: say, with a highly articulated lament for old certainties left behind, old forms relinquished; or with an elaborate, wish-fulfilling fantasy that those stable institutions had somehow been translated to the New World. St. Jean de Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American*

<sup>6</sup> Id. to id., Liverpool, [January] 27, 1844, ESRO AMS 5575/35/11.

<sup>7</sup> Id. to id., ESRO AMS 5575/35/12; the reference to Richard losing the three boats appears in a letter from Joseph Mighell to Mr and Mrs R. W. Mighell, New Orleans, December, 1847, ESRO AMS 5575/39/2.

<sup>8</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer and Max Lerner, trans. George Lawrence (two vols., Fontana, 1968), Vol. I, part ii, Chap. 9, pp. 347–50.

*Farmer*, first published in 1782, is deeply imbedded in that body of writing commonly taken as both reflective and also constitutive of American identity. The book is often cited as a fervent apology for the American ideal, the opportunity offered the humbly born European to shed the constraints of hereditary disadvantage, to make himself over as a 'new man' working his way to an independent freehold—to achieve a proper adult competence in both property and politics—through his own daring and persistence. As recently as 1988 Alfred Kazin called it an 'unqualified picture of primitive America as an egalitarian paradise.'<sup>9</sup> Earlier this year Arthur Schlesinger began *The Disuniting of America*, his defense of the American melting pot ideal against what he perceives to be the destabilizing forces of multiculturalism, with a reminder that Crèvecoeur's *Letters* celebrated the emigrant's radical break with past prejudices and manners to make himself over as 'a new man in a new dispensation.'<sup>10</sup>

I think this is to misread *Letters from an American Farmer*, or at best to read it selectively. Parts of the book, especially the often anthologized chapter 'What is an American?' do indeed read as emigration tract, and were taken as such by at least one contemporary reviewer.<sup>11</sup> Crèvecoeur himself, born near Caen in Normandy, had lived a year in England, then served as a surveyor in the French army in Canada, finally emigrating to America, where he married and settled down. By the time he wrote the book he had been farming his 120 acres of what is now Orange County, New York for under ten years.

Yet although himself an emigrant valorizing the emigrant's radical break with the past, when he comes to describe what he calls the 'Situations, Feelings and Pleasures' of his American farmer, Crèvecoeur needs to invent a line of succession tying his character to a fanciful heredity and posterity. Not he but his father, he claims, cleared the land he now farms in America:

[H]ow happy I am that he lived to build and to pay for all these improvements; what are the labours which I have to undergo, what are my fatigues, when compared to his, who had everything to do, from the first tree he felled to the finishing of his house? . . . I have but to tread his paths to be happy and a good man like him.

<sup>9</sup> Alfred Kazin, *A Writer's America: Landscape in Literature* (Thames and Hudson, 1988) p. 28.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (Norton, 1992), pp. 11–12.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Ayscough, *Remarks on the Letters from an American Farmer; or a Detection of the Errors of Mr. J. Hector St. John; Pointing out the Pernicious Tendency of these Letters to Great Britain* (John Fielding, 1783).

And as he continues to develop his freehold, so the American farmer will pass his legacy on to the next generation. 'Often when I plough my low ground', he writes, 'I place my little boy on a chair which screws to the beam of the plough . . . as I lean over the handle, various are the thoughts which crowd into my mind. I am now doing for him, I say, what my father formerly did for me.'<sup>12</sup>

Obviously this precarious practice is intended to be taken figuratively: as an emblem presenting three generations linked through the instrument of cultivation. Crèvecoeur was a physiocrat: that is, one of the French school of economists who believed farming to be a sounder basis for an economy than either trade or manufacturing, because in agriculture alone was the return on investment underpinned by a natural process. The plough guarantees the emigrant's posterity because it secures his venture in nature.

What actually happened was very different. Recent historians of American land ownership and population movements have pointed out that poor transport and their distance from markets seem to have kept most emigrant farms at a subsistence level in this period. Even in the prosperous middle colonies of New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania there was just no point in a farmer and his family working to produce more than they could consume themselves. More disconcerting for the Crèvecoeur tableau, however, was the very factor cited by Benjamin Franklin as the American colonies' greatest strength: the rapid increase in their population. With no rights of primogeniture, as James Henretta has written, 'the gains of one generation, the slow accumulation of capital resources, had been dispersed among many heirs'.<sup>13</sup> With too little land to work, even for subsistence, the next generation had to be sent out of the family as apprentices or as landless labourers employed by others. Or they could go West in search of cheap virgin land to clear and develop from scratch. Either way, the actual circumstances of late colonial and early republican agriculture forced the rising generation of farmers to replicate that same destabilizing process of uprooting undergone by their parents and grandparents. Far from having the leisure further to develop a freehold left them by their parents, young American farmers had to become permanent emigrants.

And the actual revolution—that is, the American War of Independence

<sup>12</sup> J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, ed. Albert E. Stone (Penguin, 1981), pp. 52–3.

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind, Peopling of Countries, &c.* (1751), in [William Clarke], *Observations on the late and present conduct of the French . . .* (S. Kneeland, 1755); James A. Henretta, 'Families and Farms: *Mentalité* in Pre-Industrial America', *William and Mary Quarterly* 35 (1978), 3–72, p. 22.

of 1775–83—came as an even greater shock to Crèvecoeur’s image of the American farmer. Natural increase of return over investment couldn’t protect the farmer in a state of war. Other occupations could adjust: the craftsman could make harnesses, wagons, clothing, armaments or whatever for either side in the conflict, and the trader continue to sell his raw materials and finished goods—and to a strengthening market to boot—but the farmer could do very little to protect his fields, buildings and livestock from a marauding army.

*Letters from an American Farmer* confronts this challenge to its central ideology, but without resolving the dilemma. As the book proceeds, images of natural and human conflict gather to darken its tone. Finally, though, the farmer simply steps out of his predicament, announcing his intention to light out for the frontier, as Natty Bumppo and Huckleberry Finn would do after him. Except that in Crèvecoeur’s *Letters* this conclusion runs directly counter to the book’s thematics, since it is projected as a flight from cultivation to a life of hunting among the Indians. And Crèvecoeur’s actual response to the Revolutionary War was even more starkly evasive. Leaving his farm, his wife and two of his children, he lit out—not for the frontier but back to Europe to publish his book. While he was away, his wife died, his farm was burned in an Indian raid and his children dispersed among neighbours. No wonder contemporary reviewers were so uncertain how to read *Letters from an American Farmer*: whether as propaganda for emigration, authentic reportage, fiction or a lie.<sup>14</sup>

Of course one way round this conflict between discourses of revolution and succession is simply to disentangle them and inscribe them in quite separate texts. In a sense this is what Kazin and Schlesinger are doing when they cite *Letters from an American Farmer* as an apology for the radical break into the melting-pot paradise of the New World, and what the editors of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* accomplish by accommodating the chapter ‘What is an American’ to the exclusion of ‘Situations, Feelings and Pleasures’ and ‘Distresses of a Frontier Man’.

And it is exactly what those resourceful, but also increasingly authoritarian writers of seventeenth-century New England did with their accounts of how they came to uproot themselves from Europe and settle in the New

<sup>14</sup> See Ayscough (above), who called *Letters* ‘a new species of forgery’; contrast the anonymous review in *The Monthly Review; or, Literary Journal* 66–67 (June, August, October, 1782), 401, 140–46, 273–77, where *Letters* was excerpted in three installments and judged authentic on ‘internal evidence alone’; the French were more inclined to review the book as the product of a naively powerful poetic sensibility: see Pierre-Louis Lacretelle, ‘Lettre au Rédacteur du Mercure’, *Mercure de France* (24 January, 1784), 148–9, and the anonymous review in *L’Année Littéraire* 4 (1785), 73–107.



World. Look at these two narratives of the Plymouth Separatists' first exploration of their landfall on Cape Cod:

They found it to be a small neck of land . . . the ground or earth sand hills, much like the downs in Holland, but much better; the crust of the earth a spit's depth excellent black earth; all wooded with oaks, pines, sassafras, juniper, birch, holly, vines, some ash, walnut;

Two days later they took their longboat up the bay coast further to spy out the land. Snacking on cheese, biscuit and aquavita, they soon grew thirsty, but could find no fresh water. Then:

About ten o'clock we came into a deep valley . . . and there we saw a deer, and found springs of fresh water, of which we were heartily glad, and sat us down and drunk our first New England water with as much delight as ever we drunk drink in all our lives.<sup>15</sup>

That appears in *Mourt's Relation* of the Plymouth Plantation, published in London in 1622, or just a year and a half after the events narrated there. Around ten years later, when the non-separatist Puritans began to settle Boston and its environs—a much more numerous and prosperous, better connected and better educated group—Plymouth's Governor William Bradford started to write the history of his own settlement, as though in order to establish the primacy of Plymouth's errand into the wilderness. Now the landing on Cape Cod is described very differently:

And for the season it was winter, and they that know the winters of that cuntry know them to be sharp and violent, and subjecte to cruell and fierce stormes, deangerous to travill to known places, much more to serch an unknown coast. Besids, what could they see but a hidious and desolate wildernes, full of wild beasts and willd men? . . . For summer being done, all things stand upon them with a wetherbeaten face; and the whole cuntry, full of woods and thickets, represented a wild & savage heiw.<sup>16</sup>

The difference between these two accounts is not due, as might be thought, to two historians with different interests choosing to tell their different stories; Bradford may well have written the first report too—he certainly collaborated in its production. No, the difference is not one of author, but of audience and purpose. The first is an emigration tract aimed at the metropolitan readership of potential backers and other Puritans still trying to decide whether to join them in New England. So it is replete with concrete detail: the characteristic catalogue of materials to be exploited

<sup>15</sup> *A Journal of the Pilgrims at Plymouth (Mourt's Relation, 1622)*, ed. Dwight B. Heath, (Corinth Books, 1963), pp. 18–21.

<sup>16</sup> *Bradford's History of Plymouth Plantation, 1606–1646*, ed. William T. Davis (Barnes & Noble, 1908), p. 96.

for home markets and that quiet valley offering plain water for the delectation and sustenance of the deserving pilgrim. This is a powerful inducement to uprooting. And in case the uncertain Saints still lingering at home were unmoved by the material inducements, a sermon was appended to the volume reminding them that England was not the promised land:

Neither is there any land or possession now, like unto the possession which the Jews had in Caanan . . . no land so appropriated, none typical . . . But now we are all in all places strangers and pilgrims, travellers and sojourners, most properly, having no dwelling but in this earthen tabernacle; our dwelling is but a wandering, and our abiding but as a fleeting, and in a word our home is nowhere but in the heavens.<sup>17</sup>

If *Mourt's Relation* is a promotional tract, Bradford's *Of Plimouth Plantation* is history, but history of a peculiarly American kind. While the earlier text is trying to get the faithful to get up and go, Bradford wants to keep them where they are: to prevent them from losing heart with Plymouth and returning to England or out-migrating to the better established new settlement at Boston. He does this, not by reminding them of their present material, institutional and spiritual attainments, not through promising an even more glorious future, but by recalling their past achievements and tribulations as though they had been earned and endured by an earlier generation. Clearly the history was meant to be read, not just by Bradford's contemporaries, but by their children and grandchildren also.

So from Bradford's history, all material inducements are abstracted, deer are turned into 'beasts', the Native Americans (viewed in *Mourt's Relation* with a sort of benign curiosity) become 'willd men' and the actual winter harshened. And although he offers the interpretation very tentatively (typological connections between the Bible and secular history being a most dubious exegetical practice) he does reinvent the promised land explicitly forbidden by the sermon in *Mourt's Relation*. It is, of course, New England:

May not and ought not the children of these fathers [the original Plymouth settlers], rightly say: *Our fathers were Englishmen which came over this great ocean, and were ready to perish in the willdernes; but they cried unto the Lord, and he heard their voyce and looked on their adversitie.*<sup>18</sup>

This is how Moses (in Deuteronomy, Chapter 26) told the People of Israel to identify themselves:

<sup>17</sup> Robert Cushman, 'Reasons and Considerations touching the lawfulness of removing out of England into the parts of America' in *Mourt's Relation*, 89–90.

<sup>18</sup> Bradford, ed. Davis, p. 97.

A Syrian ready to perish was my father, and he went down into Egypt . . . and the Egyptians . . . afflicted us . . . and when we cried unto the Lord God of our fathers, the Lord heard our voice . . . and the lord brought us forth out of Egypt . . . and hath given us this land, even a land that floweth with milk and honey.

Bradford does not carry the quotation as far as the land flowing with milk and honey, but he knew that his readers, every one of them, could complete the sentence.

What does it mean to be God's chosen people? The faith is not just about beliefs and conventions (though Moses's injunction follows a most detailed exposition of Jewish codes of behaviour) but also about being able to tell a certain story. But what sort of story? A narrative of uprooting and wandering. Yet how can a community identify itself in terms of uprooting and wandering without encouraging the indefinite replication of the process, and so working its own dissolution? How, in other words, can the communal identity of impermanence be converted into a stabilizing tradition? Well, first, even to tell the story is to distance and frame the original shock of deracination. To allude to a story as one already told and capable of being retold (as Moses does) is to add a further frame. To refer to Moses's allusion, as Bradford does, is to add yet another. And finally, to construct the whole process typologically—that is, to inscribe the sequence of wandering within the *telos* or end of privileged settlement (as Moses does overtly and Bradford covertly)—is to convert unstable origins into a stable identity.

The objection to Bradford's narrative is that in rewriting the earlier account of exploration and settlement, he also effaced it. Bradford's *History* is part of the American canon—included in every authoritative anthology of American literature; *Mourt's Relation* is not. To this day a thousand students of American culture read Bradford's version for every one invited into that alternative world of quiet valleys, delectable springs and nature offering her bounty to the devout pilgrim. One would almost rather have Crèvecoeur's *Letters*, with all its confusion between the valorized radical break and fantasized lines of succession, than Bradford's forceful imposition of typologies. And yet, as we have seen, even Crèvecoeur has been incorporated within 'American literature' only by virtue of a selective reading. It seems the American canon can be recuperated in terms either of the radical break (as Crèvecoeur's *Letters* has been) or of the strenuous reimposition of traditional narrative structures (as in Bradford's overwriting of *Mourt's Relation*)—but never so as to allow both revolution and succession to speak in the same text. Or to put it in the terminology immortalized by Phillip Rahv, the way in which the American canon has been constructed by its readers has been such as to divide it into the

irreconcilable camps of Paleface and Redskin: either bloodlessly abstract and over-directed, or concrete, repetitious, vernacular and self-invented.<sup>19</sup>

What was it that turned William Bradford into our first paleface writer? Perhaps he would say the unpredictable accidents of life going on around him. As the problem of Puritan New England increased in number and intensity, as notable divines began to leave in greater numbers to fight the Revolution in England or to settle their congregations further westward, as the sectarian purity of the first settlers began to be dissipated by the diverse contacts afforded by any sea port, and quarrels with the British government added their troubles to epidemics and wars with the Indians at home, so the preachers and historians of seventeenth-century New England became increasingly desperate somehow to arrest the bewildering flow of events. This they did by warning of the dangers of spiritual and political innovation while reminding the present generation of their forefathers' original mission in the wilderness. And so developed that characteristic (and immensely popular) New England rhetorical form, the American jeremiad. Properly understood histories like Bradford's and (to take a later and much more substantial example) Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702) were sub species of the jeremiad. So were the broadside elegies on worthy elders recently departed, and Michael Wigglesworth's long poem, *The Day of Doom* (1662), and of course the endless stream of seemingly endless sermons given on days set aside for fasting and prayer, humiliation and thanksgiving, then published to be bought in their thousands.

The origins and form of the American jeremiad have been described in learned detail by Sacvan Bercovitch, so only the barest outline need be given here.<sup>20</sup> In New England the jeremiad was a sermon (or history or elegy or long poem) apocalyptic in both mood and reference, accusing the present generation of having betrayed the covenant offered by God to the first settlers, of having turned aside to the profits and pleasures of secular life, and warning of God's imminent destruction of the fledgling colonies. The American form differed from its English origins in four ways. First, in its assumption of American exceptionalism: that is, that the Puritan pilgrimage to the New World had been a unique mission, an exemplary enterprise to preserve the purity of the faith and convert the heathen to it. Second, in its free (and strictly speaking illicit) use of Biblical typology to underpin this claim, that America was the land promised by God to his Saints. Third, in the proposition that even God's justice would serve as a

<sup>19</sup> Philip Rahv, 'Paleface and Redskin', in Philip Rahv, *Essays in Literature and Politics*, ed. Arabel J. Porter and Andrew J. Dvosin (Houghton Mifflin, 1978), pp. 3–7.

<sup>20</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).

sign of his mercy to New England, insofar as it would correct their errant ways. And finally (a feature insufficiently emphasized by Bercovitch, perhaps) in its emphasis on the conflict between generations.

For it wasn't just everyone present at the occasion, but the younger generation particularly, who had grown degenerate and for whom the warnings and reminders were intended. That is why Bradford places such stress on 'fathers' and why he writes as though to a generation succeeding his own. Seldom missing from the jeremiad are references to New England's first worthies: settlers, governors, divines. Sometimes, as in Mather's *Magnalia*, these are fleshed out in a whole string of pocket biographies: a gallery of pictures displayed for the young to emulate. They register almost typologically, as an anthology of Old Testament prophets, priests and kings whose example must be followed and whose mission must be fulfilled if the next generation is to avert God's justice.

If the jeremiad was America's first distinctive literary form, then it also both reflected and reinforced what then amounted to the American exceptionalist thesis, at least as far as seventeenth-century New England stood for America. And even by then the community was divided between radical and conservative images of itself. Americans were a people both wandering and teleologically determined; both uprooted and typologically settled. A nation of emigrants, it seemed, needed exceptional assurances of permanence: charters, declarations and constitutions—navigational fixes for their voyage in the midst, as well as points of reference for generations to come. Just as the Plymouth pilgrims would set out their aims and aspirations in the Mayflower Compact even before their feet touched the soil of Cape Cod, so those apostles of geographical social, political and economic mobility in eighteenth-century Virginia would also establish their ideals in declarations and constitutions to be handed down to American posterity. Thomas Jefferson thought America should undergo a revolution with every generation, but the achievements for which he most wanted to be remembered were his part in the 'framing' of the Declaration of Independence, the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom and the curriculum of the University of Virginia.

Which is why it should come as no surprise that at *fin* of our own *siècle* we too should have our dose of jeremiads chastising the errant ways of the younger generation, urgently prophesying the last things of the American Republic, and holding up a gallery of worthies (in this case books as well as men) as an example of the primitive purity to which we must all return—and incidentally selling like hot cakes, just like their seventeenth-century antecedents.

I don't mean this as a joke. Such best-sellers as E. D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* and *The Closing of the American Mind* by the late Allan Bloom

(both 1987) function, quite literally, as jeremiads, aimed at a contemporary generation thought to have degenerated from a common core of 'culture'. Bloom's book, where 'culture' means *Kunst*, or high art, as embodied in the Great Books Course, is full of references to 'founders' and 'makers' [e.g. 31, 53–4] held up as examples to the errant youth of America, led astray by 'cultural relativists' like the educational philosopher John Dewey, by the anthropologist Margaret Mead and (even more perplexingly) Hannah Arendt. And by 'makers' he meant not just the founding fathers of the American revolution but also Moses, Jesus, Homer, Buddha and other worthies who 'formed the horizons' of 'culture', and so adorn Bloom's pages like names on the frieze of a neo-classical library building.<sup>21</sup>

Hirsch's book is more intelligent, recognizing that culture also has an anthropological sense. His gallery of worthies consists not only of books and their authors, but also of people, things and ideas that constitute 'What Literate Americans Know', from 'abolitionism' and 'abominable snowman' to 'Zola', 'zoning' and 'Zurich'. 'Cultural literacy', he writes, 'is represented not by a *prescriptive* list of books but rather by a *descriptive* list of the information actually possessed by literate Americans [his italics].' That sounds fairly unintrusive, but then he tips his hand: 'My aim in this book is to contribute to making that information the possession of all Americans'.<sup>22</sup> In other words, he will turn the description into a prescription so as to ensure an orderly succession of cultural tradition.

For Hirsch, then, the imminence of the last things proceeds from nothing so rarified as Bloom's cultural relativism cutting our connection with the Great European Past, but from simple ignorance of cultural contexts in the present, leading to a fundamental breakdown in efficient communication between contemporary members of what ought to be a common culture. He illustrates his concern with reference to an experiment conducted in Harvard Square and published in the *Scientific American*, in which a researcher with a copy of *The Boston Globe* under one arm asked a passer-by, 'How do you get to Central Square?' The answer came back briefly, 'Next stop on the subway'. The next day the same man asked the same question of someone else, only this time posing as a tourist: 'I'm from out of town. Can you tell me how to get to Central Square?' This time the answer came back much more elaborate, detailing the process of entering the Red Line station in Harvard Square, going

<sup>21</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (Simon & Schuster, 1987); for reference to 'founding' and 'founders' see eg. pp. 29, 31, 53–4; for the worthies who 'formed horizons' see p. 201; 'cultural relativists' are attacked *passim*.

<sup>22</sup> E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Houghton Mifflin, 1987), p. xiv.

down the stairs, buying a token, making sure you wait on the side that says Quincey, then getting off at the first stop. You'll know that it's Central Square because there's a big sign on the wall. It says, "Central Square". The young American generation of cultural illiterates, Hirsch feels, are like the tourist: for them every context has cumbersomely to be established before the simplest of messages can be conveyed.<sup>23</sup>

Yet American concern over the severing of cultural connections, whether with the past or with one's fellow citizens drawn from so many different backgrounds, really has a very long history. The anxiety has surfaced repeatedly—perhaps especially—in arguments over the nature, quality and even viability of American literature. Think of all those supposed barriers against a serious body of American creative writing. No 'usable past' to enliven American social and physical landscapes with historical associations or against which to check the innovations of the present (in both senses of 'check'); no established social structures made visible by badges of rank for the novelist of manners to subvert: in short no common experience of past or present to which authors can allude in the expectation that their readers will pick up their signals. Complaints like these have come again and again from American authors: Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, Nathanael Hawthorne, Henry James, T. S. Eliot and many others. When producing their most characteristic work, it seems, American writers are all in the predicament of Hirsch's tourist in Harvard Square.

Of course the immediate answer to all these supposed deficiencies is that they scarcely prevented the same American authors from producing serious imaginative literature. Yet what they wrote was different. History in Cooper and Hawthorne is strangely transformed from the accessible solidity one encounters in (say) Walter Scott into a picturesque mystery, which in Hawthorne anyway, is held up to problematic interpretation. Henry James brings social irony to the American novel, but by importing European settings and manners to confront their American opposites, synthesizing for his fictional world a class system based on geographical rather than hierarchical distance. Philip Rahv's *Redskin*, endlessly repeating himself on the margins of world culture, developed the settlers' natural catalogues into that characteristically American genre, the long, open-ended poem of Whitman, Pound and Williams, unencumbered by plots of story or argument, citing chance occurrences of material reality more or less as they were encountered. The American vernacular, when finally heard and transcribed accurately, and recognized for its literary

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4; the article on 'Social and Nonsocial Speech' is by R. M. Krauss and S. Glucksberg, *Scientific American* (February, 1977), 100–5.

potential, gave us Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and the drama of Clifford Odets, Arthur Miller, Paddy Chayevsky and David Mamet, not to mention most Hollywood movies, where we have come to take its stylish simplicity for granted, as though anyone could do it.

In other words, the various tactics to which American writers have resorted in order to overcome their supposed disadvantages have produced characteristic American styles. I want to end by saying a bit more about that last mentioned literary recourse, the American vernacular style, because I think it provides one answer to Hirsch's concern that we are beginning to have to re-establish our contexts whenever we speak because we are rapidly losing our common culture.

It is a principle of communications theory that a degree of redundancy must be introduced into a signal to make it intelligible in a noisy environment. You can hear this in any railway station: 'The Brighton service is leaving from Platform 12, calling at East Croydon and Brighton only; Platform 12 for East Croydon and Brighton.'

Now there is no more noisy environment, physically and socially, than a big city. And an American city, where classes, backgrounds, nationalities and levels of education mix more bewilderingly than elsewhere, must be the noisiest setting of all. People have to assert, even define themselves without reference to a pre-existing cultural context, quickly and emphatically, in order to get anything done at all. This is certainly what happens in ordinary American speech. Studs Terkel's transcripts of people working in Chicago are peppered with different kinds of reiterative emphases—simple repetitions, positive or negative summaries of the message, introduced characteristically by phrases like, 'What I'm saying is . . . ' or 'I'm not saying that . . . '—and by tone markers like 'I'm just kidding' or 'I mean that seriously'.<sup>24</sup>

What I am saying is that what Bloom and Hirsch take to be a recent cultural collapse has been the perennial American condition. Americans have always needed to lay down their own cultural roadbeds, like tanks or caterpillar tractors. So when David Mamet comes to create his theatrical illusion of the American vernacular, he adapts the repetitions and overtone markers found in Terkel's transcripts. In the opening scene of *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984) a real estate salesman, also in Chicago, is trying to justify his failure to close on leads offered him by the company he works for (the 'Roma' he mentions is a rival salesman whose star is rising as fast in the company as his own is falling):

<sup>24</sup> Studs Terkel, *Working: People Talk about what they do all day and how they feel about what they do* (Pantheon Books, 1974), *passim*.



LEVENE, John . . . John . . . John. Okay. John. John. Look: (*Pause*) The Glengarry Highland's leads, you're sending Roma out. Fine. He's a good man. We know that he is. He's fine. All I'm saying, you look at the *board*, he's throwing, . . . wait, wait, wait, he's throwing them *away*, he's throwing the leads away. All that I'm saying, that you're wasting leads. I don't want to tell you your *job*. All that I'm saying, things get *set*, I know they do, you get a certain *mindset* . . . A guy gets a reputation. We know how this . . . all I'm saying, put a *closer* on the job . . . There's more than one man for the . . . Put a . . . wait a second—and you watch your *dollar* volumes . . . You start closing them for *fifty* 'stead of *twenty-five* . . . you put a *closer* on the . . .<sup>25</sup>

A desperate man and an author beginning his play, both invoke the redundancies of the American plain style in the struggle to be head by their audience. In Mamet's plays these stylistic features are heightened to bring out what they were designed to deal with in real life, yet as imaginative literature they also go further. For if redundancy helps to clarify a message in a noisy social field, it can also be formalized to dramatize a sense of isolation so desperate that words almost cease to mean what they say and become mere gestures. But they *do* convey, they *do* communicate something, even if it's only loneliness and meaninglessness. Redundancy and overt tone markers constitute an American style.

And so on the wider scale, let's accept that the anxiety of succession is another aspect of the 'American character'—the natural reaction to the radical break—and leave it at that. In other words, let us consign the jeremiad to the cultural context of other American best sellers—along with captivity narratives and stories of good-bad boys and how-to-do-it manuals—rather than taking it as a literal guide to public policy. The most inventive, resourceful and energetic democracy in modern history is, after all, also the most stable and long-lived—not despite its willingness to innovate and adapt, but because of it.

<sup>25</sup> David Mamet, *Glengarry Glen Ross: A Play in two acts* (Methuen, 1984), p. 3.