

Michael Kammen,

A People of Paradox

PROLEGOMENON

"Owl kept his head and told us that the opposite of an Introduction, my dear Pooh, was a Contradiction."

A. A. MILNE, *The World of Pooh*

IN 1790, AT THE CLOSE of the colonial period and the beginning of the so-called Federal era, Mr. Noah Webster remarked that "our national character is not yet formed." He was wrong, I think; and I am sanguine about saying so because Frederick Jackson Turner and Henry Adams (who were both wise as well as professorial) believed that the fundamental components of American nationality had in fact been recognizably fashioned by the beginning of the nineteenth century. I am less sanguine, however, about the phrase "national character" because it implies for most people some singular ethos or mystique. Catching hold of such an ethos firmly by the tail is difficult enough with smaller societies such as Samoa, Sumatra, or Liechtenstein; with a large and heterogeneous people, it is well nigh impossible.

Therefore I prefer to talk about national *style*. Perhaps I am deceiving myself, if not others, by using an euphemism; but I really do believe that there are differences between style, which can be perceived, and character, which cannot. By style I simply mean the ways we clothe ourselves in certain social roles and emotional robes, the ways we respond to problems, relate to others, and recognize the realities within ourselves; the accommodations and compromises we make. Taken alto-

gether, an accumulation of "stylistic modes" just might lead toward an ontological approach to American history—a quest for its very being, its historic drive and destiny.

It is worth a try, I think, because only in a country where it is so unclear what is American do people worry so much about the threat of things "un-American." Most of us tend to assume, in some vague or vainglorious fashion, that our civilization is unique. But most of us also become uncomfortable when challenged to defend that assumption. My own view is that all national societies are unique, in some degree or in various ways, but that the United States may *also* be unique because of the very intensity and complexity of its uniqueness. Now that must sound like a bit of gibberish, so let me illustrate what I mean. Australia, like the United States, has been a nation of immigrants; but not of such extremely diverse immigrants in their national origins. Canada, like the United States, is a democracy; but it was not inevitably democratic from the outset (New France never enjoyed representative government) and achieved democracy rather late in its development. Brazil has extensive natural resources; but they have not been so readily accessible or usable as those of the United States. China has long had a remarkable sense of self and chosen-ness, like the United States; but has been much more exclusivist in its outlook, with attendant implications.

One way to begin to locate the genesis and genetics of our vaunted "genius," or uniqueness, as a civilization might be to think about the process of cultural transmission from the Old World to the New, for that process involved both attrition and accretion. What ultimately matters, I think, is the particular juxtaposition or interaction of attrition and accretion. That's fairly abstract; let me try to be more specific again.

Suppose we select four or five social institutions—such as the city, the family, the school, indentured servitude, and the religious sect—and ask what kinds of influences shaped the particular forms those institutions would take in colonial America. We find that the European original or prototype of the institution is determinative, as well as the particular environment

encountered in North America, not to mention the impact of changes within that environment during the years of colonization and development. But even those factors are insufficient. We must also include the influx of ideas about these social institutions from changing European societies, and the altered attitudes of colonists toward traditional (and not always adaptable) institutions. Then we can consider what functions each institution performed in Europe, and ask whether those functions changed in a colonial setting (and if so, why). We can also ask which Europeans and Africans consciously sought to transplant their institutions intact, which regarded those institutions as defective (hoping to mold new ones), and which had little or no choice in the matter?

We begin, thereby, to view the pattern of institutional development in terms of what the biologist calls epigenesis—"the formation of an organic germ as a new product"—a theory that the germ is brought into existence by successive accretions and not merely developed in the process of reproduction. We can add yet another dimension of complexity, moreover, if we insist upon the importance of chronological variables. Just as heat, light, and mass are important variables to the physicist, chronological continuity is of crucial importance to the historian. The family had existed as a social institution for a very long time prior to English colonization, but Quakerism as a sect had not. Consequently, the sanctions and traditions of each would be affected differently in the wilderness.

Not surprisingly, we also find the course of institutional history flowing differently in diverse regions. In certain situations an altered consciousness caused men to change their social systems; in others, unplanned changes in their societies forced men to adjust their mind-sets; in still others, there must have been a near-coincidence of realization and rationalization. In New England, institutions were *relatively* stable and viable at the outset, but became less so with the passage of generations. In the southern and middle colonies, by contrast, institutions started out weak or nonexistent, but gradually grew in strength until, after a century, many were doing their jobs quite ade-

quately. The impact of this contrast upon historians has been to give colonial New England the reputation of regression, and other regions the appearance of ascension.

Ever since the halcyon days of the "imperial school" of American historians, half a century ago, we have been accustomed to think about the colonies as "reflections" of British culture, as extensions of the English polity and society overseas. We have been conditioned against the whiggish fallacy of regarding the early settlements as progenitors of our own time and place, as seedlings of the mighty oak of democracy. Like little George Washington "barking" that poor cherry tree, historians Charles M. Andrews and George Louis Beer took the ax to George Bancroft's providential tree of uninterrupted growth. Well, provincial America—to muddle our metaphors—may have been more nearly a reflection of British culture than a garden for optimistic transcendentalists in search of roots; but I would prefer yet a third alternative to the oft-used images of roots and reflections. My preference, albeit less elegant, is for *refraction*, meaning to break the course of something, and turn it away from its direct line of continuity; "especially to deflect at a certain angle at the point of passage from one medium into another of different density." That, to me, is surely what must have happened to British culture in North America: refraction rather than reflection.

There is yet another notion about the historic relation between Europe and America that may be in need of revision. I am thinking of the provocative assumption, first offered by Professor Hartz in 1955, that because the United States never underwent a feudal phase it could not develop viable traditions of the right (or by subsequent reaction, the left). My uneasiness with Hartz's remarkable book, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, derives not so much from his nineteenth- and twentieth-century extrapolations, but from his implicit picture of the colonies. For America did not simply spring from the head of Zeus, fully grown. Although the colonies did not undergo medieval feudalism, it does not necessarily follow that they burst forth from swaddling clothes into modernity either.

I have an uncomfortable feeling about those historians for whom American history commences in the *annus mirabilis* 1776, or 1787, or 1815. Theirs is an "immaculate conception" approach, oblivious to a century and a half of prior fertilization, germination, gestation—the metaphor is infinitely flexible, and stretches us back once again to epigenesis. My own view is that the colonial period had many medieval characteristics, both figurative and literal, and hence much to be discarded and diffused before emerging into the bright glare of modernity. It might be instructive, therefore, to compare colonial America as the origins of a major civilization, with the beginnings of, say, Medieval Europe or Renaissance Italy. Doing so is a tricky business, of course, because in the latter two cases we are concerned with temporal differentiations in history: how one society or era develops sequentially or vertically in time from another. With the colonial origins of American civilization we must deal with a spatial differentiation as well: how groups of men separate themselves horizontally from their contemporaneous cultures.

So long as we remain sensitive to these nuances of difference, it is profitable to cast spotlights upon *The Making of the Middle Ages*, by R. W. Southern, and *The Italian Renaissance in Its Historical Background*, by Denys Hay, both splendid books, in order to illuminate more fully our own center stage. What stimuli seem to have been conducive to the rise of new civilizations, and what conditions seem to accompany their emergence? I observe that western Europe in the early Middle Ages "was not at home with its past, had not identified itself with its past" yet; that it was gripped by a spirit of religious fervor; that it underwent, especially in the tenth century, a disintegration of authority and confusion concerning critical questions of legitimacy; that it was characterized by a pursuit of knowledge beyond the ancient boundaries of Latin tradition; that higher learning was nevertheless something of a luxury, monopolized by a priestly class; and that

the social arrangements of the eleventh and twelfth centuries were bedevilled by disputes about titles to

lands and dignities [and] had the capacity to cause endless exasperation and confusion. As a consequence of this, the primary function of the medieval ruler was that of organizing justice and pronouncing judgment. . . . Men acquiesced in government because, whether themselves litigious or not—and most men were—they were involved in a web of conflicting claims and counter-claims which could have no end until they had been pressed as far as money and strength would allow.¹

All of these phenomena also happen to have been central to the life of seventeenth-century America. Equally striking is the fact that Medieval Europe and the English colonies both began as covenanted societies in which most men were bound by clusters of formal obligations: oaths, covenants, bonds, and indentures. When these formal obligations began to disintegrate, or became less pervasive, new eras opened, ones more loosely structured and permissive.

Looking at the background of the Italian Renaissance, one finds still other parallels to the genesis of North American civilization: that the origins of a civilization have much to do with its own growth in self-consciousness; that the pluralism and diversity of the Italian city-states could nonetheless produce a common civilization ("a dominant diversity, modified by certain cohesive pressures"); that law played a very large and special part in the life of the communities; and that the emergence of cultural unity in Italy by the early sixteenth century brought with it a more generalized sense of commonality.²

Let my purpose not be misunderstood here, for I do not wish to be a naïve literalist. I merely mean to suggest that there may be certain structural and historical attributes common to the emergence of early modern civilizations, at least in the western tradition, and that the cosmology of the English colonists shared almost as much in common with medieval Chris-

1. R. W. Southern: *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven, 1953), 36, 68, 80-1, 92, 108, 145-6, 192-3.

2. Denys Hay: *The Italian Renaissance in Its Historical Background* (Cambridge, 1961), 26, 47, 56-7, 67-8, 173-4, 178.

tendom as it anticipated the realm of "King Andrew" the Democrat.³ Unquestionably, any comparative glance at the beginnings of Medieval Europe, Renaissance Europe, and America, however superficial, should also awaken us to profound distinctions. The *idea* of Europe, for example, emerged historically well after Medieval Europe had become a recognized reality in the political, religious, and economic realms. Whereas the idea of America, as El Dorado and Paradise, surfaced before the fact of America, prior to colonization, and thereby conditioned the form the "facts" would take, and even what people would make of them.⁴ Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, for example, preceded by more than a century the utopian schemes of Puritan Boston or Pilgrim Plymouth. There is a sense in which Americans, from the outset, could not fully control their own destiny because they had a mythology before they even had a country. Moreover, latecomers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would then have to accommodate their expectations to a reality already out of kilter with earlier assumptions.

Finally, yet another contrast occurs: sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europeans, such as Sir Thomas More, or Lope de Vega, or William Penn, might well indulge in social fantasies about the prospects of new life in the newer world. But colonials who lived the reality could not normally afford the luxury of fabulous pipe dreams. They had to cope and hope, rather than dream and scheme. Hence, perhaps, the apparent indifference of many Americans to utopian thought and social planning. He who carves out a kingdom, at considerable cost in sweat, and tears, and time, is not readily given to visions of social alternatives. The ubiquitous abundance of success may

3. See Luis Weckmann: "The Middle Ages in the Conquest of America," *Speculum*, XXVI (1951), 130-41; Charles Verlinden: *The Beginnings of Modern Colonization* (Ithaca, 1970); Samuel P. Huntington: *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, 1968), 96-9, 105.

4. Cf. Denys Hay: *Europe. The Emergence of an Idea* (Edinburgh, 1957), and Louis B. Wright: *The Dream of Prosperity in Colonial America* (New York, 1965).

well have conditioned the common air we all breathe more than the absence of feudalism. I would prefer, at any rate, to argue from positive rather than negative evidence.

I am not myself fully convinced of the "medieval character" of colonial America, and therefore perhaps not entirely convincing on this issue. It is an elusive insight, and one of limited utility. But its utility is twofold if it lays to rest once and for all the Lockean notion that "in the beginning all the world was America," or that we always have been what we are today; and if it suggests as well how very much has changed since the days of Captain John Smith and Governor John Winthrop. Consider these two versions of the same "document": one from the *Bay Psalm Book* of 1640, the first book printed in North America; the other from a region of the modern mind, a demonstration of its distemper.

The Lord to mee a shepherd is, want therefore shall
not I.
Hee in the folds of tender-grasse, doth cause mee
downe to lie
To waters calme mee gently leads. Restore my soule
doth hee:
he doth in paths of righteousness: for his names sake
leade mee.
Yea though in valley of deaths shade I walk, none ill
I'le feare:
because thou art with mee, thy rod, and staffe my
comfort are.
For mee a table thou has spread, in presence of my
foes:
thou dost annoynt my head with oyle, my cup it over-
flowes.
Goodnes & mercy surely shall all my dayes follow
mee:
and in the Lords house I shall dwell so long as dayes
shall bee.

But then

The Lord is my external, internal, integrated mechanism. I shall not be deprived of gratifications for my visceral generic hungers or my need dispositions. He

motivates me to orient myself toward a nonsocial object effectiveness significance. He positions me in a nondecisional situation. He maximizes my adjustment.

You may chuckle, and say that's a facile juxtaposition; I would suggest that it is highly symptomatic of the profundity of change between then and now. So long as our assessment of continuities and discontinuities in American history tends to concentrate upon politics and public institutions, we will overlook many of the major alterations and innovations, for there is indeed a certain underlying consistency to the ways men compete for power and distribute it. If, on the other hand, we think about the uses and abuses of human energies in America—what we create and what we destroy—our emphasis may alter. For we have shifted from being a conquest culture to being a consumer culture, from a culture of exploitation to a culture of exhibition, from a culture of self-sufficiency to a culture of self-indulgence, from a culture that would maximize its labor to one that would maximize its leisure, from provincial powerlessness to paralyzed omnipotence.

Changes in the ways we think about labor and leisure bring into view yet another major measure of difference. I don't think we will fully understand early American minds until we realize that their conception of time was different from our own. Their notions of work and war, of leisure and communication, indeed of life and love were unlike ours because they did not measure or conceive of time quite as we do. Their sense of long-range time—the ephemeral nature of this world, and eternity of the next; their millennial, or chiliastic, view of history; their urgency about preparation for salvation because death might come suddenly—and their sense of immediate time set them apart as being distinctly "pre-modern." Would there be time enough after the colonists' arrival to build shelters and gather adequate food for winter? Would an apprentice or indentured servant fulfill his allotted span of time? Perhaps.

They measured distance in units of time, not in miles; and the slowness of communications meant that the pace and pulse of their lives would be reckoned by different mechanisms than

our own. Living from sunup to sundown, and by the seasons, they budgeted time the way we budget money. Work and war were waged seasonally. Life was shorter but women gave over a longer span of their shorter lives to the production of new lives. Time moved more slowly in men's minds then because there were few clocks and no wristwatches; yet idleness was a greater sin because it denied social as well as personal responsibilities.

In short, we now shape time to the patterns of our lives. We work round the clock if necessary; the four to midnight shift if required; and not at all for prearranged blocks of time called "vacations." They knew no regular vacations, for the patterns of their lives were governed by imperatives of time more inexorable than any other aspect of their existence. In the last analysis, it seems to me, they were more relaxed than we about proximate time, but had a greater sense of urgency about ultimate time, their "allotted span." They hoped to get Somewhere slowly: *Festina lente*, "Make haste slowly," was the charming phrase in their almanacs and chit-chat.⁵ We, by contrast, seem to be going Nowhere in a hurry.

Sometimes even the suffixes we use can be revealing. Think for a moment about the suffix "ship." We associate craftsmanship, draftsmanship, marksmanship, sportsmanship, seaman-ship, and apprenticeship with an older, earlier America. We associate gamesmanship, brinkmanship, and salesmanship with our own. The older "ships," so to speak, had to do with man's skills in dealing with nature or producing a quality product. The newer "ships" have to do with fooling other people, or besting them. Have we moved from an age of dexterity to an age of asperity?

The generations of Americans that made and lived through the revolutionary era, 1750 to 1840 let us say, had the most

5. For suggestive nuggets, see Arthur H. Cole: "The Tempo of Mercantile Life in Colonial America," *Business History Review*, XXXIII (1959), 277-99; James Kirke Paulding: *The Dutchman's Fireside* (1831; New Haven, 1966), 252; Keith Thomas: "Work and Leisure in Pre-Industrial Society," *Past and Present*, XXIX (1964), 50-66.

extraordinary sense of optimism about the future of America: its productivity, liberty, modernity, innocence, and expansiveness. Jefferson's generation was exultant about the prospects for American civilization. We, by contrast, have developed serious reservations about the "goodness" of American values and our own performance; so we are skeptical about spreading them; some of our citizens would even immunize the planet against our malaise. Having become self-critical and anti-imperialistic, we look nostalgically but ambivalently to our past, at once yearning and condemning. The Founding Fathers had their eyes on the future; we have ours on the past, when not absolutely averted in shame. We tend to think less about where we are going than about where we have been, about simpler times, and about opportunities missed. Having turned our Janus-heads, we show the face of Cassandra while concealing the profile of Pollyanna. There may even be a sense in which Professor J. H. Plumb's recent essay, *The Death of the Past*, is mistitled; and that what really has died is the future.

Maybe, and maybe not. I cannot be sure, and many will disagree. But those of us who are historians, custodians of the past by definition, must try to recapture what Lionel Trilling once called "the huge, unrecorded hum of implication," because the life of the future is predicated upon the implication of the past. The historian is the memory of civilization. A civilization without memory ceases to be civilized. A civilization without history ceases to have identity. Without identity there is no purpose; without purpose civilization will wither.