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## Rappaccini's Children: American Writers in a Calvinist World

William H. Shurr  
*University of Tennessee*

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RAPPACCINI'S  
CHILDREN

American Writers  
in a Calvinist  
World

William H. Shurr

# Rappaccini's Children

*for Emily Grey*

Multiplex sane animae agilitas  
quae tot mirabilium artium mater est  
certum divinitatis insigne in homine.

# RAPPACCINI'S CHILDREN

American Writers  
in a Calvinist World

William H. Shurr

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To remove all uncertainty and misunderstanding on this subject, let us define original sin. [It] appears to be an hereditary pravity and corruption of our nature, diffused through all parts of the soul, rendering us obnoxious to the Divine wrath, and producing in us those works which the Scripture calls “works of the flesh.” These two things therefore should be distinctly observed: first, that our nature being so totally vitiated and depraved, we are, on account of this very corruption, considered as convicted and justly condemned in the sight of God, to whom nothing is acceptable but righteousness, innocence, and purity.

And therefore infants themselves, as they bring their condemnation into the world with them, are rendered obnoxious to punishment by their own sinfulness, not by the sinfulness of another. For though they have not yet produced the fruits of their iniquity, yet they have the seed of it within them; even their whole nature is as it were a seed of sin, and therefore cannot be but odious and abominable to God.

The other thing to be remarked is, that this depravity never ceases in us, but is perpetually producing new fruits, those works of the flesh, which we have before described, like the emission of flame and sparks from a heated furnace, or like the streams of water from a never failing spring.

For our nature is not only destitute of all good, but is so fertile in all evils that it cannot remain inactive.

Calvin, *Institutes* (2.1.8; condensed)

# I INTRODUCTION

At the critical midpoint in his career, Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote an allegory about calvinism in America. "Rappaccini's Daughter" tells of a beautiful girl, Beatrice, who tends a botanical garden of poisonous flowers and who has absorbed their poisons from birth. Hawthorne solicits the reader's serious meditations on his Allegory of the Garden. Among the allusions that abound in the story are more or less explicit references to Dante, Genesis, Ecclesiastes, Samuel, the Song of Solomon, the Gospels, Revelations, Ovid, Edward Johnson's *The Wonder-Working Providence of Scion's Saviour, Faust*, Emerson's *Nature*, Hamlet's most famous soliloquy, Sir Thomas Browne, and possibly Jonathan Edwards. All of these works are concerned with religious problems and many are cast in the form of allegory. They press the reader to consider Hawthorne's story in the same genre.

The question appears early in the story: "Was this garden, then, the Eden of the present world?" The answer is suggested by Beatrice: "This garden is his [Rappaccini's] world." The answer is confirmed a bit later, when in answer to Beatrice's call Giovanni, the would-be lover who has been watching her from his window, "hastened into that Eden of poisonous flowers."<sup>1</sup> It becomes obvious as the story progresses that Giovanni and Beatrice are the Adam and Eve of this historical garden, the actual fallen garden. The tree of life is easily identified as now the poisonous plant of death in the center of the garden; the spring from which the rivers of Paradise flowed is now the broken bowl of the fountain; the serpent, no longer the necessary tool of Satan, is reduced to "a small orange-colored reptile" easily killed by the woman, as Genesis had predicted. But further identification of the elements in Hawthorne's allegory can be made only by summoning to mind a particular variety of Christianity which, as the elder Channing had said in his critique of American calvinism, made a great deal more out of the hints and fragments of the Genesis story than other Christian traditions thought necessary. The world, in this calvinist reading, is now totally under the domination of Satan, and redemption is only a marginally successful operation involving the few elect. Rappaccini dominates the garden of the present world. He is sick with his long absorption in the study of poisonous evil, but still immensely powerful. He always wears the color of death and embodies the worst of Hawthorne's evils by sedulous cultivation of intellect over "warmth of heart." But Rappaccini is both God and Satan. He assumes divine prerogatives in a fallen world, looking into the "inmost nature" of his creations, "making observations regarding their creative essence." Like the calvinist deity, he gives his creatures no choice but preordains the poison which will take over the body of his daughter from the

moment of her birth. The demonic and the divine merge into one after the Fall: as Adam and Eve no longer enjoyed an intimacy with God when he walked in the cool of evening, so “there was no approach to intimacy between [Rappaccini] and these vegetable existences. On the contrary, he avoided their actual touch.”

The world too is fallen, as well as mankind, “as if all this beauty did but conceal a deadlier malice.” The most concentrated center of this evil is carefully specified later in the story, where all of Beatrice’s attractive power is “girdled tensely . . . by her virgin zone”; the woman is the devil’s child and her specific evil for Giovanni is precisely her sexual attraction. She is “sister” to the poisonous shrubs which exhale death. Her rich oriental beauty is “the deadliest poison in existence” in the fallen world. And Giovanni, the now fallen Adam, is superficial and sensuous, robbed of the angelic gifts he enjoyed before the Fall. In this world sexual love does not lead to marriage and consummation but to the convulsive death of the seductive woman.

In the Christian economy, it is Christ whose special care is humanity. But the truly Divine is hard to discern in a fallen world. The only major figure left unaccounted for in Hawthorne’s story is the clumsy, rather foolish old man, Dr. Pietro Baglioni, presented in the story as competing with Rappaccini for eminence in the healing arts. It may be difficult to discern the Christ in him, but there are some clues to his identity. He claims to be “a teacher of the divine art of medicine.” He offers good advice to save Giovanni. He offers the grace of a precious liquid, “almost divine in its efficacy,” which actually kills the sinful woman. From on high he renders final judgment on the action in the last words of the story. His role is that of an ineffective Christ in a fallen world whose mostly reprobate figures move in utterly predestinated patterns. To Giovanni, the divine healer can offer only his impotent tears, in the glass of “Lachryma Christi.” And the allegorical significance of the two authorities becomes transparent for a moment when Hawthorne writes that “there was a professional warfare of long continuance between [Baglioni] and Rappaccini, in which the latter was generally thought to have gained the advantage.” Calvinist piety is one of the few forms of Christianity in which this last assertion could be made, that the probabilities are in favor of Satan in his war with Christ for domination of the world.

Behind the rivalry between Baglioni and Rappaccini, in a more mundane sense, may lie the bitter fight between Galenic and Paracelsan medicine. Rappaccini obviously prefers naturally grown herbs; Baglioni’s preference for drugs derived from chemical experiment seems indicated by the liquid he gives to Giovanni in the silver vial. Significant in this battle between the schools of Galen and Paracelsus was the cultivation of botanical gardens, the earliest of which seems to have been established at the University of Padua in 1545. Padua, its university, and a botanical garden also provide the setting for

“Rappaccini’s Daughter.” And in 1545 John Calvin was prominently engaged in trials of witches and sorcerers as well as in reframing the Genevan *Ordinances Concerning Marriage*. Calvin’s domination of the 1540s had recently been described by Balzac as his “reign of terror,” in *The Human Comedy*, where Calvin was compared to another demonic figure, Robespierre. But Hawthorne’s native calvinism provided a sufficient frame in which to paint this particular version of the Garden, whether he had read this section of Balzac or not.

“Rappaccini’s Daughter” touches human flesh and nerve endings. For many thinkers in the last century, the gods turned mean the moment before they disappeared. What if “the sacred” no longer existed? What if the most rewarding and necessary of human relationships were blighted and suspect, incapable of providing the needed comfort they promised? What if, in the last act of the play, grace turned into viciousness, paternity and divinity into sadistic experimentation at the moment before all actors and their shams disappeared from the stage? This would indeed be the end of religion: “Calvin’s last extreme” in Melville’s words; the triumph of the “Conqueror Worm” in Poe’s. This would indeed be blight and torment for Hawthorne, himself a new bridegroom, cultivating the garden of his calvinist predecessors at the Old Manse, where he wrote the preface to the collection in which the story now stands.

As in other works of his, it is difficult to determine the exact degree of distance Hawthorne was able to put between himself and his subject. Frequently an editorial hand is quite visible. In “Young Goodman Brown” the intrusive author writes of “the instinct that guides mortal man to evil,” and he will not allow the reader to minimize Brown’s experience as a mere dream. In another story, where “the saddest of all prisons [is one’s] own heart,” a minister wears a penitential veil for the whole of his life in order to gain the authority, in the end, to declare all human beings infected with hidden sin. The intrusive author of “The Birthmark” asserts “the fatal flaw of humanity which Nature, in one shape or another, stamps ineffaceably on all her productions.” And in the preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*, he proclaims “the truth, namely, that the wrongdoing of one generation lives into the successive ones, and divesting itself of every temporary advantage, becomes a pure and uncontrolled mischief.”

So Hawthorne, at least when he is the self-conscious author who manages the narratives and molds his readers’ responses, frequently assumes a rigorously primitive kind of calvinism. Such a calvinism is the lens which clarifies the distortions of the Garden allegory in “Rappaccini’s Daughter.” Hawthorne is hard on his world here—hard on his Eve and Adam, on God, on the impotent old Christ, on the nature of the fallen Garden of the world. Some original sin has quite literally poisoned the scene and all its mechanisms for

wholeness and salvation. The new garden, the world, is distorted here far beyond the requirements of a more moderate and traditional Christian orthodoxy. What one senses in the story is a savage stereotype of the classic American religion—the calvinism to which American writers, particularly of the nineteenth century, have granted almost canonical status, and departure from which has always been delicious heterodoxy.

The Garden is the metaphor most frequently used by those who have attempted to describe aspects of the American experience, from Captain John Smith and the early pamphleteers of American bounty, to more recent studies of the literary culture by Henry Nash Smith, R. W. B. Lewis, Leo Marx, David Noble, and Annette Kolodny.<sup>2</sup> Garden imagery quickly summons to mind the primal myth of Western civilization, the Garden of Eden. But it is perhaps not so obvious that this myth can be and has been read in many different ways. There are many discernible “styles” of Western religion, though all of them would derive their beginnings from the first story of Western literature. There are several discernible Christianities, for example, and much of what one takes to be Christianity depends upon how one reads the simple narrative dynamics of the second and third chapters of Genesis, what happens in the transition from imagined ideal state to actual fallen state, the fall from myth into history. What the figures in the Garden represent and how their relationships are perceived, both before and after the Fall, largely determine both the theology and the institutions of life that follow.

Hawthorne's Allegory of the Garden represents one synthesis of ideas and perceptions which have always had power to move American minds. In a sense we are all Rappaccini's children and must deal with this heritage as we can. Assuredly there are other forces in the tradition, other themes which hold American literature together; but Hawthorne's insights point to an aspect of our literature, particularly that of the nineteenth century, which can bear fuller analysis and meditation, an aspect which has always been acknowledged whenever a passing allusion is made to the assumption that ours has been in some way a calvinistic or puritanical culture.

The search for the historical origin of these materials leads inevitably to the figure of John Calvin, not always or totally the Calvin of history, but a figure which has generated strong responses nevertheless. A brief pilgrimage to one of our places of origin may provide some clues as to why this is so. Few Americans of the present generation have gone to the city of Geneva with the sense of visiting the birthplace of their culture; but there may be reasons for considering such a pilgrimage, particularly in view of an opinion entertained by the Genevese themselves. At the edge of the modern campus of the University of Geneva stands a monument, the famous and often photographed Reformation Mural. The work is recent, complex, and didactic. Two

themes are blended: that John Calvin's reformation at Geneva is central to, somehow even productive of, all subsequent history; and that political and religious affairs are inextricably tied together.

At the center of the wall a group of heroic statues idealizes Farel, Calvin, Beza, and Knox, the four reformers most closely connected with the city. The faces of the great reformers seem unduly emaciated, as if eroded by a holy fervor burning from within. The real explanation is more prosaic: Catholic students have frequently poured orange paint over the heads of the reformers, which then had to be scrubbed off with abrasives, leaving the appearance of ghastly otherworldliness to memorialize a modern version of ancient hostilities. Flanking the four reformers are historical tableaux in low relief with quotations from significant historical documents. Visually, the tourist is invited to consider the idea that here he confronts the *axis mundi* of post-Renaissance civilization: this is our holy city; here we can read our origins in picture and sacred text. Luther and Zwingli are also represented, but each on his own bushy island at the outer edges of the wall, and only as names carved on statueless pedestals. The tourist is given to understand that Zurich and Wittenberg swing in minor orbit to the sacred power generated at Geneva.<sup>3</sup>

The second historical thesis is argued in the choice of text and bas relief. Behind Zwingli is a memorial to the citizens' repulse of the Duke of Savoy as he tried to scale their walls in 1602, an event central to the Genevan sense of political and religious independence. The mural is heavily populated along its whole length by political figures: Frederick William, the Grand Elector, William of Orange, Coligny, Cromwell, the Transylvanian Stephan Bocskay. The principle of selection seems determined by the urge to find historical moments at which political and religious freedom are simultaneously affirmed. Thus, the Articles of Pacification of Vienna guaranteed for Hungary, in the words of Bocskay in 1606, both "the independence of our faith" and restitution of "our ancient laws."

The American tourist naturally comes to focus on the interpretation of his own history furnished by the wall, in a cluster of materials emanating from the left hand of John Knox. The positioning is significant for identifying one of the main points of entry for calvinism into American culture. The first two items memorialize Knox's preaching of the calvinist reform at St. Giles in Edinburgh before the court of Mary Stuart. Next, the Mayflower covenant of 1620 is quoted, introduced as the precursor of the United States Constitution. With similar historical creativity the next item presents William Bradford, Miles Standish, Governor Winslow, and William Brewster frozen impossibly in a single panel. And it could hardly be with their approval that the statue of Roger Williams dominates those American materials. The Mayflower compact was framed by a rigidly class-conscious, undemocratic group; Roger

Williams was early driven out of their colony for heresy, and he probably would have received the same treatment as Servetus had he appeared in Geneva.

Still, a larger historical truth is here affirmed. There are other channels through which calvinism came to pervade the culture of America, but the main influx is described accurately: it came through John Knox and his powerful calvinizing influence on the English Church generally.

A recent gazetteer lists ten communities in the United States named Geneva. Paris and Rome are used only eight times each as American place names. The two other Reformation cities, Zurich and Wittenberg, appear only twice each. Some balance is given to the picture by the fact that fifteen American cities are called Athens, but many of these are college towns. The Reformation Mural would insist that cultural preeminence be given Geneva. There is a sense, as the tourist meditates upon the wall, that history begins anew here. The wall admits no prehistory, except perhaps for the Bible, which all four of the central figures conspicuously carry. The wall also insists that political and social history cannot be comprehended fully without taking into account religious history. As a final statement, the wall proposes that Geneva and the events there during the life of Calvin are central to post-Renaissance culture. American culture is specifically included.

If the Geneva Reformation Mural indicates one link between Calvin and the founding of America, the Synod of Dort (November 1618 to May 1619) provides a later and perhaps more important one. It was at Dort that what generally came to be called "calvinism" was hammered out and issued in a series of five canons in language that would be clear to the unlearned laity. The Synod held 154 sessions and was truly an international meeting of Reformed Christianity. Only the French among the major Protestant national groups did not attend; their chosen delegates were forbidden to leave the country at the last minute by Louis XIII.<sup>4</sup>

The Synod was held in the city of Dort in the Netherlands, and it is interesting to reflect that the Puritans, who had left England and were shortly to embark for America, were at that moment sojourning in Holland under the pastorship of John Robinson. The decrees of the Synod were important to them for focusing the central points of their belief, and many references to "the five points" are extant in colonial American literature. An essential part of the religious heritage brought to this country and cultivated here was decided at the Synod of Dort.

The Synod came about because a group of Protestants, followers of Jacobus Arminius and at first calling themselves Arminians, felt themselves to be misunderstood and unjustly persecuted by the predominantly calvinist majority of European Protestants. They requested a hearing at which they



hoped to explain themselves to everyone's satisfaction and relieve some of the pressure being put on them. In preparation for the meeting they made up a list of five remonstrances (from which the group later came to be called Remonstrants), presenting what they took to be a reasonable and scriptural version of some points then under dispute. The five remonstrances are worth itemizing.

Their first point stated that it was God's intention, before creation, to save all who would put their faith in Christ and, through his grace, persevere in that belief to the end of their lives. The second statement was an elaboration of this, that Christ died for all men and his grace is available to all.

The third point of the Remonstrants concerned free will. On this much disputed topic they made a carefully limited assertion, that human free will does not by itself stretch so far as to enable men to perform "truly good actions." They seem to have had in mind truly supernatural actions that would avail for eternal salvation, since the only example they gave was "such as having faith eminently is." In other words, they seem to assert that the will is free but not able to perform acts meritorious of salvation until strengthened by God's free gift of grace.

In their fourth point they stated that man is able to resist the grace of God, an assertion of human free will in another direction. The fifth point summarizes much of the previous four in stating that heaven can be won by good actions of believers, assisted by grace, and that God will not allow them to fall if they persevere. At the end of this fifth statement they explicitly refused to take a position on whether one who once had grace could later lose it and become reprobate, asserting that Scripture did not seem to offer definitive information here.

Taken as a whole, the five points of the Remonstrants represent an enlightened and humane version of the Christian message, one with strong parallels in earlier and contemporary traditions. The opinions were not novel nor had they ever been considered heretical; indeed, they could be taken as a good statement of conservative orthodoxy regnant in the years of medieval Christianity. But from the beginning the Synod was conducted as if it were a heresy trial. The meetings were convened before the Remonstrants had a chance to appear on the scene personally, and a firm calvinist was elected to the chair. In the end, the remonstrances were answered by five canons, the famous "five points" of the Synod of Dort. Some of the Remonstrant leaders were beheaded, others banished, and still others imprisoned, in an attempt to break up what seemed a terrible threat to the now prevailing calvinist orthodoxy. But the threat was to remain, especially in New England, where for the next century the suspicion that one was tainted by "Arminianism" was sufficient cause to invoke the full rigor of the law.

The moment was historic, for it was at Dort that those dogmas took shape, in clear and simple language, which would be zealously guarded and would sink deeply into the American national consciousness.

The five points of Dort were direct responses to the five theses of the Arminians. One of the main assertions involved the corruption that reaches to man's innermost being, his nature. This corruption is a result of Adam's sin, his fall from grace, and is propagated to each member of the human race through generation. It so deeply perverts man's natural abilities that he is totally incapable of performing any good action. Even for a person in the state of grace, any good action is totally God's. The canon left some ambiguity concerning nature. Man is assuredly corrupt, but is the material universe corrupt, also? The question was to plague American thinkers and artists and seems still to plague them—can one operate with a basic attitude of trust and calmness, or is the physical universe dangerous at every point, ready to destroy man's hopes and the spiritual values he seeks to realize?

Closely connected with this assertion, almost as a corollary, was the assertion that man's corrupt will is not free, at least in any area that affects salvation. Election of some and reprobation of the others were decreed "before the foundation of the world" for reasons which man cannot understand and to which he is not privy. Man has absolutely no hand in acquiring grace; it is either given him or not, totally by divine initiative.

As a further corollary, Dort asserted that Christ did not die for all men but only for the limited number of the elect. And the theologians of Dort, to protect the divine initiative thoroughly, took a firm stand on the question that the Remonstrants had left open. There is no way that one of the elect can become reprobate, nor can anyone who is to be damned achieve salvation. Despite the sins they will inevitably commit, because they are human, the elect will finally persevere.

So important were these decrees in the American church that they were shortly boiled down to an even briefer formulation and frozen into the easily remembered device, "tulip": total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints. Whatever "calvinism" had stood for in the mind of John Calvin, these aspects of it were formulated and canonized by the calvinists at Dort and imported to America as orthodoxy. When Jonathan Edwards reacted against Arminian positions on the Will, when Hawthorne spoke of Original Sin or Melville of Predestination or Emily Dickinson of Election—and these are key words in each writer's vocabulary—they were employing diction that resonated with meanings given at Dort.

The tonic chord of our American calvinism was sounded by Thomas Jefferson, a man who by the power of his intellect was able to gain at least some distance from the culture for the purpose of objective description. Writ-

ing to John Adams on April 11, 1823, he observed: "I can never join Calvin in addressing *his* God. He was indeed an atheist, which I can never be; or rather his religion was dæmonism. If ever a man worshiped a false God, he did. The Being described in his five points is not the God whom you and I acknowledge and adore, the Creator and benevolent Governor of the world; but a dæmon of malignant spirit. It would be more pardonable to believe in no God at all, than to blaspheme Him by the atrocious attributes of Calvin."

Jefferson discerned several major features of the national religion: the heavy influence of John Calvin, the simple formulation of Calvin's thought into five memorable points deriving from the canons of the Synod of Dort, the fact that calvinism stood in the way of a purer religion for Americans, and finally what Hawthorne would later perceive as a diabolical malignity substituted for the Deity as the object of national worship.

In the twentieth century the perception seems to be valid still, if we are to accept Robert Lowell's darkly mythologized version of the tradition in "Children of Light," where he traces the spread of calvinism from Geneva to Holland to the shores of New England.

Our fathers wrung their bread from stocks and stones  
And fenced their gardens with the Redman's bones;  
Embarking from the Nether land of Holland  
Pilgrims unhouseled by Geneva's night,  
They planted here the Serpent's seeds of light. . . .

The rest of the poem implies that the tradition still dominates.

In a lighter vein but with similar import Dorothy Parker once traced the tradition through a different route, in a short poem called "Partial Comfort":

Whose love is given over-well  
Shall look on Helen's face in hell,  
Whilst they whose love is thin and wise  
Shall view John Knox in paradise.

And generally speaking the women writers have carried our native calvinism more lightly, even with a touch of satire. Edna St. Vincent Millay is a relevant example throughout much of her writing career. In one poem, "To a Calvinist in Bali," she miniaturizes a theme which, as we shall see, Eugene O'Neill developed at great length in his *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Millay's poem, published eight years after O'Neill's play, may actually have been inspired by it. Millay's calvinist is "sprung from Northern stock" and feels something like shame in the presence of beautiful tropical flowers. But she consoles him by pointing out that there are scorpions on the scene and a blistering sun to prevent total enjoyment. She ends:

Even in this isle richly blest,  
 Where Beauty walks with naked breast,  
 Earth is too harsh for Heaven to be  
 One little hour in jeopardy.

Other women in America have also felt the need to "alleviate Calvinism." At least this was the phrase which Harriet Beecher Stowe's husband used to describe the intent of her novels. Since his own name was Calvin and he suffered from painful interior compulsions himself, one can see that he was in a particularly advantageous position for appreciating alleviations. Eleanor Hodgeman Porter, author of *Pollyanna* (1913), was another alleviator. Her glad girl fairly easily converts the calvinist preacher to a brighter brand of religion. One place where the male and female approaches to calvinism can be viewed in close proximity is in a standard study of the theology of Jonathan Edwards.<sup>5</sup> The book is a serious work on a grim subject, but it begins with a quatrain from Phyllis McGinley in which she attempts to summarize the same subject:

Abraham's God, the Wrathful One,  
 Intolerant of error—  
 Not God the Father or the Son  
 But God the Holy Terror.

Our male authors writhe and boil a good deal more when they find themselves in one of the streams of our calvinism; it is only the women, by and large, who find the negative capability to treat it with humor or objectivity. But the testimony comes from both sides that American culture has been deeply influenced by John Calvin.

Outsiders have confirmed this belief for us. One of the more interesting and eloquent formulations of American literary culture came from an Austrian professor of English philology, Leon Kellner, who published this miniature early in our present century, at the beginning of his chapter on American poetry:

Calvinism is the natural theology of the disinherited; it never flourished, therefore, anywhere as it did in the barren hills of Scotland and in the wilds of North America. The Calvinist feels himself surrounded by naught but hostile powers; his life is a perpetual conflict from his very birth. The farmer who has to keep up a constant struggle against untoward phenomena, against the refractory soil, against drought and frost, against caterpillars and a host of other insect plagues; who constantly sees his well-considered and most persistent efforts thwarted by laws whose operations he can never calculate in advance, and which give no evidence of consideration for his good intentions or compassion for his failures—he is

naturally inclined to the belief from the outset that God, who created the world, is a well-meaning but unquestionably a rigorous, cold being who rules the world with some great purpose unknown to the inhabitants of the earth. The weal and woe of mankind may perhaps enter into the plan, and they may not. God, who, to other believers in Christianity, is a loving Father, is to the Calvinist a hostile Presence, threatening doom—unless he should be found worthy of grace. Who can know that he is so? And should he find no grace, he is doomed to everlasting perdition.

Kellner argues that this spirit “inspires the whole body of American literature, not excluding the humorists.”<sup>6</sup>

Some distinctions must now be made before we can thread our way through these materials with confidence. Professional theologians, for instance, sometimes warn against the danger of confusing Calvin and calvinism: the disciples, they say, are not always true to the master. It has been my observation, though, that just about every statement that would reasonably be called “calvinist” today can be traced back to the writings of John Calvin himself. It is true that emphases differ among the later calvinist theologians, and there is considerable disagreement about what should be held central and what is peripheral. The doctrine of Predestination, for example, may stand in the layman’s mind as preeminently calvinistic, but the most learned of modern treatises consider it to be peripheral to Calvin’s thought when compared with such concepts as the majesty of God or his providence. Yet even the layman can see that these two concepts are not unrelated to Predestination. Two other positions popularly believed to be calvinistic are not really the master’s teachings at all. Calvin frequently rejects the notion that children who die unbaptized are necessarily damned forever in hell; nor does he propose material prosperity as a sign of God’s pleasure and the individual’s election. He warned, in fact, in his *Commentary on the Psalms*, against “the carnal confidence that creeps upon the saints in prosperity.”

One of the recent contenders in this dispute over the central points of calvinism is François Wendel, who argues that it is a falsification to impose any system or central idea upon Calvin’s writings. He lists several that have been attempted and argues, rather, that Calvin wrote the *Institutes* to serve the reader as an introduction to the Bible. Calvin is not to be viewed as a logician or a philosopher, constructing a coherent intellectual system like that of Aquinas; his work is rather a succession of related themes.<sup>7</sup> Wendel’s thesis furnishes the groundwork for understanding the fairly wide disparities among later calvinist theologians. Where there is a multitude of themes, one feels free to pick and choose among them in search of those that seem most characteristic.

In view of this complexity the caution may be well issued against confusing

Calvin with the calvinists. And for that reason I have chosen to use the term calvinism generally with a small c, to indicate that the writers involved believed they were dealing in some way with the patterns of thought and behavior inherited from John Calvin, whether or not the links can be established with critical respectability.

It has not been my primary intention to look at John Calvin steadily, as if he were at the center of focus. He is, along with his doctrine, a rather mythical figure in our culture. In fact, popular biographies of the man, aimed at church audiences, have generally begun from an acknowledgment of some discrepancy between the man and the later myth. They generally offer a string of apologies and explanations seeking to mitigate what the ordinary reader would have heard about the rigor of the man and his doctrine.<sup>8</sup> It will become obvious that at the center of my study stand rather the most articulate of the American writers. Calvin appears, but only as the writers viewed him several centuries later. And these were writers not particularly concerned with an objective estimate (as professional theologians would be) of a thinker dead some three or more centuries. What they perceived and described, and what forms the unity of my study, is a view of American culture and its principles transmitted to them with the label "calvinism." The justness of the label may be disputed, but the fact will remain that a large amount of American psychic and aesthetic energy has been expended in coping with what these authors (as Mark Twain put it) "take" to be calvinism.

Another problem in terminology arises when professional historians warn against using calvinism and puritanism as synonyms, a usage that the reader will notice I have already begun to practice. Historically both phenomena began in the sixteenth century as quite distinct movements. But even by the end of that century they had begun to mix and merge as English refugees returned from Geneva. Under the more genial skies of England, this combined Reformation was able to flower in significantly different styles of life from that which developed in America. Harold Bloom, in a brilliant *obiter dictum*, describes what has actually been the case: "It seems true that British poets swerve from their precursors, while American poets labor rather to 'complete' their fathers."<sup>9</sup> And the observation can be borne out at least in the case of the most British of recent American poets, T.S. Eliot, whose consciously adopted culture, as we shall see, was not able to cancel the forces of his native culture.

One may keep the concepts of puritanism and calvinism distinctly separate only in the context of their earliest origins in the sixteenth century. After that, on the American scene, puritanism may be the most useful generic description for the cultural styles that evolve, but Calvin becomes the dominant *figure* to whom the conceptualizations are ascribed. No other thinker has been charged so frequently with our cultural paternity.

That puritanism and calvinism are actually used as loose synonyms by exacting scholars is visible in a controversy between C. Vann Woodward and Edmund S. Morgan concerning the puritan ethic and whether or not it applies in the South. Neither defines the phenomenon beyond the mention of a few ethical qualities they discern in the various regional cultures, nor do they probe for the roots, to see if the phenomenon may justly be connected with actual Reformation history.<sup>10</sup> I find at work here a methodological assumption about the culture, one widely held and used by the most sensitive critics, a general agreement about a set of primary forces that have molded our culture. Whether it should be called puritanism or calvinism need not be pressed too sharply, particularly when feelings run high. It has been my intention to trace the particular manifestations of these forces in our culture by whatever names they have been locally or temporarily known.

Viewed from the perspective of this native calvinism, many of the classic American works appear in strikingly different light. Generally, the lesser writers unconsciously mirror its presence while the greater find much of their work defined by the need to deal with the preconceptions directly. In exploring this phenomenon it has seemed fairest to deal mainly with the best-known American writers and with their best works, lest I seem to be elevating a minor theme to major importance, though a strikingly apt formulation can occasionally be advanced from a relatively obscure source.

There are many paths through the subject of calvinism in America. One of them is the purely chronological. The five points of Dort could furnish a different path, suggesting a thematic arrangement of the materials. Thus the notion of a corrupted and malignant universe abounds in the work of our most "nature loving" modern poet, Robert Frost. This comes to a climax in a later poem, where "one step backward taken" just barely saves the would-be lover of woods and streams from crashing into a gully along with great boulders and "gulping muddy gallons." One learns to walk with care in Rappaccini's garden. Further indications of the influence of Dort can be seen to lie behind Thoreau's *Walden*. The carefully wrought essay is, among other things, one man's attempt to purge and purify, by his own effort, the human dross in his nature, to shape for himself accommodations to the larger external Nature. Thoreau is conscious throughout of trying to pull away from the calvinist force-field set up by his culture. The context of his success is clear in the penultimate chapter, "Spring," where he shapes a little rhyme in the style of the New England Primer, but contrary to its calvinist principles: "While the sun holds out to burn, the vilest sinner may return."<sup>11</sup> This assertion of human freedom and self-determination, in the face of Dort, also characterizes the thought of the framers of the United States Constitution, and remarkably creative and destructive tensions have been introduced into American life thereby. Similarly, it would be difficult to paint the extremes of human nature

with a darker black than Melville uses in his chapter on "natural depravity" in *Billy Budd*, but he does not need to add much to what was already introduced by the calvinists at Dort. Finally, the implications of the notion that spiritual corruption could be, and indeed is, communicated through physical conception set up the arena in which some of the most twisted characters in Faulkner and O'Neill go to their damnation.

Some other obvious themes might be pursued. The double theme of Providence and Election is deep within the calvinist theology. It inspired Winthrop's famous sermon aboard the *Arbella* with its oft-cited phrase, "We shall be as a city upon a hill," which begins the long history of calvinist biblical typology in America and a mighty undercurrent of arrogance concerning the American way.<sup>12</sup> It inspires as well the energetic missionary movement of the churches during the nineteenth century<sup>13</sup> and the massive history of the United States by Bancroft. The special election of the American people and their providential role as ministers of the Divine Plan appears in Reconstruction propaganda and in the aura surrounding recent secretaries of state. At least one of the native American religions, Mormonism, is firmly based upon the convictions of divine election of the saints and providential guidance.

In my own exploration of the calvinist materials in American culture in each of the chapters that follow, I have tried first to clarify some aspect of calvinism. The chapter then branches out into examples, which amount to speculations about what the issue has meant in the work of several writers in the tradition. The reader will doubtless think of other examples and I welcome the cooperative enterprise. It has not been my intention to repeat the findings of previous scholars, to quarrel with other interpretations of standard works, or to give an exhaustive account of the ways of calvinism in America. Individual chapters take up in order what seem to me to be the main themes that derive from Calvin and impose themselves on our awareness. Thus, chapter 2 presents evidence from two major writers that calvinism was flourishing vigorously long after its supposed demise. The next two chapters look at several of our most powerful and independent writers, the Transcendentalists and their descendants, who worked mightily to exorcize the calvinist presence. Then, in chapter 5, the calvinist perception of the nature of God, the diabolization of the deity, is considered, both as it has molded religious experience and, as a corollary, as it has affected American speculations about death. Chapter 6 explores the paradox of a libertarian political constitution imposed on a religious culture which denies free will and fears that every spontaneous human act is corrupt. Some of these themes recur in chapter 7, where calvinism is traced through several of the southern writers, particularly as it manifests itself in sexual attitudes. Chapter 8 explores tragedy and speculates on the limiting influence calvinism has had on American



notions of evil. Each of the chapters is based on easily accessible texts and historical facts, but by nature the chapters are probing and unfinished.

It has not been my intention, in exploring the materials and implications contained in this book, to minimize the influence of other theological traditions. But it must be admitted that they pale to insignificance when we consider our major mythology. The Jewish authors, for example, have entered late upon the scene. The specifically Catholic literary voice has remained a minor one, rising to anything like prominence in the nearly unique case of James T. Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* trilogy. Indeed, it was Santayana's opinion that at least "in academic America the Platonic and Catholic traditions had *never* been planted."<sup>14</sup> Whittier's *Quakerism* is stimulus for a grand indignation, but one can hardly place him as a major voice among American writers; and the *Quakerism* of Whitman is a minor strain in his full chorus. There is no recognizably Episcopalian school in our literature, and if there were it would not exercise an influence noticeably different from the calvinism we are charting in this book; a century ago our ablest theological writer, Philip Schaff, described that church as firmly tied to Geneva for its doctrine.<sup>15</sup> When we look for a Methodist influence in our literature, we can discern the unmistakable tone of the Wesleys' prose and hymnody in many of the pieces published by Emerson and Fuller in the *Dial* between 1840 and 1844, and in the devout effusions of Bronson Alcott. But the influence does not seem powerful or lasting; indeed it is one way of isolating the quaintly dated aspect of these pieces. Actually, there has been something of an effort to minimize the respectability of Methodism in our history. At least one conservative and authoritarian history of the American churches has popularized the scurrilous tale that John Wesley became insane during his visit to America. He supposedly wooed a girl, was rejected, then tried to "excommunicate" her from the church, and subsequently had to leave the country in some haste to avoid a suit of defamation which she brought against him.<sup>16</sup>

The tradition deriving from the other great Reformer, Martin Luther, has also been difficult to identify in American letters, furnishing recognizable literary materials only for a small group of immigrant authors and for John Updike.<sup>17</sup> One statement of the priority of Calvin over Luther in the American mind is well expressed by Emerson. He makes several references to Calvin, always with some awe, but few to Luther. In an early lecture on Luther he presented the Reformer as an idealized image of the scholar who also led a revolution. This was at the time (1832) when the scholarly young Emerson had just completed the formal break with his own religious tradition.<sup>18</sup> In a later essay, on Montaigne, he puts Luther and Calvin together in such a way that Luther can hardly be seen as a serious contender for the attention of a refined reader. Emerson parodies the "men of the senses" who would applaud Luther "when he advised a young scholar perplexed with

fore-ordination and free-will, to get drunk." Luther the spiritual leader is submerged in Luther the unacceptable sensualist, in this view.

In the political area, Vernon L. Parrington also found Calvin and Luther to be useful figures. At the beginning of his *Main Currents in American Thought*, Parrington saw "far-reaching liberalism" gained by the Reformation in its break from Rome. Luther's thought, he felt, lay in the direction of developing the notions of political freedom and individual liberty; contrariwise, "calvinism was no friend of equalitarianism." For Parrington, at least, "that the immigrant Puritans brought in their intellectual baggage the system of Calvin rather than of Luther must be reckoned a misfortune."

But Luther's case requires special consideration, since he surely stands as one of the major shapers of post-Renaissance religious culture, of which America is a part. One arguable way of comparing the two Reformers is to propose that where Luther has influenced the culture generally, by far the more dominant stamp on America has been Calvin's. The assertion can be explored more fully by reference to a now-classic book, Norman O. Brown's *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytic Meaning of History*.<sup>19</sup> In one of his late chapters, "The Protestant Era," Brown places Luther and Freud at opposite poles in a field of forces that have largely determined the intervening culture: Luther is the initiator, Freud the profounder commentator. The exposition is detailed and persuasive—actually, the reader senses that Professor Brown's is one of the refreshingly expert psychoanalytic examinations of cultural artifacts. In the final analysis, though, one feels that much of the insight comes from Vienna, and that much of its value lies in what it tells us about ourselves as members of Western culture generally. This is no small accomplishment, nor do I mean to speak of the book in any terms other than those of praise. The relevant comment here is that where Brown studies genus, I am after the narrower species. My own pursuit is for our peculiar Americanness. And here Calvin is by far the more useful and seminal figure.

America has been until only yesterday a thoroughly religious culture. In the nineteenth century the United States was as calvinistically Protestant as the Middle Ages were Catholic. One need only read the lives of the Beechers or the Stowes or recall the grounds on which all nineteenth-century causes were fought. Even today America has a larger substratum of religiosity than the friends or even the foes of religion ordinarily take into account.

But one must acknowledge that pure calvinism has not been espoused with the same conscious clarity in every era or in every sector of American society. Santayana put the matter succinctly in "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy." The earlier rugged calvinism, with all its gloom and glory, could not continue to exist openly in what he saw as a later unfavorable atmosphere. It has, however, subsisted as sacred mystery and has lived as such in the American mind. It is a national mythology, the deepest and most

controlling aspects of which may lie beyond rational control.<sup>20</sup> Santayana's remarks clarify my own methodology. Some American writers are purely and consciously calvinist, accepting as true the Reformer's view of nature and the religious world in which man moves. Other writers are just as consciously anti-calvinist, crusaders with a new idea to oppose to what they see as the perversions of truth in the old. But more interesting still are the less conscious assumptions about human nature found in our culture, assumptions which might seem strange to a foreigner, for example, but which are so deeply ingrained in our thought patterns that we cannot explain our Americanness without taking them into account.

And our literature taken as a whole is significantly different from any other. Comparisons between cultures seem superficial unless they are examined at great length, but another remark by the Austrian Leon Kellner points to one immediately recognizable difference: "What did a lyric occurrence like the first call of the cuckoo, elsewhere so welcome, or the first sight of the snowdrop, signify compared with the last Sunday's sermon and the new interpretation of the old riddle of evil in the world?"<sup>21</sup> A great deal that can be contrasted in British and American literature is recognizable here. One can find fragments of our myth in such frightening images of nature as that elaborated in "The Pike" by Ted Hughes, but it may be that American anthologists have chosen that British poem so frequently because it evokes a strong echo from our own tradition.

French literature provides another benchmark, perhaps the clearer for being more remote. Here the deeply-embedded Catholic matrix functions in a similar fashion to our calvinism. Proust's massive *recherche* is many things to many readers, but it is also—to put large things in small compass—an exploration of that distinctively human faculty which is free of the limitations of space and time and which can range freely across material boundaries. In more traditional terms, his multivolumed novel is an experiment to test the data for the spiritual nature of the soul, an issue more lively in medieval Catholicism than in the Reformed tradition. The Catholic influence is even more obvious in a modern sequence beginning with Bernanos and proceeding through Péguy, Claudel, and Mauriac, where conservative Catholic doctrine furnishes the intellectual and emotional "world" of the novelists. Where authors who immediately follow them—Malraux, Camus, and Sartre, for example—consciously depart from the tradition, the answers seem quite different but the issues are the same. In framing questions of man's fate and destiny, issues of freedom, of marriage, divorce, and fidelity, of the levels and kinds of theory one needs to lay under political activism, the same cultural forces are obviously powerful behind these apparently diverse writers. And when the highly successful stage producer Jean-Louis Barrault comes to write his autobiographical reflections, in *Comme je le pense* (1975), they turn out to

be meditations suggested by the first week of *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola*: the nature of God, the origin and end of man and the need to focus on that end, the massive responsibility of human freedom in such a context. We have some objectivity here with regard to the literature of another culture. I believe there is a parallel relationship in our own culture, where calvinism plays a role similar to that of Catholicism in France. But perceptions of our own *assumed* contexts require the attempt to clarify our own subjectivities.

The city of Geneva once again comes to the aid of our enterprise. It has nurtured, over the past several generations, a school of literary criticism whose major principle has been to encourage the reader's reliance on his own subjectivities. What is presented in a work of literature is the subjective world of the author, made more nearly accessible than in any other form of discourse. The critic's work, in the act of reading, is to attune his own subjectivities as nearly as possible with the works.<sup>22</sup> The method works remarkably well in some cases. In Albert Béguin's appreciations of Péguy, for example, the soft Catholic piety of the critic so closely matches that of the writer that Béguin's analyses of Péguy become almost as moving and enlightening as the originals. What is required in this kind of criticism is the difficult work for the critic of rendering his own cultural subjectivities explicit and accessible.

What most concern me are the qualities of our culture as they have been pondered by our most articulate writers. Emerson once remarked: "The Unitarians, born Unitarians, have a pale, shallow religion; but the Calvinist, born and reared under his vigorous, ascetic creed, and then ripened into a Unitarian, becomes powerful."<sup>23</sup> Whether critics, writers, or plain citizens, Unitarians or not, we are all Rappaccini's children and live in his garden. Insight and objectivity are gained by exploring that cultural environment, and John Calvin has regularly been perceived as a major force in that environment. From his generalized stimulus come the powerful controlling myths, the stories of our gods, the symbolic tales that express cultural values. It becomes immediately obvious, then, that his influence has not been a totally baneful one. Some of our best productions are given frameworks of steel by his harsh presence.

## 2 THE PERSISTENCE OF CALVINISM

It may seem that calvinism as an official theology has long been superseded in America. Enlightenment philosophers thought they had buried Calvin, but reinterment was consciously felt as a necessity a generation later by the Unitarians. Even modern historians tend to put suprisingly early dates to the demise of Calvin's influence. A central problem that must be faced concerns the actual persistence of calvinism, its duration as a cultural determinant. I believe that the views presented in this book suggest its vitality long after its supposed demise. But for the moment some attention must be paid to those professional theologians and historians who work with clearly framed historical eras and can certify the exact date of an idea's demise.

Daniel Boorstin hints at this mentality when, in the first volume of *The Americans*, he states that by mid-eighteenth century "Puritanism was all but dead."<sup>1</sup> A biographer of William Lloyd Garrison dates the demise of calvinism in America by at least the 1830s.<sup>2</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, in "The Deacon's Masterpiece," jestingly gave a more specific time: 9:30 a.m., November 1, 1855. Among historians of religion, one currently finds the strong conviction that calvinism has long been dead as the national religion. Timothy L. Smith, in a well-researched study entitled *Revivalism and Social Reform*, declares frequently that the new religious movements stemming from the revivals of 1858 successfully routed the last vestiges of calvinism from the American churches.<sup>3</sup>

We are here at the heart of the problem of intellectual history, and discover ourselves "on the verge of a usual mistake." Such declarations can be made in an atmosphere somewhat too rare. Intellectual history must not be mistaken for the history of a culture. Its proper study is, in the words of Grimm, "the small number of those who by their intelligence and their works have merited well of humanity."<sup>4</sup> But true advances in human thought are picked up only by a few. Intellectual history falsifies insofar as it studies only the visible tenth of the proverbial iceberg and sets its conclusions down as applicable to the whole culture. To record Enlightenment and Transcendentalism, scientific thought and Naturalism, is to look only at the accomplishments of a minority at any given time. The general public is sluggish and conservative, under whatever new skies its brighter stars may be scintillating. Thus the nineteenth-century domestic novel—those of Holmes and Harriet Beecher Stowe are intelligent representatives—may present lives during the age of Darwin, but the characters in them sit by their Franklin stoves and

are moved by idioms of thought and action which are a hundred years older still. Much later, in the nuclear twentieth century, Niebuhr's popular "crisis theology" demonstrates that an avowed neo-calvinism can illuminate the reality experienced by Americans alive even now. The general culture preserves the old with a tenacity that must be recognized, even if it exists underground, driven there by its most articulate analysts.

A few counter-statements exist that calvinism was in no danger of disappearing during the nineteenth century. Henry F. May cites a census showing that among 288 pre-Civil War college presidents, more than half were distinguished by "Calvinistic Protestantism in the narrower sense of the word."<sup>5</sup> Statements of contemporaries should be even more telling. The most industrious theologian who ever lived in this country, Philip Schaff, wrote in 1855 of "the enormous influence which strict Calvinism still exerts on the whole land."<sup>6</sup> And immediately after the Civil War the New Haven writer John William De Forest, analyzing the *mores* of a certain New England college town (New Haven), found them thoroughly regulated by the better citizens' consciousness of their calvinist heritage, as they apprehended it. Dr. Ravenel, father of the heroine, is charged by one of the keepers of the culture, wife of a professor at the college, to "think of our Puritan forefathers." "I do," answered the Doctor. "I think highly of them. They have my profoundest respect. We are still moving under the impetus which they gave to humanity. Dead as they are, they govern this continent. At the same time they must have been disagreeable to live with. Their doctrines made them hard in thought and manner. When I think of their grimness, uncharity, inclemency, I am tempted to say that the sinners of those days were the salt of the earth. Of course, Mrs. Whitewood, it is only a temptation. I don't succumb to it."<sup>7</sup>

For our present purposes, to discover the persistence of this tradition to a still later era in American culture, let us take the period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Two figures seem particularly apt as historical probes into the popular mentality of the period: Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes and Mark Twain. These two are chosen mainly because there can be little doubt that each, in quite different ways, had a firm grip on the pulse of America. Holmes and Twain were both best-selling authors; they appealed to broad, unlearned audiences both in writing and in their numerous platform appearances. Each in his own way furnishes strong evidence that calvinism remained alive long after its supposed demise.

For some reason, around the year 1858, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., began a concentrated effort to exorcise the latent calvinism still in his soul and still in the souls of those around him. It is no coincidence that the year was also the one which church historians have labeled as the high point of pre-Civil War revivalism in the United States,<sup>8</sup> and the connections between calvinism and revivalism, with its fundamentalist theology, will be explored

later in this chapter. This was also the year in which Holmes wrote and published his popular anti-calvinist poems "The Chambered Nautilus," "The Living Temple," and "The Deacon's Masterpiece."

Holmes was at that point nearing his fiftieth year; he was recent founder of the *Atlantic Monthly* and was becoming nationally known as author of "The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table." He had already served his term as dean of Harvard Medical School, to which position he had been elevated because of the eminence of his writings on medicine. Clearly he was feeling the responsibilities of a nationally known figure to shape the direction of civilization. It is particularly interesting to notice the phenomenon he chose to attack.

The three poems mentioned above were written for popular consumption (first published in his "Autocrat" series in the *Atlantic*). "The Deacon's Masterpiece" celebrates the hundredth anniversary of Edwards's "Freedom of the Will" as also the date of the final disintegration of the calvinist synthesis and its hold on the American mind. "The Living Temple" proposes an antidote to the calvinist notion of the corruption of the body in the anatomist's admiration of the construction and operation of heart, lungs, and brain. And "The Chambered Nautilus" finds in that marine animal an emblem suggesting man's ability to transcend earthly limitations by his own power.

Holmes continued the attack as he ventured into fiction in the popular "medicated novels" he wrote during the following decade. *Elsie Venner* subjects to analysis the notion of inherited guilt in the case of a young woman infected by poisonous venom before she was born. Holmes argued, in a second preface to the novel, that if she could not be held morally responsible for aberrant actions arising solely from this cause, "wherein lies the difference between her position at the bar of judgment, human or divine, and that of the unfortunate victim who received a moral poison from a remote ancestor before he drew his first breath?"<sup>9</sup> The narrative situation as well as the theological overtones are similar to Hawthorne's tale of Beatrice Rappaccini, but the stand against calvinism is much more firmly stated.

More searching is Holmes's attempt at a total analysis of Jonathan Edwards in an essay written late in his life, in 1880. For an initial comparison he happily chooses Pascal, whose Jansenism has often been called a Catholic calvinism. Holmes takes Edwards's calvinism as essentially a heresy, for he found it necessary to construct a new list of divine attributes over and above those given in the Christian Trinity: "The God of Edwards is not a Trinity, but a Quaternity. The fourth Person is an embodied abstraction, to which he gave the name of *Justice*. . . . Its province is to demand *satisfaction*, though as its demand is infinite, it can never be satiated. This satisfaction is derived from the infliction of misery on sensitive beings, who, by the fact of coming into existence under conditions provided or permitted by their Creator, have incurred his wrath and received his curse as their patrimony."<sup>10</sup> The building of

a hell suitable in dimensions for the punishment of sins against a Being of infinite perfection—this Holmes takes to be the source of power and strength in Edwards's theology. Man, in Holmes's summary, "is competent . . . to commit an infinite amount of sin, but he cannot of himself perform the least good action. He is hateful to his Maker, *ex officio*, as a human being." From these two preliminary premises Holmes goes on to show how the familiar doctrines of American calvinism were derived in Edwards's thought: predestination, inherited guilt, infant damnation, the illusion of free will.

The essay is more academic in style than Holmes's familiar works. He summarizes all of Edwards's main writings with attempted objectivity. But even at more than a hundred years' distance the ancient writings have power to move. Holmes's well-known wit is brought to bear for satirical purposes on almost every item. It cannot be that these ideas are without power and life if this eminent man of the world can be inspired with the rage necessary to satire.

Near the end of the essay Holmes states: "The truth is that the whole system of beliefs which came in with the story of the 'fall of man' . . . is gently fading out of enlightened human intelligence, and we are hardly in a condition to realize what a tyranny it once exerted over many of the strongest minds." The necessary word here is "enlightened," which qualifies the estimate considerably. In the concluding words of the essay Holmes gives a truer picture of the state of calvinism in 1880. It may be that future generations will be free of it, he says, but it cannot be abolished by any revolutionary violence; it is a system of ideas "which have long protected and still protect so many of our humble and trusting fellow creatures."

The Holmes we have recorded to this point gives a certain amount of information concerning the status of calvinism a hundred years ago and suggests also that the old doctrines still exerted magnetic force. He would not have wasted so much shot and powder on a dead concept, nor would Doctor Holmes, a man of such urbane practicality, have taken such pains to extirpate the disease unless he had reason to believe it currently afflicted his fellow countrymen.

From here, though, we can proceed to a still more revealing document, one which gives insight into the hold calvinism retained upon even the superior and more liberated minds of America. Over many years, at least from 1867 to 1880, Holmes exchanged letters with Harriet Beecher Stowe. Throughout these letters one witnesses the growth of a warm intellectual intimacy; one feels closer to the inner Holmes here than in those publications he carefully styled and polished for a general readership. Holmes and Mrs. Stowe began by sharing ideas and criticisms of their published work, exchanging their latest books, and consoling one another for harsh treatment at the hands of critics. As the epistolary friendship grew they began exchanging



poems and commenting on their favorite hymns. The disclosures came close to central concerns at times, as when Holmes confessed that though only “as a tribute to the holy superstitions of more innocent years” he was still at the age of sixty-two unable to read novels on Sunday, “at least until after sundown.”<sup>11</sup> At two other points he reassures Mrs. Stowe that he still attends church each Sunday. The most intense and interesting letter in this series, and the longest, is an undated one, probably from the years between 1876 and 1880, in which he confesses, “I do not believe you or I can ever get the iron of Calvinism out of our souls.” He had analyzed the conditioning in an earlier letter: “The curse of ages of incompetent, nay, inhuman thinking, filtered through the brains of holy men and the blood of tender-hearted women, but still acting like a poison to minds of a certain quality and temper, fell upon me when only the most thoroughly human influences should have helped me to bud and flower.” In the present letter he picks over the points of this old Calvinism one by one: reprobation, predestination, inherited guilt, the just and angry God, infant damnation, and the pleasure of God and the saints at witnessing God’s just retribution against the wicked.

This long and deeply meditative letter shows that these issues are still alive for Holmes himself. He hopes that they may not be the principles which rule the universe and he trusts they are not, but the door is wide open for doubt. For Holmes, the witty public sceptic, educator of his fellow man, it is still a live option that the enemy may be right.

Jonathan Edwards has been read by a large number of interesting Americans. The recent reediting of Edwards’s works and the reevaluations by Perry Miller may make his relative popularity seem a phenomenon of recent years. But the fact is that Edwards, particularly “Edwards on the Will,” has been a source to which many of the shapers of our culture have felt they had to return. It is something of a surprise to find the liberal Holmes struggling with Edwardsian doctrine; it is startling to find Mark Twain in its grip.<sup>12</sup>

Twain provides documentary evidence that Calvinism was still widespread and deeply rooted in American culture at the turn of the twentieth century. For this evidence we must turn to the writings of the last two decades of his life. Some of these writings Twain published himself; others appeared after his death, in Paine’s biography; the rest, largely in fascinating, unfinished fragments, have begun to appear only recently and to cause some rather surprising concern.

In 1963, when Twain’s “Reflections on Religion” was published for the first time, it proved to be more than the general public could cope with. Dr. Eugene Carson Blake, at that time head of the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., stated that “I would prefer to . . . remember him as the American humorist who gave us ‘The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County,’ or as the author whose ‘Tom Sawyer’ and

'Huckleberry Finn' have enthralled several generations of American youth." This preference for the author of boys' books was echoed by Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, who felt that such writings "would do Mark Twain's reputation no good among those to whom he brought much pleasure in childhood days." To this refusal to allow adult status to Twain, Dr. Peale added a more sinister suggestion: "It is a highly emotionalized outburst by a man sick with hate and anger."<sup>13</sup>

Dr. Peale's psychiatric suggestion has tended on occasion to infect even sober academic scholarship, much to the jeopardy of our full understanding of Twain during these last two decades. The innuendo would place his works outside of serious consideration even before they are read. To be sure, Twain suffered cruel and unusual torment during these years, but he also published and lectured like one in full control of his faculties. "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg," a story of fine complexity and control, dates from these years, as do other respectable works. To accuse Twain of dotage or of more clinical mental ailments is to disregard his earlier cynical commentary and to rob him of his rightful place with the great satirists of Western culture, with Swift, Rabelais, and Horace.

Many of Twain's conflicts are within himself. One need only read the letters in which he touches on the death of his beloved daughter Susy. But his quarrel is also with the world outside, the world with which, as immensely popular writer and platform speaker, he never lost touch. For our purposes there is nothing so valuable in these late writings as his careful observation of the religious temper of his times, his commentary on the staggering weight of calvinism under which the culture labored.

It was in 1902, when Twain was sixty-seven years old, that he read Jonathan Edwards's *On the Freedom of the Will*. The book was loaned to him by his long-standing clerical friend, Joseph Twichell, after one of their recurring discussions of theology and human accountability. Twain became profoundly involved in the old book. He wrote Twichell that "until near midnight I wallowed & reeked with Jonathan in his insane debauch; rose immensely refreshed & fine at ten this morning, but with a strange & haunting sense of having been on a three days' tear with a drunken lunatic."<sup>14</sup> Twain followed the argument closely and found himself and Edwards surprisingly in agreement part of the way: that man is not free, that his choices are determined by forces beyond his control. But at this point he declared Edwards "a resplendent intellect gone mad." Shirking the implications of his own logic, Edwards insisted still upon man's accountability for his sins: "*These are to blame: let them be damned,*" as Twain summarized it. The final perversion according to Twain, is the sinister disclosure in "the last third, where what I take to be Calvinism & its God begins to show up & shine red & hideous in the glow from the fires of hell, their only right and proper adornment."

This diabolized God, the infinite monstrousness that haunts the American mind, occurs again and again in American authors, in contexts that they also “take to be Calvinism.” The technique of management which Twain developed was finally one of distance: so enormous and so immensely distant is the deity, beyond the farthest stellar spaces, that he can hardly note, for weal or woe, the creatures which are smaller to him than microbes are to us. This was the line of defense taken in 1902 in the dialogue “If I Could Be There,” which Paine conjectures was written as Twain’s direct reaction to Edwards: “*Lord*. “To me there is no difference of consequence between a man & a microbe. Man looks down upon the speck at his feet called a microbe from an altitude of a thousand miles, so to speak, and regards him with indifference; I look down upon the specks called a man and a microbe from an altitude of a billion leagues, so to speak, and to me they are of a size. To me both are inconsequential.”<sup>15</sup> The Lord then points out that although billions of microbes are colonized throughout the human system, causing at times even a great degree of distress, still the human “boarding house” would hardly take the effort to bestow even fleeting attention on any individual microbe.

Twain’s writings during these years show a fascination with microbes. Most interesting is the long manuscript he wrote three years later, *3,000 Years among the Microbes* (1905). The formula is still present in Twain’s mind: as microbes are to man, so is man to God. There the speaker is a microbe who has gone through several forms of life and now inhabits a disreputable old tramp, Blitzowski. This is sniping at the deity from cover: logically, God is merely a disreputable old tramp. It is also a reduction, an anthropomorphizing that removes all of the awe and magnificence from the Edwardsian concept of God.

In his later years Twain was fascinated by the religious attitudes still operative in America. Most of what he found are actually the tenets of a calvinism long presumed dead. Twain judged them to be perverse or infantile, and attempted to expose them by the dark brilliance of his satire.

One of the most interesting fragments extant is a group of six chapters concerning “Little Bessie.”<sup>16</sup> The writing dates from 1908–1909, late in the period when Twain was supposed by some to be sick, even mentally debilitated. The chapters are remarkably vigorous and beautifully argued. Little Bessie presents her mother with a series of religious absurdities, which, to judge by Twain’s passionate involvement, must have had serious currency at the time. Curiously, they reduce to some of the “five points of Calvinism,” though Twain does not make the historical connection explicit.

Little Bessie, an *enfant terrible* “only a trifle over three years old,” first assails the calvinist solution to the problem of evil. She asks why God sent Billy Norris the typhus, why He made the roof fall in on a stranger who was trying to save an old lady from a fire, and why he allowed a drunken man to

stick a pitchfork into Mrs. Welch's baby. Her mother replies with the generalities that all was done "out of love for us," to discipline us, "to make us better." Little Bessie, like a learned counsel for the prosecution, displays the fallacy of such applications in each instance. Her mother can only retreat to what she considers firm aprioristic ground: "I only know it was for a good and wise and merciful reason." Little Bessie pursues this complacent reasoning to a magnificent *reductio ad absurdum*. If God acts as wise and loving parent, then human parents should imitate him. "Mamma, brother Eddie needs disciplining, right away; and I know where you can get the smallpox for him, and the itch, and the diphtheria, and the bone-rot, and heart disease, and consumption, and—*Dear Mamma*, have you fainted! I will run and bring help! Now *this* comes of staying in town this hot weather."

The second problem which Little Bessie handles was a favorite of Twain's during his last decades, an argument which he pursued in several forms in his late writings. The paradox is one that is embodied only in classical calvinism, among the several Christian traditions. God holds men absolutely accountable and responsible for their actions, even though He created men with no free will and with a particular nature which inevitably forces them to perform certain actions. Little Bessie argues that in such a scheme (which Twain basically accepts) the only source of evil is God. "He can't get around that fact. There is only one Criminal, and it is not man." Mamma responds that "This is atrocious! It is wicked, blasphemous, irreverent, horrible!" To which Little Bessie responds coolly, "Yes'm, but it's true."

Twain's Bessie is a careful student of John Calvin here. In the first Book of the *Institutes* Calvin maintains this contradiction himself. In chapter 17, section 5, he argues that the evil deeds men have done are totally their own responsibility. His list is rhetorically moving: murder, violence, exploitation. It is the human agents alone who are guilty and will receive well-deserved punishment. All seems well, with a kind of over-riding justice in control. Yet the opening section of the next chapter, 18, asserts the crushing contradiction that "men can effect nothing but by the secret will of God, and can deliberate on nothing but what he has previously decreed." The same point was later expressed succinctly by one of the greatest English theologians, William Perkins. His *Golden Chaine* was widely read in the American colonies and contains the following formula: "Yea, God hath most justly decreed the wicked works of the wicked. The same decree of God is the first and principal working cause of all things." Is God, then, the ultimate source of evil in the universe? Twain's Little Bessie argues that the conclusion is inescapable, though in the chapter mentioned Calvin believes that he is maintaining the "perfect purity" of God.

In addition to the Little Bessie chapters, there are several other late works in which Twain explored and exposed the fundamentalist religion he saw

around him. One of these is “The Second Advent,” an incomplete story that Twain wrote in 1881 and to which he returned several times in later years, attempting to finish it. This story is important for its thoroughly satiric treatment of another favorite calvinistic theme, dear to the hearts of Puritans from Bradford through the Mathers and onward, the theme of “special providences.”

“The Second Advent” imagines Christ reborn in nineteenth-century Arkansas. In his maturity he gathers disciples and goes about doing good. One of the disciples, St. Talmage, answers the prayers of the drought-ridden farmers and sends abundant rain. Several hours later he has to be gotten out of bed to stop the blessing when “the whole region was well nigh afloat.”<sup>17</sup> But at least “the holy disciple had shown, now, that special providences were at the bidding of the prayers of the perfect. The evidence was beyond dispute.”

These are comparatively mild beginnings. Twain goes on to show that one person’s special providence may be another equally deserving believer’s unmitigated disaster. Twain’s mind is fertile with examples.

They desired him to pray for cold weather, for the benefit of a poor widow who was perishing of a wasting fever. He consented; and although it was midsummer, ice formed, and there was a heavy fall of snow. The woman immediately recovered. The destruction of crops by the cold and snow was complete; in addition, a great many persons who were abroad and out of the way of help had their ears and fingers frostbitten, and six children and two old men fell by the wayside, being benumbed by the cold and confused and blinded by the snow, and were frozen to death. Wherefore, although numbers praised God for the miracle, and marveled at it, the relatives and immediate friends of the injured and the killed were secretly discontented, and some of them even gave voice to murmurs.

There are similarities here with several Biblical miracles; the following leaves the matter beyond doubt: “To accommodate a procession, they prayed that the river might be divided; this prayer was answered, and the procession passed over dry-shod. The march consumed twenty minutes, only, but twenty minutes was ample time to enable the backed-up waters to overflow all the country for more than a hundred and fifty miles up the river, on both sides.” The consequences are readily imaginable.

Finally, there is general revulsion against the disciples and their meddling with secondary causes. Twain’s point is that every religious person professes belief in special providences, in God’s intervention in the order of nature for the sake of the devout petitioner, but no one has ever experienced such phenomena, and disaster would follow if they were to become common. As the public meeting decides at the end of the story: “*Resolved*, that the promise ‘Ask and ye shall receive’ shall henceforth be accepted as sound in theory, and

true; but it shall stop there; whosoever ventures to actually follow the admonition shall suffer death."

There are many links between Twain's perception of the role of providence in American religious thought of his time and its powerful elevation to theological centrality in Calvin's work. Actually, the thesis of a recent and magisterial work on colonial American religious thought, by Sacvan Bercovitch, is that this notion of divine providence is "the central aspect of our Puritan legacy, the rhetoric of our American identity." Bercovitch cites a multitude of writers and speakers who apply, with fanatic literalism, Calvin's double theme of predestination and providence to produce the conviction that "the destiny of Christ's people in America was the destiny of mankind." According to Bercovitch, "John Adams was voicing the most potent platitude of the era when he announced . . . that the *Arbella* fleet had inaugurated the 'grand scene and Design in Providence, for the Illumination of . . . Mankind over the Earth.'"<sup>18</sup> Twain's satire helps to trace the evolution of this concept in the popular culture into a still later era.

But Twain, although a satirist, was himself a believer, of a particularly intense stamp. And it is because of his deeply personal involvement in the fears and beliefs of his times that he is, for us, one of the most sensitive indicators of the strength of residual calvinism at this point in our history. For him God was an absolute reality, though Twain could only see Him as the monster fashioned by the national religion and worshiped only through pride and ignorance. Twain felt particularly persecuted in the suffering inflicted on those he loved, in his wife's long psychosomatic illness, in his daughter Jean's recurring epilepsy, but most especially in the lively pain that would last for the rest of his life because of the early death, in 1896, of his daughter Susy. A year after her death he wrote a dark and troubled soliloquy, beginning "In my bitterness. . . ."<sup>19</sup> The short piece has almost mystical overtones because of the speaker's sense of intimate connection with the deity. But it is an inverse mysticism; the deity is personal tormentor who best knows his subject and can apply the torture most exquisitely. Twain felt himself caught in a calvinistic universe where man was the depraved sinner and God his just tormentor. Several years later he was able to achieve sufficient distance from this feeling to satirize it, though the satire of "The Private Secretary's Diary" is far more fierce than funny.

In this piece, written in 1907, a recording angel transcribes the deliberations of the members of the Trinity met to consider the case of one Fannie Griscom, who as a child was found playing circus on the Sabbath and later on the same day compounded the sin by laughing joyfully. In the intervening forty-nine years her punishments have been varied and severe: scarlet fever, a painful tumor behind the ear causing partial deafness, and three trepannings

that have left her face partly paralyzed and her speech affected. The Divine Cabinet decrees “that she should not be punished further in her own person for her misconduct, but that she should now be forgiven and the punishment continued in the person of her eldest son, in the form of softening of the brain, and in *his* son, (when he should have one) in the form of idiocy (*sic*).”<sup>20</sup> There is no sign here that Twain is writing merely to expose the fatuous beliefs of simple Christians, but rather that he is out to expose the universe as it is and the cruelty of whoever runs it.

One of the most enduring and finely argued tenets of traditional calvinism is the denial that the will is free in any significant way. Here Twain is in complete agreement with tradition and ranges his satirical guns on those who would affirm human freedom. His response to Edwards’s *Freedom of the Will* was agreement, as we have seen, until Edwards tried to maintain man’s accountability for his actions, as well. It may seem paradoxical to find Twain arguing for a calvinist position here, but at least one of his main objectives was to remove some of the pain of guilt and fear of hellfire from those who believed that their impulsive misbehavior was actually free and responsible.

Twain’s most sustained argument against freedom of the will is developed in *What Is Man?* He published this book anonymously in 1906 in an effort to obtain a serious and unbiased reading of his ideas. The book was not widely sold, and Twain later regretted that he had not published it under his own name. These were important ideas to Twain, and there is something almost of the missionary in his desire to persuade.

The book is, in its entirety, a dialogue between an Old Man, who argues against free will, and a Young Man. Unfortunately for the conception, the Old Man is learned, clear-headed, and a fine controversialist, while the Young Man has read nothing, barely remembers the stages of the conversation, and is constantly reduced to emotional babblings when a cherished notion is destroyed. Commentators on the book from Twain’s day to this have complained that the arguments and opinions are dated. But since many of the relevant data for resolving the question depend on introspection, the question remains perennially interesting and unresolved. Twain, in a prefatory note to the book, admitted that the thoughts are commonplace and have been for millions of people, but complained that still no one “spoke out” on the matter.

It is not my intention to outline and analyze all of the stages in the dialogue, but simply to record some of the anomalies the work presents. The foremost of these, demonstrating that Twain is indeed an American writer, is that he assumes Calvin’s evaluation of man. A multitude of his statements, early and late, could be collected bearing on the corruption of man and his position as the only truly perverted creature inhabiting the earth. But in

*What Is Man?* he surprisingly omits the examples, the jibes, the indignation. The Old Man coolly tabulates the resources of man and the springs of human motivation; reductively, man is the product of training and temperament; when he comes to act there is only one primary force that determines choices, and it does so infallibly—man's selfishness:

*Young Man:* Well, let us adjourn. Where have we arrived?

*Old Man:* At this. That we (mankind), have ticketed ourselves with a number of qualities to which we have given misleading names. Love, Hate, Charity, Compassion, Avarice, Benevolence, and so on. I mean, we attach misleading *meanings* to the names. They are all forms of self-contentment, self-gratification, but the names so disguise them that they distract our attention from the fact. Also, we have smuggled a word into the dictionary which ought not to be there at all—Self-Sacrifice.<sup>21</sup>

Twain and Holmes were both perceptive analysts of the times in which they lived. One would be hard put to find more acute observers of the public for which they wrote. What they observed in their society, and indeed what they sensed in themselves, was nothing less than a vigorous calvinism usurping and controlling nearly every religious impulse of the nation—at a time when historians have declared calvinism to be long dead. It was Twain particularly who offered a living synthesis of what has popularly been called “calvinism” in America: the monstrosity of a deity who allows the undeserved suffering of the innocent and who shows his love by wrath, the visceral conviction that the mass of men are irredeemably predestined to destruction, the gross popular abandonment to belief in miracles and special providences, and the final bind that man is responsible for his actions even though not free to determine them.<sup>22</sup>

In 1932, historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., reflected at length upon what he called “A Critical Period in American Religion” before a meeting of the Massachusetts Historical Society. The chosen period was the quarter-century 1875–1900, and it is interesting to compare the conclusions of a professional historian with the remarks of firsthand observers like Twain and Holmes. Schlesinger was able to isolate several items which were taken as threats to Christianity by articulate believers of the time. Among these were the Darwinian theory of evolution, German higher criticism, the decision to issue a Revised Standard Version of the Bible, the data on other religions being reported back by missionaries to the Orient, and the tumultuous social changes being wrought by immigration and urbanization.<sup>23</sup> The view has both the merits and the defects of cool intellectual analysis. Data can be offered for each of his points. More difficult to judge, however, is their popular effect and especially the popular reaction. From our still more distant



perspective it is possible to grasp a broader and more detailed picture of the national religion at the time. What was taking shape in the late nineteenth century was the phenomenon called fundamentalism. The term still has popular currency, so that popular news magazines can use it to denote one of the immediately recognizable varieties of American religious experience. It was a massive force which engaged the energies and molded the lives of millions of Americans. It came also to be a formally organized movement, reaching its maximum effectiveness during the 1920s; it affected most of the churches in the United States and furnished the power base for numerous politicians, the best known of whom was Anthony Comstock.

Historical studies of the fundamentalist movement furnish telling anecdotes that help to identify what everybody knows about the fundamentalist mentality: the antievolutionary forces that won out at the Scopes trial in 1925, the labelling of biologists and liberal clergy as “communist,” and the banning of textbooks which “defamed” the Founding Fathers. A judge in Kentucky, convinced by an irate parent that the world was flat, as taught by the Bible, handed down a ruling against an offending textbook. The faculty at an Iowa college in 1927 had to sign a declaration of faith that included an article maintaining that a whale had in truth swallowed Jonah. The tie between large financial interests and religious behavior was more than suspected, as when in the mid-1920s a multimillionaire real-estate dealer from Florida tried to push through a constitutional amendment making America a Christian country exclusively. In fact, the Harvard theologian Kirsopp Lake found something sinister in the suspected liaison between Mammon and Christ: “It may appear to large financial interests that industrial stability can be safeguarded by Fundamentalists who can be trusted to teach ‘anti-revolutionary’ doctrines in politics and economics as well as in theology.” The antiintellectualism of the fundamentalists is aptly illustrated by the remark of William Lyon Phelps that “a knowledge of the Bible without a college course is more valuable than a college course without the Bible,” a sentiment put even more succinctly by William Jennings Bryan: “It is better that we know ‘The Rock of Ages’ than that we know the age of rocks.” Much of fundamentalism, then and now, was captured in the highly exciting prose of Sinclair Lewis in his best-selling novel of 1927, *Elmer Gantry*.<sup>24</sup>

One of the perennial problems attendant upon the study of American fundamentalism is the difficulty of defining it. The earmarks are clear: submission to charismatic figures, the desire to legislate simplistic moral codes universally, impatience with complexity, the need to conform, easy belief in miracles and the Bible, separation of church and state in the abstract along with close involvement between Christianity and politicians in the concrete, intolerance of foreigners and minorities—perhaps all summed up in a sense of

the call and providential guidance, the need for the American Everyman to distinguish his own face in the crowd by the bright crown of glory that prospectively illuminates it.

But it is precisely because of the antiintellectual character of American fundamentalism and even the illiteracy of some of its leaders that one is able to find little or no account of its religious doctrines or theological ancestry. It is at this point that Mark Twain becomes extraordinarily useful. Harold Kaplan suggested some years ago that Huck Finn was really struggling all the way through his odyssey against an imposed and inherited calvinistic conscience.<sup>25</sup> This does not conflict with the accounts above, from Twain's later works, of the forms of calvinism which he thought he saw rampant in the America he knew. The "St. Talmage" to whom Twain ascribed the miracles in "The Second Advent" is a thin disguise for the Rev. T. De Witt Talmadge, the best known clergyman of the late nineteenth century. Talmadge was a popular revivalist preacher who belonged to the most rigorously calvinistic church in America, the Dutch Reformed, and who, at the same time, clearly avowed the tenets of the increasingly popular fundamentalist movement. The claim may seem initially strange, but I believe that Twain has given us the most lucid account of the actual theological issues and beliefs that characterized American fundamentalism in its formative years. It fed precisely on those calvinistic tenets which could be simplified sufficiently and applied immediately to daily life. The link between calvinism and fundamentalism is illuminated by these satirical vignettes of Twain.

This link seems to have been realized in a vague way by the official organization of fundamentalism itself. In 1910 its directors published a series of ten pamphlets, *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*, which included a list of "Five Points" which were to become central to the ensuing controversy. The points included were the Infallibility of the Bible, Christ's Virgin Birth, his Substitutionary Atonement, his Resurrection, and the Second Coming. Under the same impulses, the "Presbyterian Deliverance" of 1910 shaped its fundamentalist confession along nearly the same five points, substituting only "Miracles" for the Second Coming.<sup>26</sup>

In naming these tenets the "Five Points," both groups were obviously asserting their sense of continuity with the calvinist tradition as consolidated in the famous "Five Points" of the Synod of Dort. Twain might have remarked that "miracles" and "the Second Coming" were both among the religious beliefs he found uncritically embraced in the culture. But limitation to five points seems to have been an important consideration, a guarantee of continuity with the American tradition, for both groups. In aligning themselves with the current fundamentalist movement, the Presbyterians of 1910 were obviously striking a lower or at least more popular level of theological sophistication. But in their insistence on including miracles among their

points, they were merely specifying, in more popular terms, the traditional calvinist notion of God's special providences, his intrusion into history and natural causes, as an essential part of their beliefs historically. Clearly, our calvinism has shown the ability to survive any number of premature obituaries.

# 3 AMERICA'S COPERNICAN REVOLUTION

Immanuel Kant claimed nothing less than a Copernican revolution in philosophy by placing much of what had been thought to be extra-mental reality within the mind.<sup>1</sup> The Americans, particularly the Transcendentalists, believed they were much influenced by him. But in the context of the argument here developed, their revolution was even more radical than his. Kant retained an older dualism, firmly adhering to the conviction that some aspects of being lay within the bounds of human knowledge while other aspects were beyond its grasp. This paralleled the older theological distinction between natural and supernatural. The distinction is particularly strong in the Calvinist mind: so corrupted is human reason, because of the Fall, that it is forever limited to a partial knowledge unless this is supplemented, supernaturally, by divine aid. The issue came to focus specifically on the doctrine of the Trinity, an aspect of the deity held to be unknown to natural man and accessible only by revelation. The thoroughness of the American Copernican revolution was to dispatch at once Kant and Calvin, abolishing the distinction between natural and supernatural, reducing the Trinity to Unity, and claiming all Being as knowable. The claim was progressively substantiated through the several authors discussed in this chapter and the next.

There is some truth to the saying that the first Presbyterian killed the first Unitarian; to set the American dispute in its proper light some account of its prehistory is interesting. Arguments have been made for the mild humanity of John Calvin because, while other reformers and counterreformers were sending heretics in droves to the bar of final justice, he can be credited only with the burning of Servetus. And indeed, the argument continues, he tried to have that judgment mitigated from burning alive to simple beheading. But at this remove in history the incident looks like a case of personal vendetta. Servetus is an attractive figure, immensely energetic and productive, warmly devout. He was learned in classical and biblical languages, a lecturer in astrology and medicine, a theologian and jurist, a geographer and mathematician, an early discoverer of the circulation of the blood. It may have been naïveté or professional ambition or perhaps even a persecution-and-death wish that impelled him to head-on collision with the established secular-religious powers of his time. Servetus attacked Calvin's *Institutes* directly in his *Christianismi Restitutio* (1553), declaring that there is no such thing as

original sin, that the Trinity is a three-headed Cerberus, and that Jesus was a human who became divine. Calvin counter-declared that this was "a rhapsody patched together from the impious ravings of all ages," and plotted Servetus's destruction should he ever set foot in Geneva. It was Calvin who prepared the brief against Servetus when he did enter Geneva, and Calvin seems to have guided the course of the trial with care. One of the few emotional outbursts Edward Gibbon allowed himself in his massive *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* was to express his indignation at Calvin's manipulation of the trial of Servetus.<sup>2</sup>

This issue must have festered with some kind of historical permanency in the reformed mind for three centuries. When the forces lined up again, Calvinist versus Unitarian, the victory was reversed and the old victor routed from the field with a suspicious thoroughness that begs for a critical investigation it has never received. The battlefield was New England, the Boston area; the Trinitarian issue was again central; and the undoubted champion was the elder William Ellery Channing. For a young and liberal generation, his brand of Unitarianism broke the back of the long-incumbent calvinism. So quickly was victory declared by intellectuals eager to embrace the new thought, that the issues have not been carefully analyzed even to our day. The truth of the matter is that Channing was a careless theologian and that, in the urge to shake off the old orthodoxy, theological accuracy was ignored. New England Unitarianism liberated a great number of minds for one of the most impressive intellectual eras of our history, but at its basis lies a historical mistake. And while the facile victory was celebrated and embraced by the young intellectuals, the culture at large would remain enmeshed in its permanent American calvinism.

The Unitarianism of which we are speaking was an intense, brief, but influential phenomenon which took place in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Behind it recedes a long history. Arianism is in the distant background as a possible strain or tendency in the Christian church as it tried to cope with the Trinity in the context of a commitment to monotheism. More immediately in the background are the anti-Trinitarian Servetus, Faustus Socinus in Poland, and Francis David in Transylvania—all of them flourishing in the mid-sixteenth century, all of them influenced by energies released by late Italian humanism. The movement funnels into England quite early through John Biddle, whose anti-Trinitarian writings were burned by the hangman in 1647. His followers came to be called Biddelians, Socinians, and finally Unitarians.

Shortly before 1800 Samuel Taylor Coleridge was preaching gratis in Unitarian pulpits in England each Sunday. It is possible that he would have become a major apologist for the idea had not a small annuity removed thoughts of the ministry along with the need to make a living for his family

and allowed him freedom to choose a career in literature. In any event, his early connections with the Unitarian idea may have eased its way into America, especially among those who held him in high regard. As it happened, Joseph Priestly was perhaps the most prominent of the British Unitarians to influence America; he brought strength and prestige to the sect in Philadelphia when he moved there in 1794. Philadelphia Unitarianism developed strongly, guided as it was by Priestly's theology and with its membership filled out by English expatriates. Boston Unitarianism was a different thing. It developed independently of the Priestlyites, though there was cross-pollination between Boston and Philadelphia: ministers visited one another frequently and pulpits were exchanged.<sup>3</sup>

The first dramatic indication of a Unitarian invasion of Boston occurred in 1785. King's Chapel, highly Episcopalian heretofore, adopted a "Unitarian" liturgy: all the references to the divinity of Jesus or the Holy Ghost were deleted from the Prayer Book. Ripples did not become waves, however, until 1805, when the Reverend Henry Ware, a declared Liberal, was appointed to the Hollis professorship of divinity at the ancient citadel of calvinism, Harvard University. But the victory was still not complete. Channing had to explain the new idea defensively, as if it were still some alien body in the bloodstream of Boston, some fourteen years later.<sup>4</sup>

The central document upon which I wish to concentrate is Channing's "Charge at the Ordination of the Rev. Jared Sparks."<sup>5</sup> It is usually printed with the title "Unitarian Christianity." Channing delivered the address in Baltimore in 1819. Sparks (1789-1866) seems to have been well launched by the Charge. He became a prominent Unitarian minister in Baltimore, teacher at Harvard, editor and later owner of the *North American Review*, chaplain to the House of Representatives in Washington, historian of the Revolution, and eventually president of Harvard. A standard history of American religion calls Channing's Charge at his ordination "The magna charta of early nineteenth-century rational Christianity."<sup>6</sup>

The Charge opens with Channing's announcement that he will offer an *apologia* for Unitarian Christianity on this occasion. He then addresses himself, in the first half of the speech, to the principles of biblical interpretation. Scripture, in its clear statements, particularly in the New Testament, is taken as God's revelation. Since God uses such human means of communication, one is obliged to use his *reason* in understanding Scripture, much as one would have to work to interpret any important work of literature. A second principle flows from the first: no item of Christian doctrine can contradict any other. This is the wedge into calvinism for Channing: God's benevolence, he continues, is so strongly stated in Scripture that no amount of rationalization such as the calvinists go through to save God's dominion can actually succeed, since it is doomed to contradict truths strongly affirmed by Scripture

itself. In the climax to this first half of the sermon he opposes the calvinists directly: "It is astonishing what a fabric they rear from a few slight hints about the fall of our first parents; and how ingeniously they extract from detached passages mysterious doctrines about the divine nature. We do not blame them for reasoning so abundantly, but for violating the fundamental rules of reasoning, for sacrificing the plain to the obscure." Thus, in a sentence and a half, Channing dispatches the old thought summarily. The moment must have been an exciting one to his audience.

The second part of this sermon concerns the nature of God. Channing attacked the regnant calvinism at exactly the same point where the earlier Unitarian, Servetus, had attacked Calvin. Turning directly to the doctrine of the Trinity he says, "Here, then, we have three intelligent agents, possessed of different consciousnesses, different wills, and different perceptions, performing different acts and sustaining different relations; and if these things do not imply and constitute three minds or beings, we are utterly at a loss to know how three minds or beings are to be formed."

Turning then to Christology, he says, "We complain of the doctrine of the Trinity that, not satisfied with making God three beings, it makes Jesus Christ two beings, and thus introduces infinite confusion into our conceptions of his character." He goes on to say that "According to this doctrine, Jesus Christ, instead of being one mind, one conscious, intelligent principle whom we can understand, consists of two souls, two *minds*. . . . Now we maintain that this is to make Christ two *beings*" (italics added).

Nearly all catechisms state this doctrine quite baldly: the Trinity consists of one *nature* (divine) and three *persons* (Father, Son, and Holy Ghost). Jesus Christ is one *person* (Son) with two *natures* (human and divine). Very early on, as a result of the controversies of the third and fourth centuries, these terms had been agreed upon and had customarily remained the *point de départ* for speculation throughout the history of Christian theology. The Harvard Divinity curriculum surely followed the development of doctrine through Nicea, Ephesus, and Chalcedon. And no divinity student could have been unaware that, in the fifth century, the terms *person* and *nature* had become canonized for all subsequent theologians in Augustine's classic treatise *De Trinitate*, or that the widely popular Athanasian Creed insisted upon the terms at length.<sup>7</sup>

Channing's substitute terminology is strange for a theologian. Instead of the two separate, highly functional concepts, *person* and *nature*, he chose to use the words *mind* and *being*, as I have italicized them in the passages quoted. Two problems arise. Channing's terms do not correspond with any lexical exactitude to the terms sanctioned by tradition. Since he cares little for definition, they in fact tend to blur whatever clarity the original terms had introduced into the discussion. But his second mistake is even graver. Where

the tradition had used the terms to distinguish the area in which threeness might be found from the area in which oneness was asserted, Channing uses both of his terms for each area. Thus he asserts that the Trinitarian doctrine would place in the deity "three minds or beings," and find in Christ "two minds . . . (and) two beings." This is precisely the assertion which Channing rejects as foolish and contradictory, but analysis of the Trinity as Christian tradition has presented it is unfortunately not touched by his argument. The tradition may still be vulnerable, but by setting the argument in terms which he himself has manufactured for the occasion, Channing is quite clearly arguing against a strawman which he himself has set up.

My discussion here may savor of the abstract and the technical; the mistake, however, was a serious one for a professionally trained theologian to make, particularly since a major intellectual revolution was about to develop on this basis. Channing's younger contemporaries took him as their champion who had slain the old dragon. But Channing's report of the battle was vitiated by logical fallacy and historical inaccuracy.<sup>8</sup>

Channing's was the first clear counterblast of modernity—badly reasoned and historically unsubstantial but convincing enough to a culture ripe for persuasion. No great casting about is needed to find the work which took up his fully established rejection of the old and set it upon firmer intellectual grounds. What Emerson perceived was a more general issue, and it drove him down from the pulpit and out from under the shelter of even this generous orthodoxy. The issue Emerson took up in *Nature* was nothing less than abolition of the distinction between natural and supernatural, a preemption by the former of all the ground previously claimed by the latter. Channing had only partially completed the job by robbing the Trinity of two-thirds of its substance. Emerson was to complete the job and leave, as legacy, a new conception of heaven and earth for American writers to explore.

A distinction between natural and supernatural had always been presumed in Christian orthodoxy. There are some areas of action and being inaccessible to the limited natural capabilities of mankind. In Christian theology grace supplied nature's deficiency, furnishing natural man with the means to achieve supernatural actions and attain a supernatural end. By himself man operated at the level of the time-bound and secular unless "elevated" by the entirely free gift of grace. Adam's story was taken as symbolic of this unfortunate limitation: there was, after the Fall, no intimacy between the two spheres, at least none that man could any longer initiate.

The division between natural and supernatural was assumed in virtually every religious statement made up until the time of Emerson. Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464), wishing his brothers to be mystics, would also have them know their natural limitations. Nicholas can communicate his sense of light



inaccessible only up to a point. At that point the gap appears and he can only advise, "If I strive in human fashion to transport you to things divine, I must needs use a comparison of some kind." Behind this statement is the assumption of the *anologia entis* which pervaded theology from the earliest scholastics through the Reformation and beyond, the notion that being is structured similarly wherever one finds it. Man's knowledge of ultimate reality is thus limited to shadowy and indirect analogies with sensual and intellectual experiences and processes.

Presuppositions of this kind, latent in the religious tradition, can even be discerned in the Kantian distinction between phenomenal and noumenal knowledge. It was Calvin, however, who brought a particular aspect of this general Christian teaching into central prominence. E. A. Dowey, Jr., documents the growth of this concept through the works of Calvin until it flowered, he says, into one of the major organizing principles of the final Latin edition of the *Institutes* in 1559.<sup>9</sup> Calvin's interest was compressed in the phrase "*duplex ejus cognitio*" (*Inst.* 1.2.1), two ways of knowing God. Actually a finer analysis discerns a triple knowledge, but Calvin reduced the first two points to one. Natural man can know God as Creator through the phenomena of nature. A better version of this knowledge, purified of superstition and idolatry, is available in Scripture. But both kinds of knowledge remain natural, unavailing to salvation. According to Calvin, the only kind of knowledge which "vivifies dead souls" (*Inst.* 1.6.1) is the knowledge of God as Redeemer through the supernatural gift of faith.

Building on Channing's foundation, Emerson constructed new patterns of perception in which this traditional distinction was abolished. Nature, if conceived widely enough, could itself be enough to vivify dead souls.

Emerson's first published statement of himself and his principles is the carefully wrought *Nature* (1836). The book manages to be at the same time intimate and objective. A characteristic of the book that should be noticed is that it is a point-for-point rebuttal of calvinism, and therefore a point-for-point rebuttal of Christianity as New England then knew it. A mature calmness masked the clerical renegade, thorough in his rejection of the old. Emerson refutes, for example, Calvin's assertions, quoted above, that a pure knowledge of God as Creator is obtainable only from Scripture and that a saving knowledge of God as Redeemer is available only from that same source. Emerson counters, in his own first chapter, with a woodland experience during which his soul becomes permeated by a sense of divinity, the life-giving wholeness of Nature. It is perhaps Emerson's most famous image which occurs here, where he feels himself become "a transparent eyeball," recalling Calvin's similar image (also his most famous): the natural eye is blind to God until strengthened by the "spectacles" of Holy Scripture (*Inst.*

1.6.1). Calvin insists that nature is not enough for a pure knowledge of God; Scripture is necessary for true knowledge, and to this must be added the gift of faith for saving knowledge. Emerson disagrees.

Another indication of Emerson's interests at the time is discernible in the naming of his first son. While *Nature* was coming to birth so also was Waldo: they appeared to the world within six weeks of each other. *Waldo* was a name with some history in the Emerson family, but it also recalled Peter Waldo, the medieval heretic who preached one of the purest forms of religion (the Catharist) ever to challenge Rome. In his denial of the divinity of Jesus, Waldo was an early Unitarian. In his insistence on obedience only to God, not to the Church and its priests, he seems remarkably close to the self-reliance preached in the first chapter of *Nature*. In his major tenet, that matter is evil and life is to be lived absolutely in the spiritual world, one could apply equally to him Matthew Arnold's description of Emerson as "the friend and aider of those who would live in the spirit." The naming of his favorite son is another indication of Emerson's anti-calvinist commitment at the time.

Emerson's own heretical break with tradition pervades his first book as an assumption. A frequently quoted statement from his introduction becomes much more clear and interesting when seen against the older assumption of two orders: "Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE."<sup>10</sup> Emerson allows for no place in his universe inaccessible to the natural powers of man, no supernatural from which he is limited and cut off. What looks like a distinction in the passage cited is really none at all. The soul is of the same substance as Nature: "I am part or particle of God." Because of this con-substantiality, Emerson can counsel enjoyment of the sensual with an innocent delight in chapter 3; this does not conflict with spiritual insight because of what he calls "integrity of impression" *Nature* and *grace* had been an alternative formulation for the earlier *duplex cognitio*, often stated as nature vs. grace; but as Emerson saw it, "Every natural action is graceful." In his final chapter, "Prospects," Emerson unmistakably places his concepts in contrast to orthodoxy. His message is nothing less than "the redemption of the soul," actually perceived as a given in the universe, not as a special gift from the supernatural. The notion was to develop, uncalvinistically, into his inflammatory statement in the 1838 Divinity School address: "Thus *of their own volition*, souls proceed into heaven, into hell" (emphasis added). The bondage of the human will, the absolute decrees of predestination, whether deriving from the Canons of Dort or from Calvin himself, are polemically contradicted here.

But Immanuel Kant was a more recent force in Emerson's background,

and Emerson's thought is also a polemic against the cramping distinctions which Kant too placed on the human psyche. Kant, like Calvin, bases his thought on a split between what natural faculties can know or do and where they run to the limit of their power. What the American writers of this period seemed to be aware of most as their inheritance from Kant was the epistemological problem. If all knowledge is filtered through the mental categories of space and time, how does one know the universe as it actually exists in itself, unfiltered? Various strategies were developed for dealing with the problem. For Poe, the dream state could impel one "Out of SPACE—out of TIME" (in his poem "Dreamland," 1844). For Whitman it was the perception of oneness, perfectly accomplished in death, "death's outlet song of life," that allowed him to transcend space and time. In a meditation on one of the Kantian categories, "To Think of Time," Whitman ends by abolishing it: "I think that there is nothing but immortality." In the same year that *Nature* appeared, George Ripley published his *Discourses on the Philosophy of Religion*. At the beginning of the first discourse he defines the truly religious man: "His mind is not limited to the gross and material objects with which he is now surrounded, but passing over the boundaries of space and time, is conversant with truths which bear the stamp of infinity and eternity." Even Ezra Pound, who with some reluctance finally made his Pact with Walt Whitman, found it useful to begin from the same Kantian limitations in expressing his sense of the value of art, in the famous definition of Imagism: "An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. . . . It is the perception of such a 'complex' instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art."<sup>11</sup> All of these are techniques for breaking through the limitations imposed by Kantian philosophy; they are also useful for breaking down the barrier between natural and supernatural that was central to Calvin's thought.

Emerson's own views on the subject of breaking through limitations are familiar to readers of his poetry. He frequently records those "moments" (which he shares with the British Romantic poets) during which divinity and significance are perceived by natural man. In the Divinity School address (1838) he spoke of the sentiment of virtue; it operates in the ethical sphere which transcends the material, but it is by no means inaccessible to man's natural powers. "The intuition of the moral sentiment is an insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul. These laws execute themselves. They are out of time, out of space, and not subject to circumstances." Transcendent though the reality is, "supernatural" in the older pre-Kantian vocabulary, man nevertheless can act and be in this sphere: "If a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God." Here the statement seems obviously hyperbolic. But as

*Nature* made clear two years earlier, Emerson has his concept and its limitations clearly under control. He can oppose Kant directly in his chapter on Nature as Discipline (chapter 5): "Therefore is Space, and therefore Time, that man may know that things are not huddled and lumped, but sundered and individual." He is at the heart of the problem of the one and the many. But the problem is resolved in experience, when he "feels by knowledge the privilege to BE." The key is a more complete knowledge of nature: "Time and Space relations vanish as laws are known." Clearly, the first thing to recognize is the revolutionary character of Emerson's thought, in the rejection of all former dualisms which would limit man's knowledge and action to one sphere and exclude him from activity through the whole range of being.

Whether one sees Emerson against the background of Calvin or of Kant, the issues of his polemic can be reduced to the same general ones. Both adversaries present classic methods for dealing with mystery by proposing a split or a duality, either in the nature of being or in man's faculties, wherein part of the whole—the most important part—is inaccessible to him. Emerson denies this limitation axiomatically and will not base his system on it. Indeed, it becomes a legacy which he passes on to one of the stronger theological thinkers of the American nineteenth century. Horace Bushnell, in *Nature and the Supernatural* (1858), would not go so far as to deny the distinction, but he deftly circumvented it by proposing that human will and personality *are* supernatural: "We act supernaturally ourselves." Hence the ease with which he could assert a social salvation earlier in *Christian Nurture* (1846): the child in a Christian family grows up Christian as a matter of course, growing to exercise supernatural functions as he grows in natural abilities.

But this is not the only point at which Emerson departs consciously from John Calvin in *Nature*. Calvinism is sure of the identity of the Lord of the Universe. One of the oft-admired achievements of the *Institutes* is the thorough development of Calvin's Christology in Part 2 of the book. But for Emerson this lord must surely be man himself, the manipulator of language and life, of thought, of spirit itself (to follow the chapter headings in *Nature*). Calvin theologizes at length on the divine Word in Book 4 of the *Institutes*; Emerson devotes a whole chapter, also numbered 4, to a secularization of the same concept. The unique divinity of Christ, presumed by Calvin and found at such a deep stratum in Christian orthodoxy that it could hardly be questioned, is abrogated in several writings by the young Emerson.

The beginning of Book 2 of the *Institutes* probes the themes of guilt, sin, and helplessness as essential characteristics of man. So anti-Emerson is this on the face of it that the contrary opinion in *Nature* need hardly be documented at length. "All mean egotism vanishes" in the woods. Calvin's regular epithets for man are "mad", "corrupt", "defiled", "bestly", "full of

rotteness": "People are so confused," said Calvin, "they think they are saved by doing good"<sup>12</sup>—which to Emerson could sound only like parody.

Emerson, arguing against an opponent long dead, may seem to have had the last word; but the accident of history was not enough to silence Calvin. John Allen's 1813 translation of the *Institutes* was there with what could easily be taken as a rebuttal of Emerson's confidence in the Oversoul. Early in Book 1, Calvin is leveling the ground for his own structure. After disposing of an Epicurean mentality, "that sty of swines," he goes on to a less pernicious doctrine found in Vergil and "the filthy Lucretius." He quotes the *Georgics* (Book 4):

Led by such wonders, sages have opined,  
That bees have portions of a heavenly mind;  
That God pervades, and, like one common soul,  
Fills, feeds, and animates the world's great whole.

Calvin is somewhat benevolent towards this gentle pantheism, which is not unlike Emerson's; but still he finds it a "jejune speculation" and its deity a "shadowy" one. There is no true God here, whom Calvin defines characteristically as "the proper object of fear and worship."

The fundamental optimism of Emerson's early works is the most obvious point on which he clashes with the calvinist tradition. But he advances as well into assertions of human freedom, the abolition of the supernatural (as understood in orthodox theology), and into a rebuttal of other classic calvinistic tenets. A further point still needs to be investigated, however: the revolutionary theory of language which Emerson developed in *Nature* and which he handed on as a legacy to subsequent writers.

Most simply the new practice can be stated thus: in a universe where there is no distinction between natural and supernatural, reason and revelation, there need be no special language reserved exclusively for one area or the other. The need for a specialized sacred diction disappears; secular language, the language of purely human reasoning, is sufficient to describe all phenomena and all experience. There is indeed, Emerson and his followers assert, such a thing as *bona-fide* religious experience; but purely secular, nontheological language is sufficient to describe it. A whole range of words in which theologians have traditionally discerned two distinct levels of meaning, such as "grace," "faith," "vision," "spirit," can now be used univocally. The phenomenon is aptly described in the paradoxical phrase from Carlyle, "natural supernaturalism."

It was Emerson, in America, who arranged for the first publication in book form of Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*. The title given by Carlyle to Book 3, chapter 8, "Natural Supernaturalism," is also the title of M.H.

Abrams's profound and detailed study, in more recent years, of the German and English Romantic revolutions. Abrams can provide the larger context here for the desupernaturalization of the religious impulse by the Romantic writers generally: "Romantic literature . . . differs from these theological precedents [millennial hopes for an earthly paradise] in that its recourse is from one secular means of renovating the world to another. To put the matter with the sharpness of drastic simplification: faith in an apocalypse by revelation has been replaced by faith in an apocalypse by revolution, and this now gave way to faith in an apocalypse by imagination or cognition."<sup>13</sup>

Emerson, with his experiments in secularized language, is fighting in one sector of this same war. His insights ring with the immediacy of personal conviction, but they are as well a local manifestation of the international revolution and were to resonate in American letters for some time afterwards. In the context of international Romanticism it was the revolution that made our world modern; it made our perceptions and the language we now use, our scientific enquiries, quite different from what they had been before. On native grounds, it seems to have been largely stimulated by reaction against native calvinism.

Emerson's experimentation with the secularization of language began early. In his first sermon, for example, he quoted substantially from Milton's *Comus*, as if seeking a secular statement as underpinning to the sacred message. Similarly, he once considered replacing the inspired Biblical text, with which New England sermons had traditionally begun, with one drawn from a collection of popular proverbs: "Poverty is a good hated by all men." By the time he came to publish his essay "The Over-Soul" in *Essays, First Series* (1841), the methodology had become explicit. After describing the difficulties of explaining the Over-Soul, he says: "Yet I desire, *even by profane words, if sacred I may use not*, to indicate the heaven of this deity, and to report what hints I have collected of the transcendent simplicity and energy of the Highest Law."<sup>14</sup> Experimentally, the technique is prominent in his poem "Bacchus" (1846). The poem is rife with eucharistic imagery, but the blood is "Blood of the world," "Wine which is already man," and the bread is "Food which needs no transmuting." The supernatural here has been thoroughly preempted into the realm of man's secular experiences. The worldly sacrament, in terms of the assertion of the poem, is thoroughly able "to cure the old despair," to repair the effects of "the old infection," and to create (*pace* Calvin) "eternal man."<sup>15</sup>

The theoretical foundation for this secularization of language for the description of religious experience had been developed earlier in *Nature*, in the chapter entitled "Language," though earlier in the same work the premises are already present in Emerson's sense of nature as All and of the multiple continuities existing between man and nature. And indeed language is merely

one way in which man *uses* nature ("A third use which Nature subserves to man is language"). Emerson begins with ethical concepts—right, wrong, spirit, etc.—and finds them each grounded, etymologically, in "some material appearance." In fact, he asserts (without much data to rely on) that the most primitive language, in its picturesque concreteness, "is all poetry . . . all spiritual facts are represented by natural symbols." The road back to this primitive purity, which even the modern wiseman can achieve, lies through simplicity of character and "love of truth."

The way thus far in Emerson's chapter on "Language" has been from man to material object to spiritual fact. Midway through the chapter he reverses the direction of his analysis with statements tending to substantiate his insight: "good writing and brilliant discourse are . . . the working of the Original Cause through the instruments he has already made." The Over-Soul, in other words, has made things such that no special mystery is involved, known only to the elect, nor is any special language reserved exclusively for spiritual phenomena. It "is not fancied by some poet, but stands in the will of God." For confirmation of this, the record of his own religious experience stands in chapter 1 of *Nature*, described in language of fairly pure secularity.

Emerson was the first prominent American to take so thorough a step away from calvinism. Early in his writing career, in a "Letter to Plato," this conviction had already taken shape: "I need not inform you in all its depraved details of the theology under whose chains Calvin of Geneva bound Europe down." And at every stage in his progress we may assume—because of his theological training, for one reason—that he was entirely aware of the multitude of fronts on which he was fighting this war of independence.

The rebel, though, may have moments of doubt and regret. Emerson did not record many such fears which visit in the night. But this is, I believe, an unacknowledged aspect of the poem "Uriel." Printed criticism of the poem, with a nudge from Emerson himself, has identified the biographical element: Emerson's assertion that the heterodoxy expounded in "The Divinity School Address" is really the higher truth, and that even the stern old keepers of orthodoxy must recognize it as such in their more enlightened moments. But more, it seems to me, needs to be said about the persona chosen by Emerson to present this claim of having spoken a new idea. It is Uriel, whose previous literary history is developed mainly by Milton. In *Paradise Lost* (3:645-742) Uriel is one of the seven angels belonging to the highest order, the Seraphim. For all his wisdom and purity, though, Uriel allows the disguised Satan to find his way into the universe, and actually directs him to the planet occupied by man. Milton hints at some flaw of pride in Uriel, since he is disarmed by the blatant flattery of Satan, and Milton comes perilously close to calling the Seraph a simpleton (line 687). Other characters were available to Emerson for the spokesman of his poem; metrically and mythically Ariel comes to mind,

or even one of the other Seraphs, Gabriel. It must have been for the added materials from Milton, then, that Emerson made the choice he did. If the story of the "Divinity School Address" indeed lies behind the poem, then the poem itself is a confession that the fresh revolutionary doctrine which Emerson had preached might actually, when judged in another mood, be a corrupting set of ideas. In aligning himself with the figure of Uriel, Emerson seems to have been half-consciously caving in to the criticism of his orthodox opponents; he seems ready now to accept the possibility that he has been the purveyor of a heterodox idea that might very well betray the cause of human perfection which he intended to promote. There are moments when the traditional calvinism presses strong claims in the American mind, even when that mind strives heroically for independence.

Emerson, then, is no monolith. His thought evolves in interesting and cautionary ways. The splendidly anti-calvinistic synthesis achieved in *Nature* was a phase, the first major phase, in the totality of his thought. Fragments of the vision appear in the later works, but less and less as time goes on and without the sustained clarity and elaborated detail. Emerson had feared this might be so. In the journal entry which is the source for the visionary passage of chapter 1 of *Nature*, he concludes, "O keep this humor, (which in your lifetime *may not come to you twice*,) as the apple of your eye."<sup>16</sup> His thoroughly anti-calvinist synthesis was only a momentary stay against confusion, a fabric of heterodox ideas that even he could maintain only for a time.<sup>17</sup>



# 4 THE REVOLUTION EXPANDED

Emerson's break from the calvinist tradition was thorough. It should also be noticed that it was temporary, and that the issues upon which he made such startling pronouncements were largely drawn from the concerns already determined by the calvinist culture. But Emerson's firm and early statements were alive and had the benefit of live practitioners. In fact, an American classic was being written under his immediate personal influence. The denial of any split between the natural and the supernatural, and the ability of purely secular language to describe sacred experiences—both are axioms of Emerson's early thought. The denial becomes an assumption and the theory of language becomes a methodology in Thoreau's *Walden*.

Thoreau seems to have been underappreciated by Emerson. Though the disciple lived quite literally in daily view of the master, Emerson's sight was curiously dim with regard to Thoreau. He continued to fear Thoreau even after his death, if the patronizing statements Emerson read at Thoreau's funeral are justly taken to be a symptom of fear. Emerson rightly suspected that there was a great heretic in their party, but he misidentified him in speaking of Theodore Parker, who was not even as radical as Channing, as "our Savonarola."<sup>1</sup>

Thoreau must be seen as fulfilling, almost to the letter, and equally with Whitman, the ideal description Emerson presented in his essay "The Poet" (1844). Emerson charged his new poet, "Thou shalt leave the world and know the muse only," and within a year Thoreau had obeyed, taking up residence at Walden and seeking what Emerson had promised would be found there, a "new nobility . . . conferred in groves and pastures." Within the same paragraph Emerson described his new man: "Thou shalt lie close hid with nature, and canst not be afforded to the Capitol or the Exchange," predictions borne out more in Thoreau's disdain for political and financial pursuits than in Whitman's affection for Washington and the brawling streets of New York. Emerson's description is programmatic in detail: "The world is full of renunciations and apprenticeships, and this is thine; thou must pass for a fool and a churl for a long season." Thoreau experienced enough wonder at and contempt for his chosen life to feel the sting of this prediction, and Emerson sealed the man's credentials by declaring at Thoreau's funeral that he had been only the captain of a huckleberry-party. Emerson was apparently too close to his own true prophet to recognize him clearly, but he knew that some rough beast similar to Thoreau was slouching towards Concord to be born:

"He will tell us how it was with him, and all men will be the richer in his fortune."<sup>2</sup>

Thoreau's major achievement, *Walden*, does not easily submit to classification among traditional literary genres: the journal, autobiography, essay, fiction. It is all of these, but more. I believe that *Walden* can also be classified as a Manual of Discipline because of the focus on asceticism and discipline as a means to personal freedom and a sense of the whole, and also because, quite simply, thousands of readers have taken it as such. The Manual of Discipline is a genre, not often found in American letters, which records an individual's experience of transcendent being, attempting some descriptive analysis of the nature of that being, and carefully analyzing the stages by which the experience was achieved. The very fact that the author is careful to analyze these stages reveals that he is confident that the experience is repeatable and he places himself in the position of a teacher with relation to the sympathetic reader. Finally, some description, usually symbolic, is attempted of the deity itself, both to furnish the credentials of the teacher and to aid the individual disciple. We have not thought of our literature as containing a Saint Theresa or a Richard Rolle, but a case along these lines is arguable.<sup>3</sup>

The perception can be approached from another direction, by asking what is the "Transcendentalist" element in *Walden*. The book has been celebrated as the work of an early naturalist, and more recently for its bearing on environmentalism. But some other element is required to certify Thoreau as a Transcendentalist. One feature is surely an intensity of ethical interest. Emerson once put himself in the context of Kant, for whom the moral sense was the only way of bridging the chasm between phenomenon and noumenon, and of Marcus Aurelius, whose exhortations to right thought and stoic endurance were early known to Emerson: "He is moral—we say it with Marcus Aurelius and Kant—whose aim or motive may become a universal rule, binding on all intelligent beings."<sup>4</sup> But a more central aspect of Transcendentalism is the characteristic practice of *ricochet*, the leap from matter to spirit, from experience to thought. The methodological leap is as old in American stylistics as Jonathan Edwards's *Images or Shadows of Divine Things*, and continues to be an important poetic method as recently as Gary Snyder's *Myths and Tests* (1960), a series of paired poems in which the first presents the unedited "event" and the second probes for symbolic referents. The methodology characterizes Emerson's *Nature*, and Thoreau became an able practitioner of the art while writing *A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers* (1849). Many ways of reading *Walden* have been proposed, but it is at least also a religious book. Thoreau may have been acknowledging the difficulty of seeing it this way when he wrote in "Life Without Principle": "I

have . . . done my best to make a clean breast of what religion I have experienced—and the audience never suspected what I was about.”

The curious characteristic of this particular *Manual of Discipline*, and one that has disguised this aspect of *Walden* from readers, is the fact that one will look in vain here for sustained religious diction of a traditional kind. This is not a paradox: a religionless religious book. The distinction between secular and sacred has necessarily been abolished along with the distinction between natural and supernatural; and so for Thoreau, as for Emerson, there is no need for a specialized vocabulary. No usage need be reserved in this new world. A vision of transcendent Being is recorded in the book, as a stage finally achieved; but the language is thoroughly purified of any traces of Calvin's favorite cleaving of the two worlds. At least in the present context this is one of the major accomplishments of Thoreau's thought: to describe the divine in secular language. Consciousness in Concord was indeed a new consciousness; and for its expression the language had to be used in new ways.

Chapter 5 of *Walden*, “Solitude,” is the last in a sequence of three early chapters that describe a progressive withdrawal into the self. It has some initial similarities to chapter 1 of *Nature*, which contains Emerson's vision as a “transparent eyeball” in the woods. Thoreau similarly describes himself as “one sense,” which “imbibes delight through every pore.”<sup>5</sup> Emerson's first two paragraphs describe the attitudes necessary for vision—solitude and reverence; Thoreau's chapter heading indicates the requisite solitude, though the other attitude he describes in his first paragraph is a combination of “liberty” and “sympathy” with nature. Other echoes from *Nature* in this chapter seem to indicate that he is experiencing the same thing as Emerson, if not being directly influenced by his diction as well. Thoreau's “While I enjoy the friendship of the seasons I trust that nothing can make life a burden to me” echoes the rhythms and sentiments of Emerson's “There (in the woods) I feel that nothing can befall me in life—no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair.”

An important phase of this experience is a certain kind of interior detachment. Thoreau speaks, in the middle of the chapter, of the sense “of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another.” This detached “I” will become important in Whitman; in Thoreau, at this moment, it seems to be the experiential confirmation of the Transcendentalist (and Romantic) conviction of a “higher” power in the human mind by which ultimate reality can be apprehended. But we are barely a third of the way through the book at this point, and when the vision of divinity comes it is so understated that doubtless many readers have missed it. The climactic encounter with God, however, indicates the direction in which the book is moving:

I have occasional visits in the long winter evenings, when the snow falls fast and the wind howls in the wood, from an old settler and original proprietor, who is reported to have dug Walden Pond, and stoned it, and fringed it with pine woods; who tells me stories of old time and of new eternity; and between us we manage to pass a cheerful evening with social mirth and pleasant views of things, even without apples or cider,—a most wise and humorous friend, whom I love very much, who keeps himself more secret than ever did Goffe or Whalley; and though he is thought to be dead, none can show where he is buried.

The passage anticipates recent Death of God motifs in American theology and ends with illusion to the empty tomb, one of the mysteries that early Christians loved to reflect on as confirmation of the Resurrection of Jesus. A lightly stated description of the consort of the deity, Dame Nature, follows immediately; but so exotic to the national religious idiom are both descriptions that there can be little wonder “the audience never suspected what I was about.”

For a writer with this kind of experience to communicate, the usual resort is to analogy or metaphor. And Thoreau makes an initially unsuccessful attempt in this direction in Chapter 9, “The Ponds.” He is describing the particular shade of blue that characterizes the pond, and attempting also to communicate the aura of personality he apprehends; he writes, “Such is the color of its iris.” The metaphor for the world as divine body, traditional since the *Timaeus*, seems to be developing nicely when a few pages later he speaks of a lake nearby as “earth’s eye” and the trees next to the shore as “the slender eyelashes which fringe it.” But the metaphor has begun to break apart; between the two sentences he speaks of the shoreline as “the lips of the lake.” The metaphor becomes even more grotesque towards the end of the chapter when he describes the springs welling up in the middle of the pond as “the heaving of its breast.” Items for the harmonious symbol are there, but at this moment in *Walden* they do not come together; the vision is rather a transcendentalist abortion, with lips, eyes, eyelashes, and breast grappled in uneasy synthesis.

Perhaps the reason for this is that the novice still has more work of purification to accomplish. At least this is a workable theory in view of the content of Chapter 11, “Higher Laws.” Thoreau begins there with the savage instincts, the lower demons of the soul which would delight to devour a woodchuck whole. In this chapter a concrete program of asceticism is proposed, one which has surprising similarities to traditional Christian asceticism. Careful control of diet is enjoined, along with abstinence from animal food and stimulants; even fasting is recommended: “I believe that every man who has ever been in earnest to preserve his higher or poetic faculties in the

best condition has been particularly inclined to abstain from animal food, and from much food of any kind." Chastity is also proposed, in its most rigorous sense of abstinence from any sexual activity: continence "invigorates and inspires us. Chastity is the flowering of man." The chapter is filled with disguised images from the monastic tradition, with the body as at once "temple" and "food for worms," as well. Actually, it is possible to recall the poverty enjoined in the first chapter along with the counsel of obedience to one's own higher authority in the last chapter, to find *Walden* a surprising compendium of traditional Christian asceticism, however disguised and individualistically realized.

Novice and master, reader and writer, are now ready to proceed to the final stage of vision, and the metaphor of the world as divine Body is to be asserted again with Thoreau's startling originality, in chapter 17, "Spring." This chapter has long been recognized as the one holding the key to *Walden* as a whole, and one paragraph particularly has arrested the critics as crucial. If a problem-solution structure underlies *Walden*, as I believe it does, then the images of new life, resurrection, and thaw all point to what the best of Thoreau's critics has called the "resolution" here. But the full achievement of the chapter has yet to be realized. The one overly-explicated paragraph contains only the first phase of the insight. Thoreau's experience at Walden has several more subtle developments that must be appreciated before we have his thought complete.

The celebrated paragraph sets the scene: a railway cut through which Thoreau passed several times a week on his way to Concord. He noticed the peculiar forms which thawing sand and clay took, flowing down the sides of the bank most exposed to the sun: "As it flows it takes the forms of sappy leaves or vines, making heaps of pulpy sprays a foot or more in depth, and resembling, as you look down on them, the lacinated, lobed and imbricated thalluses of some lichens; or you are reminded of coral, of leopards' paws or birds' feet, of brains or lungs or bowels, and excrements of all kinds."

Analysis has often stopped here, particularly in the case of the Freudian critics who were attracted by the word "excrements," which seemed to indicate the nature of the problem as one of arrested anality and the fact of its resolution. But Thoreau can surely be read for other patterns, perhaps more obviously expressed in his text. He stresses the fact that the shapes of the thawing material bear remarkable similarity to vegetable and animal shapes in nature: "The overhanging leaf sees here its prototype." The reality has a personal quality: "I am affected as if in a peculiar sense I stood in the laboratory of the Artist who made the world and me." The statement is remarkable not only for its confession of belief in the Deity but also for the sense of harmony with divinity which the speaker feels. The diction then progresses from "work" to "labor," and several apparent cognates are listed: "globe,"

"lobe," "labor," etc.—leading to a linguistic confirmation of his insight. The word globe is the one he has been searching for: "The soft mass of the *b* (single lobed, or *B*, double lobed,) with a liquid *l* pressing it forward . . . the guttural *g* adds to the meaning the capacity of the throat." When cut or "ruptured," the World Body speaks its inner Word, as does the human. The continuity of this creative exuberance is perceived even when its products are flattened out to feathers and wings, even the wafer thin wings of the butterfly. All is analogy, continuousness, vitality. Thoreau has come into the presence of Life, doing its work in solitude. The world is something more than matter. The earth at work is God in his proper activity. What is perceived in this moment of Spring-intuition is personal, ultimate, creative. The universe is animal, as Plato suggested: divine, creative, fruitful Body.

The insight is enjoyed for several more paragraphs as Thoreau finds applications. Trees are but leaves of this world tree; blood vessels are but further incursions of thaw from the vital heat. He even parodies his own drooping features, ending "What is man but a mass of thawing clay?" "Thus it seemed that this one hillside illustrated the principle of all the operations of Nature . . . not a fossil earth, but a living earth; compared with whose great central life all animal and vegetable life is merely parasitic." The way to this enlightenment has been that of asceticism, highly idiosyncratic, to be sure, but with traditional elements included—even such stringent ones as poverty and celibacy. The vision granted is also heterodox, but undeniably it is the vision of a creative force responsible for the production and the life of the universe—in other words, also subsumable under traditional orthodox concepts.

Most of all, to measure Thoreau's achievement in terms of the progressions followed in this chapter, the vision can be stated in secular terms. "In the woods," Emerson had said, "we return to reason and faith" (*Nature*, chapter 1). The two words do not relate to two different spheres of reality; in nature truly perceived, reason and faith are both functions of the natural mind. The statement becomes programmatic for Thoreau's *Walden*. The purely secular intelligence is able to comprehend and express the sacred.

Emerson's blindness toward Thoreau's achievement was demonstrated again when he came to choose his "representative men" for his book of that title published in 1850. Intending to describe Swedenborg, he says, "Nothing can exceed the bold and brilliant treatment. . . . He sought 'to uncover those secret recesses where Nature is sitting at the fires in the depths of her laboratory.'" Can he have been ignorant of Thoreau's thoughts at the time?<sup>6</sup> He goes on immediately: Swedenborg "knows, if only he, the flowing of nature." And the secret of Swedenborg's originality, according to Emerson, was that it was "based on practical anatomy"; the author, "in a book whose genius is a daring poetic synthesis, claims to confine himself to a rigid experience."

Emerson's reading of Swedenborg was paralleled by the practice of Thoreau. Emerson then turned to his perceptions of the shortcomings of Swedenborg and the reasons for his final "dangerous discord with himself." His genius "wasted itself in the endeavor to reanimate . . . what had already arrived at its natural term. . . . Swedenborg and Behmen both failed by attaching themselves to the Christian symbol." Thoreau avoided precisely that trap. He was aware of his calvinist tradition, though he referred to it less frequently than Emerson, and he defined his position in careful contrast to it: "It seems to me that the god that is commonly worshipped in civilized countries is not at all divine, though he bears a divine name, but is the overwhelming authority and respectability of mankind combined." This is from *A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers*, from the Sunday chapter, and he has just stated his preference for something more like Pan as a god to be worshipped. In both positive and negative elements, Thoreau better fits Emerson's description than does Swedenborg. If Emerson had had sufficient distance we might now be in possession of a magnificent essay called "Thoreau: or, The Mystic."

Emerson and Thoreau exploit one basic insight. It involves the necessary split between knowable and unknowable areas of being. Fundamentally it is an epistemological problem, though with their calvinist heritage they received it mainly as a religious problem concerned with the limitations of fallen man. The problem also concerns limitations of perceiving in space and time in a Kantian context—terms which place the evolution of American thought in the wider context of international Romanticism of the nineteenth century. Once it was perceived that this distinction need not hold, *de facto*, in their own experience of knowing, there was an immense sense of liberation and release, one that carried forward two generations of writers, each exploiting the insight in his own significantly different way, yet each developing the method another logical step. The insight, in Emerson's case, evolved into the means for a major therapy for the language, which resulted, in Walt Whitman, in an enormous and expansive sense of poetic health.

In "Passage to India" Whitman will allow not even Emerson's minimal distinction in the universe between the Me and the Not Me: "Nature and Man shall be disjoin'd and diffused no more, / The true son of God [the poet] shall absolutely fuse them."<sup>7</sup> There is no allowable dualism to the perceptive *amigo* who would read Whitman as he demands. But much earlier still, when Whitman defined his new poetry in the Preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, he acknowledged that he already understood and espoused Emerson's abolition of the Supernatural: "The whole theory of the special and supernatural and all that was twined with it or educed out of it departs as a dream."

With this background it may be possible to read "Song of Myself" afresh. It is quite clear that the thrust of the first part of this initial poem (sections

1-42) is characterization, a definition of the "I" who will speak throughout the collection. The "I" defined is nothing less than all of being, including the past, present, and future of all diverse humanity. This achievement, surely unique in literature, must be established before Whitman's historical significance can be appreciated. It is only on the foundation of such a speaker or "persona" being achieved that the metaphysical unity of man and nature can be asserted: could such an "I" exist (and the force of Whitman's poetry convinces us it does), then everything is "I" and nothing is disjoined from anything else. The problem of the one and the many is resolved in favor of the one.<sup>8</sup>

This metaphysical solution achieved in Sections 1-42 of "Song of Myself" informs the rest of Whitman's work. In his own development of the Emersonian insight, Whitman abolishes the distinction between body and soul; no meaning can accrue to an unseen mysterious life force that is not identified with body. Where this insight is most consciously expanded is in the "Children of Adam" section of *Leaves of Grass*, particularly in "I Sing the Body Electric." The first four lines introduce the subject and the thesis which is important to us here:

I sing the body electric,  
The armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them,  
They will not let me off till I go with them, respond to them,  
And discorrupt them, and charge them full with the charge of the soul.

Behind the fourth line here is a shadow of the medieval notion that part of the soul of the lover is transmitted in sexual intercourse (even causing proportionately shorter life due to such loss of soul). Also hinted is the uncalvinistic notion that such an act can heal natural "corruption." The supposition that will develop in the poem is that if body comes only from soul, there really cannot be much difference, or, as he puts it at the end of the first stanza: "And if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?"

Whitman's basic symbol, informing the great majority of his poems, is what he at one place in this poem calls "processions" and at another "the circling rivers." In its largest extension the symbol begins with the perception of the ocean of life or Being. The metaphor is basic, as in the poem "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life." This general Being becomes particular or individuated as it flows from the womb at birth: "Be not ashamed women . . . you are the gates of the soul" ("I Sing the Body Electric"). At the term of its individual status, life flows back again to ocean through the other womb of the grave.

What Whitman mainly celebrates in "I Sing the Body Electric" are the erotic aspects of the intuition, delighting in the physical images and movements but insisting that they are all merely "likes" of the soul; they are



identical with the soul or life and merely its visible aspects. The poem ends: "O I say these are not the parts and poems of the body only, but of the soul, / O I say now these are the soul!"

There can be no doubt that the delight in shock is based on the calvinist preconceptions of his audience with regard to sexual propriety; but the pro-founder debate quarrels with Calvin's presupposed split between what man can know "naturally" and what he cannot. Solution is through abolition of the problem. There is nothing but the oneness of being perceptible behind its visible aspects. The whole section in which this poem was placed, "Children of Adam," insists that the Garden, from which presumably Adam fell, is this world now, and that the world is coming out of a dark night and is ready to see this: "To the garden the world anew ascending. . . ." The final identification is made in the first line of another poem in the section: "Spontaneous me, Nature." The force of the comma is to set Nature in apposition to "me," forcing an identification where even Emerson saw distinction.

Whitman develops this thesis with rich variety. Because of his intuition of being, he has abolished not only space but the other Kantian limitation, time. His book, his poems, and himself are one, out of space, out of time. "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is surely a sexual seduction of the future reader, explicitly consummated in section 8, "which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you." A similar conception underlies "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand." The reader, holding the book on his lap, has this "I" by the shoulders (line 11). Consummation is again envisaged: "Here put your lips upon mine I permit you, / With the comrade's long-dwelling kiss or the new husband's kiss / For I am the new husband and I am the comrade." Time is again abolished with the last poem of the "Calamus" section: "Be it as if I were with you. (Be not too certain but I am now with you)."

One way of viewing the American Renaissance is to see it, historically, as a conscious break from tradition. New England calvinism presupposed a radical limitation in man's abilities to apprehend reality in any "saving" way. Man's natural powers could apprehend only a sterile physical reality; it required the influx of divine grace to enable the mind to take in the rest of reality, the supernatural.

The problem was focused more immediately for these authors by the neo-calvinism of Kant's distinction between the knowable "phenomenon" and the *ding-an-sich*, the unknowable "noumenon." Beginning with Channing and Emerson the distinction was abolished and unity of the two spheres was asserted. From this revolution the main theses of Thoreau and Whitman developed. Their works are therapeutic avenues of escape for the individual from the mental terrors of the national religion.

But if these leaders of the intellectual culture prosecuted their revolution successfully, two points are still to be noted. The concepts which controlled

their speculation were mainly determined by traditional calvinism, as were the questions they chose to handle. Also, where the most lucid minds of the era were able to gain some conscious objectivity with regard to the national religion, calvinism remained deeply ingrained in the thought and *mores* of the culture generally, as the remarks from Holmes and Twain, in a previous chapter, demonstrate. The attempt instructs us how strong the reaction was, the magnitude of the energies ready to revolt, and also the close ties with original calvinism even in rebellion.

T.S. Eliot's assessment of his native religion is quite similar, but his rebellion against American calvinism took a significantly different direction. Whitman was dead only a couple of decades and his massive presence was still undigested by American criticism when Eliot began to write. The range of potentially significant texts is large here—the ending of *The Waste Land*, *Ash Wednesday*, *Murder in the Cathedral*, *The Family Reunion*, or the essay on Dante are several possibilities. But I should like to concentrate on *Four Quartets* because of its comprehensive historical and cultural sweep, its attention to American matters, and its status as a late autobiographical work.

The *Four Quartets* seems to me to be Eliot's most personal statement. While he was living, Eliot refused to consider the project of an "authorized" biography. I believe, however, that he has given us a framework for it in the *Quartets*.<sup>9</sup> It is not that the language grows any less cool and formal, but the sense of his own personal odyssey and the history of his family gives the reader a clear impression of narrative unity through the suite of poems. The first poem, "Burnt Norton," places the scene of the meditation in present-day England, in a place that Eliot had visited. He seems to have chosen it as the opening for his recorded thoughts in the present because, as a country house that had been destroyed, then restored, and then been let fall back into dilapidation, it represented for him the difficulty of maintaining an orderly world view and a sense of the continuity of tradition.

In the second poem, "East Coker," Eliot returns to the English village from which his ancestors departed in 1667. The first part of this poem includes words from one of those ancestors, Sir Thomas Elyot in his *Boke Named the Governour* (1531), on which the twentieth-century descendant wants to meditate for echoes of a theologically rich and still coherent world view: *dauncinge, matrimonie, sacrament, conjunction, concorde*. The third poem, "The Dry Salvages," recalls the rocky New England coast where the last English members of this family debarked in a new land, and where Eliot's own family vacationed when he was a boy. Recalled also is the river, "a strong brown god . . . almost forgotten by the dwellers in cities," the Mississippi, flowing past St. Louis where Eliot spent his youth. The last *Quartet*, "Little Gidding," returns to present-day England, to the site of Nicholas Ferrar's lay monastery, the place where "England" most intensely "is." The whole of the

*Four Quartets*, then, can be read quite confidently as a family odyssey in which the chronological and geographical stages are quite clear. Framed by poems set in present-day England, the two middle *Quartets* explore the roots of the Eliot family in the rich English past and the interlude of the family's residence in the more sterile and negative culture of America.

There are many recapitulations of the tradition in the poem. For the kind of religion that Eliot wants to revivify, to bring alive in himself, he most obviously draws upon Dante and John of the Cross, with numerous allusions to St. Thomas Aquinas, Dame Julian of Norwich, and others. The poem is the act of a renaissance man incorporating various fragments of a long tradition into an intensely meaningful unity. It is also a verbal museum, preserving and presenting significant fragments of the human past. But so far the *Four Quartets* seems to place Eliot outside of the tradition we have been exploring, with the family's experience in America as only a distracting interlude of some few centuries. It is interesting, then, to pick up some of the other allusions in the suite by which Eliot seems to be consciously filling in and assessing the contributions of that American interlude to himself as a new representative man.

Poe is mentioned indirectly (in "Little Gidding," line 127), or at least the Poe who was admired by Mallarmé as purifier of the dialect of the tribe.<sup>10</sup> And later in the same poem, (lines 216–18), Eliot seems to have taken a lesson from Poe's famous comments on verbal economy in his review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's tales. As Eliot puts it: "And every phrase / And sentence that is right (where every word is at home, / Taking its place to support the others.)" More central to our subject, Eliot has emphasized the same aspect of the *Bhagavad Gita* ("do not think of the fruit of action") as Emerson did in "Brahma." Eliot's version is in part 3 of "The Dry Salvages." Thoreau, in the "Spring" chapter of *Walden*, had perceived the unity of the cosmos in the way in which all organic things are similarly formed: "The whole tree itself is but one leaf, and rivers are still vaster leaves whose pulp is intervening earth. . . . You here see perchance how blood vessels are formed. . . . Such are the sources of rivers. In the silicious matter which the water deposits is perhaps the bony system, and in the still finer soil and organic matter the fleshy fibre or cellular tissue." Eliot's perception of the same unity is stated thus: "The dance along the artery / The circulation of the lymph / Are figured in the drift of stars" ("Burnt Norton," lines 52–54). A sentiment from Thoreau's first chapter ("Practically, the old have no very important advice to give the young") is echoed by Eliot:

Do not let me hear  
Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly  
Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession,

Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God.  
 ["Burnt Norton," lines 93–96]

And from the same first chapter of *Walden*, Eliot could have taken the text for his meditation on time in the first part of "Burnt Norton": ". . . to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and the future, which is precisely the present moment." The quotation is from Thoreau but in its rhythm and syntax it could be from Eliot.

Whitman is also a strong presence in *Four Quartets* as Eliot continues to assess the American interlude in his family history. To accept Whitman, the reader must hold "creeds and schools in abeyance"; to approach Little Gidding, "You would have to put off / Sense and notion." In "Burnt Norton" Eliot's line "the trilling wire in the blood" (line 49) is expressed with the same metaphor as Whitman's "I Sing the Body Electric." And a few lines later, when he begins with "To be conscious is not to be in time," Eliot is attempting strategies for escape from the limiting Kantian category of time similar to those pointed out earlier in his Transcendentalist predecessors. It is possible also to hear esthetic echoes of Whitman as the Christlike wound dresser (from *Drum-Taps*) in Eliot's extended conceit of the world as vast hospital for souls, with Christ as "the wounded surgeon" (in part four of "East Coker"). Nor is "the rank ailanthus of the April dooryard"<sup>11</sup> (from "The Dry Salvages," line 12) dissimilar in function or diction from Whitman's lilac. But we are on even surer ground in seeing Whitman's message and diction incorporated into Eliot's synthesis in the passage beginning "O voyagers, O seamen," and ending "Not fare well, / But fare forward, voyagers" ("The Dry Salvages," lines 162–68).<sup>12</sup>

Mark Twain is part of Eliot's personal history also, especially in his mythologizing of the great river which flowed past Eliot's boyhood home. Eliot wrote: "I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river / Is a strong brown god—sullen, untamable and intractable" ("The Dry Salvages," lines 1–2). Lionel Trilling made this connection in an essay on *Huckleberry Finn*<sup>13</sup> in which he attributed the greatness of Twain's book to its power of mythologizing the great god "which seems to have a mind and will of its own, and . . . appears to embody a great moral idea." And Eliot himself, seven years after the publication of *Four Quartets*, wrote his own assessment of Twain's "only . . . masterpiece," describing Huck's power as deriving from his aloneness: "There is no more solitary character in fiction." Eliot's assessment of the book is high: "So we come to see Huck himself in the end as one of the permanent symbolic figures of fiction; not unworthy to take a place with Ulysses, Faust, Don Quixote, Don Juan, Hamlet and other great discoveries that man has made about himself."<sup>14</sup>

The presence of Twain's mythologized river is strong in "The Dry Sal-

vages": "Time the destroyer is time the preserver, / Like the river with its cargo of dead negroes, cows and chicken coops" (lines 115–16), details from Twain which also appear in the prose of Eliot's essay.

Eliot's late poem, then, is quite autobiographical; it shows as well a high degree of immersion in American writers and their best works. But we are given even more in the third of the *Quartets*: analysis and judgment of these American materials, of the American phase of the family odyssey, in terms that are at once highly intellectualized and intimately experienced. Locally, in the narrative structure, the American phase of his development is situated in "The Dry Salvages," the poem which includes allusions to the rocky Massachusetts coast, where Eliot's forebears landed in the seventeenth century, and the Mississippi, which flows past his boyhood home in Saint Louis. The place-name of the title and its connection with king-fishers, fishermen at sea, and a depressing lower-class atmosphere, had been associated in Eliot's mind with death and suffering for at least twenty years. They were in fact developed in this way in the "Death by Water" section of *The Waste Land*, though in lines that Eliot rejected before the poem was published.<sup>15</sup>

In part one of "The Dry Salvages" the sea and river are primarily destroyers; they situate the human condition in its context of death: "The river is within us, the sea is all about us." The lyric of part two celebrates only "the bone's prayer to Death its God." The calvinistic overtones of death, destruction, and terror in American literature will be elaborated on in the following chapter. Eliot develops his own version of the phenomenon in the meditative section that follows, when he describes this lyric as "the backward half-look / Over the shoulder, towards the primitive terror." This may be the experience "of many [American] generations," but the narrator himself can now find alternatives: "It seems, as one becomes older, / That the past has another pattern." It was perhaps "due to misunderstanding, / Having hoped for the wrong things or dreaded the wrong things" that this pocket of Western civilization developed. Eliot, in "The Dry Salvages," seems to feel that America is a dreadful historical error, one that makes sense only when the viewer is "encouraged by superficial notions of evolution." The narrator discerns only "the wrong things" in his personal prehistory, such as "the bitter apple and the bite in the apple" prominent in New England calvinism. Part three of the poem is, then, a meditation on American restlessness and change, picking up Emerson's and Whitman's confidence in the natural flow of things into the future, undergirded as they undergirded their thought by themes introduced from "Krishna."

The short lyric of part four is a prayer addressed to the Virgin in diction reminiscent of the Book of Common Prayer, asking her very uncalvinistic intercession for the fishermen and others who face the terrors of death at sea. One remembers suddenly that other fishermen, from Latin and Mediterra-

nean climes, have taken over the Gloucester trade: Eliot had named them "Portuguese" in a headnote originally written for the poem but later removed. But such "Catholic" materials begin to tip the *Four Quartets*, at this point, toward the next poem, the home poem of "Little Gidding." The link is further strengthened when one finds, in the last section of this poem, that the setting is firmly back in England. In this last section the present finite individual (addressed as "You are the music / While the music lasts") is encouraged to find the timeless, "The point of intersection of the timeless / With time." I take it that one is hereby charged to step out of the stream of aberrant forces impinging from the American past, and through "prayer, observance, discipline, thought. and action," to accept the gift, the "Incarnation."

Eliot's *Four Quartets* is an impressive chronicle of his family. The narrative of the poem takes the reader from the sterile present directly to the past, where religion, language, and culture mutually enrich one another. The third Quartet then explores the family interlude in America, retrieving negative cultural images from that experience. The last of the four Quartets returns the reader to the mainstream in England.

It is probably in Eliot most strongly that we sense the notion of America as a historical mistake, an aberration in the historical flow of the great tradition of the conservative Christian West. The final canto of the final poem in the suite asserts the necessity of a return to the point, perhaps somewhat arbitrarily chosen, where the tradition broke off: "the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time" ["Little Gidding," lines 240-42]. It is only in England, not in America, that the mystical experience is available, that the Transcendentalist urge for authentic personal religion, for removal from the limitations of space and time, can be accomplished: "Here, the intersection of the timeless moment / Is England and nowhere. Never and always." The key figures in this tradition have been summoned: the Apostle John, Dante, the Spanish and especially the medieval English mystics, holy men from the Anglican tradition, even John Milton, Dean Swift, and Yeats. And the present final setting of the poem, published as it was in the midst of the Anglo-Catholic revival, seemed to indicate the potency of such a renaissance, being carried on as it was by such figures as Evelyn Underhill, W.H. Auden, Graham Greene, Gabriel Fielding, and a host of other writers. The effect of Eliot's meditation on these historical traditions was carefully to evaluate but then finally to abolish the American contribution.

Eliot, then, has worked his way through the American materials as well as the more generally European. We find in Eliot the return of a failed experiment back into the mainstream of Western culture. Eliot may seem to be placed uneasily in the company of the American Transcendentalists here. But like them he is sensitive to the negative and destructive elements in the

American religious tradition. And like them he struggles to find an alternative religious synthesis that will prove more personally satisfying and more congenial to his poetic talents.

In a sense, Eliot's position is in itself a critique of the Transcendentalists' critique of calvinism. The dialect of the American religious and theological tribe had to be purified, to be sure, but one senses in Eliot a far more conservative impulse. Where the Transcendentalists would go into the future unencumbered by the baggage of the unbearable past, Eliot would imagine himself, rather, deeper into the past for the freshness of the tradition closer to its source. He ends by restoring at a higher and presumably now more viable level all that the Transcendentalists had been unable to accept because of calvinist encrustations: the Incarnation, the Atonement, the liturgy and sacraments, the traditional language of theology and mysticism. Eliot himself was "the wounded surgeon," and *Four Quartets* is an operation to excise the American malignancy and to rejoin the present to its severed roots in the past.

Eliot's stock suffers strange fluctuations from year to year—royalty, conservatism, and Catholicism are difficult commitments for a modern reader to make—so that finally it remains moot whether his new synthesis can be valid for all or only for a few like-minded learned searchers. And even among these latter there have been second thoughts. F.R. Leavis, long a champion of Eliot's work, has ended with some reservations. In one of his last books he writes a long appreciation of the "musicality" of the *Quartets*, but towards the end the reader senses him recoiling, with some regret, from "the Eliotic fear of life."<sup>16</sup>

There appears, then, to be a strong line of continuity from Channing and Emerson, through Thoreau and Whitman, to Eliot. At the thematic level they are all religious writers, struggling in one way or another against the powerful presence of calvinism in their native culture. All are intensely interested in authentic religious experience. In the case of several of them, Thoreau especially, the religious dimension of their writing is obscured because the vocabulary does not match our inherited calvinistic diction for speaking of divinity. All strive mightily to free themselves from the pull of their native religion. And, in the case of Eliot, the whole culture of America must be shaken off because of its divergence from the Western religious tradition.

# 5 DEATH AND THE DEITY

In the thought peculiar to Whitman and Emerson the soul is quite willing to take wings and soar to a vision of transphenomenal being. No Daedalus fears obtrude, nor any terror of the unknown. The universe is man's by right of optimism. Knowing Nature as they insist they do, no alien nature can lurk there to terrify. The nature of Deity is Benevolence, and Death is easy access to him.

This, however, is one artistic and intellectual view, in conscious rebellion against the tradition. There are other views of God and death that stand in opposition. Mark Twain reserved the most formal prose of his career for description of the national deity.

“Strange! that you should not have suspected, years ago, centuries, ages, æons ago! for you have existed, companionless, through all the eternities. Strange, indeed, that you should not have suspected that your universe and its contents were only dreams, visions, fictions! Strange, because they are so frankly and hysterically insane—like all dreams: a God who could make good children as easily as bad, yet preferred to make bad ones; who could have made every one of them happy, yet never made a single happy one; who made them prize their bitter life, yet stingily cut it short; who gave his angels eternal happiness unearned, yet required his other children to earn it; who gave his angels painless lives, yet cursed his other children with biting miseries and maladies of mind and body; who mouths justice, and invented hell—mouths mercy, and invented hell—mouths Golden Rules, and forgiveness multiplied by seventy times seven, and invented hell; who mouths morals to other people, and has none himself; who frowns upon crimes, yet commits them all; who created man without invitation, then tries to shuffle the responsibility for man's acts upon man, instead of honorably placing it where it belongs, upon himself; and finally, with altogether divine obtuseness, invites this poor abused slave to worship him!”<sup>1</sup>

This American national deity is called “calvinistic” with some justice. Calvin is the theologian who most concentrates these materials into one figure. St. Augustine, because of the polemical nature of his writings, can be cited at almost any point in the theological spectrum. With curious selectivity Calvin quotes him as follows: “In a wondrous divine way He loved us even when He hated us” (*Inst.* 2.16.4). The classic American text for this is found in the introspective recollections of our greatest theologian, Jonathan Edwards. Early in his *Personal Narrative* he states:



From my childhood up, my mind had been full of objections against the doctrine of God's sovereignty, in choosing whom he would to eternal life, and rejecting whom he pleased; leaving them eternally to perish, and be everlastingly in hell. It used to appear like a horrible doctrine to me. . . . But I have often, since that first conviction, had quite another kind of sense of God's sovereignty than I had then. I have often since had not only a conviction, but a delightful conviction. The doctrine has very often appeared exceeding pleasant, bright, and sweet. Absolute sovereignty is what I love to ascribe to God. But my first conviction was not so.

One must allow for the occasional power and necessity of the paradox, but this is not to say that every paradox is immune to criticism. The paradox *manqué*, the unresolvable paradox, is simply a contradiction; one may live with it and even find in it a certain expression of one's own emotional turmoil, though finally it is a form of self-deception, a lie. But the pervasive American theology has always allowed the deity full license. The ways of God are not our own. Although he may seem to act consistently like a brute and a thug, still there is a type of American piety that has not needed to strain this gnat from the potion it easily drinks. And it seems quite likely that this vivid image of a god who hates men is a thin disguise for a man who deeply loathes himself. At least several quotations like the one following, from the sermon entitled "Men Naturally God's Enemies," could be selected from Edwards's writings: "A natural man has a heart like the heart of a devil. . . . The heart of a natural man is as destitute of love to God as a dead, stiff, cold corpse is of vital heat." Death and self-hatred are linked here, by our earliest theologian, to generate powerful feelings which may give us some clue to the nature of our literature and our speculation.

Among those who have studied Edwards's *Personal Narrative*, Edward H. Davidson has shown perhaps the greatest interest in the personal state of mind behind it. Davidson believed the *Narrative* to be the work of a man who, in his late thirties, felt himself to be at that point in life where the sense of wonder and awe—the foundation of his religious sentiments—had sensibly begun to wane, a visionary loss such as many have felt at that age. Edwards restimulated his spiritual fervor, according to Davidson, by the strategy of total abandonment to divine sovereignty. "Thus to live in submission is to live in divine wonder. And thus for Edwards the character of a man is not really his own and certainly not of his making."<sup>2</sup> Davidson's words echo, perhaps unconsciously, the phrase repeated with powerful rhetorical effect in one of John Calvin's most famous sermons: "We are not our own." Notable in Edwards's statement is the progression from an emotional state which he describes as "horrible" to a further state where quite different emotional words dominate: "delightful," "pleasant," "sweet." The salvation from self-loathing, in this

American exemplar, lay in following the calvinist direction of abandonment of human reason. Edwards was a man of powerful intellect; his emotional life was even more powerful.

When Joseph Campbell, in his early study of various mythologies and their common themes, presented what he called "the ogre aspect of the Father," it was to a selection of texts from Jonathan Edwards that he turned for illustration.<sup>3</sup> The primitive calvinist mind revealed there has no room for anything but hierarchy and abasement. Man approaches the final Being not merely with traditional Christian reverence and awe, but with well-motivated terror. Another early calvinist who worked this theme with even more delight was Michael Wigglesworth, whose obscene deity separates families and burns babies at the Day of Doom. Wigglesworth's divinity, though attempts have been made to defend the man and his doctrine, is finally a Moloch whose ways we are to praise.

Ye sinful wights, and cursed sprights,  
     that work Iniquity,  
 Depart together from me for ever  
     to endless Misery;  
 Your portion take in yonder Lake,  
     where Fire and Brimstone flameth:  
 Suffer the smart, which your desert  
     as it's due wages claimeth

The phenomenon seems necessarily to flow from the milieu that characterized colonial America: one stepped into it as into an atmosphere that could do nothing else but poison the breather to this view. There are contrasting views in our literature: Anne Bradstreet's God is sweet and so is Edward Taylor's; Roger Williams insisted on the imitation of Christ and the ethic of love. But the contrast is particularly illuminating here. Bradstreet, Taylor, and Williams were well-educated, and educated in England. Wigglesworth, while he did not imbibe the atmosphere from his birth, came to New England at the age of seven and received only the clerical indoctrination of a Harvard student of that era.

One of the accomplishments of Walt Whitman was that he was able to synthesize and systematize diverse elements in the American mind. He rarely deals with the personal God of Christian orthodoxy. The sense of personality he finds in the universe is rather elaborated from himself, from the expanding and encompassing "I" who speaks his poems. Whitman generally removes the Christian Trinity from the heavens and then repersonalizes the whole with his cosmic persona

But on at least one occasion, in "Chanting the Square Deific," Whitman turns to the American religion and puts together some of the elements he

finds there. The poem is consciously heterodox: Whitman needs four elements, instead of the Christian Trinity, to balance the forces of love and hate, evil and mildness, which the tradition presents. The poem mirrors a mental geography similar to that found in William Blake's longer poems. The many faces of the calvinist God, as Whitman sees them, can only be adequately described by a quaternity: Father, Son, Satan, and Holy Ghost. The accuracy of Whitman's insight appears in the fact that the Moloch-deity is not Satan (who is handled in the third canto), but his fiercer opposite, the Father of the first canto:

Relentless I forgive no man—whoever sins dies—I will have that man's  
 life;  
 Therefore let none expect mercy—have the seasons, gravitation, the  
 appointed days, mercy? no more have I,  
 But as the seasons and gravitation, and as all the appointed days that  
 forgive not,  
 I dispense from this side judgments inexorable without the least remorse.<sup>4</sup>

Reactions of the poets to this perverse father-deity have been intense, particularly of those poets who are naturally attracted to metaphysical style and perception. The most self-consciously religious of the modern poets, T.S. Eliot, found his native land unbearable and deliberately shifted to a position where he seemed to stand in the mainstream of Western civilization, rather than in one of its peculiar offshoots. His "too easily quotable" declaration for royalty, classicism, and Anglo-Catholicism must be taken, I believe, as an analysis of American shortcomings and one man's attempt to find a satisfying religious alternative.

There is historical justification for this. England managed to purify itself of its Puritans while retaining the ground gained in the Reformation generally. When William Laud was elevated to the archbishopric of Canterbury in 1633, history conspired also to elevate him to the ranks of men who have altered the future. He possessed nearly tyrannic power to see to it that calvinist dissenters, of whatever persuasion, were at first uncomfortable (which they didn't mind) and then legally unable to remain in England. For them, Europe was also impossible, and the familiar language and promised tolerance of the new colony offered an attractive alternative. George Herbert wrote (coincidentally, in 1633): "Religion stands on tiptoe in our land, / Redie to pass to the American strand." When Cotton Mather came to write the history of the church in New England, his *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702), he endorsed this view of the matter by alluding to Herbert's poem in his introductory sentence: "I write the *Wonders* of the CHRISTIAN RELIGION, flying from the Depravations of *Europe*, to the *American Strand*." What was per-

ceived as an undesirable version of Reformation Christianity was happily purged from the English church, and just as happily received as orthodoxy in America.

The quality of this banished Puritanism is expressed by another of the famous Mathers, Samuel (1626–1671). Though he spent most of his life preaching in the remaining dissenting churches in England and Ireland, he received his education at Harvard and was considered an American by his contemporaries. According to Cotton Mather,

He argued against *the sign of the cross in baptism, that* whatever was to be said against *oyl, cream, salt, spittle*, therein is to be said against the *cross*, which indeed never had been used, in the worship of God, as *oyl* had been of old. *That* there is as much cause to worship the *spear* that pierced Our Lord, as the *cross* which hanged him, or that it were as reasonable, to scratch a child's forehead with a *thorn*, to shew that it must suffer for him, who wore a *crown of thorns*; *that* the cross thus employed is a breach of the *second commandment* in the very letter of it, being an *image* in the service of God of *man's devising*, and fetch'd, as Mr. *Parker* says, *from the brothel-house of God's greatest enemy*.<sup>5</sup>

Eliot, searching for historical roots and cultural richness, rejected this narrow conception of "Religion" and espoused the more Catholic one he found in England, as if America were a historical mistake and the sooner corrected the better.

Erich Fromm, in *Escape from Freedom* (1941), put his finger on this aspect of the Reformation heritage. "Luther and Calvin," he wrote, "belonged to the ranks of the greatest haters among the leading figures of history, certainly among religious leaders." So powerful is the despotic and merciless God of Calvin, said Fromm, that "the more or less subtle constructions he made to uphold the picture of a just and loving God do not sound in the least convincing." Fromm need not be taken as a theological expert, carefully defining the Calvin of history; his value lies in his identification and description of Calvin as a mythic figure. Eliot was obviously looking for a different myth, something he could not find in the American tradition.

But the matter yields further observations, closer to the subject of this chapter. Eliot was a writer of pronounced mystical characteristics. There can be little question as to why his mysticism did not flourish in the presence of what American orthodoxy proposed as the national deity, and why Eliot sought the formal ritual of anglo-Catholicism for protection.

The matter comes to a clear point in the case of Eliot's contemporary, Robert Frost. It must be recognized that in the spectrum of Frost's personal interests the deity also holds a position, one which Frost consciously manipulated and shifted. The late Masques are interesting items, where Frost handles

God gingerly, with a weak and tentative satire. Earlier, the figure had been powerful and there had been a memorable confrontation. Both Eliot and Frost manifest early mystical interests which never come to full flower. Their later courses diverge markedly, but there seems to have been a moment in the life of each poet when the urge toward mystery was about to result in a commitment to the traditional mystical way. This moment is most fully described by Frost in his most famous poem.

“Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” may be the best known poem ever written by an American. It is surely one of the most commented upon—so much so that readers, critics, and the author himself frequently pleaded for a moratorium to criticism. Only the promise of some truly new insights can justify still another expenditure of effort, readers’ and writer’s, on the subject. A new interpretation of the poem is possible, based on Frost’s specific diction and its provenance. The interpretation once established generates two insights: that Frost, in this poem, is responding negatively to one of the most profound and typical elements in the American religious experience; and that several other early poems, which Frost was always careful to popularize, can now be linked as a coherent series of statements. The cluster of poems documents, I believe, a significant moment of change in the evolution of Frost’s consciousness and reveals something about the American consciousness generally.

Commentary on “Stopping by Woods” is already extensive enough for us to determine something like a *stemma* of critical traditions. The most common interpretation, thematically, has been that the poem is an ethical statement concerning social commitments and obligations to which a man must listen. This is an obvious view, one that responds to the attention-soliciting repetition with which the poem ends. Louis Untermeyer was one of the earliest to put this interpretation into writing. Reginald L. Cook, Robert Doyle, D.J. Lepore, and Stanley Poss, for example, have continued to accept this reading as adequate.<sup>6</sup>

The second major tradition of interpretation was most strikingly stated by John Ciardi in his famous 1958 article in the *Saturday Review*; “Can one fail to sense by now that the dark and snowfall symbolize a death-wish, however momentary, i. e., that hunger for final rest and surrender that a man may feel, but not a beast?” The insight had been anticipated a decade earlier by Wellek and Warren in *Theory of Literature*, where “sleep” was seen as a “natural symbol” for death. It continues as a tradition in William Van O’Connor and Leonard Unger, John F. Lynan, Lawrance Thompson, and James Armstrong, for example. Lloyd N. Dendinger has seen the lure of death operating thematically in the poem, but proposes the “lure of wilderness” typical in American letters as even more basic to the poem. Two more recent authors, Richard Poirier and Frank Lentricchia, have pursued the study of

Frost to its greatest depth yet; both still hold the subject of the poem to be resistance to the death wish.<sup>7</sup> One must note, however, that Frost objected strongly to Ciardi's thesis: "That's all right, but it's hardly a death poem."<sup>8</sup>

These two interpretations can stand together. Ciardi conflated them in his *Saturday Review* article by saying that the speaker in the poem is finally recalled from the attractive power of the death-wish by his sense of belonging to the world of man; the social side of his nature prevails over the psychic lure of the depths.

A third tradition of interpretation can be discerned in which the "dark woods" stand out as the central symbol to be explicated. Robert Langbaum used the terminology of theological Existentialism when he analyzed the poem as a "momentary insight into the nonhuman otherness of nature." John T. Ogilvie rightly discerned that imagery of the dark woods is pervasive in Frost's early poetry; for him the woods symbol implied the poet's desire for isolation and his need to explore the inner self. George W. Nitchie, surveying the whole range of Frost's poetry, read this poem as a "yearning back to Eden . . . an imagined withdrawal from the complicated world we all know into a mysterious loveliness symbolized by woods or darkness."<sup>9</sup> One finds a vagueness in all of these readings, as if they were not based on sufficient evidence to make the readings definite or persuasive.

Finally, one may mention a fourth tradition of interpreting the poem. This is a blatant allegorization, particularly of the first stanza. I know whose woods these are, the interpretation says; He made them; His house is in the village; the village church. This makes the poem a religious allegory of a fairly simple-minded type. (If done with some irony it could take its place beside the thoroughly successful spoof of symbol-hunting generally, Herbert R. Coursen's "proof" that the speaker is really Santa Claus and that he must get on with the distribution of toys he has promised to all good children.<sup>10</sup>) But the allegory is presented seriously. I have not seen this tradition in print anywhere, but each year students have assured me that it was the quasiofficial interpretation whenever they came around dutifully, almost ritually, to "do-ing" the poem again in primary and secondary school English classes. The curious thing about this interpretation is that it bears some similarity to the one which I am about to propose. Allegory is too blunt an instrument to use for analysis here, but there is convincing evidence that the poem is the record of a religious experience; or rather, since it is more precise to be more general here, that the poem is a record of the mind's encounter with transcendence. Emerson achieved it, and on very nearly the same New England ground. Emerson's experience is joyfully recorded in the first chapter of *Nature*. In similar woodland circumstances Frost's mind also threatens to become transparent, but his reaction is different. As he later told a questioner, "I thought it was about time I was getting the hell out of there."<sup>11</sup>

An analysis of the structure of Frost's poem shows that line 13, "The woods are lovely, dark and deep," is central. From the first line, irrelevancies tug at his attention: the curious question of the *ownership* of these woods (Emerson would have dismissed the question quickly with the assertion that nobody owns the landscape), the sudden attention to the trivial subject of the horse's response to a pause in their journey, and finally the abrupt shift to auditory sensation in the analysis of the sound of snow falling. But there is only one assertion in the poem about the subject most under consideration: "The woods are lovely, dark and deep." All of Frost's attention to the actual woods is concentrated here; it is here that the subject itself is finally able to gain ascendancy over the side issues which attempt to snag the mind on its route towards this center. A major effect with which criticism of the poem must concern itself is the tension created by the actual subject of the poem and the speaker's resistance to it for three-fourths of the poem. When the assertion is finally made, its diction assumes supreme importance.

The speculation that this resistance is primarily to the lure of death is finally inadequate. Whatever associations with death the words "sleep" and "dark" may have, they also are appropriate to another area of experience, which I shall set forth shortly. A more problematical aspect of the death-wish interpretation is the existence in the poem of a concrete symbol of death, a symbol which is not at the poem's center of focus. If death appears in the poem, it is represented by the "frozen lake" mentioned almost casually in line 7. This symbol takes its meaning from well-documented facts in Frost's life. Frost's early obsession with suicide usually took the form of death by drowning, and according to his family the lake of this poem was between the Frost farm and the nearest town of West Derry, a drive which the poet often had to take.<sup>12</sup> This information underlines the statement of the poem that while the speaker may feel caught between the lure of death and something else ("Between the woods and frozen lake"), it is the something else represented by the woods that mainly occupies his attention. If "lake" is associated in his mind with death, what then does the more central assertion about the woods mean?

The answer to this question involves a climactic phrase from a poem by Henry Vaughan, "The Night." The phrase reads "A deep but dazzling darkness." The phrase will be seen to have immediate correspondences with line 13 of Frost's poem, "The woods are lovely, dark and deep," prepared for earlier by "The darkest evening of the year" in line 8. Vaughan's poem works in the tradition of mystical theology which conceives of the soul's ascent to God as a passage through various well-defined stages of illumination until the final stage is reached in which the brightness is so intense that the seeker's senses and mind are blanked out, as it were by overstimulation. When the soul is wrapped in this dark night or cloud of unknowing, it knows, paradoxically, that it has arrived at the right place, at its spiritual center. The night

becomes luminous, a deep but dazzling darkness which is God. One of the traditional sources for this notion of Divine Darkness is Dionysius the Areopagite, in his *De Mystica Theologia* (1.1):

As for thee, dear Timothy, I counsel that in the earnest exercise of mystical contemplation thou leave the senses and the operations of the intellect and all things that the senses or the intellect can perceive, and all things in this world of nothingness or that world of being; and that, thine understanding being laid to rest, thou ascend (so far as thou mayest) towards union with Him whom neither being nor understanding can contain. For by the unceasing and absolute renunciation of thyself and all things, thou shalt in pureness cast all things aside, and be released from all, and so shalt be led upwards to the Ray of that Divine Darkness which exceedeth all existence.

Throughout his poem, Vaughan works with these same paradoxes of darkness and vision and the finding of oneself in the total abandonment of the self. His final stanza reads:

There is in God (some say)  
a deep, but dazzling darkness; As men here  
Say it is late and dusky, because they  
See not all clear;  
O for that night! where I in him  
Might live invisible and dim.

The stanza sketches two alternative responses possible for one who approaches this kind of night. The practical New Englander (Frost) may say, equivalently, "it is late and dusky," and escape back to the brightly lit interior of home and family. The Anglican mystic (Vaughan) stays with the experience and relishes the slow and dangerous knowledge it provides.

The facts of biography must remain subsidiary to literary analysis, but there is much in Frost's early life to explain his resistance to this kind of experience. His mother, always something of a religious fanatic, was a devoted Swedenborgian during Frost's early boyhood. Among the stories she told the children were those of the biblical Samuel, Joan of Arc, and Swedenborg himself, all of whom were granted direct auditory communication from the supernatural world. His mother encouraged the sensitive young boy to develop his own gifts of second sight and second hearing. When he actually began hearing the sound of voices from another world, "he almost scared himself out of his wits," as his biographer remarks<sup>13</sup>, a phrase that corresponds with Frost's own later statement of his desire to "get the hell out of there" when something similar seemed about to occur.

The question remains, of course, whether Frost knew this passage from



Vaughan. The answer can be a confident yes, if only on the basis of Frost's well-known competence in the documents of his trade. But we can come closer. No fewer than three writers must have thrust Vaughan's lines upon his attention with new freshness shortly before Frost came to write his own poem. The year before, Herbert J.C. Grierson published his famous anthology *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century*.<sup>14</sup> The volume, which included Vaughan's "The Night," was to start a renaissance of interest in the Metaphysical Poets. T.S. Eliot, that same year, wrote his essay on the Metaphysical Poets as a review of this book, and published it the first of many times in the *London Times Literary Supplement* (October 20, 1921). Frost was jealously aware of what Eliot was doing, as he would be for several years to come. He could hardly have ignored a book of poems that was promising to revise the official history of English letters. But a third source was also available which put Vaughan's poem explicitly in the mystical tradition and in the context of "Divine Darkness" literature. This was Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism*, a book so popular that it went through twelve printings between 1911 and 1930. Miss Underhill's emphasis was on the Anglican mystical tradition, in which Eliot (again) was becoming so totally interested. Miss Underhill cites the final stanza of Vaughan's "The Night" on the same page that she quotes the passage from Dionysius the Areopagite which I have introduced above.

In the absence of actual records it always seems tendentious to propose "probable" sources for a particular literary work. But I am not convinced that the question of sources is the crucial one in this instance. A more fertile source of investigation (as in the case of the Freudian criticism that posits a death-wish here) is the more general question of *provenance*: analogous areas of human experience where similar diction is employed. The three authors mentioned above provide, then, a possible source for Frost's diction, but they present a *certain* analogue to both experience and diction. Frost, in the central statement of this poem, employs the vocabulary characteristic of this kind of mysticism.

A well-known source of Frost's early thought provides a still richer trove of analogues. This is William James. Frost already knew the writings of the noted psychologist when he sought admission to Harvard as a special student in 1897. James was on leave of absence when Frost was there, but one of his psychology professors used James's shorter *Psychology* as his text. Frost used this text, as well as James's *Talks to Teachers on Psychology*, when he was a teacher at the Plymouth Normal School in 1911–1912.<sup>15</sup> Frost himself said in 1932, "The most valuable teacher I had at Harvard I never had. . . . He was William James. His books meant a great deal to me."<sup>16</sup>

In James's 1902 volume *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Frost would have found the same vocabulary of mysticism used by Vaughan, though not the citation from the poet himself. In lectures 16 and 17, for

example, James quotes from Henry Suso, German mystic of the fourteenth century, on the state of the soul in mystical rapture, "lost in the stillness of the glorious *dazzling obscurity* and of the naked simple unity. It is in this modeless *where* that the highest bliss is to be found." A night-time experience, close to Frost's in "Stopping by Woods," is also quoted: "The perfect stillness of the night was thrilled by a more solemn silence. The darkness held a presence that was all the more felt because it was not seen. I could not any more have doubted that *He* was there than that I was. Indeed, I felt myself to be, if possible, the less real of the two." To select a final citation, among many that relate to the vocabulary of Frost's poem, James quotes St. Teresa of Avila on the mystic's sense of nothingness, the threat of abandonment of one's being. The metaphors of wakefulness and sleep are especially pertinent: "In the orison of union, the soul is fully awake as regards God, but wholly asleep as regards things of this world and in respect of herself. During the short time the union lasts, she is as it were deprived of every feeling, and even if she would, she could not think of any single thing."<sup>17</sup> The provenance of Frost's imagery is now quite clear. The words and images do not characterize Freud's descriptions of the death-wish; they are found, however, throughout a large range of literature that attempts to describe a particular kind of mystical experience, an encounter with the Absolute in which man's own sense of selfhood is threatened with annihilation.

What all of these considerations lead to is the conclusion that "Stopping by Woods" is a decisive poem in Robert Frost's mental development. It clearly describes the goal of a road not taken, the road of the holy man whose goal is absorption in transcendent being. In determining the parameters of his genius Frost came upon this area, as is clearly shown by the vocabulary of this poem. Where the earlier Transcendentalists found in this experience the goal of their desires, Frost's later American draws the line and retreats. The poem is a statement of resistance to a particular kind of experience which the speaker finds radically uncongenial. Frost is on territory too personally threatening to cultivate as his own field of creative endeavor. He has perceived the American national deity and withdrawn from the field.

Frost wrote another poem which by its title seems intended as a companion poem to "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." This is the poem from *West-Running Brook* (1928) called "Sitting by a Bush in Broad Sunlight." The title suggests, and the fourth stanza confirms, an allusion to the theophany experienced by Moses at the burning bush. The poem comments on two phenomena, each of which happened only once in the history of the world: the beginning of evolution when the first "creature" took life from the sun, and the only time God spoke his name to a human. The final stanza records the persistence of these two phenomena: one as "our breath," the other as "our faith." But the tone that any reader will identify in this poem is

one of chilly distance and flatness of statement. The poem moves increasingly toward prosaic statement and flawed rhyme. In the context we have been establishing it seems likely that Frost was quite content to have this epiphany manifested safely in the remote past, and to someone else.

Frost wrote several other poems which verge upon the edge of the same emblematic night of "Stopping by Woods," the night where one knows he will lose himself—even though it is the night where the mystics have trusted they would finally find themselves and a total transforming wisdom, as well. This cluster of poems has its own dramatic structure. I will sketch it lightly, with some well-known poems, to show the general curve; many more poems could be plotted along the points on this graph. The poems I have chosen are the ones Frost came back to again and again in his public readings. Several years earlier, in "An Old Man's Winter Night," the subject of the poem is vaguely troubled by a sense of presences in the night, but because of aloneness and feeble old age, he is unable to confront them directly: "one aged man—one man—can't keep a house, / A farm, a countryside." Here is the beginning of the fear that will develop of the formlessness lying outside of artificially established human boundaries. Another poem from the same volume (*Mountain Interval*, 1916) confirms Frost's own preferences for the earthly and the particular. The famous "Birches" expresses a conscious choice of one direction over another as proper for human cultivation: "Earth's the right place for love":

I'd like to go by climbing a birch-tree  
 And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk  
 Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,  
 But dipped its top and set me down again.

Here, too, there is an unwillingness to cope with the experience of transcendence expressed several years before the moment in July 1922 when "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" was written. A few years later, in the 1928 volume *West-Running Brook*, Frost published "Acquainted with the Night." The speaker is again alone, again it is night. He feels totally isolated in a lifeless city and a loveless universe. A sign of the powerful feeling locked in this poem is the fact that it is held together by a tight *terza-rima*, a form unusual in Frost. Panic, caused by a perception of limitlessness, is very close to the surface. Again, in "Desert Places" (1936), in a setting similar to that of "Stopping by Woods," the speaker has a sense of a universe that is no longer inhabited, whether one considers the vast interstellar spaces or his own spaces "so much nearer home." In these poems the reason for his earlier rejection of the transcendent experience is developed: it is as if acceptance would have set him loose to wander in total isolation in the infinite formlessness of the universe. The form-maker, the poet, has little tolerance for chaos.

A final note to the explanation of Frost's resistance to the transcendent experience as he recorded it in "Stopping by Woods" is stated in "Design" (from *A Further Range*, 1936). This is another closely-knit poem, a well-designed sonnet more tightly unified by the use of only three rhymes. The diseased and freakish combination—spider, moth, and flower—are brought together in a small pageant of death. The poem ends with a melancholy alternative: either the unthinkable premise of a causeless universe or "the design of *darkness* to appall" (italics added). If the latter is true, the negative vastness that tenants the universe shapes things malevolently. A powerful convergence of calvinist insight occurs here, aided by the image of the spider, the "loathsome insect" described by Jonathan Edwards. The small universe of Frost's poem is infected by a malignancy, and its cause is wrath. One who perceived transcendence in this way could hardly be expected to cry, with Henry Vaughan, "O for that night. . . ." Not only mankind but the entire physical universe has fallen from grace, has been corrupted by the Fall.

Many other poems by Frost should be considered as part of this same cluster. In *West-Running Brook* the lonely wanderer in the woods has only God, yet senses himself still utterly "Bereft," as the simple title of the poem states. That same wanderer, in "The Most of It" (from *A Witness Tree*, 1942), sees something powerfully appear, but it is a beast "with horny tread." The hiker in "Leaf Treader" (from *A Further Range*, 1936) senses an irrational indignation against God's autumn leaves and their implied solicitation to his own death. These somewhat neutral hints gain in significance when the thread is sought that ties them together. "Come In" (also from *A Witness Tree*) is an invitation from Whitman's bird of death, the thrush, to enter the dark woods, "pillared" like a temple to suggest that a god lives there. The invitation is of course refused. Frost, in the initial poem of the collection, "Beech," had firmly set his imaginary boundaries, beyond which he would not stray into "dark and doubt." Hemingway a decade earlier had described "a clean, well-lighted place" where mental safety could be preserved, and the dark swamp bordering the "big, two-hearted river" into which Nick Adams refused to stray. But the religious overtones of this psychological experience are more clearly presented by Frost. The last three lines of "Come In" read "I would not come in. / I meant not even if asked, / And I hadn't been." To one reared in a calvinist culture there is the ominous suggestion in the last line that the speaker does not sense himself to be one of the Elect. Even as late as 1947, in *Steeple Bush*, in a poem called "The Fear of God," he was seeking to define "an arbitrary God / Whose mercy . . . / Won't bear too critical examination."

We might even argue at this point for the existence of a calvinist poetry in America, a poetry that springs directly from the Reformer's personal view of the world. Frost certainly was directed by it in this early cluster of poems.

There is a long tradition behind him. Among the earliest to establish the calvinist lyric in America was Jonathan Edwards. Most readers, especially of his *Personal Narrative*, have been surprised by the sweet mysticism and potential poetry there. Another of his works, the unfinished *Images or Shadows of Divine Things*, sounds, in its title, like notes toward a Platonic theory of art. A statement from that work reads: "The earth or this earthly world does by men's persons as it does by their bodies: it devours men and eats them up. As we see this our mother that brought us forth and at whose breasts we are nourished is cruel to us, she is hungry for the flesh of her children." The title must be kept in mind: Mother Nature, the cruel devourer of her children, is an image of the Divine nature. This seems quite clearly to be the tradition which Frost inherits, the reaction to which he records in "Stopping by Woods."

Whether the American religious tradition presents the deity as "one dam Injin" (according to Melville's *Queequeg*), as demon, or as terrifying destroyer, it is clear that the theology is perversely flawed and partial. One looks almost in vain, in our religious or our secular writers, for *le beau dieu* of Chartres or the beloved Bridegroom celebrated in other Christian traditions. Nor does it seem to be an oversimplification to find a powerful source for this in John Calvin and American acceptance of him; it is his view of God, who "loved us even when he hated us," which has powerfully molded ours.

With such a view of the divinity, it should not be surprising that death, even as a secular event, has received a uniquely American treatment by our writers. We have not reflected on death as a personal experience yielding matter for philosophy with the freedom that Europe has. Recent Existential analysis, with its roots in more than a hundred years of European thought, is a foreign importation which has not, so far as one can tell, sunk real roots here. Death has not been realized as an experience yielding systematizable meaning.

Jean-Paul Sartre early turned his attention to Faulkner, bringing the European mind to bear on this limitation of the American.<sup>18</sup> He liked Faulkner's art, he said, but found his metaphysic deficient. Where Sartre faulted the American was on the score of time: Faulkner's reality did not include the future. In a now famous simile he declared that all of Faulkner's characters were like people riding in a convertible, seated so they could look only backward. The present was a rush and a blur; only the past could be clearly described. The future contained no reality that affected the present. Coming down to specifics, Sartre noted that the reality of Quentin's suicide, in *The Sound and the Fury*, was a force that exerted itself only as part of his sense of the present: Quentin constantly speaks of his death as a fact which has already come into being. Sartre proposed a more complete metaphysic: "Man is not the sum of what he has, but the totality of what he does not yet have." Since

the American's sense does not include the future and the death that inevitably lies there, his metaphysic is incomplete.

Behind Sartre's critique was the recent influence of Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (1927), and even farther behind that stood Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard's usual self-mockery is visible when he writes: "Before I pass over to universal history. . . it seems to me that I had better think about this [death], lest existence mock me because I had become so unlearned and highfalutin that I had forgotten to understand what will some time happen to me as to every human being."<sup>19</sup> One of Heidegger's best American commentators, James M. Demske, expresses the fuller metaphysic thus: "Mortality, for Heidegger, is not a mode of ceasing-to-be, but a mode of being, indeed *the* mode of being characteristic of existing man."<sup>20</sup> The very unknownness of this inescapable futurity is essential to a complete sense of reality. Far from being a non-fact, a concept without content, the fact of death is one of the highest significance for a full sense of the present. Demske summarizes Heidegger again: "Death leaves man 'open,' or necessarily pointing to something beyond himself, ultimately to being itself." Such secular speculation on death is a rarity in American writing.

Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* was published in 1929. A fine contrast can be drawn with André Malraux's novel *La condition humaine*, published only five years later. The character nearest to the norm in this novel, the one with whom the male reader most easily identifies, is a leader in the Chinese revolution of 1927, named Kyo. He is speaking to a fellow revolutionary, a fanatic named Ch'en who has already assassinated for the cause. They are discussing the actualities of the revolution and the degradation which is threatened by the necessary killings. Kyo realizes that he and his friends have moved to a state of mind beyond courage, to a disturbing fascination with death. Kyo asks, "Do you think of it [killing others] with . . . with anxiety?" Ch'en hesitates, and then replies slowly, "I'm looking for a word stronger than joy. There is no word. Even in Chinese. A . . . complete peace. A kind of . . . how do you say it? of . . . I don't know. There is only one thing that is deeper. . . . An ecstasy towards . . . downward." Kyo then realizes that Ch'en's fascination with death has turned around against him, and he sees his friend as a mystic, absorbed with his own death as a means of reaching the "absolute." Kyo responds, after these reflections, "My father believes that the essence of man is anguish, the consciousness of his own fatality, from which all fears are born." Ch'en replies, "One can always find terror in himself. One only needs to look deep enough: fortunately one can act."<sup>21</sup>

This is not a point to which an American author's thought would have clarified, yet it can immediately be placed in the ambience of modern French concerns with action, authenticity, the fear of the absurd, significance. And indeed, Malraux's prose is full of sequences that take the American reader far

beyond the mental paths ingrained by his own culture. When Faulkner's Quentin commits suicide the event is at once motivated and obscured by his confused sense of guilty disgrace. Quentin's meditations are intended, it seems, to be an account of the warped sexual fantasies the culture has helped generate in his mind, amplified by the fact that he only dimly recognizes the forces that push him into action. Malraux's characters burn clearly, with their issues of action and significance, to the end.

Although the experience has been recorded and probed in our literature, and despite the title of Leslie Fiedler's greatest book, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, we have not yet transformed the experience of death into a meaningful concept. Our literature, in fact, has been characterized rather by what Harold Bloom recently called the American authors' "evasion of death."<sup>22</sup> But the experience is there with manifold tonalities: Hemingway's main character cannot sleep without a light for fear that death will carry off his consciousness, and in one of his most powerful images death is associated with the smell of putrefaction luring the grinning hyena. Whitman, one might almost say, carried on a strange romance with the experience of death, and one of his major achievements is to have incorporated it into his optimistic philosophy of life. Emily Dickinson also, by sheer strength of imagination, died many times and succeeded where Lazarus failed in carrying back reports. All of this is something, yielding in fact fragments for the highest of literary possibilities, whether the tragic or the comedic.

But once again I believe that it is our inherited calvinism which has prevented the development of these germinal speculations. Calvinism is a frame rigidly holding our society. The American, when he thinks of death, is confronted by calvinistic statements like the following: "No work of a pious man ever existed which, if it were examined before the strict judgment of God, did not prove to be damnable" (*Institutes*, 3.14.11). It is true that Calvin goes on immediately to assert also that no sin is so heinous that it cannot be forgiven by the mercy of God. But I have never seen this second statement quoted in an American source. The first confirms our worst fears and is sufficient. It is doubtful that even the most liberated are ever able fully to rise out of the force-field created by a powerful idea unconsciously accepted by the whole society.

American philosophizing on the future and the fact of death has been strictly controlled by the five points of the traditional religion. Where death approaches, our old calvinism asserts itself more vigorously, and we are like the aging John Cotton as described by Cotton Mather in 1695—though without the genial humor implied in the description: "And being asked, why in his Latter Days, he [John Cotton] Indulged *Nocturnal Studies* more than formerly, he pleasantly Replied, *Because I Love to Sweeten my mouth with a piece of Calvin, before I go to sleep.*" The ordinary citizen, less sure of his

certain election, finds it impossible to move beyond the freezing images of judgment and afterlife presented to us so powerfully. And where the attempt has been made, the face of the monster god all too often intrudes to abort further speculation. Even our authors least chargeable with timidity, when they have been able to break away from the tradition, have not provided insights acceptable to the culture generally. Set in this context of the national religion, however, many of our most significant works, particularly those of the poets, take on new dimensions of meaning.

One place to begin is obvious, with a poem which until fairly recently was taken to be the American masterpiece, William Cullen Bryant's "Thanatopsis." I am inclined to rate this as a better poem than is now generally allowed, but only after some discussion of where the poem really is to be found. This may seem a surprising form of expression for such a public and well-known poem, but there is a real problem concerning what lines we mean to consider under the title "Thanatopsis." The fact that it exists in several different published versions has long been known. What all of these versions have in common is the long mid-section, lines 17b-66a. Closer investigation of these data can still yield new insight.

Bryant, more than any other of our writers on death, felt the full weight of the calvinist tradition pressing upon him. Both parents traced their descent from early Puritan settlers and a famous grandfather was calvinist to the core. Bryant wrote the earliest version of his poem in 1815 when he was twenty years old.<sup>23</sup> This was apparently the copy which his father found in 1817 and sent, along with other materials, for publication in the *North American Review*. There the mid-section (lines 17b-66a) appeared with four introductory quatrains but without the familiar closing lines (66b-81). The introductory quatrains set the subject of death in an explicitly calvinist context. Allusion is made to the entry of death with the fall of man in Eden, and to an angry God establishing this doom to vindicate his justice:

This bitter cup at first was given  
When angry justice frown'd severe,  
And 'tis th' eternal doom of heaven  
That man must view the grave with fear.

Bryant later commented on the misplacing of these calvinist lines and the twelve that preceded them. He did not disclaim them but in a letter of 1860 he said that they were from another fragment of poetry and "were I suppose printed by mistake as part of 'Thanatopsis.'"<sup>24</sup> If this comment can be trusted, it throws important light onto what we must take to be the original "Thanatopsis." The poem originally existed only as the mid-section, 17b-66a. The spurious introduction suggests that Bryant was occupied with the horrors of death at the time. The mid-section suggests, by its importance to



Bryant and his public, that the problem had some universality; its publication was of general and lasting significance.

I should like to attend, then, to this mid-section, lines 17b–66a, and call it the poem “Thanatopsis.” This poem, through several reprintings carefully overseen by Bryant, underwent little change. Where the *North American Review* printing relied heavily on dashes, Bryant later reduced many of these to periods and commas. There are also some verbal changes, but they affect precision or mirror simply a “poet’s choice” among fairly synonymous alternatives. The poem as he first wrote it remained firm.

This “Thanatopsis” is delivered with all the authority traditionally granted the poet’s voice. No alternatives are allowed, even by allusion. Death is quite simply what Herman Melville most feared, annihilation. No sentiment is allowed. The peace of mind is pure stoicism and the only comfort is precedent: it happens to everybody. Severely ruled out of this *dies irae* is any personal figure, whether of Judge or Father. In any event, whatever should lie beyond the dread gate, there will be no personal consciousness of the speaker to meet it. The poem is clearly a strategy of evasion and negation. The tribal deity had become too fierce to tolerate.

This is, of course, heterodoxy of a dangerous sort, as the subsequent history of the poem shows. Such a statement could not be allowed to stand. The earliest extant copy of the poem, written in Bryant’s hand about two years earlier than the *North American* printing, has an eight-line blank verse introduction. These lines acknowledge the heterodoxy of the poem, as a statement irksome to those who hold the more approved “fallacies.”<sup>25</sup> The introduction did not survive to any version printed by Bryant, but its opening phrases suggest the route he would take to make the poem suit the palate of American orthodoxy: “It was the Better genius that was wont/ To steal upon the bard.” A poet is subject to moods and speaks differently according to which mood is in control, though here he calls the poem thus introduced the “Better genius.”

We come then to Bryant’s final version of the poem. This is the version found in *Poems* (1821), which has become standard in hundreds of anthologies. Here the concluding lines and a new introduction appear for the first time; both have been permanently sutured to the text; now standard, they alter Bryant’s original statement in several ways.

In the new introduction all signs of a calvinist context or any explicit quarrel with orthodoxy have disappeared. In their place is a statement which reconstitutes the speaker of the poem and greatly weakens its authority. No longer is it the poet, the traditional searcher of truth and speaker of wisdom. Rather the voice now is “Nature’s,” a disembodied and depersonalized voice at best. What is registered here is a disclaimer of the poet’s responsibility. More ruinous still to the authority of the poem is the explanation that nature has many moods and that the sentiment about to be expressed is only one

among them. The reader is left quite comfortably to choose whether this one suits or not. The challenge of the original poem is completely undermined.

The conclusion (lines 66b–81) to “Thanatopsis” as it was finally printed in *Poems* (1821) was also new, and has been standard in anthology reprintings ever since. Essentially it is an example of the habit Bryant had now fully developed of adding prosaic lines to the end of his poems to reduce their content to an easily graspable lesson. It, too, greatly weakens the authority of the original. It is pure exhortation, of the kind that sounds like hysteria because the exhorter has no basis for his assertion. The reader is encouraged to find himself “sustained and soothed / By an unfaltering trust.” The conventional reader, who would give the poem its immense popularity through the next hundred years, could supply an object for that trust: a providential divinity, conviction of his own righteousness, the salvation offered by a just God at judgment day. But the poem itself offers no such basis. No divinity is present in the poem. The only trust possible, in the world of the poem, is in the Nature which now has many moods and which, in the original poem, inevitably led every personal being to utter annihilation. The need for trust, without the basis for trust, produces despair—even in the final tailored version of the poem. “Thanatopsis,” then, is clearly a poem whose form is blurred and distorted by the forces of the calvinist culture, which the mind of its author is only partially able to identify and resist. At its core is a powerful elaboration of classical stoicism, as if this were the only suitable armor against a demonic universe; but the introduction and conclusion, abetted by the calvinism latent in the popular audience which received the poem, have obscured its intent and have conventionalized the response to it.

Other American writers have shown similar discomfort when facing the gates of death and the deity who waits there. Again, it is the central work of a poet’s canon which explores the themes considered in this chapter. In Wallace Stevens’s “Sunday Morning,” the aging speaker has come to the point where she feels the need to incorporate the fact of inescapable death into her sense of reality. She finds it impossible to use the inherited patterns of calvinism as a means of defining this reality. At first the notion of death does summon up notions of “that old catastrophe,” of “silent Palestine, / Dominion of the blood and sepulchre.” But the present beauty of the garden drives these thoughts away as unusable. In fact, it is the beauty of the garden which then assumes the visual center of her meditation on death. It seems like paradise, though one can take it as such only at the risk of asserting the false and the transient as permanent and true. “But when the birds are gone, and their warm fields / Return no more, where, then, is paradise?” It seems that annihilation must be the final terminus of life: in this garden, death “strews the leaves / of sure obliteration on our paths.” And at the end of

the poem, in the final image, the flocks of undulating pigeons finally sink “Downward to darkness, on extended wings.”

But the mature calmness of the poem argues that something satisfying has happened, that the speaker has come into possession of herself with a rich sense of reality. “Death is the mother of beauty” is asserted midway through the poem, and it is picked up again towards the end: “Death is the mother of beauty, mystical / Within whose burning bosom we devise / Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly.” There are hints here of an intuition of Being as personal and—in Heidegger’s terms—of death as an opening to the further reaches of Being. Our creative source, alive and conscious (“sleepless”) awaits us. Life is an incomplete fragment until this area of reality is acknowledged and the willingness to explore it is asserted. Stevens’s speaker has considered the calvinism latent in her culture and has felt the need to move beyond it to a private heterodoxy, a more supreme fiction, which is just as illusory but esthetically more satisfying.

The poem is a rich achievement but one that could be attained only by facing the obstacles set up by the national religion and finding a more secular path to the fuller metaphysic. In Stevens’s culture, the odds were very much against success. Stevens was fully aware of the calvinism all Americans inherit. Fragments of the calvinist synthesis lie scattered throughout his poems. In “No Possum, No Sop, No Taters,” the evil in a bleak landscape is absolutized: “Bad is final in this light.” He remarks paradoxically, and with little support from the rest of the poem, “It is here, in this bad, that we reach / The last purity of the knowledge of good.” It must be a negative knowledge, generated only from the positive evil that infects the present. The poem ends with an insight into the calvinist condition, the loneliness of the fallen human in a fallen world:

The crow looks rusty as he rises up.  
Bright is the malice in his eye . . .

One joins him there for company.  
But at a distance, in another tree.

One of the points of interest in this poem is the effect created by twice using the adjective “bad” as a noun. In a long poem, “*Esthétique du Mal*,” Stevens creates a theory of art from this insight. At least two other poems feature calvinist figures and the shadows they cast into the present. “The Doctor of Geneva” experiments with the idea that a man like Calvin, used to life in a tight little city by the side of a lake, might have his world view expanded and finally shattered by exposure to the endless reaches of the Pacific. The man, however, is able to maintain his composure, and his

system, in the face of the "oracular notions of the wild." Stevens uses an unusual word for his doctor, *lacustrine*, one who dwells by a lake. Emerson had used it in his 1867 Phi Beta Kappa address, "Progress of Culture": "Who would live in the stone age, or the bronze, or the iron, or the lacustrine?" Clearly Stevens is saying that his Calvin prefers the power of his primitive thought to "the ruinous waste" of pure nature. Cotton Mather is the other calvinist figure, in "The Blue Buildings in the Summer Air." Stevens presents him as a man who must have been tormented with doubt in the face of the ultimate sensuous beauty of the world; the heaven he hoped for is, to Stevens, "the blank." Stevens abolishes the calvinist culture: "Cotton Mather died when I was a boy." But it was a private interment, a private success. The secular speculation on immortality, recorded in "Sunday Morning," has not been widely duplicated in our literature. Our best minds have so far not been able to liberate the rest of the culture.

Such at least is the reflection forced by consideration of a final recent poem, "Mr. Edwards and the Spider," by Robert Lowell. An annotated version of the poem would reveal allusions to numerous works of Jonathan Edwards, from his boyhood treatise on spiders to his mature defense of the emotional excesses of the Great Awakening. As such, the poem is a minor compendium of American calvinism. It is also a meditation on death, as Calvin defined both center and circumference of the subject for the American mind.

Lowell's first stanza recalls the essay by young Edwards on his observations of spiders achieving mobility by spinning filaments until there was enough to catch the wind and transport them through the air. The theme of death is introduced by Lowell in a line thoroughly consonant with Edwards's rhetoric: "They purpose nothing but their ease and die." The second stanza recalls Edwards's great sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," and the image there which has burned itself into our consciousnesses: "The God that holds you over the pit of Hell," says Edwards, "much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over the fire, abhors you and is dreadfully provoked." The third or middle stanza presents a remarkable achievement: Spider, Death, and God are linked inextricably in the American mind. Only one escape is possible, "the sinner's last retreat," and that is the possibility that death will be annihilation: "It's well / If God who holds you to the pit of hell / Much as one holds a spider, will destroy, / Baffle and dissipate your soul." But that solace is cut off by Calvin. For one who senses his imperfections, death is eternal consciousness of extreme pain: "This is death, / To die and know it."

Lowell's is a perfect synthesis of the American materials we have been following in this chapter: a diabolized god and the terrors of being exposed to him in an afterlife. It is only the rare and perhaps mentally unbalanced

individual who senses in himself the perfect purity that would be rewarded by bliss at the moment after death. Western civilization does not allow for a series of purifying reincarnations, nor does American protestantism allow the soul to expect the necessary cleansing on successive levels of a Purgatorio before the end is achieved. The only alternative for the imperfect human in a calvinistic setting is the torment Lowell and Calvin have presented.

Over a hundred years ago, Leconte de Lisle anticipated twentieth-century European reflections on death with a nearly miraculous manipulation of verb tenses: "*Homme! Sache mourir afin d'avoir été*" (in "Le Secret de la vie"). For all but a few independent minds, Calvin has cut short such fertile insight. Predestined as it is for both sinner and saint, life receives no meaningful light from the necessary phenomenon of death. Rather, in the tradition represented by the American writers discussed here, the deity has been sensed as a figure inspiring terror, and the "flight of the alone to the alone," whether through mystical vision or through death, could hardly be anticipated with pleasure.

# 6 VIOLENCE AND THE POLITICAL ORDER

Long ago, Matthiessen quoted T.S. Eliot's observation that "Henry James' work is a criticism of the America of his time."<sup>1</sup> One way to read the corpus of James's works is to follow a quite clear line of progression through his fictional re-creation of contemporary cultures. He may have worried as much as any writer over the weaknesses in the American system and contributed at least as much valid diagnosis. It was also Eliot who said that James had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it. But it may be that James's "idea" was so vast and all-encompassing that it escaped even Eliot (though it did not escape Pound), and that it took virtually the whole of his work to expound it.<sup>2</sup>

James's critique, to sketch it rapidly, falls into several stages. The earliest can be represented by his two novels *The American* (1877) and *The Europeans* (1878). It is standard among the Jacobites that these early novels represent the drawing of a sharp line, with representative characters on each side, between two distinct cultures. European culture is older, corrupt, manifesting a certain jungle agility in its attempts to survive parasitically on representatives of the innocent, wealthy, and generous American culture. Granted that these are broad strokes, meant to imitate the carefully nuanced analyses of James; still I think they will serve to indicate the general line of James's earliest fictional analyses. In the second phase, represented best by *The Bostonians* (1886), James shifts his analysis to the American scene and American characters exclusively. And here the same negative-positive polarity develops, but totally within the American setting. The neutral figure, Verena, is torn between the healthy-minded (as the other James would say) sexuality of Basil Ransom, the Southerner who has come to Boston to make his fortune, and the sick-minded Bostonian spinster who represents a lot of things James does not like: spiritualism, a hysterically conducted feminist movement, the fads of a lunatic fringe generally. This is grossly oversimplifying, but at least one of the threads that holds together the complex materials of *The Bostonians* is the polarity developed within America itself between Boston and the rest of the country. It is interesting to recall here the foil which James created for the New Yorker, Christopher Newman, in *The American*: he is the Unitarian minister from New England, clearly crippled by a muscle-bound conscience, and responding to "Europe" only as the guide books direct him. If I read the direction of these novels correctly, James seems to be working toward the thesis that any weakness threatening this new American culture from within comes from the New England contribution.

It will serve my own restricted purposes in this chapter to pass now to statements from Henry James in the final phase of his career, his final assessment of the culture. It was, of course, a negative one: he gave up his American citizenship a few months before he died in 1916. Ezra Pound at the time felt this to be a profoundly meaningful act, directly relating to the crisis they were living through. Writing in the *Little Review* for August 1918, Pound lamented that the Americans did not understand the implications of James's change of citizenship: "They have understood nothing about it. They do not even know what they lost. They have not stopped for eight minutes to consider the meaning of his last public act. After a year of ceaseless labour, of letter writing, of argument, of striving in every way to bring in America on the side of civilization, he died of apoplexy."

Two late literary texts from James support this negative judgment of American culture. The first is in the travel book he published in 1907, *The American Scene*. There are actually two books bearing that title; both were published in the same year, one in England and the other in America. The only difference between the two is the omission of the last section of the last chapter in the American edition. What is there about this important last section that James felt would be too offensive to his American readers, but that nevertheless must be said in print for someone? The main part of this five-page conclusion is a dialogue between James and the Pullman car that carries him away from his last stopping place on the eastern seaboard. James is impressed by the amount of space that has been conquered in the United States, partly through the agency of the railroad. The Pullman says to him: "See what I'm making of all this—see what I'm making, I'm making." And there follows a long response to this boast which stands effectively as James's last word on the American scene. It must be quoted in full:

I see what you are not making, oh, what you are so vividly not; and how can I help it if I am subject to that lucidity?—which appears never so welcome to you, for its measure of truth, as it ought to be! How can I not be so subject from the moment I don't just irreflectively gape? If I were one of the painted savages you have dispossessed, or even some tough reactionary trying to emulate him, what you are making would doubtless impress me more than what you are leaving unmade; for in that case it wouldn't be for you I should be looking in any degree for beauty or for charm. Beauty and charm would be for me in the solitude you have ravaged, and I should owe you my grudge for every disfigurement and every violence, for every wound with which you have caused the face of the land to bleed. No, since I accept your ravage, what strikes me is the long list of arrears of your undone; and so constantly, right and left, that your pretended message of civilization is but a colossal recipe for the

creation of arrears, and of such as but remain forever out of hand. You touch the great lonely land—as one feels it still to be—only to plant upon it some ugliness about which, never dreaming of the grace of apology or contrition, you then proceed to brag with a cynicism all your own. You convert the large and noble sanities that I see around me, you convert them one after the other to crudities, to invalidities, hideous and unashamed; and you so leave them to add to the number of the myriad aspects you simply spoil, of the myriad unanswerable questions that you scatter about as some monstrous unnatural mother might leave a family of unfathered infants on doorsteps or in waiting-rooms. This is the meaning surely of the inveterate rule that you shall multiply the perpetrations you call 'places'—by the sign of some name as senseless, mostly, as themselves—to the sole end of multiplying to the eye, as one approaches, every possible source of displeasure. When nobody cares or notices or suffers, by all one makes out, when no displeasure, by what one can see, is ever felt or even registered, why shouldn't you, you may indeed ask, be as much in your right as you need? But in that fact itself, that fact of the vast general unconsciousness and indifference, looms, for any restless analyst who may come along, the accumulation, on your hands, of the unretrieved and the irretrievable!<sup>3</sup>

James's anger here is so passionate, so devastating, that the passage needs no further comment.

The second piece of evidence for James's final condemnatory judgment of American culture can be found in the unfinished novel *The Ivory Tower* and the notes James left for it. In this novel the American is now an old man, just about to die. His wealth has been amassed at the expense of a great many people. His fortune is built on the ruthless destruction of competitors, on a lifetime of lying and cheating and shady business deals. When he comes to the end of his life, he calls over a distant relative, a European. He bypasses all possible American heirs to give his fortune to the European. He is happy to find that the European has no sense of getting and spending, that he doesn't know the first thing about finance. He feels that by leaving his fortune to this man he can cleanse it of the grime and immorality that are now entangled with it. At this point the manuscript breaks off. In the notes James left, indicating his ideas for the development of the story, the European's best friend is an American who gradually tricks the European out of the whole fortune under the pretense of helping him to administer the properties. James seems to be saying that America has not followed the patterns he had hoped. America has emerged into maturity more corrupt than Europe had ever been.

James's is a dire judgment, but one voiced early and repeated ominously throughout our history. One of the earliest and most sagacious observers of



the new culture was Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur. His *Letters from an American Farmer* first appeared in 1782 in London. The most recent critic of the book finds a significant unity in it: "Taken as a whole, all twelve letters dramatically duplicate the process of pastoral itself: the dream about to be fulfilled, the momentary grasping of its reality, and its inevitable disruption and destruction."<sup>4</sup> James's judgment and de Crèvecoeur's cohere with Eliot's, though the analyses are different. All three came to the painful conclusion that the American system is fatally flawed. America as an idea is perfectly coherent, indeed lovely, to many writers both of Europe and America; but the historical reality is seriously defective. Liberty releases energies that are just as likely to be violent and destructive as to be creative.

One approach to "America as a problem" is to consider the topic of violence. The issue has been with us from the beginning, and the thread of violence through our national history has been followed and analyzed by many American thinkers.<sup>5</sup> It is a complex phenomenon which many historical and social forces have combined to produce. The present discussion will be limited to the points where this phenomenon seems to touch on our native calvinism, with no intention of claiming total reduction to a single cause.

The violent nature of Calvin needs little documentation. With considerable self-awareness he confessed his tendencies in this direction in a letter to his colleague Francis Dryander (1557): "I am perfectly aware that my temper is naturally inclined to be violent." His most favorable biographers transmit more evidence. He consented to the burning of "witches" (more than twenty in one year of his hegemony in Geneva) and to the beheading of Jacques Gruet. He helped in the burning of Servetus, making the strange and careful distinction, according to one of his biographers, that "the convicted should be committed to the secular arm and burned, because the Church abhors the shedding of blood."<sup>6</sup> Adulterers and prostitutes were drowned in the Rhone. In Calvin's surge to become *capo di tutti capi* in Geneva, opposition was treated firmly. Ami Perrin and his followers fled or were tortured and executed, their families banished. A contemporary chronicler, Roset, recorded in terms that would have delighted Mark Twain that Calvin's triumph was complete when "everyone went to sermons regularly now, even the hypocrites." One of the most sympathetic of Calvin's modern biographers, John T. McNeill, admits that Geneva under Calvin was characterized by "repressive discipline, harsh laws, and paternalistic controls." A less sympathetic observer might relish the irony implicit in the fact that Calvin's first book, his doctoral dissertation, was a commentary on Seneca's two books on clemency, which the ancient author had reputedly written to tame the tyrant Nero.

This complex religious mentality has occasionally been duplicated on the American scene. Ten days after the Haymarket affair (May 4, 1886), the New York nondenominational religious weekly *The Independent* editorialized as

follows: "A mob should be crushed by knocking down or shooting down the men engaged in it; and the more promptly this is done the better." The *Congregationalist*, a Boston religious weekly, proposed a religious solution along similar lines: "When anarchy gathers its deluded disciples into a mob, as at Chicago, a Gatling gun or two, swiftly brought into position and well served, offers, on the whole, the most merciful as well as effectual remedy."<sup>7</sup>

Since Calvin frankly expressed the passions here under consideration, his words may furnish a clue to help us understand a characteristic which, as this book attempts to show, has so strongly marked our own national mentality. Example may be taken from a liturgical book he compiled in 1540, *The Form of Prayers and Manner of Ministering the Sacrament according to the use of the Ancient Church*. To insure proper "fencing of the tables," a peculiarly calvinist practice, the following formula was provided: "In the Name and by the authority of Our Lord Jesus Christ, I excommunicate all idolaters, blasphemers, contemnors of God, heretics and all who form separate sects to break the unity of the Church, perjurers, all those who are disobedient to their fathers and mothers, and to their superiors, all seditious, unruly, violent, injurious persons, adulterers, rakes, thieves, ravishers, the covetous, the drunken, the gluttonous, and all who live a scandalous and dissolute life."<sup>8</sup> The "I" who speaks here claims supreme visible power under the invisible God, a heady standpoint for a man who, so far as history knows, never bothered to undergo a rite of ordination for himself. Such a man needs, from deep within his nature, total power over both the minds and the bodies of his subordinates; such a figure also supposes a constituency ready to grant him such power over themselves.

Still, violence is always the unexpected reality in our tradition. The surprise was terrifying when the doctrinaire nonviolence of the early 1960s shifted abruptly to pervasive violence later in the decade. The earlier phase came endorsed by respected liberal credentials—Thoreau's 1850 essay on Civil Disobedience was widely read and quoted; it became standard textbook fare on all campuses. But the surprise might have been mitigated, we might have been prepared for the worst, had we cared to pursue even Thoreau's thoughts to a fuller stage of development, to his writings at the end of the decade on John Brown. Here Thoreau declared, much as Faulkner would later, "I do not wish to kill nor be killed, but I can foresee circumstances in which both these would be by me unavoidable."<sup>9</sup>

Thoreau maintains a curious admiration, amounting to hero-worship ("a man such as the sun may not rise upon again in this benighted land") for this harsh and violent man. The "Plea" for John Brown is really panegyric. Brown and his men are the twelve disciples; his statue should be erected in the Massachusetts State House courtyard. In establishing Brown's authority, Thoreau was happy to report that Brown was "by descent and birth a New

England farmer," "a transcendentalist," and "the most American of us all." With historical insight valuable to the thesis here pursued, Thoreau identifies him with "the Puritans" who "died lately in the time of Cromwell" or who "have come over and settled in New England." Thoreau's own present reputation as a pacifist and father to American pacifist ideas can hardly stand in the face of his admiration for this man who brutally killed many and would have killed more.

Nor is Emerson's judgment of John Brown any less surprising. In November of 1859 he delivered a widely publicized lecture entitled "Courage." John Brown is eulogized there as "the Saint, whose fate yet hangs in suspense, but whose martyrdom, if it shall be perfected, will make the gallows as glorious as the cross." Nathaniel Hawthorne heard of this statement and shrank "unutterably" from the notion "that the death of this blood-stained fanatic has 'made the Gallows as venerable as the Cross.'" He concluded, "Nobody was ever more justly hanged."<sup>10</sup>

Hawthorne was more viscerally in tune with the Puritans. He knew their violent histories well, and considered the destruction of the Indian to be an essential facet of their calvinist patterns of thought. In his revealing story "The Maypole of Merry Mount," the Puritans looked upon the revellers and "compared the masques to those devils and ruined souls with whom their superstition peopled the black wilderness." To one scholar, Frederick C. Crews, what Hawthorne perceived was nothing less than a collective delusion in his Puritan forebears, whose nearly unique joy was the sadistic delight they took in brutal destruction of the "demonic" natives. In Hawthorne's prose: "Their weapons were always at hand to shoot down the straggling savage"; their assemblies proclaimed "bounties on the heads of wolves and the scalps of Indians."

Hawthorne also recorded in this story his perception that the values which prevailed in the Merry Mount incident were to persist, at some deep level, throughout the nation's history. He announced his story as an allegory and believed that "the future complexion of New England was involved" in the outcome of that conflict. "The Maypole of Merry Mount" is a story about history, about one of those rare crossroads days when the future hangs in the balance between two alternatives and the issue is settled definitively. "Jollity and gloom were contending for an empire." Hawthorne as author allows himself to become profoundly involved in the story. He editorializes heavily about the violent nature of these Puritans whose ways were to prevail and about the gloomy discipline which they imposed on life. Yet in his final remarks, he gives it as his authorial opinion (and it was Hawthorne himself who invented the term "intrusive author") that this dark calvinism best mirrors the facts and is finally the only discipline that can shape reality to any wholesome end. In other words, he not only perceives but sanctions the view

of life in democratic America that imposes the strictest repression, even though it is one that also includes an almost ritualized outlet for violence in the destruction of Indians. This is a paradoxical view of the culture for which there is no resolution.

Several of Hawthorne's stories have an element which shows another facet of the calvinist tradition strongly directing the course of his narratives. "The Maypole of Merry Mount," "Young Goodman Brown," and "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" are all stories of transition. Each records a moment—in the history of the culture in the first story, in the history of representative individuals in the other two stories—at which the future becomes fixed. The trap of determinism, and it seems to be a determinism toward reprobation rather than election, is sprung audibly in each of the stories.

As one attempts to analyze the discordancies in Hawthorne's fictional themes, the feeling arises that there is something in the later, anti-calvinist American system that doesn't and can't work, that perverts the original purity of the experiment. But Hawthorne is not entirely satisfied with the perfection of the old calvinist system, either. In fact, his conceptions concerning humanity and the calvinist interpretation are not only subtle and complex; they are, finally, confused. Arguments for and against the calvinist view of life press with equal force here.<sup>11</sup> For example, there is a convincing theory that he intended the "Custom-House" introduction to *The Scarlet Letter* to render the story more persuasive by pretending to have actual historical sources for it. But one finds the logic of the Introduction suggesting a further conclusion: this dismal scene of Uncle Sam's pensioners, the lazy and fatuous old men for whom Hawthorne shows a distant and superior contempt, is the direct result of the theology and *mores* of those stern Puritans who held the same ground a few generations earlier, those dying generations whose begetting, birth, and dying he is about to celebrate. In short, Hawthorne cannot come to a final judgment concerning his calvinist heritage. It is as if in the same moment of apprehension he sees its short life-span, its perverse sanctioning of violence, and yet its necessity to an adequate conception of human life and government.

The grand figure in Hawthorne's ambivalence towards cultural ideals is Hester herself. With her gorgeous letter and her free-thinking spirit she seems to represent the emergence of a healthy human figure from the diseased society. But narratively what she represents cannot be grafted back onto the stock for its cure: her daughter must live that life in another country while she remains as unassimilated mystery on the outer fringes of this. Editorially, at the end, her intrusive author must finally sink his admiration for her in his *frisson* caused by her sexual "stain."

No such ambivalence characterized the mind of Herman Melville. He was profoundly aware that something was wrong with the national culture.

The most concentrated moment of his historical insight occurs in a poem where he applies a calvinist critique to the American Constitution—a document which, as we shall see, appears to be at the heart of the problem of violence. The poem is called “The House-Top: A Night Piece” and is found in his volume of poems on the Civil War.<sup>12</sup> Melville was intensely involved in the ironies of this war and wrote the seventy-two poems of this collection in a few months. This particular poem considers the draft riots that occurred in New York City in 1863, but probes to the center of the American psyche, governmental and public as well as personal and private. The poem is one of Melville’s finest, celebrating a moment when the veil of illusion is lifted and the changeless heart of man is revealed for what it always and everywhere is: “and man rebounds whole eons back in nature.” The steaming jungle atmosphere, suggested early in the poem, suits the atavistic qualities Melville perceives in operation. This is Melville’s probe to the heart of darkness, to the bases of human behavior. Irish immigrants living in a New York ghetto found themselves suddenly subject to draft call for the Civil War. Believing that free Negroes of the city were somehow responsible, they began several days of looting, burning, and lynching in nearby colored neighborhoods. Appeals from political leaders and from the Roman Catholic bishop of New York were ineffectual in checking the rampage, which Melville, observing the conflagration at night from across the city, called “the Atheist roar of riot.” Finally, extreme measures seemed necessary and the militia was sent in, its leadership personified ironically as “wise Draco,” the Athenian legislator who stands for law at its harshest and most repressive. A brooding Melville sees two historic judgments implied in the event: a confirmation of Calvin’s insistence on man’s innate depravity, and a condemnation of the Constitution’s overly optimistic view of man’s nature and probable actions. The poem concludes:

Wise Draco comes, deep in the midnight roll  
Of black artillery; he comes, though late;  
In code corroborating Calvin’s creed  
And cynic tyrannies of honest kings;  
He comes, nor parlies; and the Town, redeemed,  
Give thanks devout; nor, being thankful, heeds  
The grimy slur on the republic’s faith implied,  
Which holds that Man is naturally good,  
And—more—is Nature’s Roman, never to be scourged.

What Melville seems to be saying is that the Constitution is politically naive; it is flawed by a tragic misapprehension of human nature. The observer, the speaker of the poem, perceives the irony: ordinary nonrioting citizens applaud the use of martial law without realizing the implication that Calvin was right about man’s corrupt nature; America is attempting to find its place in history

based on a false "faith" that denies this corruption. Melville's poem must be the classic text expressing the conflict between our unique political theory and our native religion.

What the concentrated power of this poem explores in miniature receives more extended treatment in Melville's final meditation, *Billy Budd*, where he probes the kind of personality sanctioned by law for governing. Captain Vere was the last of the three characters in the story to be developed. The other two may seem too pure—too purely innocent and too purely malignant. Vere, as mediator between Billy and Claggart, provides a focal point for the *human* involvement in the eternal struggle between good and evil.<sup>13</sup> The characterization of Vere thus becomes immensely important. We are to understand that he is an ordinary mortal with superior characteristics. He is a conscientious reader and thinker. His fellow officers consider him superior in intellect to themselves. Thus we follow the actions of this figure in the trial of Billy Budd with the feeling that the best of us might act this way. Vere, who has considered all questions of human morality and what he conceives to be the necessary functions of law, proceeds then to manipulate the trial so that it must result in the death of the angelic Billy.

Melville has drawn on many sources for his rich characterization of Vere. One of them may be Thomas Jefferson. Of all our national heroes Jefferson has always had the reputation of being the most learned and the most ethically concerned. Yet his record is not without blot. In the trial of Aaron Burr while Jefferson was president, he seems to have pursued the defendant with more than ordinary zeal. Burr was a long-standing political rival and personal enemy who very nearly beat Jefferson to the presidency. (The election was so close that it went into the House of Representatives, where Jefferson won by one vote.) Burr had recently been exonerated by a federal grand jury of any subversive activity. Jefferson then sent a public letter to Congress outlining a flimsily constructed conspiracy case against Burr and pronouncing his guilt "beyond all question." In the words of a recent historian of the matter, "Having convicted Burr before the bar of public opinion prior to his apprehension, the first Magistrate proceeded relentlessly to mobilize executive resources to prove the preconceived guilt. Jefferson did not turn the case over to the United States attorney, but acted himself as prosecutor, superintending the gathering of evidence, locating witnesses, taking depositions, directing trial tactics, and shaping public opinion as if judge and juror for the nation."<sup>14</sup> Some three years later, writing from retirement at Monticello, Jefferson continued to exonerate himself in the action. He wrote to John B. Colvin (Sept. 20, 1810) that observance of laws is a high duty "but not the highest." The state of affairs imposed "a law of necessity and self-preservation, and rendered the *salus populi* supreme over the written law."

The cases of Jefferson and Vere are not without significant differences,

mainly in the fact that Jefferson erred by going outside the law while Vere erred by remaining within the strictest definitions of the law. But a consideration of the similarities is more rewarding. Each of the two figures held the highest executive position in his "world." Each confronted a situation in which another individual had to be sacrificed. Each found himself in a borderline case where there was serious question whether the law should give way to higher considerations. Each relentlessly sacrificed another human being on the grounds of "principle." And each, on reflection years later, found his actions still justifiable. On purely literary ground, the reader may also be arrested by the similarity of names of the victims, Burr and Budd. Billy is taken from a ship called "The Rights of Man"; Jefferson had a formative hand in framing the French revolutionary document from which the ship took its name. What Melville seems to be exploring in a fictional situation, and what is clearly the real issue for Jefferson, is that the law, no matter how carefully constructed, can be circumvented by human ingenuity in the production of evil: "And man rebounds whole aeons back in nature."

The issue can now be stated clearly. There is a profound tension in American life as it has been meditated on historically. On the one hand is the calvinist insight into man's instinctive appetite for violence, for behavior that is demonically disruptive of some divinely ordained harmony; peace and order can be maintained only by strict control of passionate and irrational humanity. One of Calvin's *obiter dicta* puts it concisely: "Rough halters for rough donkeys." On the other hand, the political system that was later imposed on this culture was based on the axioms that man's nature was innately good and that the individual should be guaranteed maximum freedom, with every confidence that he will perform well. There is no need here to pursue a dubious thesis that would hold Calvin responsible for violence in America, for the darker side of our history. It is enough to say that significant debates in our history have frequently polarized around two opposing points of view, and that a deeply ingrained calvinism has presented a persuasive rationale for one of the sides. The conflict will be most apparent to anyone who tries to reconcile the basic documents of the Republic—the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution—with its violent and calvinistic anthem—"The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

There has not always been unanimity concerning the nature of this tension in our culture, but the conflict has frequently been felt and several attempts have been made to find its roots. Charles Beard, for example, two generations ago demonstrated his feeling of some great weakness in the American way and published his famous analysis of how corruption had entered the documents which form the theoretical and practical foundation of the country. His revisionist study of the Constitution insisted that it was constructed by the wealthy as an instrument of self-protection. His book *An*

*Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (1913) has been the object of controversy since its publication. I do not want to review the dispute here or the significant criticism it has drawn; the point is that the book can be seen as one attempt, in a long series, to clarify the problem of America. Beard observed that "most of the law . . . is concerned with the property relations of men." He argued that the "impelling motive" behind those who supported the new Constitution "was the economic advantages which the beneficiaries expected would accrue to themselves first, from their action." His method was to determine who initially supported and who opposed the Constitution, to record what information was retrievable concerning their financial status, and to let these facts stand for themselves: nonslaveholders, farmers, and debtors all opposed while those with significant financial holdings supported. The final implication was that the Constitution was a document flawed by partisan interest and that it needed revision along more truly democratic principles. Beard's critique employs more recent Marxist analyses of historical conflict, but this newer analysis finds materials already laid out by an earlier and more historically American analysis.

Woodrow Wilson, Beard's contemporary, also pursued his studies of the American system with the sense that there was a flaw somewhere that needed uncovering. Wilson's family line illustrates the classic pattern of one major influx of calvinism into America, from sixteenth-century Scotland to Northern Ireland to Philadelphia in the early nineteenth century. Many in the family pursued the clerical vocation, including Wilson's father, who established the family as Southern, Presbyterian, intellectual, well-disciplined, and—somewhat astonishingly—proslavery. He was one of the organizers of the new Southern Presbyterian Church when the National Assembly of the Presbyterian Church excommunicated its slave-holding members in 1861. This sentiment is mirrored in Wilson's own thinking when, towards the end of the last volume of his history of the United States, he remarks that the South would now be coming back on its feet again since they had recently, for all practical purposes, disenfranchised the large body of Negro voters.

Wilson suffered from chronic stomach complaints, as did John Calvin.<sup>15</sup> The luggage that arrived with him at the White House in 1913 included a stomach pump and old-fashioned tar tablets. A popular biography introduces him thus: "In his last years Wilson became pure Scotch, an iron-nerved old Covenanter, using every aid he could command to carry out what he devoutly believed to be the Will of God. In this phase his prototype was Scott's Balfour of Burleigh who smote the enemies of the Lord and feared not. Old histories of Scotland are full of the same narrow, God-fearing men, ready to slay or be slain for what they believed to be right—as revealed to them after long study and fervent prayer."<sup>16</sup>

Wilson's first published work, while he was still a senior at Princeton, was



an article called "Cabinet Government in the United States." It appeared in Henry Cabot Lodge's *International Review* for August 1879. The flaw that Wilson detected in the American system of government at that time was one that he was to pursue and develop through several subsequent writings. The problem, according to Wilson, was that virtually all legislation was prepared by nearly anonymous committees of Congress, working in private. As a result, no one was responsible for laws. His solution was to have members of the president's Cabinet selected from among the congressmen. They would initiate legislation and would stand or fall in their positions according to whether the legislation was passed or failed. Behind this analysis stood a very real and practical problem in the country at the time, the situation of a president of one party facing a nearly immovable Congress of the other party, exactly the same situation Wilson himself was to face after the November election of 1916.

Wilson's solution would emphasize personal responsibility for the smooth running of the country rather than reliance on a flawed system which allowed progressive measures to languish. With admirable consistency, Wilson was still pursuing this method of government after the World War, when he brought his case for the League of Nations personally to the people of the country. His legendary trips of 1919 were to persuade the people themselves to override a congressional opposition that he felt was purely partisan.

Wilson, then, coming from a deeply calvinistic background, also felt there was some flaw in the American system. His analysis of the flaw does not seem particularly apt; no one since has proposed any serious attempt to restructure the government along the lines he suggested. What his case demonstrates, though, once again, is a visceral calvinist reaction against what is seen to be an overly optimistic and idealistic political theory.

It was to another facet of this problem that James Madison had addressed himself in Number 10 of the *Federalist Papers*, and here we come to a more acute analysis, to a clearer joining of issue and answer. Madison was concerned to prove the ability of the new Constitution "to break and control the violence of faction." From his use of the word "faction" it is obvious that Madison considers the problem in terms of groups rather than individuals. But the problem to be solved is the same, violence. Among the causes of violence he puts "Liberty" at the top, which seems to place Madison, for the moment at least, among the orthodox upholders of the five points of Dort. By a curious anomaly this is the very quality of human life most to be maintained by the new system of government. It looks very much here as if friend and foe are the same. In desperation, one must think, Madison tries for explanation at a deeper level and in the process comes up with a suspiciously calvinist insight: "The latent causes of faction are thus *sown* in the nature of man"—the corrupt seed theory used by Augustinians, and later by calvinists, to

explain the transmission of inherited guilt and evil from generation to generation.

As Madison builds his political solution to the problem by reference to the peculiarly Federalist or representative form of Democracy proposed by the Constitution, his inferences are constantly qualified to probabilities. A firm clarity marks the stages of Madison's argument, making all the more apparent his insight into the precariousness of human legal formulations even at their best. It is precisely the function of the legal structure to mitigate, to limit and control, the viciousness of bias, corruption, self-interest, and greed, without infringing over-much upon personal liberty. These human failings, he seems to be saying, we will always have with us; and Federalism *appears* to be the best way to control them.

Violence, the need for its control, and the desire for its extirpation were also in the mind of Joel Barlow as he tried to supply a national epic in *The Columbiad* (1807). In the preface he sets as one of his objectives "to discountenance the deleterious passion for violence and war." Barlow projected a meliorist theory of history and hoped by the influence of his poem to assist in the death of the human instinct for violence. In this context he castigated the ancient epics for their contrary purposes. With regard to the *Iliad* he deplored "its obvious tendency . . . to inflame the minds of young readers with an enthusiastic ardor for military fame; to inculcate the pernicious doctrine of the divine right of kings; to teach both prince and people that military plunder was the most honorable mode of acquiring property; and that conquest, violence, and war were the best employment of nations, the most glorious prerogative of bodily strength and of cultivated mind." It was for this reason that he finally judged that Homer's "existence has really proved one of the signal misfortunes of mankind." One need not argue here that there are better readings of Homer; the point is rather that Barlow felt his countrymen badly needed a remedy for this inherited mischief.<sup>17</sup>

The long-standing debate between the calvinist American intellect and the American Constitution rose to one of its most furious pitches during the arguments concerning abolition that preceded the Civil War. There the most liberal minds in the North declared the Constitution at fault precisely on the score of its libertarianism, its tolerance of the hated institution of slavery. At the famous meeting in Framingham, Massachusetts, in 1854, William Lloyd Garrison burned a copy of the Constitution on the speaker's platform, condemning it as "a covenant with death, and an agreement with hell." Four years later, at another Garrisonian convention in Boston, Wendell Phillips denounced George Washington as a traitor to humanity for giving us the Constitution.<sup>18</sup> These attacks are from still different points, but once again the American liberal mind has found itself in the particularly calvinist posi-

tion of condemning a libertarian document in an effort to repress violence and evil.

It may seem to be exaggeration for the purpose of thesis to call this fear of violence and the need to check human freedom by the name of "calvinism." One may see it rather as simply the perennial Christian message. But that would be to give another index to the extent to which we in America have come to identify orthodox Christianity with strict calvinism. There are other traditions equally as Christian which have not flowered on our soil. One might recall, for example, the profound belief in divine grace as healer of the wounds of original sin, which is found in the Roman- and Anglo-Catholic traditions. Marlowe's Doctor Faustus, at the end of his long trial, has a momentary vision of this power which he has consciously rejected: "See, see, where Christ's blood streams in the firmament!" And the young priest in Georges Bernanos's *Journal d'un curé de campagne* can exclaim in the face of all deception and adversity, "*Qu'est-ce que cela fait? Tout est grace.*"

Similarly, and within the religious traditions struggling for ascendancy early in our formative years, the Quakers proposed an alternative to this strict calvinism. The Quakers were unconvinced that man or his universe was in any way naturally corrupted. The individual could govern his own passions, and his pledge "to live peaceably and justly in civil society" was enough to guarantee his religious freedom in William Penn's 1682 Frame of Government. In the preface to that document Penn sets down his broadly optimistic principles: it really doesn't matter a great deal what form of government is instituted, for "there is hardly one frame of government in the world so ill designed by its first founders, that, in good hands, would not do well enough. . . . Let men be good, and government cannot be bad; if it be ill, they will cure it." Such faith in individual liberty, such genial tolerance, and such confidence in human goodness were far from the ideas which our national religion has sanctioned as orthodox. On the contrary, as we have seen, the national calvinism has judged instinct and passion to be thoroughly corrupted, and any form of government that does not provide mechanisms for repression is flawed at the root.

By some curious perversity of history, a national religion and a national Constitution radically at variance with one another have coexisted for two centuries. It has been our historical role to live with the resulting tension. The American looks at puritanism and doesn't like it. He admires the Constitution. But he is so deeply formed by native calvinism that in the final analysis the puritan way is seen as the best, the most realistic, and the Constitution is seen as a dreamer's attempt to establish a nation without taking into account man's innate leanings toward violence.

Latent in all of the critiques we have seen is the idea that freedom is a

dubious value, that violence boils always just below the surface, that stern public measures are constantly required to police the evil instincts of the individual, and that the American system errs on the side of indulgence. There is a constant tension in the American mind between the need for individual freedom and the fear of it; between a "Jeffersonian" libertarianism and the instinct for repression. On the darker side has always been the image of Calvin's Geneva, divinely organized and sternly ruled, elevated at times by enthusiasts to a status equaling the New Jerusalem of *Revelations*.

Calvin's thought is the culmination of one line of development from St. Augustine. Augustinianism is a complex system of ideas and argumentation, mirroring not only a complex and deeply troubled mind, but also the fact that Augustine, in his long life, engaged in a multitude of controversies with "adversaries" of all shades and extremes of opinion. He was always intensely focused on the controversy immediately before him and was never one to avoid assertion of an opposite extreme when the Faith seemed endangered. It is for this reason that it has so far been impossible to construct a satisfactory synthesis of his thought, and it is also for this reason that he can be found so widely quoted during the Reformation by disputants on every side of such doctrinal questions as the freedom of the will, the nature and efficacy of grace, the meaning of the Redemption, and the capacities of human nature.

A recent scholar, Herbert A. Deane, summarizing Augustine's political thought, mainly from *The City of God*, proposes the following ideas:

Even to disobedient, prideful man God has been most merciful; he has established new institutions, adapted to the new conditions of sinful existence, in order to keep . . . society from collapsing into complete anarchy and chaos. These institutions, the entire legal and political order, are divinely ordained as both punishments *and* remedies for the sinful condition of man. . . .

The earthly peace and order that they make possible are no longer natural and spontaneous, but must be maintained by coercion and repression.<sup>19</sup>

The description is closely packed with ideas which we associate with calvinism: the sense that social and political authority is somehow divinely "given," and that one would oppose or tamper with it only under pain of sin; that peace and order are not the natural conditions of history in a fallen time scheme; and that "coercion and repression" by external authority are to be expected, not to be questioned, by the blind and wrong-hearted individual.

Who is to be the executor, the engineer, of this program of control and repression? By a process with which we are so thoroughly familiar that we may not immediately gasp at its extravagance, Calvin, without even mentioning,

much less justifying, the fact that he *assumes* the role, seems to have spent his life issuing vicegerent directives from the divinity. "I announced," he wrote to Farel, "that no one would be admitted to the Table of the Lord [on Easter Sunday] who had not beforehand presented himself for examination." In Calvin's Geneva, as in early New England, excommunication was equivalent to civil disenfranchisement. Calvin recommended a wider and sterner use of it in his treatise *On the Necessity of Reforming the Church*, as "that best nerve of discipline . . . the most salutary remedy for chastening the guilty." The recommendation is repeated in *The Institutes* (4.12.4ff.) for sins far less serious than those which merited excommunication in other evangelical traditions. But Calvin was not one to pursue the enemy to the borders and there let him escape. Outside of church government there exists civil government, whose purpose, according to Calvin, is "to cherish and support the external worship of God, to preserve the pure doctrine of religion, to defend the constitution of the Church, to regulate our lives in a manner requisite for the society of men" (*Institutes*, 4.20.2). Calvin makes it clear, in the next section, that the civil order is not to tamper with the laws of the church but that it should punish infractions of those laws with its own means. Those who bear "the sword of justice" must protect the church. That it is no metaphorical sword, that it implies physical punishment and death, is explicit in the sections following and in his biblical commentaries (on *Deuteronomy* 13.1–5, for example).

Behind much of Calvin's political writing is the debilitating concept of divine right. It is not by the consent of the governed that authority exercises its power, but by authority from on high which the ordinary citizen knows little of and is hardly in a position to criticize. Calvin wrote a preface introducing the Acts of the Conference of Ratisbon (1541), in which he hands on these legal documents to the subscribing states "that they may accept the light of God when it is offered to them, without looking this way and that to see which way the wind is blowing." What is proposed here is a theory of authority which has the divinity for its origin and inspiration, which places a practically illimitable power in the hands of those who govern, and which requires the unquestioning assent of those governed. This theory is usually accompanied by strong guilt and a morbid and introspective fear of destruction as the penalty for disobedience. It may be that such guilt can occur from time to time within many religious traditions, but it feeds most richly on the ideas and emotions of calvinism.

The notion of divine right—whether of kings and princes, of a president, or of civil authority of any kind—always exists as a temptation to lay unbearable problems in some superior hand, as Melville pointed out in "The House-Top." But in the calvinist tradition it exists as a treasured principle. John Knox, in *The Scots Confession* (1560) stated it thus:

We confess and acknowledge that empires, kingdoms, dominions, and cities are appointed and ordained by God; the powers and authorities in them, . . . are ordained by God's holy ordinance for the manifestation of his own glory and for the good and well being of all men. We hold that any men who conspire to rebel or to overturn the civil powers, as duly established, are not merely enemies to humanity but rebels against God's will. Further, we confess and acknowledge that such persons as are set in authority are to be loved, honored, feared, and held in the highest respect, because they are the lieutenants of God, and in their councils God himself doth sit and judge. They are the judges and princes to whom God has given the sword for the praise and defense of good men and the punishment of all open evil doers. Moreover, we state that the preservation and purification of religion is particularly the duty of kings, princes, rulers, and magistrates. They are not only appointed for civil government but also to maintain true religion and to suppress all idolatry and superstition.

Moderation is not to be expected from John Knox, but similar statements were made part of doctrine by other reformers who followed Calvin. A year later (1561) Heinrich Bullinger wrote the widely adopted *Second Helvetic Confession*, where the same assertion is made, in briefer scope, under the heading "The Magistracy Is from God" (in chapter 30). And the Westminster Confession of Faith, composed in 1643, repeats Knox's ideas with some fuller development. Even the modernized version adopted in 1958 by the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America upholds the divine origin of secular power and defines, though now in mitigated terms, "the duty of civil magistrates to protect the Church" (chapter 23). The historically evolved principles of separation and of power from the consent of the governed had still not broken through the hard shell of our inherited calvinism; nor has the American mind, formed by its native religion to fall back on harsh physical repression, fully accepted the explicit doctrine of its national Constitution.

The full history of violence in America is yet to be written, in spite of the presence of many suggestive studies already mentioned. But, on the testimony of many American writers and thinkers, the passions that have regularly polarized the commonwealth clearly derive from the most basic sources of our identity as a people. If the dreamer of the American Dream awakens to a flawed and occasionally violent reality, it is because of two conflicting value systems espoused simultaneously in the culture: the libertarianism of Jefferson and his Constitution, and the authoritarianism basic to our native religious calvinism.

# 7 THE SOUTHERN EXPERIENCE

It may be instructive to begin a chapter on the South with a false start. There is a tradition which from time to time has seemed on the brink of playing a major defining role in southern literature, but at present the influence must be assessed as minimal, almost nonexistent. The locale itself has been absorbed, as far as defining characteristics are concerned, into the stream of America generally. I refer here to the ancient culture of New Orleans, and the vigorous local mixture of French and Catholic that was strongly entrenched there.

The New Orleans culture produced one true literary masterpiece, George Washington Cable's *The Grandissimes* (1880), but it was a masterpiece far off the path of standard American fiction. In fact the book may with justice be called the unique example of a European novel written in America during the nineteenth century. Though others, notably Richard Chase,<sup>1</sup> have sought American precedents for it, still I feel that its frank sensuality quite distinctively sets it apart from the American tradition and solidly in the European. The old city of New Orleans, circa 1810, boasts a leisured wealth based on several generations of a slave economy; social stratification is entirely in control of the plot. Taste and breeding distinguish even the stage properties from those of any other American novel: "The doctor made a low, indrawn whistle and raised his eyebrows—the rooms were so sumptuously furnished; immovable largeness and heaviness, lofty sobriety, abundance of finely wrought brass mounting, motionless richness of upholstery, much silent twinkle of pendulous crystal, a soft semi-obscurity—such were the characteristics. The long windows of the farther apartment could be seen to open over the street, and the air from behind, coming in over a green mass of fig-trees that stood in the paved court below, moved through the rooms, making them cool and cavernous."<sup>2</sup>

The novel exhibits a frank ease and sexual maturity which allow comments like the following, which surely could be found in no book produced elsewhere in America at that time: "'Clotilde, my beautiful daughter,' said Aurora . . . 'I tell you now, because you don't know, and it is my duty as your mother to tell you—the meanest wickedness a woman can do in all this bad, bad world is to look ugly in bed!'"

The popular American novel of the time would handle such matters more discreetly. A good example to set against Cable would be a New England writer's equally popular novel, John William De Forest's *Miss Ravenel's*

*Conversion.* Lily Ravenel's sexual awakening is described in 1867 in more mystico-sentimental terms: "It is true that for a moment it [the kiss] had startled her greatly, and seemed to awaken in her some mighty and mysterious influence. But it is also true she was half angry at him for troubling her spiritual nature so potently, and that on the whole he had not advanced himself a single step in her affections by his audacity. If anything, she treated him with more reserve and kept him at a greater distance than before."

DeForest brings his heroine from *ingénue* to matron with the following analysis, reflecting a tradition which would be amplified but not materially changed in the sentimental fiction of the rest of the century: "Woman is more intimately and irresponsibly a child of Nature than man. She comes oftener, more completely, and more evidently under the power of influences which she can neither direct nor resist, and which make use of her without consulting her inclination. Her part then is passive obedience and uncomplaining suffering, while through her the ends of life are accomplished."<sup>3</sup>

Women, in De Forest's view, are both higher and lower than men: higher in their exquisite sensitivity and purity, but lower in the qualities of responsibility and self-control. George Washington Cable's characterization is refreshing and mature, but not a voice to be found elsewhere among American writers.

The religious dimension of the New Orleans culture described by Cable is an easily carried local brand of French Catholicism, never intrusive in the dynamics of the action. It helps define the culture and its ancient richness but makes no perceptible demands. There is one moment when Cable comes close to our subject, but the way he uses calvinism shows his entire psychological freedom from its demands: "The whole tribe of Grandissime believed, this morning, in the doctrine of total depravity—of the negro."<sup>4</sup>

There is a moment too when Cable's novel touches on an American theme, and then it does so with startling accuracy: when a terrified Negress is given a chance to run for her life, an anonymous member of the lynch mob shoots her in the back with his pistol.

On several occasions Faulkner seems consciously to have gone in search of this matter of New Orleans, in his early writing and in his brief stays in the city. Cable could provide one of the scenes that haunted his mind:

"The shadow of the Ethiopian," said the grave apothecary.

M. Grandissime's quick gesture implied that Frowenfeld had said the very word.

"Ah! my-de'-seh, when I try sometimes to stand outside and look at it, I am ama-aze at the length, the blackness of that shadow!" (He was so deep in earnest that he took no care of his English.) "It is the *Némésis*



w'ich, instead of coming afteh, glides along by the side of this morhal, political, commercial, social mistake! It drhags us a centurhy behind the rhes' of the world! It rhetahds and poisons everhy industrhy we got!—mos' of all our-h immense agrhicultu'e! It brheeds a thousan' cusses that nevva leave home but jus' flutter-h up an' rhoost, my-de'-seh, on ow heads; an' we nevva know it!—yes, sometimes some of us know it.”

The scene, in another idiom, could have been Faulkner's, but noticeably missing in Cable is the theme, the rationale powerful enough to carry Faulkner's tragic insight. Southern as it was, in its peculiar and temporary way, Catholic New Orleans could not furnish sufficient material for Faulkner's parables. The dynamics of his tragic vision had other native sources.

The case of Flannery O'Connor is equally instructive. Her last book of stories is called *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. The American edition is introduced with a thoughtful essay by Robert Fitzgerald, long-time friend who shared her intense Catholicism. Fitzgerald states that the title “comes from Teilhard de Chardin, whose works Flannery O'Connor had been reading at least since early 1961.”<sup>5</sup> Attempts have been made subsequently to find traces of the serene mystical optimism of Chardin in her work, where an opposed world-view seems to prevail. She remains firmly rooted in Faulkner's territory. The title of the book is that of the first story, where the racial and family tensions, seething from the beginning of the story, rise to converge in the hideous death of the mother. The pattern of this story is the pattern of virtually all of O'Connor's fiction: what rises to the plane of action is human wickedness; when the wickedness of two human beings converges, the inevitable result is tragedy. Other stories continue to explore the hypocrisy and pretension of graceless characters. In no world but a fallen one, to paraphrase Melville's calvinism in “The Encantadas,” could these stories have taken place.

Examination of calvinism in the South must sooner or later come to focus on Scotland and the heritage the Scots and the Scotch-Irish brought with them to this country. Woodrow Wilson once exclaimed enthusiastically that every line of strength in American history “is a line colored with Scottish blood,” and Steven Vincent Benét praised “the broadsword virtues of the clan” to be found among leaders of the Old South. The claims for Scottish influence on American culture, as they have been ingeniously overstated, were parodied by the British historian George Shepperson: some have proposed Scotland to be “the origin and inspiration of the American experience at its most distinctive and best: constitutional government, national and local democracy, business ability, technical genius, the independent and common-sense spirit in all fields, religious and secular—in short, rugged

individualism in church, state, and countinghouse."<sup>6</sup> Not much is left that we might care to characterize as American that has not been accounted for by the Scottish heritage as defined here.

It has always been assumed that rigid calvinism entered the South through the Scotch-Irish.<sup>7</sup> This is true, though some qualifications have to be added to make the story complete. As early as the Revolution, Benjamin Franklin estimated that nearly a third of the million inhabitants of Pennsylvania were Ulster men. More kept coming and, as a group, they showed a strong tendency to fan out in all directions, in the South following the mountain valleys until they pervaded the area. They were, in the main, the settlers of the old Southwest. Uprooted from their native Scotland and, a generation later, from Northern Ireland, they had largely slipped from church membership by the time they reached America. It seems clear, however, that part at least of their cohesiveness lay in a hardheaded loyalty to the old kirk and a distrust for outsiders. The American Presbyterian Church was highly successful in organizing them back into strong local churches by 1800, and the influence of Sir Walter Scott's novels within the next few decades would provide the basis for a strong social cohesiveness.<sup>8</sup> A sign of their conservatism and small tolerance for outside interference can be found in a few phrases issued in a pastoral letter, in the last year of the Civil War, by the Southern Presbyterian Church: "When we solemnly declare to you, brethren, that the dogma which asserts the inherent sinfulness of this relation [slavery] is unscriptural and fanatical. . . that it is one of the most pernicious heresies of modern times, that its countenance by the church is a just cause of separation from it. . . , we have surely said enough to warn you from this insidious error."<sup>9</sup>

To this day the Scots gather for games and national festivities each July in the mountains of North Carolina. And there are Southern Presbyterians who consider themselves especially close to their origins when they can hear a preacher with the burr still in his tongue, a condition not infrequently manufactured for important sermons.

The Scottish sense of the clan took a more sinister turn later in the nineteenth century, as illustrated by the publication, in 1905, of *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*, by Thomas Dixon, Jr. This was of course the text for D. W. Griffith's famous film *The Birth of a Nation*. Born and raised in a Presbyterian family, educated at the Baptist college of Wake Forest, and for many decades a practicing Baptist minister, Dixon was fully aware of the historical roots of southern culture. His preface stated that "how the young South, led by the reincarnated souls of the Clansmen of Old Scotland, went forth under this cover and against overwhelming odds, daring exile, imprisonment and a felon's death, and saved the life of a people, forms one of the most dramatic chapters in the history of the Aryan race." It is not fair to credit Dixon with the bigotry and terrorism of the

later Klan, but he cannot have been unaware that the first clan had been abolished by its founders for precisely the same excesses.<sup>10</sup>

Strong as this Scotch-Irish influence was, it was soon to be overshadowed by two denominations which, by the Civil War, came to dominate the South entirely, though the new forces carried as firm as calvinism as the old. It has been estimated that at least ninety percent of church membership in the South was evenly split between Baptist and Methodist. Both of these, along with the Presbyterians, agreed so much among themselves and so disagreed with their northern counterparts that all decided to keep the separate regional jurisdiction which had been thrust upon them by the war and the disagreements that had preceded it. Curiously, nine-tenths of the newly freed slaves became either Methodists or Baptists, though in churches separately constituted for them.

Methodism has frequently experienced the temptation to stray from its Wesleyan origins towards calvinistic rigor. One of the Wesleys' earliest associates in the founding of Methodism was the revivalist of the Great Awakening, George Whitefield. But a split occurred early on theological grounds. Whitefield withdrew to found the "Calvinist Methodists." The liberal Benjamin Franklin donated funds to establish a nondenominational chapel where men like Whitefield could preach, though he marvelled in his *Autobiography* that people flocked to hear him since he abused them "by assuring them that they were naturally *half beasts* and *half devils*." This Methodist leaning toward calvinism was particularly manifested when it found itself on the ripe ground of the frontier or the backwoods. From Methodism's participation in revivalism came the various "Holiness" movements, which finally had to be forced out of the church itself into independency. The rigor with which they attacked worldliness and maintained the South's blue-laws, regulating drinking, gambling, and entertainment, has usually been taken as a diversion that kept them from facing the more troublesome problems of segregation and industrialization, though concurrently the image of the southerner as irremediably calvinistic suffered not at all. This brand of southern religion—characterized by revivalism, the desire to impose a personal morality by repressive legislation affecting everyone, and by a profound distrust of human nature—is still widespread in the South and can easily be traced to calvinist origins.

The Baptists as a group have not been notably theological in the quality of personal speculation or in the training of ministers. Nevertheless, where they have cared to draw up creeds or doctrinal statements, they have generally gone back to the Westminster Confession for inspiration. The most authoritative creed for the Southern Baptist churches is the Philadelphia Confession of 1688, an adaptation of the Westminster Confession of 1647 with only slight changes. There is no such softening of the calvinist materials here as can be

found in some other American confessions, in the Confession of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church (1829), for example, which still closely follows Westminster, or in the American Methodist Articles of Religion (1784), which follow Westminster more loosely still. A popular history of American religion generalizes on the subject thus: "No explanation is apparent for the revulsion of the great body of American Baptists into a Calvinism exaggerated to the point of caricature, except the reaction of controversy with the Methodists."<sup>11</sup>

Strong in Baptist consciousness is the tradition of the Particular (i.e., Calvinist) branch. This group, which broke from London Congregationalism around 1638, stood for baptism by total immersion, against infant baptism, and for the notion—from the Synod of Dort—that Christ died only for the Elect (hence, "Particular" Baptists). It later joined the other major Baptist stream, the Separate (more "Arminian") branch, but brought with it the confession of 1677, a rigorous interpretation of the Westminster Confession.

It may be added here that the Presbyterians, influential in spite of their relatively small percentage of adherents, have maintained a particularly strong tie to the Calvinist past. Leonard J. Trinterud has said that "the entire history of the [Presbyterian] Church has been shaped by that which its founding fathers thought and did during its first half century [in New England], 1706–1758."<sup>12</sup> In the South this has been truer than in the North. Where the Presbyterian Church in 1958 modified the text of the Westminster Confession to include a more benevolent tolerance for other sects, and a mild disclaimer of the doctrine of infant damnation, the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (a southern denomination with about thirty thousand members) reaffirmed the older version as it had always stood. To be sure, there were Episcopalians as well as Presbyterians among those American Scots who drew their ancestry from Highlander and Jacobite families, but it should not be understood that they were immune from Calvinist influence in the least. By far the most vocal Americans among them were more of the Presbyterian persuasion. Woodrow Wilson's predecessor as president of Princeton, James McCosh, published the thoroughly Presbyterian study of *The Scottish Philosophy* in 1875.<sup>13</sup> Generally, then, it can be said that Calvinism in the South has come from many sources; it is pervasive; and its history, though complex, is verifiable.

Traces of the ancient rigor still lie on the surface of life in the South. A thoroughfare, a shopping center, and a large subdivision of a major southern city are named Brainerd. Citizens of this comfortable enclave are uniformly unaware that the name derives from the Indian missionary David Brainerd, son-in-law and disciple of Jonathan Edwards. Brainerd never visited the South, but early missionaries carried his name there shortly after his death, while his journal was still immensely popular. He was one of the twice-born

with a vengeance. He was converted to the doctrines of the Great Awakening by the preaching of Gilbert Tennent and seems gladly to have accepted his dismissal from Yale because of his opposition to the worldly religion practiced there. His biography is entitled *Flagellant on Horseback*. Edwards, who could hardly be convicted of lax religious devotion, considered Brainerd's main fault to be excessive contempt for the flesh. Calvinism in the South is a complex phenomenon, but two statements can be made with certainty: it entered the South with almost every religious influence that came to bear on the region, and it has pervaded the day-to-day lives of the people at every social level.

Southern literature is intensely local; it is perhaps the only American literature where the techniques of the local colorist have yielded profound and universal themes. Military defeat emphasized the qualities of doom and duty as well as those of courage, and a fierce loyalty. Along with the code went a myth: the war formed a sharp point in history between the dream of the past and the unbearable present, best captured in miniature in two lines from John Crowe Ransom: "But see the roses on your trellis dying / And hear the spectral singing of the moon." But the loyalty is an ambiguous one. At the end of *Absalom, Absalom!* Shreve asks Quentin why he hates the South. The Canadian's name sounds like "shrive," which is consistent with the confessional probing of a dark history that is the story. Quentin replies with a denial that amounts to affirmation: "I don't hate it," and then to himself, "*I don't hate it, I don't. I don't! I don't hate it! I don't hate it!*" There is matter here for profound personal tragedy, and it may be that Calvinism has provided the stimulus for the few appearances of the tragic mode in America.

In a small book on the Vanderbilt Fugitives, John M. Bradbury suggested a comparison between the Nashville group and the New England Transcendentalists. The judgment seems a case of special pleading, or at least premature. Yet there are some interesting correspondences. The convergence of so much wit and wisdom is remarkable in both instances, and has rarely been paralleled elsewhere in American intellectual history. A yet more striking parallel is the sheer weight of a dominant Calvinistic culture exerting its influence in both cases.

A curious document in this history, yet one that must be coped with, is the 1930 manifesto *I'll Take My Stand*. Several of the authors subsequently made their way to national prominence: Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren. The viewpoints of the twelve authors are not easily reducible to homogeneity: where they do so reduce, the area may be called utopia. It was a curious kind of revolution in that the young men all felt themselves to be the last of the old rather than the first of the new. The grandeur they perceived was of a sun that had already set; the tragedy they felt was that it had never had a chance to shine fully. Their vision contained its own critique: it was based on a one-man-one-farm agricultural economy at a

time when slavery was no longer possible, when the horrors of tenant farming were about to disappear, when expensive machinery which few individuals could afford was becoming a necessity, and when the bottom had temporarily dropped out of every market, anyway. Yet the virtue it paradoxically extolled was the serenity of classical leisure. But the book has enjoyed a life of its own as a contribution to the national self-image. It is perhaps the best expression of the myth of a people written in America since the Declaration of Independence.

John Donald Wade's "The Life and Death of Cousin Lucius" contains the central vignette of the book, the fictitious composite of a man who had lived through the Civil War into the present, containing and sharpening within himself the values and ideals now rapidly becoming anachronistic. After the dream-like characterization, the poignant violence of Wade's conclusion creates one of the high points of the book: "He *was* dead. And all who wish to think that he lived insignificantly and the sum of what he was is negligible, are welcome to think so. And may God have mercy on their souls."

*I'll Take My Stand* has recently been reprinted with an introduction by Louis D. Rubin, Jr., who sums up the book as "a rebuke to materialism, a corrective to the worship of Progress, and a reaffirmation of man's aesthetic and spiritual needs."<sup>14</sup> As such we can take it for a book of statements by young authors asserting for their time what must constantly be rediscovered by every generation. But the summary leaves out one historical element of the book which I believe to be important. In the first essay John Crowe Ransom states: "I will propose a thesis which seems to have about as much cogency as generalizations usually have: The South is unique on this continent for having founded and defended a culture which was according to the European principles of culture; and the European principles had better look to the South if they are to be perpetuated in this country."

Allen Tate had proposed the same thesis in his biography of Jefferson Davis a year before: "Southerners believed that they stood for 'Christianity and Civilization' and, seen in the light of the main traditions of Europe, the assertion was literally true: theirs was the last stand, they were the forlorn hope, of conservative Fundamentalist Christianity and of civilization, based on agrarian, class rule, in the European sense. Europe was already being Americanized—which means Northernized, industrialized—and the south by 1850 was more European than Europe." I take the key word here to be "European"; but what can that word mean in a country where nearly every idea and institution has been traced to European antecedents? What seems to be lingering in the mind here is a nostalgia for the one moment of European history which has least impinged on American national consciousness, the Renaissance, and I believe that Ransom may be expressing the feeling of them all that somewhere in the mental geography of the South the Renaissance is

uniquely preserved. Confirmation is found in the "Introduction: A Statement of Principles" to which all twelve authors more or less subscribed: "The amenities of life also suffer under the curse of a strictly-business or industrial civilization. They consist in such practices as manners, conversation, hospitality, sympathy, family life, romantic love—in the social exchanges which reveal and develop sensibility in human affairs. If religion and the arts are founded on right relations of man-to-nature, these are founded on right relations of man-to-man." The attraction here is to utopia, to some atemporal *locus amoenus* of the mind. The atmosphere of Urbino is here, the setting for the gracious amenities of the all-night conversation in Castiglione's *The Courtier* (1528). The mind would float to higher elevations in a life arranged by the Duchess Elizabetha Gonzaga, with the stimulus of Cardinal Bembo's discourse on the Platonic ladder of love.

It may have been that Jefferson Davis achieved something of this at Briarfield, as Tate describes it, but the achievement was short-lived and involved a very small number. Those few who struggled to establish an estate by their middle years found it destroyed before old age could properly be said to have overcome them. And even if they all "translated Latin with perfect accuracy," the topsoil was still quite thin for this sort of flowering. Basic to the vision is leisure; as Ransom says, "The good life depends on leisure, but leisure depends on an establishment, and the establishment depends on a prevailing magnanimity which scorns personal advancement at the expense of the free activity of the mind." Whatever this may be, it is hardly an accurate description of any society of human beings who have left their record in history. It is impossible to cite any culture where such leisure was achieved without ruthlessness and exploitation. Thomas Sutpen's dream of leisured ease, in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* is a case in point, from the pen of a more realistic southern chronicler; and as early as 1782, de Crèvecoeur drew a bitterly descriptive picture of the contrast between the luxury of the citizens of Charleston and the misery of the slave culture that supported it.<sup>15</sup>

But at least the Renaissance was proposed and respected in *I'll Take My Stand*, as existing in the South perhaps uniquely in the American mind. The question arises with some urgency: why was America so little touched by the values of the Renaissance, and why could such traces as struggled for survival in the South not endure? And a cogent answer for this question must begin with the figure of Calvin himself.

No one would call into question either Calvin's native genius or the fine thoroughness of his education. His was the rigorously disciplined and broadly ranging education of the late Renaissance, and among his intimate friends were some of the outstanding figures of the day.<sup>16</sup> He wrote poetry and knew the languages that gave access to ancient lore, whether classic, biblical, or patristic. Among his writings can be found prose-poems on the dignity of

man, such as the following, where the standard translation of 1813 only dimly mirrors the cadences of the original: "The manifold agility of the soul, which enables it to take a survey of heaven and earth; to join the past and the present; to retain the memory of things heard long ago; to conceive of whatever it chooses by help of the imagination; its ingenuity also in the invention of such admirable arts,—are certain proofs of the divinity in man" (*Institutes* 1.5.5). For his literary style in the vernacular he has been called one of the founders of modern French prose. But one would hardly look to him to find the expansive catholicity of Pico, for example, or any delight in the lyric impulse. Where earlier humanists felt free to test all spirits, there was a closing down of the canons of orthodoxy in Calvin to a narrow biblical literalness. This was not true of all of Europe, and Calvin's followers increasingly felt themselves on alien ground, their intense literalness needing wider space to develop. Thomas Paine, the pamphleteer of the American Revolution, in *Common Sense*, observed that "the Reformation was preceded by the discovery of America, as if the Almighty graciously meant to open a sanctuary to the persecuted in future years, when home should afford neither friendship nor safety." Paine's historical insight had been stated very early, by Governor Winthrop. Even before leaving for America he wrote that the new land was to be the refuge for those whom God "means to save out of this generall callamitie" of the churches in Europe.<sup>17</sup> And a half century later than Paine, Philip Schaff could see America still as the haven for those who felt they were persecuted by the less rigorous: "Thus was North America from the first, like Geneva in the time of the Reformation, only on a much larger scale, an asylum for all the persecuted of the Old World. And so it has remained to this day."<sup>18</sup> Intensity such as Calvin's could be shared by only a few, and could not be tolerated by the less-persuaded many. Pressure was relieved when this intensity escaped to America.

In seeking historical insight here, one comes upon a curious figure in Calvin's Geneva who embodied an unattractive version of Renaissance qualities, a slack dilettantism that could offer a counter-image to Calvin of all that he was not. I do not mean to suggest any actual influence here; both personalities were fully formed before they met and associated in Geneva. The figure is François Bonivard (1493–1570), rescued from obscurity by Byron and immortalized as "The Prisoner of Chillon." Bonivard was the second son of local nobility, well educated and well traveled before he inherited the abbacy of the Benedictine monastery of St. Victor, just outside Geneva's walls. He was more involved in politics and light literature than in monastic practices. His loyalties always lay with the Swiss alliance against the claims of the Savoyards, and this eventually led to his six-year imprisonment at Chillon but also to tolerant readmission to the newly reformed Geneva when he was



released. He seems to have accepted the Reformation easily, as well as the small pension the Genevoise gave him to be their chronicler. He shouldered the new religion lightly and turned to polemics against the old; he wrote much light verse and prose which he never published; he was much married, frequently involved in scandals, always in debt. By a natural buoyancy, old connections, and the strength of his political martyrdom he maintained himself throughout Calvin's hegemony in what must have been anything but congenial circumstances. Perhaps Byron was right to see him as a symbol, but I believe the historical evidence shows him in Geneva as a symbol of everything that Calvin was not, the last remnant of the "decadency" purged by the new order. The city was not in his hands but in the hands of a purposeful, self-admittedly violent Ahab of Geneva.<sup>19</sup>

Bonivard helps to solve some historical anomalies. If there was very little flowering of Renaissance qualities in America, when there was much of it later in Europe, it is because of our national religion. Our roots reach to a very dry bed. Perhaps this is what Hawthorne and Henry James tried gropingly to say in describing the "plight" of the artist in a country without a literarily usable history. But both missed the point; in their refined probings of moral matters, each was accepting the legacy that the powerful but unacknowledged founder of the culture chose to leave. The battle for dominance was already fought and won in the figures of Bonivard and Calvin.

I have already sketched the pervasiveness of calvinism in the South. One of the authors of *I'll Take My Stand* can sum it up: "One would judge from the average history text and from the recitations conducted by the Northern schoolma'am that the Puritans and Pilgrim fathers were the ancestors of every self-respecting American. Southern children spoke of 'our Puritan Fathers.' No child ever heard of the Southern Puritan fathers—the great horde of Scotch-Irish Presbyterians and German Lutherans [a much smaller horde] and other strict and puritanical peoples who had pushed to the Mississippi River and far North of the Ohio before the New England population had got a hundred miles west of Boston."

*I'll Take My Stand* now strikes the reader as correct where it builds a utopia. But it goes wrong at several other places. One point is surely in the attempt to certify the utopia as actual historical fact and future possibility. Another is the pervasiveness of the historical guess, as in Ransom's "their labor was leisurely . . . it would have borne better fruit eventually." But more basically still, I believe they erred profoundly by omitting a major force in their own history. Vanderbilt in 1930 was not the South; a fundamental calvinism was rampant outside its walls and was to be attended to. The essay in which this might have been noticed was Allen Tate's "Remarks on the Southern Religion," but he interested himself mainly in declaring a utopian,

High Church theme that Protestantism is "hardly a religion at all" and that the South is the only American extension of Catholic Europe.

Each of these writers went his own way, and the stand they took in 1930 proved in many cases not to be final. The book remains, however, as dream, as myth, as explicit and multifaceted description of one stratum of regional consciousness. But at the same time, a greater writer was taking his stand.

If the history recorded in this chapter is true, one realizes that a profounder level of real experience was being probed by William Faulkner. In 1930, Faulkner's was a name hardly yet formidable in the field. Yet by some curious vibrations of the *Spiritus Mundi* this was the time when his analysis was most searching. His publications between 1929 and 1932 included *Sartoris*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, "A Rose for Emily," *Sanctuary*, and *Light in August*.

The growing intensity of Faulkner's early power is easily sensed in these works. He was reading the Old Testament each year, and traces of the Fall and its effects are obvious, threatening to become the only possible story, locally repeated throughout history. But if we can take the group as a series, recognition of Calvin's thought becomes explicit only in the last, in *Light in August*. This is not to say that Faulkner was reading Calvin or even would—his friends assert that he probably didn't. But such reading, in any event, would only have given Faulkner materials to put into a book. The profound calvinism of *Light in August* was intuited as part of the fabric of experience. More than two decades ago William Van O'Connor warned that "if one does not perceive that the Calvinist spirit is the *central* issue of *Light in August*, the novel of necessity will be seen confused in them."<sup>20</sup> The book is worth looking at closely, not only as documentary evidence of the pervasiveness of calvinism in the South, but also as the best example of what a particular theology can do to amplify art.

In surface structure, *Light in August* is one of Faulkner's clearest experiments. The two plots are clearly laid out and neatly integrated. The framing plot, involving Lena Grove's placid maternity, is fully articulated with the central exploration of violence and sterility in the narrative of Joe Christmas. But there is a theological deep structure in this book which is by no means so obvious. What I mean here is that by allusion and suggestion Faulkner drives the mind of the reader far beneath the regional, deep into the reservoirs of human experience, to levels where literary and theological formulations tend to reinforce one another.

*Light in August* contains two closely written passages. They can serve actually as polar focal points toward which the major forces of the novel tend to gravitate and at which they can be seen to converge. The major items in these two passages cluster about the images of blood and the shadow. The first passage describes Joanna Burden's perception of what she calls the shadow:

I had seen and known Negroes since I could remember. I just looked at them as I did at rain, or furniture, or food or sleep. But after that I seemed to see them for the first time not as people, but as a thing, a shadow in which I lived, we lived, all white people, all other people. I thought of all the children coming forever and ever into the world, white, with the black shadow already falling upon them before they drew breath. And I seemed to see the black shadow in the shape of a cross. And it seemed like the white babies were struggling, even before they drew breath, to escape from the shadow that was not only upon them but beneath them too, flung out like their arms were flung out, as if they were nailed to the cross. I saw all the little babies that would ever be in the world, the ones not yet even born—a long line of them with their arms spread, on the black crosses. I couldn't tell then whether I saw it or dreamed it. But it was terrible to me. I cried at night. At last I told father, tried to tell him. What I wanted to tell him was that I must escape, get away from under the shadow, or I would die. "You cannot," he said.<sup>21</sup>

Carl Jung has dealt with this perception of the shadow in human existence. It is a common experience in periods of introspection and intense self-knowledge, during which one can glimpse the roots of wrongness in oneself and in mankind generally. The shadow is the instinctive, the dark, the primitive, the uncontrollable. It is projected as the dark figure we fear or hate, but it is projected from within the psyche itself. It embodies both personal and collective elements. Joanna's confession, delivered under clearly emotional pressure, describes more her inner world than the objective world of the South of which she is only vaguely an inhabitant. But though neurotic, her words confirm a reality that is true universally, for according to Jung the shadow is an archetype that resides in the collective unconscious in which all men share.

These statements need not stand or fall with Jung's theories of mental behavior. The insight was Plato's as well, an author to whom Faulkner alludes in Chapter 7 of this novel (p. 140). In the allegory of the cave, the illusory shadows projected on the wall are caused by material being. Reality, pure and transcendent, is behind the viewer as a source of light. Whatever is projected on the wall as shadow is an interruption, a blocking of the rays from this pure focal source.

Faulkner was consciously diving to this level of human experience, attempting to describe this light. An interviewer once asked him to comment on the strange and allusive title he had picked for this novel. Faulkner insisted that there was no literary allusion here, that the title signified for him the mood in which the mind sinks below history into the mythic truths of tradition, where there is a different kind of light to see by. Faulkner explained that

in August in Mississippi there's a few days somewhere about the middle of the month when suddenly there's a foretaste of fall, it's cool, there's a lambency, a luminous quality to the light, as though it came not from just today but from back in the old classical times. It might have fauns and satyrs and gods and—from Greece, from Olympus in it somewhere. It lasts just for a day or two, then it's gone, but every year in August that occurs in my country, and that's all that title meant, it was just to me a pleasant evocative title because it reminded me of that time, of a luminosity older than our own Christian civilization.<sup>22</sup>

Faulkner's memory was at fault here, or else he deliberately chose to disguise the inspiration for his title. Henry David Thoreau had also tried to describe the peculiar quality of August light in his country in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers*. It reminded him too of man's innocence in an era before history began.<sup>23</sup> The source suggests that we may not be wandering far off the right track if we find parallels between the theology that had dominated Thoreau's New England and theological concepts to which Faulkner was also exposed.

What Joanna Burden calls the shadow, then, is the root of evil at the heart of matter, blocking the pure transcendent light. Perhaps no one in Western civilization has formulated the insight more strikingly than Calvin. For Calvin, it is the corruption that affects not only man but the whole of creation. In one of his more arresting statements, Calvin describes man as one of "those whose feet are swift to shed blood, whose hands are polluted with rapine and murder, whose throats are like open sepulchres, whose tongues are deceitful, whose lips are envenomed, whose works are useless, iniquitous, corrupt, and deadly, whose souls are estranged from God, the inmost recesses of whose minds are elated with insolence—in a word, all whose powers are prepared for the commission of atrocious and innumerable crimes."<sup>24</sup> This bleak anthropology has been applied many times in our calvinist culture, but perhaps nowhere so specifically as in an editorial in the *Congregationalist* magazine for February 27, 1878, where the writer commented upon the wandering unemployed in terms that seem strikingly parallel: "They are profane, licentious, filthy, vermin-swarmed thieves, petty robbers, and sometimes murderers, social pests and perambulatory nuisances; which require the immediate and stringent attention of the community. . . . We confess a strong feeling in favor of the idea . . . that it might be well to revive for use in this connection the long obsolete whipping-post."<sup>25</sup>

Calvinism of this distressing extreme is a thematic resource which Faulkner has brought to a peak of development here, though it is built into his novel at several other points as well. Joanna's brother is named Calvin, and McEachern, who rears Joe Christmas, is an avowed Presbyterian of the stric-

test construction: predestination and divine determination of events are mentioned in the narrative at its highest points.<sup>26</sup> Historically, the concept was central to Faulkner's immediate religious environment. The Darwinian theories of the late nineteenth century not only seemed to impugn the dignity of man as the direct creation of God, but also blurred the exact moment—so clearly stated in Genesis—where this creation went wrong. Persecution of the new theories was equally strong in all three of the most popular religious denominations which were molding Faulkner's South. In 1878 Alexander Winchell lost his chair at Vanderbilt when the General Conference of the Southern Methodist Church censured him for proposing a Darwinian alternative to orthodoxy. In the following year, Crawford H. Toy was forced to resign his position at Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville for the same reason. And in the 1880s the Presbyterian Church dismissed James Woodrow from his professorship at Columbia Theological Seminary for suggesting that Darwinism and the Bible could stand together.<sup>27</sup> The South that Faulkner knew was firmly opposed to any scientific theory that would seem to soften the theological account of man's hereditary evil and consequent guilt.

But the thematic patterns of *Light in August* are not yet completely exposed. The second major focal point occurs toward the end of the novel. The private army of Percy Grimm has just cornered the escaped Joe Christmas. His murder and mutilation are described vividly:

When the others reached the kitchen they saw the table flung aside now and Grimm stooping over the body. When they approached to see what he was about, they saw that the man was not dead yet, and when they saw what Grimm was doing one of the men gave a choked cry and stumbled back into the wall and began to vomit. Then Grimm too sprang back, flinging behind him the bloody butcher knife. "Now you'll let white women alone, even in hell," he said. But the man on the floor had not moved. He just lay there, with his eyes open and empty of everything save consciousness, and with something, a shadow, about his mouth. For a long moment he looked up at them with peaceful and unfathomable and unbearable eyes. Then his face, body, all, seemed to collapse, to fall in upon itself, and from out the slashed garments about his hips and loins the pent black blood seemed to rush like a released breath. It seemed to rush out of his pale body like the rush of sparks from a rising rocket; upon that black blast the man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever. They are not to lose it, in whatever peaceful valleys, beside whatever placid and reassuring streams of old age, in the mirroring faces of whatever children they will contemplate old disasters and newer hopes.

[pp. 406-07]

Blood, then, is the second major thematic motif in the novel; many forces in the narrative come to a climax here.

Blood, for Joe Christmas, is corruption; he calls it "filth." As such, it is connected closely in his mind with woman. His first perception, as a teenager, of the uniqueness of women is that they are "victims of periodic filth" (p. 161). His first girl, Bobbie, is seen as corrupt simply because she is a woman: Joe thinks to himself that her "smallness was not due to any natural slenderness but to some inner corruption of the spirit itself" (p. 150). The concepts come together as Joe is walking through the woods at night on his way to meet Bobbie: "He reached the woods and entered, among the hard trunks, the branch-shadowed quiet, hardfeeling, hardsmelling, invisible. In the notseeing and the hardknowing as though in a cave he seemed to see a diminishing row of suavely shaped urns [female shapes] in the moonlight, blanched. And not one of them was perfect. Each one was cracked and from each crack there issued something liquid, deathcolored, and foul" (p. 165). Later, when he becomes Joanna's lover, he is ready to perceive her at a distance as a vessel of "rotten richness ready to flow into putrefaction at a touch" (p. 229). There is some unclarity in Joe's perception, but the identification of sexual processes, blood, and the evil shadow is clear to him. Nor is this only the delusion of a wicked and twisted mind. The two most innocent and virtuous characters in the story have similar perceptions. When Gail Hightower first thought of marriage it was as "a dead state carried over into and existing still among the living like two shadows chained together with the shadow of a chain" (p. 420). He insists to his young wife, when explaining to her his fascination with his Civil War ancestor, that it is only "virginal desire which makes heroes" (p. 423). And Byron Bunch, the second innocent in the novel, once he has fallen in love with the pregnant Lena Grove, resists the "terrible" acknowledgment in his conscious mind that "she is not a virgin" (p. 352).

Clearly then, blood is linked with the female and with the process of generation. It is a foul stream like the black fluid that flows from the mouth of the dead Emma Bovary. Words like "abomination," "filth," and "pollution" abound in this context. And once again the theology of Faulkner's Calvinist tradition is not far in the background: "Everything," says Calvin in his *Institutes*, "in man—the understanding and the will, the soul and the body—is polluted and engrossed by this concupiscence." "Concupiscence" suggests sexuality, and Calvin makes it explicit that in his view evil and guilt are passed on in procreation: "Original sin, therefore, appears to be a hereditary depravity and corruption of our nature, diffused through all parts of the soul, rendering us obnoxious to the divine wrath and producing in us those works which the Scripture calls 'works of the flesh.'" For Calvin, seminal fluid is important as the actual carrier of heredity: man's seed is the distillation of his blood-guilt, and the dark moment of procreation is the instant in which

corruption is transmitted. In speaking of infants, Calvin says: "For though they have not yet produced the fruits of their iniquity, yet they have the seed of it within them; even their whole nature is, as it were, a seed of sin, and therefore cannot but be odious and abominable to God."<sup>28</sup>

One of the stories frequently repeated about Calvin concerns his wife. He married late to the widow of a friend. When she died his only recorded comment was that she never got in the way of his work.<sup>29</sup> That the female occupies a dubious and suspect place in God's precarious economy was a favorite theme also of his disciple, the author who founded the Scottish calvinism carried to the new world, John Knox. Knox was an admirer and student of Calvin and long a resident in Geneva. But he proved too violent a pupil even for his violent teacher. When Knox showed Calvin his pamphlet *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, Calvin was offended by its extremes and advised against printing it. But Knox went on to publish the book (1558), aimed against the queenship ("regiment") of Catholic Mary. Unfortunately for Knox, Mary died within a few months and was succeeded by the Protestant Elizabeth. So generally had Knox argued against the monstrosity of government by a woman that Elizabeth quite rightly assumed that his arguments should extend to her as well, and the book came close to impairing the work of Calvin himself and undermining the situation of the English exiles then in Geneva.

Knox states his case firmly at the beginning: "To promote a woman to beare rule, superioritie, dominion, or empire above any Realme, Nation, or Citie, is repugnant to Nature; contumelie to God, a thing most contrarious to his reveled will and approved ordinance; and finallie, it is the subversion of good Order, of all equity and justice." To the prosecution of the case he ransacks history, both sacred and secular, for incident and opinion. Adjectives are used heavily; in the course of a page one finds women to be blind, weake, sicke, impotent, foolishe, madde, and phrenetike.<sup>30</sup> Knox may share the fears of Joe Christmas, if words are to be taken literally: women, seated on the throne, "defile" and "pollute" the seat of God. They are genitally "filthe," replicating in a modern setting the Old Testament horror of menstrual blood.

But one need not go all the way back to Old Testament taboos for this notion. It is a typically calvinist corruption of medieval scientific notions. Dante, for example, in Canto 25 of the *Purgatorio*, has the Latin poet Statius explain the process of generation. It begins with pure uncirculated male blood which has acquired "formative power" in the heart before flowing down "to that place better left unmentioned," as Ciardi translates it. This active blood mingles in conception with the passive blood of the female, acting as soul to form and shape the embryo from the menstrual blood which would otherwise tend to flow away.

Between this naive and lovely science and Faulkner stand the calvinist

additions to the notion of blood. The Westminster Confession of Faith, written and espoused in the 1640s, is an important landmark. Chapter 6 treats "Of the Fall of Man, of Sin, and of the Punishment Thereof." The "original corruption" of Adam, whereby he became "wholly defiled," now descends to each member of the human race "by ordinary generation." The blood which carries life now also carries radical evil. By it "we are utterly indisposed, disabled and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil." Even in a nature that is regenerated by the grace of Christ "all the motions thereof, are truly and properly sin." Faulkner has distilled the whole of this powerful tradition, it seems to me, in the figure of Joe Christmas. If sex is frequently surrounded by shame and fear in the American mind, our national religion provides ample reason for it to be so.

Calvin discerned a regenerating grace in the dark universe, but only for a narrowly limited few, a small detached remnant who would not walk the ways of the *massa damnata*; and Calvinist churches, whether in New England or the South, traditionally walked with a sense of their separateness from the mainstream of human life. Faulkner's focus is not on the elect but on the doomed and on the blood-guilt which is passed from generation to generation. But peripherally he does notice the Dilseys of this world, and in *Light in August* there is a moment that shows the possibility of a lambent light in a dark world. Gail Hightower, though long defrocked, still finds a special peace in his preparation for the Sunday evening prayer which he can no longer lead: "the next week," he thinks, "its whatever disasters not yet born, the heart quiet now for a little while beneath the cool soft blowing of faith and hope" (p. 321). His reflections on the music from the nearby church show, however, that even the worshipers there are among the damned: "Listening, he seems to hear within it the apotheosis of his own history, his own land, his own environed blood; that people from which he sprang and among whom he lives who can never take either pleasure or catastrophe or escape from either, without brawling over it. Pleasure, ecstasy, they cannot seem to bear: their escape from it is in violence, in drinking and fighting and praying; catastrophe too, the violence identical and apparently inescapable. *And so why should not their religion drive them to crucifixion of themselves and one another?*" (p. 322). Even the church, in Hightower's vision, stands in the world "like a rampart, like one of those barricades of the middleages planted with dead and sharpened stakes, against truth and against that peace in which to sin and be forgiven which is the life of man" (p. 427). Grace is a rare commodity in Faulkner's universe, as in Calvin's.

Calvinism is largely antisacramental; it runs counter to the human need to express itself in symbol and ritual. Faulkner supplies the lacking dimension by providing an inverse sacramentalism. In a doomed world only man's doom will express itself symbolically. It is therefore fitting that Faulkner describes



Percy Grimm as “a young priest” the moment before he performs the horrid blood ritual on the dying Joe Christmas.

At bottom, Faulkner’s allegory is not an allegory of the South, as his early commentators believed. It is rather the allegory of man, whenever and wherever he is found, clearly similar to the vision of John Calvin; it is the story of the old Adam in terms of the now fallen American Adam with no access to redeeming grace. The allegory is not complete in *Light in August*; but it may be that this novel is the most important fragment in a whole career of allegory. And it may be that Faulkner is the deepest explorer of our national religion.

# 8 CALVINISM AND THE TRAGIC SENSE

There has always been a major tragic figure in our culture—latent, frequently suggested, yet never fully developed as such. This is the figure of Christopher Columbus, who has puzzled American writers from Irving through Whitman to Hart Crane. Philip Freneau, the poet of the American Revolution, was one of those early struck by the possibilities of the subject. Freneau's forte was the shorter poem, but even within this scope he found room to dramatize a few moments in Columbus's life. In "Columbus to Ferdinand" he characterized him as a man of the high Renaissance, with strong passions firmly guided by the light of reason. In a better poem, "Columbus at Valladolid," Freneau imagines Columbus on his deathbed, stripped of worldly glory by a thankless king, with prison behind him and an obscure grave ahead. In his loneliness he still preserves his courage and sense of adventure as he contemplates still another world he now must explore without a guide. In his fall his mind is clear and his sense of self is strong. He foresees, as he dies, a new world of possibilities for human freedom.

The story of Columbus was problematical for all the American authors: how to relate the action of several centuries ago to the American scene which was their main interest? Freneau's strategy, the dream vision which bridges the two, was developed at length by Joel Barlow as he worked for several years to celebrate his view of the new political order in his epic, the *Columbiad*. But the material received its fullest treatment in the seventeen books, with numerous appendices, which constitute Washington Irving's biography of Christopher Columbus. Irving's treatment is leisurely, minute, at once detached and devout. His Columbus is a man who considers himself animated by a heavenly fire, guided by the hand of God. He is a man who in action is uniformly firm, aggressive, and just; in contemplation he ranges widely; in adversity he has a rich sense of the tragic dimensions of his suffering. Irving truly presents a Holinshed's which a later Shakespeare might have mined for tragic matters. And a few years later, Henry David Thoreau mused, in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers*: "Who knows what shape the fable of Columbus will at length assume."

For a tragic figure is fully presented by Irving. The flaw of the great man is found not only in his vaulting ambition but in his participation in the prototypical American sin (according to Faulkner)—exploitation of the natives as

slaves. In his fall, too, he is portrayed in heroic dimensions. A malignant fate not only denies him the immense financial remuneration he has been promised, but even keeps him ignorant of the true extent of his accomplishment. He dies thinking that he has discovered only another coast of an already known continent.

Walt Whitman jotted some phrases verbatim from Irving's study of Columbus, and used materials from this biography to develop his own portrait of the aged and abandoned explorer in "Prayer of Columbus." As it now stands, the poem is thoroughly enmeshed in the fibers of *Leaves of Grass*; the preceding poem, "Passage to India," introduces it by extensive allusions to Columbus. In such an optimistic setting one would not look for a sustained probing of the tragic. Though Whitman sees Columbus as "A batter'd, wreck'd old man," it is rather as "History's type of courage, action, faith" that he is developed. He is the adventurer, confident that present distress will yield to victory. Again the dream vision is brought into play. The last four lines of the poem read:

As if some miracle, some hand divine unseal'd my eyes,  
Shadowy vast shapes smile through the air and sky,  
And on the distant waves sail countless ships,  
And anthems in new tongues I hear saluting me.

It was Hart Crane's treatment of Columbus in Part I of *The Bridge* that finally revealed why this figure, apparently so apt for the tragic mode, could not be used in our tragedies. It was not for any deficiency of language or learning in the writers themselves; the deficiency was in the figure. Crane begins Part I with "Ave Maria" and ends with the medieval hymn "Te Deum Laudamus." Throughout, Columbus is thoroughly aware of his Spanish connections and his Italian antecedents. He reveres the Virgin and alludes to the Spanish mystics. In a word, Columbus belongs to a world that is medieval and Catholic. Though he discovered our continent, another reality intruded before it was settled, another consciousness grew here, transplanted from the darker soil of an intervening Reformation.

At its birth a national literature may struggle for self-realization in the epic; a certain maturity is marked by a flowering of the tragic sense. America has followed this pattern, but obsessive preoccupation with the forces defined by calvinism has determined our perception of the tragic. Freedom and personal responsibility for the consequences of action are central to the full development of tragedy. One might wonder that tragedy has been written at all in a culture where a direct line can be drawn from Calvin's denial of free will to B. F. Skinner's determinism. Melville, one of our greatest tragedians, analyzed the matter more fully and accurately. In a chapter called "The Mat-Maker" (chapter 47 of *Moby-Dick*), he allegorized an incident from

ship-board life. "Using my own hand for the shuttle" Ishmael passes a strand of twine in and out of the long yarns of the warp, "as Queequeg, standing sideways, ever and anon slid his heavy oaken sword between the threads, and idly looking off upon the water, carelessly and unthinkingly drove home every yarn." To Ishmael, in this dreamy calm, "it seemed as if this were the Loom of Time, and I myself were a shuttle mechanically weaving and weaving away at the Fates." The mechanisms of Melville's own masterpiece of tragic insight become clarified here as he allegorizes further:

This warp seemed necessity; and here, thought I, with my own hand I ply my own shuttle and weave my own destiny into these unalterable threads. Meantime, Queequeg's impulsive, indifferent sword, sometimes hitting the woof slantingly, or crookedly, or strongly, or weakly, as the case might be; and by this difference in the concluding blow producing a corresponding contrast in the final aspect of the complete fabric; this savage's sword, thought I, which thus finally shapes and fashions both warp and woof; this easy, indifferent sword must be chance—aye, chance, free will, and necessity—no wise incompatible—all interweavingly woven together.

Melville is the rare individual able to rise above those restrictions of his culture which would limit him to a fate solely determined by an Election made before time began. With the exception of William Faulkner, no other American tragedian has been able to rise above this limitation.

The nearest contender is Eugene O'Neill and he especially illuminates the situation of the writer in America who probes the tragic dimension. At the mid-point of his career he turned consciously to Greek models for tragedy, to the most fully developed sequence which history has left us, the *Oresteia*. O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* does not come up to its model, but because it is so closely set against the classic form its shortcomings are more visible. Obvious at first glance is the larger grandeur of Aeschylus. The whole of society is involved in the misdeeds of his main characters, particularly in the kind of repression they are able to employ to minimize public reaction against their crime. More than that, the cosmic order is involved; forces are caught at a moment of evolutionary shift. Behind Apollo's order to execute vengeance stands Zeus; behind the Furies' urge to punish matricide stands the dark figure of Fate itself. The resolution of the matter involves both heaven and earth, human society as well as superhuman forces, as the divinely human institution of Law decrees the fate of the evildoers and transforms the cosmic furies into benevolent Eumenides.

Obviously O'Neill cannot orchestrate his materials so richly for a twentieth-century audience. His reduction of the cosmic issues to interiorized "psychological" conflicts seems, by contrast, to be a mismanaged exercise in miniaturization. But still a further reduction is visible against the classic

background. Where the spectrum of ethical values for Aeschylus had included profound speculation on justice, wisdom, mercy, animal force, retribution, and vengeance, O'Neill's spectrum begins and ends with sexual guilt.

We are here close to the heart of an element that has flawed and limited the American probing for tragedy in nearly every instance in which it has appeared. Let us consider a list of other works, by no means exhaustive, for which a legitimate claim to the status of tragedy can also be made: Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, James's *The Wings of the Dove*, Dreiser's *American Tragedy*, Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Albee's *The American Dream*. Each of these employs one or several of the conventions of traditional tragedy, each explores the problem of evil in an American situation. But one has the feeling that, profoundly as these works dive, they do so within narrow limits. One does not find here the sense of restoration of eternal justice, the final purging of the state, the issues of cosmic harmony, or even a profound sense of evil and its consequences involved in closer investigation of such vices as envy, ambition, exploitation.

Basically the American analysis of tragedy is limited to one evil alone. Deep in our national psyche there is room for only one real evil; no other sin than the sexual can set the American conscience reverberating so loudly. Our sense of tragedy bears this out. Each of those tragedies cited in the representative list above explores, however deeply, the narrow range of sexual sin. The case was otherwise with Dante, for example, who afforded sexual offenders very nearly the easiest room in hell. He dispatched the subject at the outset and left eight more circles, deeper in hell, for the exploration of more profoundly disruptive evil. Clearly he moved in a larger world. So narrowly limited are we by the calvinist heritage that no sin has yet been dramatized that is so gross and taboo-ridden as the sexual. O'Neill works splendidly within this crippling limitation.

*Mourning Becomes Electra* has received thorough Freudian analysis; actually O'Neill consciously employed classic psychiatric insights in writing the play, as he admitted. Other elements, perhaps less conscious but even more central, can now engage our attention. One of the paradoxes latent in the history of art must surely be the fact that O'Neill, caught in the powerful grip of these calvinistic limitations, created a dramatic work as grand and central as it is. *Mourning Becomes Electra* is deeply rooted in the American scene and the American consciousness. The massive house which dominates the stage in every scene but one is gray New England stone. The wood portico of white pillars is obviously a thin mask which indicates the pretended solidity of the family's antecedents but must now serve as transparent foreground, suggesting rather a Greek approach to the thoroughly American subject. In several stage directions in the reader's version of the play, O'Neill insists that one visualize it accurately: "The pure white temple front seems more than ever like an

incongruous mask fixed on the somber stone house."<sup>1</sup> The house occupies a stark position in the viewer's mind, with associations that place it somewhere between the House of Atreus and the House of Usher. Lest we miss the Americanness of the setting, O'Neill has set a lilac blooming in the dooryard.

In still other ties between the play and the calvinist American culture, our attention is directed to portraits of the family in the library; it is a room such as Hawthorne might have described: "At the rear of the fireplace, on the right, is one of a grim-visaged minister of the witch-burning era" (p. 119). O'Neill may actually have been reacting against a kind of American Victorianism, still alive in his own time, but he presents it dressed in symbols that evoke the long puritan heritage.

O'Neill sends a probe still deeper into our cultural roots as he explores the conflict between the American desires to see the world as a garden or as a harsh battlefield of duty. The theme is kept alive in the play by the repeated song of the choral figure, Seth. The lovely lilt of "Shenandoah" celebrates river, valley, and love—and also separation, the need to leave this inherited paradise, to pursue a kind of exile "across the wide Missouri." Orin (Orestes) is the character who most embodies this dichotomy early in the play. As vacillating avenger he is tugged from duty by his own vision of Eden. To express this, O'Neill focuses on the unique American classic of idyllic paganism, Herman Melville's *Typee*. The myth of breaking away from a strangling American atmosphere and heading for freedom, for the frontier, for the islands, grows stronger as the trilogy progresses. In Orin's weak mental grasp on reality the "lost island of peace" is at once the place away from his family where he has tried to escape, and the mother to whom he returns: "You're my lost island, aren't you, Mother?" (p. 149). There is completion of a circle here: the sensuous, adulterous mother becomes identified with Melville's Polynesia for the guilt-tormented American youth. At the end of the play the choral figure's song has shifted to "Oh Shenandoah, I can't get near you."

O'Neill follows several precedents, ancient and modern, in making Lavinia (Electra) the central character of the play. It is she who most dramatizes the configurations the story must take in its American setting. She is the character who most dramatically changes: from a thin-lipped, disapproving spinster to a fully freed woman whose sensuality equals her mother's—and then finally back to sterile rigidity, but now with immensely heightened consciousness. It is in Lavinia's consciousness that the *agon* of the drama most takes place.

Struggling for definition in her mind and being is the concept of love. Her long-absent father has been murdered by her mother; her mother is a suicide; her brother is a murder-avenger seriously crippled by guilt, and eventually himself a suicide; her fiancé remains throughout a narrow provincial who is

ill-equipped to cope with her passionate changes. In her powerful drive to find love and a path to normalcy she must cannibalize her relationships, devouring and destroying those she would love in her urge to impose her own meaning and her own fulfillment. Lavinia's "fall" is complete, permanent, and powerfully moving.

To achieve this genuine success, O'Neill had to bend the recalcitrant materials of a new psychology and an ancient tradition. He speaks of "fate" at several points in the play, but it remains peripheral as a dramatic force; to place the classic Greek concept at the center would have burdened modern belief with unwarranted strain. He also employed concepts from modern psychiatry, but in discussing this facet of the play in a letter to Barrett H. Clark, he said that the play did not depend on these theories and would be substantially the same without them. It remains, then, for us to see exactly what the mainspring of action is. A clue to O'Neill's achievement lies in a peculiarly unidiomatic use of language which occurs at the climax of the trilogy, late in Part Three, and involves a moment of illumination experienced by Lavinia.

Lavinia's struggle for self-definition necessarily takes place against the background of her lush and sensuous mother, a woman so powerfully sexual that she could momentarily rouse her husband from his deathbed. When Lavinia is being wooed by Captain Brant—the man who she later comes to realize is trying to destroy her father by making love to her mother, using her for cover—she finds it impossible to unbend from her rigidity: "LAVINIA. (*in a dry, brittle tone*) I remember your admiration for the naked native women. You said they had found the secret of happiness because they had never heard that love can be a sin" (p. 39). She perceives that the two, love and sin, are bound together in her culture. Later, in the third act, as this theme develops, her mother characterizes Lavinia as a "puritan maiden" and mocks her: "Isn't beauty an abomination and love a vile thing?" (p. 72).

Her mother's death, in which Lavinia plays her Electra-like part, signals a release within her and a surge in the opposite direction. She escapes to the islands with her brother and lives for a while a life that is fully sensuous and free. Recounting it later to her mystified and somewhat disturbed fiancé, she says: "I loved those Islands. They finished setting me free. There was something there mysterious and beautiful—a good spirit—of love—coming out of the land and sea. It made me forget death. There was no hereafter. There was only this world—the warm earth in the moonlight—the trade wind in the coco palms—the surf on the reef—the fires at night and the drum throbbing in my heart—the natives dancing naked and innocent—without knowledge of sin!" (p. 212).

Back on home grounds, though, living again in the family home, the older power reasserts itself. Somewhere in the middle, she senses, is love; but

she can only experience its extreme opposites—dry sterility or sensuous abandon. In her world the word love is poisoned and the experience unattainable. Her achievement in the play, and O'Neill's, is to analyze this malaise.

In the last act of the final play, Lavinia alternately attracts and repels her fiancé by the wildness of her passion and the shadowy guilt for her complicity in the deaths that have now left her the only surviving member of the family. Finally realizing that she cannot burden someone else with her history she breaks off the engagement. Earlier she had described her affair with an island native: "I had kissed him good night, that was all—in gratitude! He was innocent and good. He made me feel for the first time in my life that everything about love could be sweet and natural" (p. 224). Now, to her fiancé, she says: "All right! Yes, if you must know! I won't lie any more! Orin suspected *I'd lusted with him!* And I had!" (p. 255). This is idiosyncratic use of the verb in the phrase I have italicized. It is as if O'Neill, through his character, is stretching the ordinary conventions of language to define not new phenomena, but new insight into experience. The word *love* in the environment of the play is poisoned, the reality impossible. The idiom which Lavinia creates, only a moment before the play ends, stands out for its breach of linguistic decorum. Burdened and enlightened with this realization, she withdraws into the family mansion, has the shutters nailed closed, and disappears into reclusive despair.

O'Neill was to explore this phenomenon of the poisoning of love more intensely and personally in the later family plays. Here, however, he exposes the subject at great length. If it is true, as I have suggested, that the American tragedy is flawed and limited by its inability to focus on any vice other than the sexual, then we must still admit that O'Neill has done magnificently within these bounds.

This house, which "Grandfather Abraham" had been able to build only by an act of treachery against his own brother, is the abode of guilt and consequent death. The family is defined by its Americanness and its calvinism. It may be that O'Neill, at the moment, is somewhat in eclipse as an American thinker. We have yet to deal with our grandfathers, and he belongs to their generation. But he has uncovered layers of authentic American consciousness, historical as well as present. In *Mourning Becomes Electra* the characters are all damned, foreclosed from joy and freedom. Our calvinist heritage has forged unbreakable links between sex, law, sin, guilt, damnation—and the sequence comes to stand for the whole of moral reality. Cramping as the calvinist heritage was for O'Neill, it nevertheless channeled his work, in this instance, to a supremely moving experience.

But we look, among the tragedians, for the superior intellect, the mind critically above the characters he maneuvers and the values that drive them. And I believe that there was a moment, earlier in our history, when the tragic



muse was more fully alive, not so cramped and limiting as she was in the case of O'Neill. The time was mid-nineteenth century, the author was Herman Melville, and one of the tragic figures most prominently in the American mind during this expanding and industrial era was Prometheus.

The aboriginal source for the Prometheus story is Hesiod's relatively brief poem of about a thousand lines, the *Theogony*. The poem is mainly a listing of the gods, attempting an orderly account of their emergence, with only brief tags or phrases indicating narratives attached to them. Hesiod's work can be described as a pre-philosophic attempt to account for cosmic and mental forces, their relationships to one another, and characteristic modes of action. There are only two relatively long narrative sections, one of which is the story of Prometheus; the other is the story of the cosmic battle between the Titans and the army of Zeus's monsters. The watery world and the power of fire are highly significant motifs in the story of Prometheus (as they are in the story of Ahab). According to Hesiod, Ocean is at once the uncle, the grandfather, and the great-great-grandfather of Prometheus by a number of incestuous unions. Prometheus not only brings the boon of fire to mankind, thereby initiating the crafts and manufactories necessary to the development of civilization; he also preserves the more nourishing portion of slaughtered meat from Zeus's thunderbolt by tricking Zeus into choosing the gleaming fat which covers only bones. Significant narrative moments are easily remembered by the reader of Hesiod. The Sky-God hates his children, and mother Earth counsels: "My children, you have a savage father: if you will listen to me, we may be able to take vengeance for his evil outrage [imprisoning his children in darkness under the earth]: he was the one who started using violence." The revenge is undertaken by Chronus, who castrates his father and throws the testicles into the sea. But the sperm spread out upon the waves and generate the Furies and the Giants in the womb of mother Earth. Earth also gives birth to the monster Typhœus, who is then buried in Tartarus but is the origin of evil winds at sea. Tartarus is prominent in Hesiod as the horrible abode of dark rebellious powers. Also associated with the sea is the witch Hecate, who gives or prevents good catches of fish at whim.

Two things must be obvious from Hesiod's account of the Prometheus materials: it represents an early version of that mentality I have called "calvinist" throughout this book; and the figures and motifs powerfully prefigure *Moby-Dick*. Ocean in Melville's novel is the domain of evil and contains a monstrous presence. The fat and bones which are substituted as an offering to the divinity resemble the most memorable details Melville uses in developing his whale—blubber and the gigantic skeleton. Melville frequently puns on the two meanings of sperm. The many characteristics of Prometheus and his brothers are consolidated in Ahab. And the Promethean gift of fire and divine retribution by thunderbolt are prominent details in Ahab's story.

Hesiod, writing in the second half of the eighth century B.C., stands between Homer and Aeschylus, in what his editor and translator calls "an age innocent of philosophy."<sup>2</sup> A richer development of the Prometheus story in Greek antiquity appeared during the age of fullest philosophical speculation. In *Prometheus Bound*, the only extant play of Aeschylus's trilogy on the figure, the intellectual issues prominent in the culture of that time are carefully discerned: the benevolent gift-giver who seeks to understand the nature of man's relationship with the divine, the conflict between free will and fate, the mystery of evil in a divinely controlled universe, the possibility of a flawed God, and at the end the conviction that God will change to mirror man's expectations more faithfully.

Aeschylus preserves and even augments the "calvinist" features of the divine. He describes a god of "sullen soul," "the tyrant of the skies," wielder of "dreadful punishments," looking upon the human race with hatred and wishing to destroy it. He is inflexible, "nothing moves his rigour"; he is "ungrateful and unjust." But on the other hand he is also a god who can change or be changed, who in "no way shall escape his destined fate," an insecure god, "falsely secure," whose "abject and dishonorable fall" can be prevented only by heeding the advice of Prometheus, whose own divine qualities are mollified and almost equalled by his human qualities.

Prometheus, in Aeschylus, is the creator and molder of men, giver of all the arts and crafts. He has nothing but scorn for the timid daughters of Ocean who counsel his subservience to higher powers: "Go then, with prompt servility fall down/Before your lord, fawn, cringe, and sue for grace./For me I value him at less than nothing." To the subservient messenger of Zeus, Mercury, he is defiant: "Me let him hurl,/Caught in the fiery tempest, to the gloom/Of deepest Tartarus; not all his pow'r/Can quench th' ethereal breath of life in me." Mercury replies much as Starbuck does to Ahab: "Such ravings, such wild counsels might you hear,/From moon-struck madness. What is this but madness?" But Prometheus had already told him, in words that could have come from Ahab: "If to detest my enemies be madness,/It is a malady I wish to have."<sup>3</sup>

Closer in time to Melville were Byron and Shelley, both of whom used the Prometheus myth with powerful shadings from their own culture and their immediate personal interests. Byron's "Prometheus" (1816) is a poem of fifty-nine lines which emphasizes the Manfred-like qualities of the hero: pride, agony, loneliness. He is less than god but makes god fear, and the crime for which he suffers is kindness. Byron's "mighty lesson" in the final stanza is that man should recognize that he himself is Prometheus, part divine: defiant resistance is the stand his "firm will" must take against the cosmic political evils. But within the limits of the poem no hero is seen who will eventually alleviate the sufferings of the tormented Romantic Hero.

Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) is a much more complicated vehicle. There is no need here to attempt to reduce the whole bearing of the poem to a few sentences of prose. There is in Shelley's poem a sense of Prometheus as a Christ, "nailed" to his rock—and the play was immediately condemned for blasphemy. Earth proclaims her son "more than God, / Being wise and kind." Shelley's thematic purposes also licensed him for a major distortion of the original myth: Jupiter in the end does not receive Prometheus's warning; he marries Thetis instead of espousing her to Peleus, and his reign over heaven and earth is terminated. The work as a whole is unmistakably a product of English culture as it stood at the moment, as Shelley was delighted to point out in his preface: the products of genius "are due less to the peculiarities of their own minds than to the peculiarity of the moral and intellectual condition of the minds among which they have been produced." But Shelley also defended his conscious distortion of the original materials for ideological reasons: "I was averse from a catastrophe so feeble as that of reconciling the champion with the oppressor of mankind."<sup>4</sup> These observations are of particular interest. The primitive myth is susceptible of warping under the pressure of later cultural developments and equally under the pressure of the personal views of the author.<sup>5</sup>

The Prometheus myth has furnished a vehicle for inquiry into perennial mysteries: the limitation of man's knowledge, his sense of something "divine" within himself because of his desire for immortality and his reluctance to subordinate his mind to something greater, his sense of the opacity of the "real" which he cannot completely know and control, his indignation at the falsity of authority and the injustice of unmerited pain, his bewilderment as to whether life has purpose and meaning or whether the search for significant being and significant achievement is a delusion. This has been the general humanistic use of the myth. It has proven further malleable to more locally and temporally determined cultural and personal pressures.

For all its sharp edges, the narrative of Prometheus retains fully enough flexibility to accommodate just about any set of personal preconceptions an author may bring to it. Thus, it was Rousseau who saw in Prometheus's invention of the sciences, not an aid to the progress of culture, but an attempt "to destroy the peace of mankind."<sup>6</sup> And that towering historical cause of personal misery and political good order, Napoleon, was called by one of his aides after the battle of Waterloo, "Our Prometheus." The ambiguities of the figure were ready-made when they came to the mind of Herman Melville, who mentions Napoleon twice in *Moby-Dick*.<sup>7</sup>

There could be no way of predicting what form the Prometheus story would take in a culture dominated, at its theological foundations, by Calvinist forces. But in retrospect the narrative materials can be seen to have precipitated in the figures of a monomaniacal sea captain and a vast, hulking mon-

ster of the deep.<sup>8</sup> The Prometheus elements in *Moby-Dick* are not immediately obvious to the reader; but they can be picked out, even though they lie strangely scattered, embedded in the strata of the novel as if after some destructive upheaval. The forces that realign these elements will occupy us for some pages.

Prometheus is mentioned twice in *Moby-Dick*. The first is in an attempt to analyze the deepening madness in Ahab, in chapter 44, "The Chart." Melville posits a soul as the center of the human, ever awake when body and even mind are asleep at night. It is this center which, in standard Transcendentalist terms, has direct channels of communication with the eternal; in Ahab's case it is the eternally demonic which flows into Ahab's being during sleep and starts him awake screaming, rushing him from hammock and stateroom. But it is Melville's unique addition to the Transcendentalist dogma, an addition that serves to further secularize Transcendentalism itself, that those soul thoughts are directly generated by thoughts previously entertained by the waking mind. As an analogue, Melville presents the example of Prometheus's vulture, who "feeds upon that heart forever" (p. 175) but who is a creation of Prometheus himself. The analogue is useful preliminarily for placing Ahab in the company of those heroes called to participate directly in the cosmic battle between "gods and devils"; but the major thrust of the passage is to certify Ahab as insane.

Explicit mention of Prometheus can be found only once more in the novel, and it is interesting to note that the Promethean figure himself, Ahab, carefully defines the significance of the figure while applying it to someone else. The ship's carpenter and the blacksmith, whom Ahab calls "Prometheus," are fashioning the parts of a new leg for Ahab in chapter 108. Ahab remarks on the redness of the blacksmith's fire. His musings are important for their sudden revelation of the dynamics of the novel: two major themes converge here at an instant. "I do deem it now a most meaning thing, that that old Greek, Prometheus, who made men, they say, should have been a blacksmith, and animated them with fire: for what's made in fire must properly belong to fire; and so hell's probable'" (p. 390).

Ahab himself is a "manmaker," like Prometheus, and will shortly renew the dedication of his men during the storm scene when the masts and yard-arms are tipped with fiery corpusants and he defiantly grasps the links of the ship's lightning rod. Prometheus had used a rod of fennel to steal fire from the sun and, in some accounts, had animated men with fire. But when Ahab says "what's made in fire must properly belong to fire," he suddenly bends the ancient Greek narrative to convergence with classical calvinism, to make it serve as support for the doctrine of reprobation: "and so hell's probable." Ahab's own role as self-damner and damner of the men he has made unfolds as the novel swiftly progresses to its end. The bleak notion of Calvin, that the

mass of men are among the reprobate, is borne out in the epilogue, where only one of the crew members survives.

Many other elements of the Prometheus myth seem obvious in the story once the two explicit allusions are attended to. Ishmael utters a Promethean statement while meditating on the memorial tablets set in the walls of the New Bedford Whaleman's Chapel, concluding his melancholy thoughts with, "And therefore three cheers for Nantucket; and come a stove boat and stove body when they will, for stave my soul, Jove himself cannot" (p. 41).

Captain Peleg, one of the owners of the *Pequod*, is the first to describe Ahab for Ishmael, and he introduces the Promethean captain as "a grand, ungodly, god-like man" (p. 76). Starbuck's soliloquy in chapter 38, after the blasphemous communion with "the murderous chalices" (the upended harpoon sockets), refers to the heathen crew which Ahab has collected as "whelped somewhere by the sharkish sea," much as were the monsters in Hesiod who would later fight for Zeus against the Titans; and inverting the figure of the benevolent Over-Soul from Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, he calls "the white whale. . . their demogorgon" (p. 148).

Similarly, there is a highly circumstantial story connected with the nephew of Prometheus. (Ahab means "Uncle.") This was Deucalion, who with his wife was the only one saved from the universal flood in Greek mythology. The parallel with Ishmael becomes striking with the added fact that Deucalion's means of salvation was a large chest; Ishmael is saved by the box that has been carefully measured as Queequeg's coffin, then carved by Queequeg as a sea-chest, and finally outfitted as a life-buoy. Perhaps it should also be added that it was Prometheus who, according to some accounts, delivered Athena from the head of Zeus; Queequeg, in a similarly unusual operation involving several humorous references to obstetrics, delivers Tashtego from the head of a whale into which he has slipped while baling case (p. 290).

All of these are somewhat static items. The Promethean elements are visibly present in the story, and nudge the reader's sensibilities in certain directions. His responses are amplified at points by evocations of the ancient myth. And yet *Moby-Dick* is not a Promethean story in the classic pattern. The most massive transformation wrought by Melville on these materials was a change in literary genre. Prometheus—in the myth, in Aeschylus apparently, in Shelley—is fundamentally a comedic figure. His story ends with release from his bonds, vindication and success for his actions, and marriage to a goddess. Melville bends the story to tragedy, with the final punitive destruction of the Promethean hero.

A theory of tragedy and the tragic hero is developed in the narrative of *Moby-Dick*. Just before Ishmael ships aboard the *Pequod*, and long before he meets the captain, he meditates upon the general nature of a hero: he would

be stiffened with the purposefulness of a Nantucket Quaker, molded by the natural forces of the sea and the long periods of solitude it enforces, and further emboldened by the demands of a dangerous profession. Some "man of greatly superior natural force" would emerge, "a mighty pageant creature, formed for noble tragedies." Ishmael further speculates that "a half wilful over-ruling morbidness at the bottom of his nature" would not detract from such a figure, since "all mortal greatness is but disease" (p. 71). This preliminary description, with its hint of some corruption deep in human nature, sets the genre as tragedy and the world of metaphysical forces as calvinistic. Aristotle theorized that the action of the tragic hero is determined by the combination of *ethos* (character) and *dianoia* (the complex of ideas and values which the personage is able to express);<sup>9</sup> Melville furnishes his alternative, more deterministic formula in chapter 47, "The Mat-Maker," where events are ruled instead by chance, free will, and necessity. Ahab himself adds an element that further specifies the tragic hero in a Christian context. He is contemplating the three mountain peaks stamped on the face of his gold doubloon. They are crowned by a firm tower, a volcano, and "the courageous, the undaunted, and victorious fowl," all of which he takes as symbolizing himself. But the three peaks, he has just remarked, stand "proud as Lucifer" (p. 359). At the end of the second day's chase, Ahab gives classical expression to that element in his character which Aristotle called *Hubris*: responding to Stubb's solicitous inquiry whether he has been injured in the chase, Ahab replies: "Nor white whale, nor man, nor fiend, can so much as graze old Ahab in his proper and inaccessible being" (p. 459). Within a page Starbuck again analyzes the old man's tragic flaw as "impiety and blasphemy." Thus Melville, with reliance on traditional analyses and with his own creative additions to the theory, has consciously molded the Promethean narrative to a tragedy, and his analysis of the hero's flaw is offered in terms of an easily recognized theological system.

Thus with Melville a new set of dynamics has entered to distort the traditional Promethean story to something entirely different. Emerson, in an essay that Melville had in hand when he was writing *Moby-Dick*, had predicted the shape that the story of Prometheus might take in a calvinist culture. This essay was "History," the first piece in *Essays, First Series*. Mrs. Hawthorne wrote in a letter, during the fall of 1850, that Melville was a frequent and welcome guest in their house and that he was always careful "not to interrupt Mr. Hawthorne's mornings." On one morning, she was delighted to report, he "shut himself into the boudoir & read Mr. Emerson's Essays."<sup>10</sup> Emerson's essay "History" is interesting to the reader of *Moby-Dick* for his comments on the supreme excellence of Greek culture, his analysis of several heroic figures, his comments on divine madness, and his theory of the con-naturalness of all minds. Concerning Prometheus, he suggests a wide "range of

meanings" to this "first chapter of the history of Europe." As Emerson reads the myth, "Prometheus is the Jesus of the old mythology. He is the friend of man; stands between the unjust 'justice' of the Eternal Father, and the race of mortals; and readily suffers all things on their account." The reading is hardly straightforward; a peculiarly Christian evolution of the myth has begun to take place. The specific variety of this Christianity is made explicit as Emerson continues immediately: "But where it [the myth of Prometheus] departs from the Calvinistic Christianity, and exhibits him as the defier of Jove, it represents a state of mind which readily appears wherever the doctrine of Theism is taught in a crude, objective form, and which seems the self-defense of man against this untruth, namely, a discontent with the believed fact that a God exists, and a feeling that the obligation of reverence is onerous."

The syntax displays a certain promethean defiance against the reader here, leaving him free, surely, to speculate on the partial but certain connection between Prometheus and calvinism, the possibility that "right worship is defiance," or the possibility at least that too much respect for such a deity might show "a slight dash of flunkeyism."<sup>11</sup> Emerson continues, in the next sentence but one, "The Prometheus Vincutus is the romance of scepticism." The final word is such a favorite of Melville's that speculate he must have on the possibilities of the story of Prometheus, rewritten in a calvinistic context, by an author whose favorite book was *Ecclesiastes*.

The calvinism in *Moby-Dick* has been noticed by other writers,<sup>12</sup> but I should like to extend and develop its function and to suggest that it is as deeply woven into the fabric of the novel as any other of its numerous elements; that it furnishes the dynamics of the plot, technically speaking; and that it accounts, because of the echoes it starts, for the massive esthetic experience to which generations of its readers have testified.

The sermon of Father Mapple has served, in the minds of many readers, as an early compressed model in the story which has some important bearing, normative either positively or ironically, on the narrative that follows. Among Father Mapple's credentials must be a thoroughly humanized version of classical calvinism. He is the solitary thinker, the wrestler in his own soul with the mountainous truths he preaches, the good shepherd of souls who come under his pastoral care. As he interprets the story of Jonah it becomes clear that he, like Calvin in his commentary on the book, considers Jonah to be one of the elect, reluctant though he may be. He *will* carry out providentially foreordained actions, he *will* be saved himself; he must pray for repentance, though the will to that act is given only by God. Promethean dimensions are possible within the human: "Delight is to him . . . who against the proud gods and commodores of this earth, ever stands forth his own inexorable self," but only within strict limitations: "top-gallant delight is to him, who acknowledges no law or lord, but the Lord his God" (p. 51). The subtle adjustments of this

matter of Calvin will be the intellectual delight of those who voyage with Melville.

Already in the first chapter of the book, in a passage assumed to have been inserted during a stage late in the composition of *Moby-Dick*,<sup>13</sup> Ishmael begins to conjecture about the "springs and motives" of the Fates, which cast him in the role he would play, "cajoling me into the delusion that it was a choice resulting from my own unbiased freewill and discriminating judgment." Ishmael's speculations, so far, can fit any number of deterministic philosophies. But the musings quickly come to a point. Taji, the metaphysical wanderer and searcher at the end of Melville's earlier book *Mardi*, who breaks loose from all conventions and traditions to explore the uncharted sea, becomes Ishmael at the beginning of *Moby-Dick*: "I love to sail forbidden seas, and land on barbarous coasts. Not ignoring what is good, I am quick to perceive a horror" (p. 16).

Ishmael twice states the calvinistic upbringing which has prepared him for such perceptions: "I was a good Christian; born and bred in the bosom of the infallible Presbyterian Church" (p. 54); and, when trying to cope with Queequeg's outlandish religion, "I say, we good Presbyterian Christians should be charitable in these things" (p. 78). There is reason for this sympathy; Queequeg's little idol, Yojo, shares some of the calvinist deity's franchise on predestination: "Queequeg placed great confidence in the excellence of Yojo's judgment and surprising forecast of things." But the same paragraph introduces a more William Jamesian view of the deity, which provides groundwork for the healthy scepticism that will eventually save Ishmael intellectually: "a rather good sort of god, who perhaps meant well enough on the whole, but in all cases did not succeed in his benevolent designs" (p. 66). This limited and partially impotent God is discerned later as "the unseen and unaccountable old joker" (p. 195).

As he gradually pulls away from Ahab's psychological madness and intellectual calvinism, Ishmael makes further comments on the inadequacy of the national theology. In the chapter called "The Monkey-Rope," he finds himself standing at the railing of the ship and tied to Queequeg, who is precariously standing on the whale and engaged in "the tumultuous business of cutting in," that is, stripping the whale of his blubber. Ishmael reflects on "the dangerous liabilities" of the situation: if Queequeg slips and falls, Ishmael is honor bound to follow: "I seemed distinctly to perceive . . . that my free will had received a mortal wound; and that another's mistake or misfortune might plunge innocent me into unmerited disaster or death." The allusion is obviously to the calvinist catechism, which Melville quotes in his "Extracts": "In Adam's Fall/We sinned all." Ishmael objects to such a theology and to any incident which would tend to support it: "I saw that here was a



sort of interregnum in Providence; for its even-handed equity never could have sanctioned so gross an injustice" (pp. 270–71).

As it is, the great calvinist hero in our literature is Ahab. It is he who fully accepts the original doctrines and the fuller implications as they have evolved historically. Only one who sees the world as totally governed by predestination could address the gods thus: "Swerve me? ye cannot swerve me, else ye swerve yourselves! man has ye there. Swerve me? The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run" (p. 147).

The word itself, "predestinated," serves as a minor refrain in the book. After the demonic communion service, the second mate, Stubb, tries to laugh away his sense of doom, but the laugh sticks in his throat: "One comfort's always left . . . it's all predestinated" (p. 149). According to the teller of the *Town-Ho's* story, the brutal mate Radney was "predestinated" to taunt Steelkilt to the point of destructive violence (p. 213).<sup>14</sup> The accident that leaves the cabin boy Pip insane has its function on the "predestinated craft" (p. 344). Even a day when nothing happens to advance the plot materially is casually described as "predestinated" (p. 295). But an enormous leap forward takes place in the final chapter, the culminating moment of all the forces of the story, when the passive "predestinated" becomes an active word and Moby Dick is seen "strangely vibrating his predestinating head" as he rushes to stave the *Pequod*. Identification of the deity in this calvinistic world, not only for Ahab but for the narrator Ishmael, is unmistakable.

Such a predestinated world has its reprobates, and "such a crew . . . seemed picked and packed by some infernal fatality." Can it be that all those aboard the *Pequod* are doomed to hell fires? The reader is moved by the dignity and simple humanity of Starbuck, but his are the actions of a natural man which are worthless for gaining salvation—as Ishmael expresses it, "the incompetence of mere unaided virtue or right-mindedness in Starbuck" (p. 162). Ishmael himself escapes the general doom; but his escape is a very special case which must be considered later in detail. It is Ahab, as the controlling calvinist intelligence in the novel, who introduces another element from the calvinist synthesis, the total depravity of the human race: "The permanent constitutional condition of the manufactured man, thought Ahab, is sordidness" (p. 184). And he too, like Prometheus, is a "manmaker" who will exploit their sordidness for his own ends.

Finally, even the name of the ship, the *Pequod*, furnishes a telling recollection of the calvinist way of life operating in an American setting. In May 1637, the calvinist forces with some Indian allies surrounded the village of the Pequots. Their huts were set on fire and those who could flee were cut down. The tribe was annihilated. Only four Indian girls escaped. The tale must have seemed to Melville a suggestive model for what happened to Ahab's ship.

American calvinism, then, is clearly visible in the fiber of *Moby-Dick* and attention to these themes carries us far into the experience of the book. But as a great work it still contains mysteries, and more can be accounted for by pursuing its ingrained calvinism from another point of view. When Melville finished the book he wrote to Hawthorne a judgment that has frequently been puzzled over but never, I think, satisfactorily explained: "I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as a lamb."<sup>15</sup> Melville seems to think that his book will be held as wicked by the orthodox general audience of American readers; but he seems also to assert a higher vision of things as they are, his own privileged claim to the truth. What can this 125-year-old mystery mean? Let us attempt an answer by following Ahab's (and Ishmael's) conceptions of what they are about. Quite clearly Melville would have us understand that Ahab is insane from the beginning of the voyage and even before; his madness doesn't change, it only deepens. What does change is his conception of what he is trying to destroy, and this can be charted quite clearly. It must be asserted that what he first sets out to destroy is the satanic, "that intangible malignity which has been from the beginning; to whose dominion even the modern Christians ascribe one-half of the worlds," the Devil himself. This is an insane quest. In the same paragraph Melville describes it as "frantic morbidity," "monomaniac." Ahab is "crazy" (p. 160). At least such a quest aligns Ahab initially with the great heroes of Christian legend, such as Saint George who slew the Dragon, to whom Melville alludes in another place (p. 307). But if this is the initial perception of the object of the quest, the perception changes materially in Ahab's mind.

A few chapters later Ahab's private whale-boat crew emerge from hiding for the first time. They appear to be of "a race notorious for a certain diabolism of subtilty, and by some honest white mariners supposed to be the paid spies and secret confidential agents on the water of the devil, their lord" (p. 187). There is something peculiar here: Does one enlist the Devil to fight the Devil? Is not the object of the chase shifting to another direction?

One may, at this point, begin to reflect on one of the most persistent traits applied to Ahab by others in the story, the term "blasphemy." Even before Ahab appears on the scene, the insane prophet Elijah tells Ishmael some of the background of the captain on whose ship he has just signed. Elijah asks if they have heard "nothing about that deadly skrimmage with the Spaniard afore the altar in Santa? . . . nothing about the silver calabash he spat into?" (p. 87). Both crimes would be considered blasphemy, and the altar and chalice would have to be reconsecrated before they could be used again for sacred purposes. The pious Christian Starbuck considers Ahab's "vengeance on a dumb brute" as "blasphemous" (p. 144) and Ahab himself comes to feel the need to underplay the "impiousness" of his hunt for one particular whale (p. 183).

The acts of blasphemy demonstrate an important aspect of Ahab's actions and cannot be overlooked in a total view of the character. He rails consciously at the divinity: "I now prophesy that I will dismember my dismemberer. Now, then, be the prophet and the fulfiller one. That's more than ye, ye great gods, ever were. I laugh and hoot at ye" (p. 147). And he does so in many ways. Drinking from the harpoon sockets in chapter 36 is a desecration of the Communion service, as the consecration of the harpoons in Chapter 113 is a blasphemous Baptismal service: "Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli!"

The energies of the hunt, then, are turned from the pursuit of Satan to the blasphemous pursuit of God. And it is quite early in the book that Ahab realizes his willingness to undertake the hunt even under these conditions: "And be the white whale agent [Satan], or be the white whale principal [God], I will wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy" (p. 144).<sup>16</sup> And the narrator soon comes to assume that Ahab's will is set "against gods and devils" alike (p. 175). The perception is confirmed from still another source: the mad prophetic Gabriel, who "in his gibbering insanity, pronounc[ed] the White Whale to be no less a being than the Shaker God incarnated" (p. 267).

Some classic theological debate lies behind this perception. David Hume, in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, seemed to cover the ground thoroughly with his three-horned statement of the problem of evil: "Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?" A century later, Melville's Ahab was unable to shake himself from the demands of these questions, which were precisely the questions generated by classical Calvinism, as well. Contemplating the severed head of a whale, as if it were a Sphinx, he speculates on the horrors it must have seen—all examples of the good failing and the wicked succeeding, the just treated with monstrous injustice. He concludes: "O head! thou hast seen enough to split the planets and make an infidel of Abraham" (p. 264). Where sceptical agnosticism was Hume's response to the problem, passionate involvement in the search for the divine criminal is Ahab's. If God is the cause of all, then he is the cause of all the evil that exists: "Who's to doom, when the judge himself is dragged to the bar" asks Ahab, in a wild monologue that causes the Christian Starbuck to blanch, but wins the approval of the demonic Fedallah (p. 445). Clearly it is the predestinating Calvinist God who is the object of his hatred; Ahab parodies the Christian creed in addressing Him: "Thou knowest not how came ye, hence callest thyself unbegotten; certainly knowest not thy beginning, hence callest thyself unbegun." The only appropriate response, at least for a passionate man with Ahab's perceptions, is the one he so magnificently voices: "Thy right worship is defiance. . . . defyingly I worship thee!" (pp.

416-417). To which Starbuck exclaims, clinching the identification of combatants, "God, God is against thee, old man" (p. 418).

Let us bring all of this to a point: the mad Ahab has first isolated the monstrous, the diabolic, and then merged it with the Christian divine. God is the monster, the source of evil, at least as the culture has presented him to the hero of this classic American work. Ahab's perception is similar to what Thomas Jefferson saw as Calvin's God: "a dæmon of malignant spirit." Jefferson continues, it may be recalled, that "It would be more pardonable to believe in no God at all, than to blaspheme Him by the atrocious attributes of Calvin."

The book may still not seem a terribly "wicked" one if what we have is the perception only of a certified lunatic, no matter how powerfully the force of his insanity may move us. Some such reflection must cause the reader to expand his own reflections, to cast about for collateral light upon this insane and at the same time calvinistic hero. And at this point the character Ishmael becomes suddenly important, as a control figure possibly answering the reader's need for a normative view of the hero. Some surprises unfold as this character is explored.

The famous chapter on "The Whiteness of the Whale" (chapter 42) begins with the following transitional statement: "What the white whale was to Ahab, has been hinted; what, at times, he was to me, as yet remains unsaid." This is unmistakably important to the reader, furnishing as it does a link between the subjective monomaniacal perceptions of Ahab and the reader's own desire to appreciate the total aesthetic reality being presented. Ishmael is a middle range figure, neither perceptibly higher nor lower than the reader, not noticeably wiser or better. He is also a figure in process of becoming, so the statement about what his reflections were "at times" is important to the reader, who must also consider a variety of options, some of which must be tested only to be rejected.

Ishmael approaches the object of his captain's monomania with surprising openness. In this chapter he is willing to sink all prejudgments and allow himself to be carried by the full force of symbols and myths emerging from deep within his culture; he becomes the ideally malleable subject. What he submits to, through a subtly modulated series of reflections, is the notion that whiteness has symbolized transcendent goodness, that it also accrues to objects of the utmost horror and fear, and that in each instance it is "the very veil of the Christian's Deity" (p. 169). In other words, Ishmael is able to believe "at times" that the deity, at least as a concept elaborated in the Christian tradition (as Melville apprehends it), can be granted transcendent goodness but must also be the unique and transcendent source of evil in the world.

But Ishmael is an evolving character who is developing towards a quite different and more satisfying metaphysic than Ahab's. Ishmael's humor, his

buoyant scepticism, carried by the exuberant, life-asserting prose of the book itself, these provide the key to the final phase of the meditations. True, Ishmael "at times" sees what Ahab sees: the malignant and destructive deity, the latent demonism in the world, the coherence of the calvinist world view. But he sees it as a concept, a theory, a mighty theme to produce a mighty book. There is something else in him that frees him from this imperative, that finally releases him from Ahab and his calvinism and the reprobation of the crew generally. For Ishmael has within him, even more than scepticism, a comedic center which liberates and furnishes the enduring basis for joy.

This comedic center is also the physical center of the book, the chapter entitled "The Grand Armada." Here Ishmael's whaling boat finds itself surrounded by hundreds of whales. The strong whales circle outside, protecting the mothers and infants within. The mysteries of procreation and birth, of tender nursing, are shown to the privileged Ishmael. Aggression or violence would be sacrilegious as well as suicidal at this calm center of the whale world. Ishmael takes the experience as powerful emblem for himself: "Even so, amid the tornadoed Atlantic of my being, do I myself still for ever centrally disport in mute calm; and while ponderous planets of unwaning woe revolve around me, deep down and deep inland there I still bathe me in eternal mildness of joy." The experience is not permanent in his consciousness: "There is no steady unretracing progress in life" (p. 406). But it is permanent in his being: while engaging in the most pleasant activity aboard the whaling ship, seated around a tub of spermaceti with the other sailors and breaking up the soft globules by hand, occasionally squeezing another sailor's hand by mistake, Ishmael reflects, "In visions of the night, I saw long rows of angels in paradise, each with his hands in a jar of spermaceti" (p. 349).

Through the course of *Moby-Dick*, resources have developed within Ishmael that have allowed him finally to break out of the imprisoning system of the national religion. John Calvin's commentary on the biblical Ishmael, in the book of Genesis, helps us to clarify the final situation of Melville's Ishmael. The biblical Ishmael is Abraham's son, but by the slave woman Hagar. He and his people are physical descendants of Abraham and live in his presence; but they do not share in the fulfillment of the promise given to Abraham. Calvin is quick to apply one of his own favorite terms to Ishmael, to place him in the divine economy as Calvin understands it: quite curtly, "he was a reprobate."<sup>17</sup> The situation of Melville's Ishmael is the same up to a point. He too stands outside the promise; but by an act of his own psyche he stands outside the system of calvinist beliefs, as well. And far from being reprobate, he asserts at the end, "I *only* am escaped alone to tell thee" (p. 470; emphasis added, here and below). Ahab submits to the national religion, is totally bound by it. A great man, but predestined to be among the reprobate, he is driven mad and destroyed by the system to which he subscribes. He is the

hero of our greatest calvinist tragedy. Ishmael, on the other hand, is a still larger figure, able to stand outside the myth and transcend it, and to proclaim that freedom to the reader: "I only am escaped alone *to tell thee*." The role of Prometheus the gift-giver is transferred to Ishmael at the end. He alone, through a particularly Melvillian combination of joy and scepticism, has emancipated himself from the American religion and its deity. Ishmael is the first of us to liberate himself from the national religion. The book is a "No! in thunder" to the received orthodoxy. That is why it is a powerful book, and a wicked book which left its author feeling "spotless as a lamb."

# 9 EPILOGUE

Calvinism is the dark side of our moon. Death is madness and despair; Ahab is not Prometheus as Christ, who cannot die, to whom the ways of things will eventually bend, but rather the satanic Prometheus, rebellious and doomed, impotent and infinitely sad. Napoleon once remarked, according to Emerson, that history is a fable to which we all agree. And in a very real sense, the past exists only as memory, as dream, as genetic input realized in the present moment. To a bewildering array of inanimate artifacts are added fear, hope, pride, imagination, ambition, to create the reality of the moment. But it is also true, as Robert Penn Warren wrote, that "history is what you can't resign from."<sup>1</sup> History exists in each mind as personal reconstruction; upon reflection one succumbs to the desire to know oneself and the forces that mold and thereby define the possible maneuvers of the present. But one runs the risk of subjectivity. For William Blake, America was the mental utopia where all forces of oppression disappeared, and love and liberty reigned. For Franz Kafka, "Amerika" was like a vast European hotel, where total organization and subordination frustrated the individual who was unable to insert himself into the machine at any point. In place of these "outside" myths of the land, our own authors seem to me to have offered insights into a more comprehensive myth, in identifying the massive forces they have felt pressing upon them, and which I have put together under the term "calvinism." So strong has the force been, so powerfully has it fixed the American mind, that there are moments when we are unable to consider any other possible religious systems. Such at least is the reflection suggested by the opening words from a book by one of our best modern historians: "Christianity teaches that God is good and man is bad, that God is in fact so good and man so bad that man deserves eternal damnation." Something is wrong here. The first word needs close attention; surely it misconceives one formulation, our own national formulation, for a much wider range of possibilities.

In one way or another, *Moby-Dick* contains all of our calvinistic themes. Melville's story and much of its drama are based on a sense, in its tragic protagonist, that there is a definite line between the knowable and the unknowable, a division between the limited human reality and the greater reality; and that the other reality, to which Ahab has no natural access, is of final import to the human. Ahab's tragic flaw is to dare to cross that line; Ishmael's salvation is to disbelieve in any such split, to draw away from this insane view into a more secular and healthy scepticism concerning such mysteries. There is an old saying that whom the gods would destroy they first drive mad. And the pattern is Ahab's; as the monster god of the national religion becomes real

to him he becomes progressively more insane and finally is destroyed in the watery flood of that god's wrath. Mystical union with that god is unthinkable, and to this extent even Ishmael, like Frost, is limited by the national religion.

The world of *Moby-Dick* is a violent one; where Ahab fully immerses himself in that violence, Ishmael carefully limits his own violence to the necessities of survival while striving to preserve his precarious sense of wholeness and harmony. The calvinist world is a rigidly authoritarian world; authority in the first instance is God's, but more visibly it resides in the calvinistic figure who arrogates total obedience to himself by reason of some solipsistically perceived mandate, and who withers the opposition of his subordinates. Ahab, again.

The world of *Moby-Dick* is anti-woman at the deepest level of instinct. The biblical Ahab's wife was Jezebel, who led him to worship strange animal gods and abandon Jehovah. Ishmael perceives himself as a motherless, wifeless orphan, and Ahab leaves his wife, the moment she conceives, to spend several years at sea. Hesiod's notion is important here, that one of the punishments Zeus imposed for the benevolent crime of Prometheus was the creation of "the damnable race of women," "this beautiful curse to go with the blessing of fire." According to the code, whaling is a search that demands of the hero total sequestration from the female. Finally, the obvious limitations of the human mind and will in a calvinist universe are based on the premise of total wickedness, total corruption of these faculties. The inevitability with which any great work of art patterns its forces to resolution is powerfully amplified in *Moby-Dick* by the sense of a predestinated world rushing to doom from which no one escapes except the narrator, whom luck has maneuvered to independence from these forces. *Moby-Dick* is a dream-world, our nightmare myth, where only one of the sleepers is able to pinch himself awake.

Insofar as *Moby-Dick* is a compendium of what our native calvinism can be, it is a story of the mental discovery of some significant part of America. Ahab, like Columbus, must trick and cajole a reluctant crew to pursue the same bizarre dream that he entertains. And so the figure of Columbus finally becomes usable, after all. But the calvinism in Melville's world warps the medieval Columbus materials far beyond useful recognition.

One of the most extensive critiques of these national matters can be found in the works of H. L. Mencken. He is something of our Ishmael, intelligent and sceptical while still passionately involved. In an important essay called "Puritanism as a Literary Force," Mencken rode out specifically against "comstockery," the current manifestation of perennial puritanism. Anthony Comstock was something of a Horatio Alger who made his way to Congress and kept his name alive before the public by his associations with the Mann Act, the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice and other agencies



which prosecuted obscenity trials, and the enforcement of temperance. For Mencken he represented a great amount of what was wrong with the American world: "that deep-seated and uncorrupted Puritanism, that conviction of the pervasiveness of sin, of the importance of moral correctness, of the need of savage and inquisitorial laws, has been a dominating force in American life since the very beginning."<sup>2</sup> Mencken rises to some of his best epithet-making prose as he pursues "the professional sin hound, the virtuoso of vice."

In the face of such repression, Mencken feels, literature has become proletarian in America, labored, pedestrian, imbecile. One of the forces that have created this atmosphere, he says, is "that plupious and beauty-hating folk, the Scotch-Irish." As for its principal manifestation currently, "it is sex that especially fascinates the lubricious Puritan mind." It is with some glee, the reader apprehends, that Mencken is able to charge the political powers of his day with hypocrisy: "The *New York Sun*, for example, in the course of a protest against the appointment of a vice commission for New York, has denounced the paid agents of private reform organizations as 'notoriously corrupt, undependable and dishonest,' and the Rev. Dr. W. A. Reinsford, supporting the charges, has borne testimony out of his own wide experience to their lawlessness, their absurd pretensions to specialized knowledge, their habit of manufacturing evidence, and their devious methods of shutting off criticism." The actual historical links backward to an authentic, recognizable calvinism are at times tenuous and difficult to forge with theological accuracy, but Mencken easily perceives it as a continuing element in our tradition, and the reader, at this point in the book, will easily associate with it many earlier items that bear an unmistakable calvinist aura.

A decade later, at the height of American affluence, another of our major writers raged most savagely at the dark limitations imposed upon the American psyche by what he identified also as puritanism. William Carlos Williams, then an established poet well into his middle years, published *In the American Grain* in 1925. Where his poetry is cool and precise, this book is an expansive rant obviously deriving from D. H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature*, published only two years earlier. Williams's book runs in fact against the American grain, which he faults in nearly every chapter for narrowness, bigotry, morbidity, and self-righteousness. Williams personifies his world of forces, "the malfessant ghost that dominates us all," as "The Puritan," alive in his day as well as in history, producing "a race incapable of flower."<sup>3</sup> But the power of the indictment is carried in more sustained passages:

The result of that brave setting out of the Pilgrims has been an atavism that thwarts and destroys. The agonized spirit, that has followed like an idiot with underdeveloped brain, governs with its great muscles, babbling in a

text of the dead years. Here souls perish miserably, or, escaping, are beat into grotesque designs of violence and despair. . . . It has become "the most lawless country in the civilized world," a panorama of murders, perversions, a terrific ungoverned strength, excusable only because of the horrid beauty of its great machines. Today it is a generation of gross know-nothingism, of blackened churches where hymns groan like chants from stupified jungles, a generation universally eager to barter permanent values (the hope of an aristocracy) in return for opportunist material advantages, a generation hating those whom it obeys.

And so our native calvinism has produced, in its latter years, its own kind of apocalyptic end, its own spiritless parody of religion, its secular entropic stasis.

Williams proposes the antidote: "Upon that part of earth they occupied true spirit dies because of the Puritans, except through vigorous revolt." And the revolt, it seems to me, has been carried on, accounting for much of the vigor in American letters. But there is something shortsighted here, something too narrowing of vision in the rage behind Williams's indictment. He briefly evaluates Emily Dickinson, for example, as "starving of passion in her father's garden." The image is complex and precise, encapsulating much of what we know about her. But it does not allow Williams to explore the extent to which her poetry is precisely a revolt against the limiting pressures in her culture. Her poems are a record of many years of mental guerilla warfare against the established forces. And so with most of our best literature. The literary enterprize has been prosecuted with the rigor of revolt since the beginning. But, as in any such conflict, the nature of the oppressor strongly determines the shape of the revolt. Calvinism has provided a highly charged myth of the culture; its multifaceted imperatives and taboos have produced the sharp edges that distinguish American authors and their works from those of any other culture.

One of the mysteries of history is that other cultures, other literatures, have not developed in the same way when some of the same forces appear to have been at work. Geneva is a case in point, a city which would seem to be even more directly susceptible to the influence of Calvin. The parallels between Geneva and America can be pressed to some extent. Jean Charles Léonard Simonde de Sismondi (1773–1842) has been compared in his religious beliefs with Channing, with whom he corresponded. In his economic ideas—that wealth should be made to produce happiness instead of more wealth merely—he can be compared with Thoreau. Another Genevan, Henri Frédéric Amiel (1821–1881), has actually been called "the Swiss Thoreau," especially for his solitary, undramatic life and for his *Journal intime*.<sup>4</sup>

But the differences between Geneva and America are even more striking. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, ever the most loyal "citizen of Geneva," has been

linked with Calvin by a famous historian, who finds a significant historical epoch bracketed by the two figures: Calvin, the prodigal son of France, creating powerful new cultural forces in Geneva; Rousseau, the prodigal son of Geneva, later bringing a transformed version of these forces to France and thence to the rest of the world. We seem to be dealing with a significantly different Calvin here, or at least he is remembered differently, and different aspects of his work seem important in this European context. The historian goes on to define Rousseau's calvinism: "The old Calvinist intransigence in its entirety . . . came through in [Rousseau's] constant moral passion, in his cries of indignation, and in his confused and vehement demand for justice and truth—the eloquent political and moral radicalism of which was to imbue successions of generations thereafter—even if it came through in the new language, accessible to the men of his century, of a sentimental religiosity without Church or dogma."<sup>5</sup>

Calvin is indeed remembered differently here. But Rousseau himself remembered Calvin in a way that is corrective of the American mythic figure: "Those who regarded Calvin only as a theologian do not know the extent of his genius. The drafting of our wise edicts [in Geneva], in which he played a large part, does him as much honor as his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Whatever revolutions time may bring to our religion, as long as love of country and of freedom is still alive among us, the memory of that great man will never cease to be a blessing to us."<sup>6</sup> To my knowledge only one American writer has seen Calvin's legislation as being as important as his theology. This was our canonical historian, George Bancroft, himself a strongly calvinist interpreter: "Events do, as I believe, correspond to the Divine idea," was his theory of history. Bancroft laments the shortcomings of Calvin, his "use of the sword for the extirpation of heresy." But he would have him remembered also as "the most efficient of modern legislators." He made Geneva "the impregnable fortress of popular liberty, the fertile seed-plot of democracy." But this assessment of Calvin is to be found in a minor occasional piece, not in Bancroft's massive *History*.<sup>7</sup>

In a way, the names of Calvin and Rousseau can be linked in a description of our culture. Calvin's particular version of "return to the Bible" and Rousseau's invitation to "return to Nature" fairly accurately define two poles of the American religious instinct and its substitutes throughout our history. But when we look at Calvin alone we remember him differently; he functions differently. Ezra Pound, in his own version of Dante's *Commedia*, placed Calvin in hell, in Canto XIV, along with other bigots whom he disliked. The disposition is succinct, but it suggests that the continuities we have been studying are valid, that recent formulations derive from earlier ones.

It was Hawthorne's genius, in his allegory of Rappaccini's garden, to provide an early model for the America experienced by many of our writers.

They discovered themselves living among the forces of the fallen garden and understood the conditions of their own ordeals in terms similar to those Hawthorne used. They analyzed the myth, fought against it, added new elements to it, exorcized it, succumbed to it, or tried to replace it with myths of "a world elsewhere." Consistently they identified this world as calvinist and Calvin as one of the figures presiding over our culture. In their various ways they make our world explicit for us. Emerson said of the orator, "The deeper he dives into his privatest, secretest presentiment, to his wonder he finds this is the most acceptable, most public, and universally true." And of the poet: "He will tell us how it was with him, and all men will be the richer in his fortune."

# NOTES

Calvin's *Institutes* has been translated into English several times; the first version appeared in 1561 and was reprinted five times before 1600. The frequency of publication has continued. For my purposes the most important translation is that of John Allen, published in England in 1813. This translation has held the field from its first American edition of 1816, through six more editions and over thirty reprintings, up to the present. Generally when American authors have mentioned Calvin's thought they have known it through this translation. Because it has been a primary source of American Calvinism it is also the translation I quote, unless another source is indicated.

Scholars will be aided by the bibliography of works on Calvin and Calvinism which can be pieced together from the following sources: *Bibliographia Calviniana*, ed. D. Alfredus Erickson (Berlin: C.A. Schwetschke, 1900); *Calvin/Bibliographie, 1901-1959*, ed. Wilhelm Niesel (Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1961); "Petit Supplément aux Bibliographies Calviniennes, 1901-1963," ed. Pierre Fraenkel, vol. 33 of *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance, travaux et documents* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1971); Joseph N. Tylenda, S.J., "Calvin Bibliography, 1960-1970," ed. Peter De Klerk, *Calvin Theological Journal* 6 (1971): 156-93; and Peter De Klerk, "Calvin Bibliography, 1972," *Calvin Theological Journal* 7 (1972): 221-50. These lists range widely and refer to studies in many languages, but they are not exhaustive.

As the best single point of entry into the study of American religion, both for bibliography and for an assessment of issues and problems, I recommend Henry F. May, "The Recovery of American Religious History," *American Historical Review* 70 (October 1964): 79-92. Perry Miller's original essays and provocative anthologies still stand at the beginning of any study of this subject. Valuable also is Larzer Ziff's *Puritanism in America: New Culture in a New World* (New York: Viking, 1973).

## INTRODUCTION

1. Quotations are from "Rappaccini's Daughter," in *Mosses from an Old Manse*, vol. 10 of The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, ed. William Charvat et al. (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 91-128. 2. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1950); R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1955); Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967); David W. Noble, *The Eternal Adam*

and the New World Garden (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1968); Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1975).

3. An exceptionally rich and interesting history of Geneva on the eve of Reformation, with detailed information on the government, external relations, population, major figures, and so forth, can be found in Henri Naef, *Les origines de la Réforme à Genève* (Geneva: Droz, 1968). The larger historical context may be supplied by William Martin's *Switzerland: From Roman Times to the Present*, trans. Jocasta Innes (New York: Praeger, 1971); ironically, Calvin is mentioned there only in a chapter entitled "The Collapse of National Unity." An American theologian has referred to Geneva as "the metropolis of a grand, sublime, and terrible idea." See Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (New York: Harper, 1877), 1: 463.

4. A full and authoritative treatment in English of the Synod of Dort can be found in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*. 1: 508ff.; the documents of the Synod are reprinted in translation in *ibid.*, 3: 550ff.

5. Conrad Cherry, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards: A Reappraisal* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1966), p. 1. Mrs. McGinley's poem is in her collection *Times Three* (New York: Viking, 1961), p. 19.

6. Leon Kellner, *American Literature*, trans. Julia Franklin (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1915), pp. 40-41.

7. François Wendel, *Calvin: Sources et évolution de sa pensée religieuse* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950), pp. 273-74. That Calvin presents no "definitive synthesis," either in philosophy or in theology, is also the thesis of Charles Partee in *Calvin and Classical Philosophy* (Leyden: Brill, 1977).

8. For example, Robert P. Kerr, *The People's History of Presbyterianism in All Ages* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1888); and James I. Good, *Famous Reformers of the Reformed and Presbyterian Churches* (Philadelphia: Heidelberg Press, 1916), represent a class of books with no scholarly pretensions which seem aimed only at replacing, for ordinary church classes, the popular myth of Calvin with the counter-myth of a pious and learned biblical commentator.

9. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), p. 68. For the relationship between calvinism and English Puritanism, see Ziff, *Puritanism in America*, chapter 1 and notes. A recent assessment of the forms English Puritanism was taking in the American colonies can be found in chapter 2, "The Puritans," of Michael T. Gilmore's *The Middle Way: Puritanism and Ideology in American Romantic Fiction* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1977).

10. Edmund S. Morgan, "The Puritan Ethic and the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 24 (1967): 3-43; and C. Vann Woodward, "The Southern Ethic in a Puritan World," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 25 (1968): 343-70. Morgan, in the final paragraph of his essay, finds current American social analysis to be merely the old perceptions dressed in new clothes: "The most popular analysis of American society after the second World War was a lament for the loss of inner-directedness (read simplicity, industry, frugality) which had been replaced by other-directedness (read luxury, extravagance). The Puritan Ethic has always been known by its epitaphs. Perhaps it is not dead yet" (p. 43).

11. The couplet is actually a variation on lines by Isaac Watts, the British hymnodist. See *The Variorum Walden and the Variorum Civil Disobedience*, ed. Walter Harding (New York: Washington Square Press, 1968), p. 315.

12. The theme, in its earlier manifestations, is impressively developed by Sacvan Bercovitch in *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1975).

13. The rise and decline of the missionary movement during the nineteenth century is sketched in chapter 7 of Sidney E. Mead's *The Lively Experi-*

ment: *The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York: Harper, 1963). 14. George Santayana, *Character and Opinion in the United States* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956), p. 24; originally published in 1920. 15. Philip Schaff, *America: A Sketch of the Political, Social, and Religious Character of the United States of North America*, ed. Perry Miller (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1961), p. 129; originally published in New York by Scribner, 1855.

16. Leonard Woolsey Bacon, *A History of American Christianity* (New York: Scribner's, 1930), pp. 124–25. 17. I have explored what seem to me the powerfully realized Lutheran materials in Updike in "The Lutheran Experience in John Updike's 'Pigeon Feathers,'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 14 (Fall 1977): 329–35. Philip Schaff, in the work cited above, considered the German churches in America to be so badly fragmented that their influence was entirely disproportionate to the number of their adherents, which he estimated to be one-sixth of the American population in 1855 (see *America: A Sketch*, p. 145). In a more general sense, of course, one must acknowledge a definite "Lutheran" strain which comes into our literature by secondary influence; Jacob Boehme, Emanuel Swedenborg, and Sören Kierkegaard were profoundly influenced by their Lutheran heritage, and all have found devoted readers among American writers. 18. *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Stephen E. Whicher and Robert E. Spiller (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1959), 1: 118–43; the quoted phrase is on p. 127. 19. Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytic Meaning of History* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1959); reprinted as a Vintage Book (New York: Random House, n.d.). 20. George Santayana, *Winds of Doctrine and Platonism and the Spiritual Life* (New York: Harper, 1957), p. 212; the essay was originally published in 1913.

21. Kellner, *American Literature*, p. 8. 22. A brief introduction to these critics is provided by J. Hillis Miller's essay, "The Geneva School: The Criticism of Marcel Raymond, Albert Béguin, George Poulet, Jean Rousset, Jean-Pierre Richard, and Jean Starobinski," in *Modern French Criticism, From Proust and Valéry to Structuralism*, ed. John K. Simon (Chicago: Univ of Chicago Press, 1972), pp. 277–310. 23. *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), 9: 407–08. The entry is for March 3, 1862; Emerson goes on to give as examples "Dr. Channing, Dewey, Horace Mann, Wasson, Garrison, and Others."

#### THE PERSISTENCE OF CALVINISM

1. Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (New York: Random House-Vintage Books, 1958), p. 6. 2. Walter M. Merrill, *Against Wind and Tide: A Biography of William Lloyd Garrison* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1963), p. 30. 3. Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957); reprinted as a Harper Torchbook (New York: Harper, 1965). Smith's assertion of "revivalism's triumph over Calvinism" amounts almost to a thesis of the book; see, for examples, in the Harper edition, pp. 33, 56, 80, 88–92, 102, and 157. 4. Quoted by Carl Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1932), p. 34. 5. Henry F. May, *Protestant Churches and Industrial America* (New York: Harper, 1949), p. 12.

6. Schaff, *America*, pp. 91–92. 7. John William De Forest, *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (New York:

Rinehart, 1955; originally published in 1867), p. 437. 8. See Smith, *Revivalism*, p. 63. 9. *The Writings of Oliver Wendell Holmes*, Riverside Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1892), 5: x. 10. *Ibid.*, 8: 361-401, *passim*.

11. I quote from Holmes's letters as printed in *Life and Letters of Oliver Wendell Holmes*, ed. John T. Morse, Jr. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1896), 2: 223-55, *passim*. 12. Many of Twain's biographers provide details of the calvinist influences in his boyhood, beginning with Van Wyck Brooks, *The Ordeal of Mark Twain* (New York: Dutton, 1920). For a thorough account of the fascination the Bible exercised on Twain, see Allison Ensor's *Mark Twain and the Bible* (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1969).

13. The quotations in this paragraph are from a United Press International release, dated New York, October 5, 1963, printed in the Louisville *Courier-Journal*, October 6, 1963, section 4, pp. 1, 4. 14. Albert Bigelow Paine, *Mark Twain: A Biography* (New York: Harper, 1912), 2: 1157. 15. *Ibid.*, p. 1159.

16. *Mark Twain's Fables of Man*, ed. John S. Tuckey (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1972), pp. 34-44. 17. *Ibid.*, pp. 50-68, for this and the following quotations. 18. Bercovitch, *Puritan Origins*, pp. ix, 62, 88. 19. Tuckey, *Mark Twain's Fables of Man*, pp. 131-32. 20. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

21. Quoted from *What Is Man? And Other Philosophical Writings*, ed. with an introduction by Paul Baender (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1973), pp. 146-47. 22. Twain's perceptions and opinions on American popular religion have the ring of a thoroughly personal and sincere indignation. But it is quite possible that his formulations were clarified to some extent by the speeches and writings of his close friend, the famous and publicly self-advertised anti-calvinist Robert Ingersoll. See "Mark Twain and Robert Ingersoll: The Freethought Connection," by Thomas D. Schwartz, *American Literature* 48 (1976): 181-93.

23. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., "A Critical Period in American Religion," *Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings* 64 (1932): 523-48. 24. Some of the materials in this paragraph have been suggested by Norman F. Furniss, *The Fundamentalist Controversy, 1918-1931* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1954), *passim*. Interesting also, but less objective, is Stewart G. Cole's *History of Fundamentalism* (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1931). For early manifestations of religious bigotry and antiintellectualism see Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (New York: Rinehart, 1938), which is especially good in sketching the controversy surrounding Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures* and the rise of the Know-Nothing party. William G. McLoughlin also sees connections between calvinism and fundamentalism, as a function of his larger definition of American religion as a "pietistic perfectionism." See his stimulating article, "Pietism and the American Character," *American Quarterly* 17 (1965): 163-86. 25. Harold Kaplan, *Democratic Humanism and American Literature* (Chicago: Univ of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 242.

26. Furniss, *Fundamentalist Controversy*, pp. 12-14, 130.

#### AMERICA'S COPERNICAN REVOLUTION

1. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1933), p. 22 (preface to the 2nd ed.). 2. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, chapter 54, note 36. Roland H. Bainton describes a moment from the death of Servetus: "From the flames he was heard to pray, 'O Jesus, thou Son of the Eternal God, have pity on me!' Farel said that if he had been willing to confess Jesus, the eternal Son of God, he might have been saved." Bainton comments ironically on what



must be the unique case of execution for a wrongly placed adjective. The famous church historian's general assessment of Calvin can be surmised from a chapter title: "The Peak of Protestant Intolerance: John Calvin." See his *The Travail of Religious Liberty: Nine Biographical Studies* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1951). 3. Illuminating background is furnished here by Conrad Wright, *The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America* (Boston: Starr King Press, 1955); by William R. Hutchison, *The Transcendental Ministers: Church Reform in the New England Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1959); and by Daniel Walker Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1970). 4. The orthodox criticism of Channing and his followers was expressed by Robert Baird in mid-nineteenth century in an encyclopedic survey of American religions. So far beyond the pale of regnant calvinism were Channing's opinions that he was not even named by the pious historian: "About twenty-five years since, German Transcendentalism made its appearance among the Unitarian clergy, and has spread rapidly. Its adherents, generally, are not very profound thinkers, nor very well acquainted with the philosophy which they have embraced, or with the evidence on which it rests. It promises to relieve its disciples from the necessity of building their religious faith and hope on probabilities, however strong, and to give them an intuition and infallible knowledge of all that is essential in religion; and it affords an unlimited range for the play of imagination. It has charms, therefore, for the contemplative and the enthusiastic." See Robert Baird, *Religion in America; or, An Account of the Origin, Relation to the State, and Present Condition of the Evangelical Churches in the United States, with Notices of the Unevangelical Denominations* (New York: Harper, 1856), p. 559. 5. Citations from Channing are all from *The Works of William Ellery Channing, D.D.* (Boston, 1888).

6. *American Christianity: An Historical Interpretation with Representative Documents*, ed. H. Shelton Smith, R.T. Handy, and L.A. Loetscher (New York, 1960), 2: 493. 7. J.N.D. Kelly is perhaps the most learned and lucid writer on this complex era of intellectual history. See especially his *Early Christian Doctrines*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper, 1960), pp. 252–343; and *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd ed. (New York: McKay, 1972), pp. 205ff. For a very brief treatment see also *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward Rochid Hardy (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), pp. 31–33 of the introduction. 8. A renewed interest in Channing has produced several books in recent years, notably Robert L. Patterson, *The Philosophy of William Ellery Channing* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1955); David Edgell *William Ellery Channing: An Intellectual Portrait* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955); and Arthur W. Brown, *Always Young for Liberty: A Biography of William Ellery Channing* (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1956). In modern times, however, no analysis has been made of his argument on traditional theological grounds, the grounds on which it would have been met in its own day. Moses Stuart of Andover Seminary met Channing's challenge with charity but with a strong concern for "true doctrine" in *Letters to The Rev. Wm. E. Channing Containing Remarks on His Sermon Recently Preached and Published at Baltimore* (Andover: Flagg and Gould, 1819). His analysis places Channing's remarks, including his contrived terminology, against the tradition of accepted Protestant creeds and the most respected divines. But the now-obscure pamphlet seems to have mounted little firepower against the already persuaded followers of Channing. It was, indeed, an idea whose time had come. 9. Edward A. Dowey, Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1952). 10. I quote from the edition of *Nature* edited by Merton M. Sealts, Jr., and Alfred R. Ferguson (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1969), p. 5. Subsequent quotations are from this edition.

11. Ezra Pound, "A Few Don'ts by an Imagist," *Poetry* (1913): 198–206. 12. Calvin, Sermon on I Cor. 11:26ff. 13. M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1971), p. 334. 14. Emerson's early sermon can be found in *Young Emerson Speaks: Unpublished Discourses on Many Subjects*, ed. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, Jr. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1938) The quotation is from *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, ed. William H. Gillman et al. (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1960—), 4: 16. 15. These remarks have been stimulated by suggestions in Hyatt H. Waggoner's *Emerson as Poet* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 144–45. 16. *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, 5: 18, 19; emphasis added. 17. A more naked version of the Transcendentalist struggle against native calvinism is visible in the life and work of Jones Very; see James A. Levernier, "Calvinism and Transcendentalism in the Poetry of Jones Very," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 24 (1978): 30–41.

#### THE REVOLUTION EXPANDED

1. "Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England" (1880). Emerson's distrust of Thoreau is explored at length throughout Joel Porte's *Emerson and Thoreau: Transcendentalists in Conflict* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1965). 2. Emerson published "The Poet" in *Essays, Second Series*, in 1844. 3. The title of Lawrence Buell's fourth chapter, "From Sermon to Scripture," in *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1973) suggests a progression toward this thesis, though the materials he develops are from other authors and other texts. The notion of Thoreau as a mystic is not entirely new. His published works and his journals are filled with expressions of joy, ecstasy, illumination. For a fine selection of these statements see Porte, *Emerson and Thoreau*, pp. 147–71. While I believe the subject still needs a more direct assault, there actually has been a fairly constant interest in Thoreau as a religious writer. The image of Thoreau as Hindu holy man was suggested by Arthur Christy, *The Orient in American Transcendentalism* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1932), p. 206. William Bysshe Stein has explored this possibility in two articles: "The Hindu Matrix of Walden: The King's Son," *Comparative Literature* 22 (1970): 303–18; and "The Yoga of Reading in Walden," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 13 (1971): 481–95. Jonathan Bishop's pursuit of the religious themes in Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* leads him to the discovery of important structural elements in that work; see his essay "The Experience of the Sacred in Thoreau's Week," in *ELH* 33 (1966): 66–91. Finally, though the list could be greatly extended, J.S. Bois, in "Circular Imagery in Thoreau's *Week*," *College English* 26 (1965): 350ff., finds clues pointing to a conscious separation of the sacred and the secular in Thoreau's imagery. 4. *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903–1911), 10: 92. 5. All quotations from *Walden* are taken from *The Variorum Walden and the Variorum Civil Disobedience*, annotated and introduced by Walter Harding (New York: Washington Square Press, 1968). 6. An alternate explanation is possible: that Thoreau's "Spring" chapter is a creative extension of Emerson's insights into Swedenborg. 7. *Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader's Edition*, ed. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York: Norton, 1968), p. 416. Subsequent quotations are from this edition. 8. Whitman's "I" as a rich polysensuum has been frequently analyzed. See, for example,

Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism*, pp. 324-30, for Buell's perceptive theories and a survey of the theories of others. Many other analyses of the structure of the book exist, and a useful survey of them is provided by Thomas Edward Crawley in *The Structure of "Leaves of Grass"* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1970). 9. Marion Montgomery argues for a "deliberate autobiography" conducted throughout the *Selected Essays*; Eliot, in the 1950 preface, called them "a kind of historical record of my interests and opinions." See Montgomery, "Eliot's Autobiography," *Illinois Quarterly* 37 (1974): 57-64. 10. Quotations are from *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1971).

11. By a curious literary coincidence, Betty Smith celebrated the same tree in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* in the same year that *Four Quartets* was published. 12. The case for continuity and similarity is expanded by Sydney Musgrove in *T.S. Eliot and Walt Whitman* (Wellington: New Zealand Univ. Press, 1952) and by James E. Miller, Jr., in *Quests Surd and Absurd* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1967). 13. Introduction to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1948). 14. Introduction to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (London: Cresset Press, 1950), pp. vii-xvi. 15. See pp. 62-63 of *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, ed. Valerie Eliot (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1971). 16. F.R. Leavis, *The Living Principle: 'English' As a Discipline of Thought* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975), p. 261.

#### DEATH AND THE DEITY

1. Mark Twain, *The Mysterious Stranger*, ed. with an introduction by William M. Gibson (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1970), pp. 404-05. 2. Edward H. Davidson, *Jonathan Edwards: The Narrative of a Puritan Mind* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966), p. 126. 3. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: Pantheon, 1949), p. 126. It was Sylvia Plath who concretized this figure into the father as Nazi, obscuring any more godlike figure in the sky behind him; see "Daddy" in *Ariel* (New York: Harper, 1966). 4. Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, ed. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York: Norton, 1968), pp. 443-44. 5. Quoted from Ursula Brumm's analysis of the puritan imagination in *American Thought and Religious Typology* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1970), p. 38.

6. See: Louis Untermeyer, *Come In* (New York: Holt, 1943), later amplified and published as *The Pocket Book of Robert Frost's Poems* (New York: Pocket Books, 1956), p. 192; Reginald L. Cook, *The Dimensions of Robert Frost* (New York: Rinehart, 1958); John Robert Doyle, *The Poetry of Robert Frost: An Analysis* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand Univ. Press, and New York: Hafner, 1965), p. 195; D.J. Lepore, "Setting and/or Statement," *English Journal* 55 (1966): 624-26; and Stanley Poss, "Low Skies, Some Clearing, Local Frost," *New England Quarterly* 41 (1968): 438-42. 7. See: John Ciardi, "Robert Frost: The Way to the Poem," *Saturday Review* 40 (April 12, 1958): 15ff.; René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949, 1955) (the passage relevant to Frost can be found on pp. 194-95 of the first edition and p. 179 of the second edition); Leonard Unger and William Van O'Connor, *Poems for Study* (New York: Rinehart, 1953), p. 600; John F. Lynen, *The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1960); Lawrence Thompson, *Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost* (New York: Russell, 1961), p. 27; James Armstrong, "The 'Death Wish' in 'Stopping by

Woods,'” *College English* 25 (1964): 440–45; Lloyd N. Dendinger, “The Irrational Appeal of Frost’s Dark Deep Woods,” *Southern Review*, n.s. 2 (1966): 822–29; Frank Lentricchia, *Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of Self* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1975), p. 96; and Richard Poirier, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), p. 183. 8. Quoted in Louis Mertins, *Robert Frost: Life and Talks-Walking* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1965), p. 371. 9. Robert Langbaum, “The New Nature Poetry,” *American Scholar* 28 (1959): 323–40; John T. Ogilvie, “From Woods to Stars: A Pattern of Imagery in Robert Frost’s Poetry,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 58 (1959): 64–76; George W. Nitchie, *Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1960). 10. “The Ghost of Christmas Past: ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,’” *College English* 22 (1962): 236ff.

11. Quoted in Mertins, *Robert Frost*, p. 304. 12. See Lawrance Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Early Years, 1874–1915* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1960), p. 548. 13. *Ibid.*, p. 36. 14. The book was published by Oxford Univ. Press in 1921. It is from this edition that I have cited Vaughan’s “The Night,” above. 15. Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Early Years*, pp. 231–32, 239–41, 372.

16. Lawrance Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph, 1915–1938* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1970), p. 643. 17. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: New American Library, 1958; originally published in New York by Longmans, Green, 1902), pp. 322, 67, 313. 18. Jean-Paul Sartre, “Le Bruit et la Fureur,” originally published in *La nouvelle revue française* (June and July 1939), reprinted in *Situations I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), pp. 70–81. It has been translated as “Time in Faulkner: *The Sound and the Fury*,” in *William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism*, ed. Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1963). 19. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1941), p. 148. 20. James M. Demski, *Being, Man, and Death: A Key to Heidegger* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1970), pp. 2 and 3 for this and the following quotation.

21. I quote from Chevalier’s translation of Malraux’s *La condition humaine*, called *Man’s Fate* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), pp. 147–48; all of the ellipses are in the text. 22. Harold Bloom, *Figures of Capable Imagination* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976): “Yeats, though esoteric, moves towards a broader European account (and acceptance) of death, but the American poetic story of death is less universal, and probably more of an evasion of death, an evasion that is the ultimate triumph of imaginative solipsism” (p. 90). 23. I work with the revised dates proposed by William Cullen Bryant II in “The Genesis of ‘Thanatopsis,’” *New England Quarterly* 21 (1948): 163–84. Older chronologies are based on Bryant’s admittedly vague recollections many decades after the fact; the newer chronology is based on close analysis of remaining manuscripts and letters. 24. *Ibid.*, p. 178. 25. *Ibid.*, p. 181.

#### VIOLENCE AND THE POLITICAL ORDER

1. F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1941), p. 193. 2. I run counter to a powerful figure here. V. L. Parrington criticized James as a “life-long pilgrim to other shrines than those of his native land,” and characterized him as “a self-deceived romantic” who thus doomed himself to a “pursuit of intangible realities that existed only in his imagination.” See *The Begin-*

nings of *Critical Realism*, vol. 3 of *Main Currents in American Thought* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958), pp. 239–40. 3. Henry James, *The American Scene*, ed. Leon Edel (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 463–64. 4. Kolodny, *Lay of the Land*, p. 60. 5. I attempt here to strike a new configuration of data that have been handled many times and from many differing points of view. A selection of recent titles might include the following: Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *Violence: America in the Sixties* (New York: New American Library, 1968); Alphonso Pinkney, *The American Way of Violence* (New York: Random House, 1972); Ovid Demaris, *America the Violent* (New York: Cowles, 1970); David Abrahamson, *Our Violent Society* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1970). Several collections and symposia on the subject have also appeared recently: *Violence in America: A Historical and Contemporary Reader*, ed. Thomas Rose (New York: Random House, 1969); *American Violence: A Documentary History*, ed. Richard Hofstadter and Michael Wallace (New York: Knopf, 1970); and *Violence: The Crisis of American Confidence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1971). Representative of recent American concern for violence on television is Michael J. Arlen's "The Air: Blood Marks in the Sylvan Glade," *New Yorker* (October 13, 1975), pp. 142–51. A recent study concentrating on the theme of violence in the literary mind is Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1973).

6. Roland H. Bainton, *The Travail of Religious Liberty: Nine Biographical Studies* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1951), p. 40. A hint of the line I am pursuing is in Bainton's later statement that "We are today horrified that Geneva should have burned one man for the glory of God, yet we incinerate whole cities for the saving of democracy" (p. 94). 7. The two examples are cited by Henry F. May, *Protestant Churches and Industrial America* (New York: Harper, 1949), p. 101. 8. John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1954), p. 151. 9. "A Plea for Captain John Brown" (1859), from *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, Riverside Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1893), 10: 228. Subsequent quotations from Thoreau are from this volume. C. Vann Woodward has a detailed and judicious chapter entitled "John Brown's Private War," in *The Burden of Southern History* (New York: Random House, 1961), which has stimulated my own remarks on the subject. 10. Both comments are quoted by Ralph L. Rusk, *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Scribner's, 1949), p. 402.

11. Hawthorne's confusion has been pursued to psychiatric roots by Frederick C. Crews in *The Sins of the Fathers: Hawthorne's Psychological Themes* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966). 12. Melville's poems are quoted from *Collected Poems of Herman Melville*, ed. Howard P. Vincent (Chicago: Hendricks House, 1947). 13. I have recorded my basic analysis of *Billy Budd* in the final chapter of another work, *The Mystery of Iniquity: Melville as Poet, 1857–1891* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1973). My comments here are based on this fuller reading of the story. 14. Leonard W. Levy, *Jefferson and Civil Liberties: The Darker Side* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1963), p. 71. 15. So also did Calvin's contemporary adversary, Ignatius of Loyola. For a fascinating "parallel lives" account, weighted on the side of the Catholic cause, see A. Favre-Dorsay, *Calvin et Loyola* (Paris: 1951).

16. John K. Winkler, *Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Vanguard, 1933), p. 7. 17. In his condemnation of Homer, Barlow was following an already established American tradition. Eighty years before, Cotton Mather, in his *Manuductio ad*

*Ministerium*, reluctantly allowed candidates for the ministry to read the *Iliad* because Homer "bears testimonies to many points of morality" and because he shows prayers as always being answered; but he deplored Homer's depiction of the gods as rogues and his "false model of heroic virtue," Achilles. 18. A learned eyewitness to a Garrisonian meeting found their behavior deplorable on several counts: "I myself have heard a Quakeress, Lucretia Mott, of Philadelphia, in company with Garrison, and regardless of all true female delicacy, deliver before a mixed assembly of blacks and whites, in the Baptist Church of Norristown, in 1848, a perfectly fanatical discourse against the American Constitution, and in favor of the full equalization, not only of all races, but also of both sexes." See Schaff, *America*, p. 178. 19. Herbert A. Deane, *The Political and Social Ideas of Saint Augustine* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1963), pp. 95-96.

#### THE SOUTHERN EXPERIENCE

1. Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (New York: Anchor Books, 1957), pp. 167ff. 2. George W. Cable, *The Grandissimes: A Story of Creole Life* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1957; originally published in 1880), pp. 299, 288, 156. 3. DeForest, *Miss Ravenel's Conversion*, pp. 145, 372. 4. The tone is jesting here. Closer to the center of the tradition we are describing was the remark by Gilbert Tennant, a preacher of the Great Awakening, who once called those whom he considered to be unregenerate ministers "moral Negroes." See T. Scott Miyakawa, *Protestants and Pioneers: Individualism and Conformity on the American Frontier* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 160. 5. Flannery O'Connor, *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1965), p. xxx.

6. George Shepperson, "Writings in Scottish-American History: A Brief Survey," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser. 11 (April 1954): 163. 7. The Scottish influence has been traced in detail and into many areas of American culture generally, North and South alike. Some standard studies are: Ian C.G. Graham, *Colonists from Scotland: Emigration to North America, 1707-1783* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1956); John H. Finley, *The Coming of the Scot* (New York: Scribner's, 1940); and T.J. Wertenbaker, *Early Scottish Contributions to the United States* (Glasgow: Jackson, Son, 1945). The most recent study is Andrew Hook, *Scotland and America: A Study of Cultural Relations* (Glasgow: Blackie & Son, 1975). Much has been written on the influence here of the Scottish enlightenment; see, for example, Terence Martin's *The Instructed Vision: Scottish Common Sense Philosophy and the Origin of American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1961). A complete issue of the *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser. 11 (April 1954), was devoted to Scotland and America and is a rich source for study of the connection. Many more specialized studies exist, such as the late Paschal Reeves's "Thomas Wolfe and His Scottish Heritage," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 28 (June 1964): 134-41. Also to be noted is a recent general history, Donald G. Mathews's *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1977); though he does not pursue his subject into its roots in Calvin and Knox, the book contains a wealth of interesting detail. 8. Rollin G. Osterweis, *Romanticism and Nationalism in the Old South* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1949), explores in chapter 4 the strains from Scott latent in the Southern Myth; and the chapters in *Huckleberry Finn* on the Grangerford-Shepherdson feud are a telling indictment of the resulting code. 9. Quoted in Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale

Univ. Press, 1972), p. 62. 10. The Ku Klux Klan's connection with fundamentalism, another facet of the Calvinist national religion as I explored it earlier, is asserted by J.M. Mecklin in *The Ku Klux Klan: A Study of the American Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1924), pp. 19ff.

11. Leonard Woolsey Bacon, *A History of American Christianity* (New York: Scribner's, 1930); this is vol. 13 of the American Church History Series. 12.

Leonard J. Trinterud, *The Forming of an American Tradition: A Re-examination of Colonial Presbyterianism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1949), p. 7. 13. Wilson's predecessor as president of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt, was also credited with a thoroughly Scottish ancestry in the *Scottish Historical Review* for 1904. 14. *I'll Take My Stand*, published as a Harper Torchbook (New York: Harper, 1962); quotations are from this edition. 15. De Crèvecoeur, in Letter IX

of *Letters from an American Farmer*; the myth of a leisured culture in the South has been disproved, for the earlier years at least, by Carl Bridenbaugh in *Myths and Realities: Societies of the Colonial South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1952).

16. For a study of Calvin as a Renaissance figure, the following works are especially useful: Quirinus Breen, *John Calvin: A Study in French Humanism* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1968; first published in 1931); and Basil Hall, *John Calvin: Humanist and Theologian* (London: Historical Association, 1967). 17.

Quoted from Bercovitch, *Puritan Origins*, p. 102. 18. Schaff, *America*, p. 91. The notion is prominent also in George Bancroft's *History of the United States*. 19. Bonivard's collection of books and manuscripts furnished the foundations of the library for the Academy which Calvin founded at Geneva. So they came together in the end. 20. William Van O'Connor, "Protestantism in Yoknapatawpha County," in *Southern Renaissance: The Literature of the Modern South*, ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr., and Robert D. Jacobs (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1953), p. 158 (emphasis added).

21. All quotations are from the Modern Library edition of *Light in August* (New York: Random House, 1950); the lines quoted are from pp. 221–22. I hope here to add something to a considerable body of analysis that already exists concerning the workings of Faulkner's southern Calvinism in *Light in August*. See Alwyn Berland, "Light in August: The Calvinism of Faulkner," *Modern Fiction Studies* 8 (1962): 159; Elmo Howell, "A Note on Faulkner's Presbyterian Novel," *Papers on Language and Literature* 2 (1966): 385; J. Robert Barth, "Faulkner and the Calvinist Tradition," *Religious Perspectives in Faulkner's Fiction*, ed. J. Robert Barth (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1972), p. 11; Hyatt H. Waggoner, "Light in August: Outrage and Compassion," in the same collection, p. 125; and Benjamin W. Griffith III, "Calvinism in Faulkner's *Light in August*," *Bulletin of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture and Religion* 2 (Winter 1978): 8. 22. *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia, 1957–58*, ed. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), p. 199. 23. The opening paragraph of the second chapter is relevant here: "In the morning the river and adjacent country were covered with a dense fog, through which the smoke of our fire curled up like a still subtler mist; but before we had rowed many rods, the sun arose and the fog rapidly dispersed, leaving a slight steam only to curl along the surface of the water. It was a quiet Sunday morning, with more of the auroral rosy and white than of the yellow light in it, as if it dated from earlier than the fall of man, and still preserved a heathenish integrity." 24. This passage, from *The Institutes*, 2.3.3, is a rhapsodic

development of a passage from St. Paul in Romans 3:10-18. See also *Institutes*, 1.14.5. 25. Quoted by Henry F. May in *Protestant Churches and Industrial America* (New York: Harper, 1949), p. 96.

26. The themes emerge most strongly on pp. 325, 335, 392, and 405. 27. See Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., "A Critical Period in American Religion," *Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings* 64 (1932): 528. 28. The quotations from Calvin are all from *Institutes*, 2.1.8. 29. It can also be determined, from historical sources, that he had great affection for his wife and that he was desolate at her death as well as at the death of their only child; but his *statement* has been the only useful item in building his myth. See for example Kilian McDonnell, "Calvin Without Myths," *Commonweal* 81 (1964): 163-66, an article of general interest for its attempt to identify elements of the Calvin myth and balance them by fuller historical accounts. 30. Among the works of Robert Louis Stevenson can be found a two-part essay about his fellow Scotsman, called "John Knox and His Relations to Women." Stevenson convincingly argues the likelihood that Knox intended the "First Blast" to be a revolutionary call, encouraging the violent overthrow of the two women who reigned in the kingdoms he was concerned about, England and Scotland. In the second part of the essay he presents the record of Knox the pastor maintaining a masterful but intimate relationship with a series of religiously troubled women, two of whom left husbands and children to abide in his presence in Geneva. See *Familiar Studies of Men and Books* (New York: Scribner's 1900), pp. 307-66. Stevenson remarks in the preface to this collection of magazine pieces that there are more essential similarities between Scotland and America than between Scotland and England (p. 7).

#### CALVINISM AND THE TRAGIC SENSE

1. Eugene O'Neill, *Mourning Becomes Electra: A Trilogy* (New York: Liveright, 1931), p. 69. Quotations in the text are from this edition. 2. Hesiod, *Theogony*, translated with an introduction by Norman O. Brown (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953), p. 15. 3. The quotations from Aeschylus are from the translation of *Prometheus Chain'd* by R. Potter (1777). This is the translation most frequently reprinted in the early nineteenth century, and the one which Melville purchased as he was beginning to write *Moby-Dick*. See Merton M. Sealts, Jr., *Melville's Reading: A Check-List of Books Owned and Borrowed* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1966), #147. Some of the prose rhythms of *Moby-Dick* seem to me to echo the pentameters of Potter even more strongly than those of Shakespeare to which they are usually compared. Potter translated all of Aeschylus, and in his prefaces he gives prominent notice to Salvator Rosa, Poussin, and Claude Lorrain, painters whom Melville would come to admire greatly. 4. All quotations from the play and its preface are from Ernest Bernbaum's *Anthology of Romanticism* (New York: Ronald Press, 1948), pp. 883-935, 1198-1202. 5. Two more positive connections can be made between Melville and a highly personalized use of the Prometheus myth. In December 1849, as he was beginning to write *Moby-Dick*, he purchased two books in which the figure is prominent: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus* and Goethe's *Autobiography* (Sealts, *Melville's Reading*, nos. 467 and 228).

6. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, at the beginning of Part 2 of the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*. 7. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, ed. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker (New York: Norton, 1967), pp. 125, 307. Subsequent page references are to this edition. 8. Several readers of *Moby-Dick* have briefly labeled Ahab as



Promethean. The most extensive development of the notion is Richard Chase's, in *Herman Melville: A Critical Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1949). Chase tries to identify, through the whole canon of Melville's works, figures whom he calls "true" Prometheuses and "false." The latter fall short of the ideal because of moral treachery, pride, or some impossible desire for the absolute. For him, Billy Budd is the best example of the true Prometheus and Ahab of the false. Chase's is one of the more personal and exciting readings of *Moby-Dick*, but the original Promethean narrative is not explored at any length in the instance of Ahab, nor are the reasons why the myth is distorted in Melville. G.M. Sweeney, in *Melville's Use of Classical Mythology* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, N.V., 1975), is especially interested in Melville's fascination with the Prometheus figure, and studies the ancient and Renaissance versions of the story that Melville is known to have read. His introductory chapter is a useful survey of a number of critics who have briefly speculated on the functions of the Prometheus myth in *Moby-Dick*, 9. Aristotle, *Poetics*, chapter 6. 10. See Eleanor Melville Metcalf, *Herman Melville: Cycle and Epicycle* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1953), p. 91.

11. The two quoted phrases are from *Moby-Dick*, p. 416, and Melville to Hawthorne, letter of June 1851. For the latter, see *The Letters of Herman Melville*, ed. Merrell R. Davis and William H. Gillman (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1960), p. 129. 12. T. Walter Herbert's *Moby-Dick and Calvinism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1977) appeared after this section on Melville had been written. Though our discussions and final interpretations of *Moby-Dick* are significantly different, I was happy to see my sense of Melville's calvinism confirmed by Mr. Herbert's minute researches into the rigorous Dutch Reformed calvinism espoused by Melville's family. An earlier study of Herbert's was "Calvinism and Cosmic Evil in *Moby-Dick*," *PMLA* 84 (1969): 1613–19. See also, on the same subject, Thomas Werge, "Moby-Dick and the Calvinist Tradition," *Studies in the Novel* 1 (1969): 484–506. The poet Robert Lowell once said in an interview, "I always think there are two great symbolic figures that stand behind American ambition and culture. One is Milton's Lucifer and the other is Captain Ahab: these two sublime ambitions that are doomed and ready, for their idealism, to face any amount of violence." See A. Alvarez, "A Talk with Robert Lowell," *Encounter* 24 (1965): 42. 13. A recent and authoritative reconstruction of the stages of composition of *Moby-Dick* is by James Barbour, "The Composition of *Moby-Dick*," *American Literature* 47 (1975): 343–60. The critique and amplification of Barbour's argument by Robert Milder should be noted: "The Composition of *Moby-Dick*: A Review and a Prospect," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 23 (1977): 203–16. 14. Richard H. Brodhead is the most recent student of Melville to consider "The Town-Ho's Story" as a small mirror version of *Moby-Dick* itself, inserted into the novel "for the sake of clarifying a pattern underlying that action." See *Hawthorne, Melville, and the Novel* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 140. If the chapter is paradigm for the whole novel, it is important to notice that the thematics of the chapter depend heavily on a theological determinism; the narrator climaxes a series of references to predestination when he says, near the end of the tale, "Gentlemen, a strange fatality pervades the whole career of these events, as if verily mapped out *before the world itself was charted*" (*Moby-Dick*, pp. 221–22). The phrase I have italicized indicates that the narrator is proposing a prelapsarian view (the harshest interpretation) of Predestination. 15. Letter of November 1851; see Davis and Gillman, *Letters of Herman Melville*, p. 142. 16. Lawrance Thompson, in *Melville's Quarrel with God* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1952), convincingly

glosses Ahab's statement in the way that I have indicated by brackets in the text; see p. 185. 17. John Calvin, *Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. John King (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 1: 433.

#### EPILOGUE

1. Robert Penn Warren, *Selected Poems: New and Old, 1923-1966* (New York: Random House, 1961), p. 51. 2. All quotations are from H.L. Mencken, *A Book of Prefaces* (Garden City, N.J.: Garden City, 1927), pp. 197 ff. The essay was originally published in New York by Knopf, 1917. 3. All quotations are from William Carlos Williams, *In the American Grain* (New York: New Directions, 1956), originally published by James Laughlin, 1925. The same prose tone can be found thirty years later in his introduction to Allen Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco: Citylight Books, 1956): "Hold back the edges of your gowns, Ladies, we are going through hell" (p. 8). 4. Caroline C. Leighton, *A Swiss Thoreau* (Boston, 1890), cited by W.D. McCracken, *Romance Switzerland* (Boston: Joseph Knight, 1894), p. 74. 5. Herbert Lüthy, *From Calvin to Rousseau* (New York: Basic Books, 1970), pp. 265-66. 6. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (1762), note 12 to chapter 7, "The Lawgiver." 7. George Bancroft, "A Word on Calvin the Reformer," *Literary and Historical Miscellanies* (New York: Harper, 1855), p. 406.

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