

MAIN CURRENTS IN AMERICAN THOUGHT

AN INTERPRETATION OF AMERICAN LITERATURE
FROM THE BEGINNINGS TO 1920

BY
VERNON LOUIS PARRINGTON

THE COLONIAL MIND

1620-1800

BY
VERNON LOUIS PARRINGTON

Foreword by David W. Levy

VOLUME I ❖ 1620-1800
THE COLONIAL MIND

VOLUME II ❖ 1800-1860
THE ROMANTIC REVOLUTION IN AMERICA

VOLUME III ❖ 1860-1920
THE BEGINNINGS OF CRITICAL REALISM IN AMERICA



University of Oklahoma Press : Norman and London

CHAPTER II

THE TRANSPLANTING OF IDEAS

I

THE Great Migration, it will be remembered, fell in the time of the Laudean reaction, when the Presbyterian Utopia seemed remote and the hopes of the Puritan dreamers were fallen low. The Boston leaders quitted England ten years before Charles summoned the Long Parliament, and twelve before the royal standard was unfurled at Nottingham. The armed struggle for supremacy was far below the horizon, and the outlandish philosophies that later sectaries were to propagate so diligently were as yet little known in the land. The generous grain of liberal thought was still in the milk, its fruitful doctrines unripened. The immigrant gentlemen who came to Massachusetts Bay were Puritan Anglicans who professed a hearty love for the mother church and were no friends to the principle of Separatism. They were potential Presbyterians who rejected alike the Arminianism of Laud and the autocracy of the bishops. It is reasonable to suppose that as strict Calvinists, trained in the ordinances as well as in the doctrine of the French theologian, they came hither with the conscious purpose of setting up the complete Genevan discipline in the new world. If such was their plan—and certainly before their coming over they seem not to have entertained any thoughts of Separatism—it received a check from the Plymouth influence and the Puritan experiment was turned aside from the path of its natural development.

It was a somewhat curious misadventure that was to entail unforeseen consequences. Except in matters of doctrine Pilgrim and Puritan consorted ill together. Their social antecedents were as unlike as their views on political and religious institutions. The intellectual leaders of Plymouth—whatever may be said of the London adventurers who joined the Holland group—had been nurtured in Elizabethan radicalism. They were Brownist-Separatists of plebeian origins, who had arrived at their conception of

some admixture of Anabaptist influence, nearly a generation before the Stuarts came with their divine-right theory. During their years on the continent they lived remote from the current of events in England, and under the guidance of the tolerant Robinson they had been disciplined in the theory and practice of primitive Congregationalism. On their removal to America they brought with them a consciously democratic church order, that met their simple needs and had taken shape from the experience of daily life. This democratic model of church government was spontaneously supplemented by the plantation covenant of civil government drawn up aboard ship, which was to serve as the organic law of the new commonwealth. Two cardinal principles—which at bottom were one—thus found their way to New England in the *Mayflower*: the principle of a democratic church and the principle of a democratic state. When ten years later the Boston leaders were faced with the problem of erecting a social order, they accepted the Plymouth model of Congregationalism, but rejected the plantation covenant. They saw no need for the latter as they were already provided with an organic law. The charter which Winthrop was insistent upon bringing with them out of England was asserted to be the constitution of the commonwealth and, meticulously interpreted, was to determine largely the form and scope of the new political state. It was construed to grant a legal sanction to government; but as the charter of a Carolinian trading company it quite naturally restricted authority to the managing heads, and granted powers to its directors that were useful in managing trade ventures but might easily become intolerable if interpreted as the organic law of a commonwealth. With such enlargement of powers the directors of the corporation would constitute a political oligarchy. There was a striking difference, certainly, between the covenant of Plymouth and the charter-constitution of Massachusetts Bay, and a political philosopher could readily enough have foreseen the course that events would take in the Puritan commonwealth, given the men and the ideals in control.

THE PURITAN PRESBYTERIAN

II

To make clear what was involved in the attempt to adapt the Plymouth model of church government to the charter commonwealth it is necessary to consider somewhat particularly the body

of prejudice and principle brought to the new world aboard the *Lady Arbella*, as the Puritan contribution to New England. The capable leaders who created the early institutions of Massachusetts Bay colony were Jacobean Englishmen of middle station, halfway between the aristocrat and the burgher, with certain salient characteristics of both. Fashioned by a caste society, they transported to the little commonwealth an abundant heritage of class prejudice. They aspired to be reckoned gentlemen and to live in the new world as they had lived in the old, in a half feudal state, surrounded by many servants and with numerous dependents. They honored rank, were sticklers for precedence, respected class distinctions, demanded the hereditary rights of the gentry. They had been bred up in a static order where gentlemen ruled and the people obeyed, and they could not think in terms of the Plymouth plantation covenant, subscribed by all heads of families. To the modern reader of his journal there is something almost childish in Winthrop's insistence on public deference to his official position and his grief when the halberd-bearers refused to provide the usual formality to his little progresses. But if they aspired to be rated as gentlemen, there was much also of the burgher nature in them. They were potential capitalists, eager to accumulate ample landholdings, keen to drive a bargain, given to trade and with as sharp an eye to the main chance as any London merchant. The community of goods that marked the early days of Plymouth they disliked so greatly as to account it almost sinful. In the infancy of the settlement they entered upon an active mercantile life, building their ships for the West Indian trade, joining in the fisheries off the Newfoundland coast, venturing far in pursuit of gain. Active, capable men, excellent administrators rather than speculative thinkers, stewards of the public interests as well as their own, they would take it ill to have their matured plans interfered with by busybodies and incompetents. Their own counsel sufficed them and they wanted no help from outsiders.

Endow such men with religious zeal; let them regard themselves as particular repositories of righteousness; give them a free hand to work out their program unhampered by rival policies; provide them with a handbook elaborated in complete detail by a master system-maker; and the result was certain. Their Utopia must be a close-knit church-state, with authority reserved to the aristocracy of Christian talent. It is needless to inquire whether

a definite conception of a theocracy was in their minds before their coming over; some such order was clearly implicit in their religious fervor, their Hebraic theology, their Geneva discipline, their aristocratic prejudices. They might nominally accept the Plymouth model of church-government, but they would meddle with democracy in church and state no more than necessity compelled. Circumstances, as well as their own promptings, would counsel quite an opposite course. They were engaged in a difficult and perilous undertaking, begirt by wilderness enemies, and fearful of hostile interference by the home authorities. If the venture were to survive, a drift towards centralization of power was as natural as it was inevitable. The common security would not suffer any dispersion of forces or domestic bickerings over authority. Dissatisfied members must be held in subjection and dangerous swarmings from the mother-hive must be prevented. The principle of Separatism was too disruptive to insure cohesive solidarity; the parts must be welded into a protective whole; and for such business what ideal was more efficient than a theocracy with Jehovah substituted for King Charles—not openly and seditiously, but quietly, in the hearts of the people. The historian need not wander far in search of the origin of the theocratic principle; it is to be found in the self-interest of the lay and clerical leaders. Ambitious men could not have devised a fitter means to weld together the two groups of magistrates and ministers, and endow their charter prerogatives with divine sanction. The Stuarts were bunglers at the business in comparison with Winthrop and Cotton. But if they worked the metal to such shape as they chose we must not forget that it had been well heated in the smithy of John Calvin. Overlook that fact and the theocracy becomes incredible.

There are perhaps sufficient grounds to assume that some plan of minority control was worked out before the migration took place. The preliminary discussions in England had been long and the terms of the charter were carefully seen to. By its provisions the right of franchise rested with the freemen of the corporation, in number about a hundred and ten. Of the total body of freemen it was known that only a small group would undertake the venture; probably fewer than a score came over with the emigrants, and through removals and death the number was speedily reduced to about a dozen. This handful of freemen constituted the court, and chose the governor, deputy governor and the assistants or

magistrates. These latter were to number eighteen according to the charter provision; but with more offices than eligible candidates, the number was necessarily reduced, and six assistants with the governor came to be reckoned a quorum of the court with sovereign powers.¹ It was a patriarchal undertaking, and to Carolinian gentlemen there was nothing unusual or unjust in a handful of leaders exercising plenary powers over the lives and fortunes of two thousand members of the commonwealth. If the charter could not have been construed as granting such powers, it is reasonable to assume that they would not have entered upon the business. The lay leaders were practical men. They had ventured their estates in the hope of bettering their condition, both spiritual and material, and with their personal fortunes at stake they were in no mind to intrust the fate of the undertaking to other hands than their own. They loved power quite as much as did the ungodly, and accounting themselves God's stewards they reckoned it sin not to use it in his name. As Puritans they would not keep a weather eye on the majority will. God did not speak in the Scriptures through majority votes; his chosen were a minority, the remnant in Israel.

A further sanction was at hand. If these Hebraized Englishmen created a close corporation and ruled magistrally, if the order in the new church-state was inquisitorial and stern, it was in strict conformity with the teachings and example of Calvin. Men deeply read in the *Institutes*, familiar with the Genevan Ordinances and the practices of the Consistory, were not likely to discover in them any lessons in democratic toleration. Righteousness may be fearfully relentless, and John Calvin had been a tyrant on principle. Iron-willed and masterful, he had risen to power in the turbulent city-state of Geneva in sixteenth-century fashion. A few splashes of blood on the white garments of the Church did not greatly trouble him. He was never squeamish about ways and means of furthering the Lord's work. He violated the right of refuge to bring to the stake the pantheistic Unitarian Servetus, and he thanked God when the bungling of the executioner prolonged the sufferings of certain others of his victims. The Genevan discipline was rigorous, and the clerical inquisitors were more relentless than the lay. The tyrannies that have been freely charged upon the New England oligarchy are easily explained in the light of the

¹ See James Tinslow Adams, *The Founding of New England*, Chapter VI.

Calvinistic Ordinances. There were no whippings or banishments or hangings in early Pennsylvania where Quaker and Lutheran dwelt together in peace if not in fellowship. But they were New Testament men and not out of the Old, like the Saints in Massachusetts Bay. They worshiped a God of love rather than a God of wrath.

Granted the conception on which the theocratic experiment went forward, namely, that Jehovah was the sole lawgiver and the Bible the sufficient statute-book; granted also that these priests and magistrates were stewards of God's will; and the centralization of power in the commonwealth becomes invested with a higher sanction than the terms of the charter. It was an oligarchy of Christian grace. The minister was the trained and consecrated interpreter of the divine law, and the magistrate was its trained and consecrated administrator; and both were chosen by free election of the Saints. If unfortunately the Saints were few and the sinners many, was not that a special reason for safeguarding the Ark of the Covenant from the touch of profane hands? Hence all legislative experiments by annually elected deputies, no matter how exactly those experiments might fall in with the wishes of the majority, were sternly frowned upon or skillfully nullified. Not only were such popular enactments, it was held, too often prompted by the carnal desires of the natural man, but they were no better than an insult to God, as implying the insufficiency of the Scriptures to every temporal need. Unregenerate and sinful men must have no share in God's work. The Saints must not have their hands tied by majority votes. This explains, quite as much as mere love of power, the persistent hostility of the leaders to every democratic tendency. Such institutions as grew up spontaneously out of the necessities of the situation, were sharply hedged about by restrictions. The town meeting, which was extra-legal under the charter, was safeguarded by limiting the right of voting to freemen, except in a few trivial matters; and the more popular deputies, who inclined to become self-willed, were forced to accept the principle of magisterial veto on their actions. When a law was passed, it was purposely left vague as to penalties, in order to give a free hand to the judges to punish as they wished; and it was not till 1641, after much insistence from the representatives of the people, that Ward's Body of Liberties was finally adopted.

Later critics of Puritanism discover in the theocratic experiment of Massachusetts Bay a preposterous attempt to turn back the pages of history, and refashion Englishmen after an ungainly Hebraic pattern. But to the leaders of that experiment it seemed rather a Utopian venture to create in the new world a nobler social order than elsewhere existed. Whether such a society was either possible or desirable, has long since become only an academic question; what is more suggestive is the fact that in spite of some bitterness on the part of a small minority, the stewardship of an oligarchy remained the accepted principle of government in Massachusetts Bay until the vacating of the charter in 1684. That it lingered out so long a life is a testimony to the skillful opportunism of the leaders. They early adopted a strategic policy which the British ministry foolishly refused to adopt a hundred years later; they cautiously undermined any potential disaffection by admitting the wealthiest and most influential to the rights of freemen, thus allying the ambitious and capable members of society with the ruling group, and laying the foundations of a provincial aristocracy, which in the course of time would secularize the government and substitute an economic for a theocratic basis of authority. The loss of the charter only hastened what in the nature of things must have come about eventually.

III

CERTAIN MISTAKES

Skillful as were the theocratic rulers and logical as was their course, it seems plain in the light of later developments that they fell into certain grave mistakes at the very beginning of their work that were to hamper them seriously in after days. Those mistakes were the adoption of the covenant-principle of church organization borrowed from Plymouth, that started the new churches on the road to Congregationalism, and the granting of the land in fee-simple to non-freemen, that was to create an independent yeomanry. Of the two the second was far graver, for it threw the economics of the developing commonwealth on the side of local home rule and provided a substantial foundation for the erection of a democratic opposition to the oligarchy. If the plantation system of Virginia, or the Patroon system of New

have followed the path of Genevan Presbyterianism in harmony with the desires of the leaders, and the democratic opposition both in church and state must have been starved into submission. But with the system of small holdings and the development of a vigorous yeomanry, the eventual development of Congregationalism into a federated group of self-governing churches was predetermined more rigidly than by any logic of John Calvin. The defeat of the Presbyterian program of the theocrats was implicit in a decentralized land system.

The decision of the Salem church in 1629 to adopt the Plymouth model, and the acceptance of that decision by later churches in Massachusetts Bay, has been abundantly commented upon, but the significance of it has been somewhat inadequately explored.² Very likely it was a deep hatred of episcopal rule that opened the mind of Endicott and his fellows to the reasoning of Dr. Fuller of Plymouth, and persuaded them to take this first step towards Separatism; nevertheless as disciples of Calvin, desirous of establishing a Bible commonwealth, they must soon discover that a system centrifugal in tendency and decentralizing in spirit, unless closely restrained, was certain to lead them far from the Canaan of their hopes. Separatism was the negation of a state church, and the rule of the congregation was the negation of an official creed and ecclesiastical unity. If Congregationalism were suffered to develop its democratic potentialities, the leaders must eventually find themselves in like position with Laud, with schismatics disturbing the orthodox harmony and rending the church from within. The authorities early began to feel, what the Anglican Lechford pointed out in 1641, that the system was dangerously democratic, and the principle of centralizing conformity was set to work. The spirit of Calvin's Consistory was invoked. Under the guise of brotherly counsel, or church fellowship, the principle of consociation was developed, a principle that opened a convenient door to official coercion. Brotherly counsel that comes armed with the weapon of excommunication, that points its argument with the threat of banishment or hanging, is certainly not the pure spirit of Christian fellowship that Congregational historians have chosen to see in the principle of consociation. The most ardent apologist has hard work in discovering the democratic

² See Williston Walker, *A History of the Congregational Churches in the United States*, *Princeton, N.J.*