

# The Passing of Anglo-America

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The process of malting colonies out of other peoples' land involves, among other things, a certain amount of mythology, creation mythology, to overcome the moral revulsion of seizing property and deracinating an indigenous population. An ennobling aim is necessary, and the form such moves take is usually the vision that a higher culture, a superior seed of human understanding, is being passed to an uncultured other. The notion lies close to rape, but one may find numerous parables about the divine rape of mortals in Homer and Ovid in which the offspring becomes the leader of his people. Aeneas, founder of Rome, was the result of Aphrodite's seduction of the mortal, Anchises. At any rate, this mythologizing of land seizure is the psychology of imperialism. Its western origins can be traced back to Virgil's Aeneid, which supplied Europe with a founding legend on which to base its own expansion into the Americas.

A flurry of new translations of the Aeneid from Venetian printing houses in the sixteenth century made this epic a best seller at the height of European expansion into the New World. The work not only ascribed an ennobling genealogy to the European states that were once colonies of Rome, but provided the justification of "natural Law" for overthrowing indigenous societies and claiming their territories. Virgil's description of a people primed for colonization goes thus:

These groves belonged to native Fauns and Nymphs  
And men from tree trunks born, from hardy oak,  
Who had no code of custom and no culture,  
And knew not how to yoke the ox, collect  
Or store the yield, but fed on branches' fruits  
And victuals of toilsome hunting.

Richard Waswo has traced the importance of the Aeneid to sixteenth century Europe in a recent article, where he notes that "Virgil's story had been retold often enough ... to make it possible to elaborate the Trojan origin of every European people." He goes on to say that the "presumed history of Trojan descent did not merely 'account for' the arts and sciences of Western civilization by deriving them from a single, long-destroyed source. It also defined what constitutes civilization itself (settled agriculture and cities: tilling the earth, building walls and towers on it) as opposed to its opposite, savagery (dispersed nomadism: hunting and gathering in forests)." Aborigines were the culture-less, and Virgil's portrayal of the savages of pre-imperial Rome provided the necessary fiction "that enabled both ancient and modern colonialism to proceed in fact as the transmission of empire and learning (*translatio imperii et studii*), of domination and tutelage, that came largely to constitute the modern history of the world."<sup>1</sup>

But the "missionary impulse" of empire came well after initial probes by entrepreneurs and investment companies, who risked capital setting up small ventures in unknown territory. To assure protection for their investments and to fend off rivals from other empires, according to D. K. Fieldhouse, these venture capitalists turned to their home governments for protection: "Governments, for their part, encouraged exploration and settlement, but could do little more for lack of money. Their turn came when the colonies had been established; for, by asserting that subjects could not throw off allegiance and that all land occupied by them belonged to the Crown, they eventually made dependencies out of what might have become independent republics."<sup>2</sup>

The imperial psychology developed slowly as colonies came under the protection of European states. But something even more crucial must be added to the development of colonial and imperial thinking of the era, the fact that colonials themselves wanted to preserve a connection to the home country to distinguish themselves from native life. Hence the growing dissension between colonial Patriots and so-called Loyalists in

1 Richard Waswo, "The Formation of Natural Law to Justify Colonialism, 1539-1689," *New Literary History* 27 (Autumn 1996), pp. 743-59.

2 D. K. Fieldhouse, *The Colonial Empires: A Comparative Survey from the Eighteenth Century*, 2nd ed. (London: The Macmillan Press, 1982), p. 85.

the years preceding the War of Independence, and the forging of an Anglo-American identity soon after. The hyphenation of colonial identity runs all through the European imperial network after 1815, when colonialism shifted from the Americas to Africa and Asia. A dual identity as Franco-African or as Anglo-Indian preserved a privileged relation to the home country.

The forming of Anglo-American identity after independence implies that the Trojan-descent narrative was already active as a myth of American origins. John Higham has made a study of the persistence of Anglo-American identity in his book, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860-1925*, where he observes of 1890s "nativist" sentiment: "Now, as then, the race-thinkers were men who rejoiced in their colonial ancestry, who looked to England for standards of deportment and taste, who held the great academic posts or belonged to the best clubs or adorned the higher Protestant clergy."<sup>3</sup> The task of literature and the other arts was to flesh out this bond with the parent culture through derivative styles and forms of expression in which England is palpably present. American landscape painting of the nineteenth century is not so much about the White Mountains and the Berkshires as it is about subliminal recollections of English meadows and hills, English rivers. The New York we think we see in the Metropolitan Museum's collection of the Picturesque School is only tentatively native; in truth, the paintings are palimpsests, translucent sketches of America painted over England.

Freedom was an English virtue imported to Americans through blood and the continuity of culture, through transmission of the good racial seed to the new offspring. And this underlying mythical unity survived war and separation, and would continue well down through the twentieth century as a national myth. Literature was the medium through which the myth of race and origins was fleshed, filled out with heroes, supplied with parables, and disseminated. Poetry carried the message first, but sermons and political tracts did their work shaping Anglo-American identity for eighteenth and nineteenth century minds. In bringing the

<sup>3</sup> John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860-1925* (New York: Atheneum, 1955), p. 139. Edition reprinted with preface from Rutgers University Press, 1963.

novel to maturity in America late in the nineteenth century, Henry James saw his role in much these terms when he noted in a letter,

I can't look at the English-American world, or feel about them, any more, save as a big Anglo-Saxon total, destined to such an amount of melting together that an insistence on their differences becomes more and more idle and pedantic. I have not the least hesitation in saying that I aspire to write in such a way that it would be impossible to an outsider to say whether I am ... an American writing about England or an Englishman writing about America.<sup>4</sup>

The history of American literature may be seen as an allegory of the relation between England and America, in whose connection lies the descent from the Greek gods, who had raped or seduced various mortals to create the Trojan royal family, to the dissemination of the royal seed into Europe and from thence to the New World. America's nobility as a new culture rested upon this tenuous link back to ancient mythology. And from it arose all those heroes expressing a refined individuality and courage based upon the powers of a divine germ in the racial heritage. The American hero was an armature of native roughness containing a kernel of sacred DNA. But in asserting this claim to royal seed, American writers and artists were writing a racial history in which anyone not Anglo-American was excluded from legitimacy. The originating impulse to link the two cultures laid the groundwork for a history of racial, religious, and sexual exclusions from power.

"The hero," Karl Weintraub writes in *The Value of the Individual*, "is the supreme accomplishment of a style of life and the ideal of personality held in common." The epic process he traces requires a series of obstacles and impediments to be overcome to achieve heroic stature, which also involves separating oneself from the group in order to draw on self-initiative. "The stimulant for self-accounting lies in the telling of great deeds and accomplishments. From it results *gestae*, perhaps memoirs, but hardly autobiographic self-reflection of the more contemplative inward kind."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in H.D. Allen, *Great Britain and the United States: A History of Anglo-American Relations (1783-1952)* (Long Acre, London: Odhams Press, 1954), "Introduction," p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Joachim Weintraub, *The Value of the Individual: Self and Circumstance in Autobiography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 5-6.

The frontier was a neatly packaged set of obstacles by which to "prove" the American hero. Whether or not North America was in fact a hostile wilderness beset with enemies and beasts, the mythological mind needed to imagine it as such, and portrayed the New World in such terms out of necessity. The Indian was conceived as an enemy, even goaded into the role, to complete the drama of a racial theater. An unregenerate world made heroes out of ordinary settlers, and writers were quick to turn settlement experience into mythical texts. A preoccupation with heroes and heroic plots has long been the thrust of much popular culture, from comic books to the movies.

But before turning to the story of an American counter mythology, for that is what it seems to be – the establishment of opposing myths rather than a destruction of myth itself – I want to say something briefly about the allegorical discord that began to manifest itself in literature as early as the 1840s. While Emerson in no sense departs from Wordsworth, Schiller, or Rousseau in defining nature as spiritual knowledge, or as the beginnings of the unconscious, his essay *Nature* challenges the originating myth of a heroic defeat of alien wilderness. If the body of America is nurture to the human soul, the hero's conflict has no meaning. The American renaissance constructed a second allegory in American literature in which the self is mothered into being through the spirit of nature. The divine seed is not outside the land but within it, accessible by those who enter to contemplate its forces and harmony. This equalizes the virtue of those who come to it, and in a very subtle way erodes the claims of Anglo-American lordship. Frank Lloyd Wright, an ardent Emersonian, designed dwellings to express just this nurturing relation between environment and human life.

The growing urban landscape of the nineteenth century transcribed these opposing modes of relation onto its buildings and town plans, where mansions and skyscrapers narrated the Anglo-American myth and the green belt, the garden city, the terraced house spoke of symbiosis and Emersonian idealism. Even architecture and town planning would play out a polarity of myths which had already begun to divide literature and the fine arts.

When Whitman applied Emerson's religion to poetry, a new poem emerged in which self is the product of nature, not its overseer. The hero of "Song of Myself" becomes multiple and extensive, dissolved into

otherness through the adhesive, amatory principles he celebrates. The land absorbs him and through loss of center his consciousness becomes inclusive, coextensive with nature.

Twentieth century literary tradition broke apart as the allegory of self developed into opposing myths. One stream conveyed the fable of the sovereign self, of which Eliot is the main progenitor and influence, the other conveyed the self as messenger of nature, the tradition of Whitman, Pound, and Gertrude Stein. The restoration of native cultures at the breaking of the colonial world stimulated the Civil Rights and feminist movements of the next two decades. Led by Charles Olson, certain poets returned to Pound's poetics as a source of relational ideology and coined the term postmodernism. Their purpose was threefold: to expose the myth of heroic selfhood as racism, to open form through indeterminate arguments, and to shift attention from self to relations. The movement was vague, speculative, and proliferated a host of more or less small, ephemeral cliques that included women, gay and lesbian writers, African-American, and other ethnic groups, as each gave voice to an excluded constituency. Eventually certain dominant styles and themes were sifted out of the ferment, and it was inevitable that some of the writers would converge to form an internationalist, post-colonial movement calling itself ethnopoetics. Their celebration of collectivism recalls the eighteenth century communal ethos Barry Alain Shain uncovers in *The Myth of Individualism*.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, a group of Anglo-American formalists, with a grounding in the doctrines of New Criticism and Eliot's enduring influence in the textbooks, pursued an unusual path in the psychopathology of selfhood known as Confessionalism. Paradoxically, formal closure and verse orthodoxy were no longer a literary code for the pre-eminent self, but became symbols of alienation, as Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath and others narrated the disintegration of the Anglo-American myth. Vast learning and sophistication were brought to bear on the decline and eventual suicide of personae representing the last generation of old-style transatlantic consciousness.

What followed in the national culture was something like a deluge of

<sup>6</sup> Barry Alain Shain, *The Myth of Individualism: The Protestant Origins of American Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

counter-mythologies revamping, developing, nurturing the identities of newly liberated minorities, racial and religious, and an overwhelming tide of arguments against white male hegemony coming from the Civil Rights movement, feminism, anti-war protesters, and the Chicano renaissance. The defeat in Vietnam set in motion a feminist critique of male authority that coincided with the theoretical revolution.

The rage to identify and uproot the buried network of ideas associated with the privileging of a specific race and gender spread into academic disciplines. The text became a particular focus of scrutiny, where usage and grammar were shown to favor masculine individuality, and where themes and narrative structures "heroized" male selfhood and depicted others as passive, undifferentiated, or marginal. Deconstruction became the tool for attacking tenuous logical assumptions on which such texts depended for their legitimacy. English departments were now viewed as bastions of a male literature disseminated by male professors.

For good or ill, Shakespeare is a focus of the debate over Anglo-American mythology, and dislodging him in the name of pluralism and gender equality has behind it a powerful lobby of curriculum reformers. Already, the turn to broader contexts of cultural life is underway in programs engineered by American Studies departments, popular culture curricula, and even in what some critics are calling "artificial mythologies," the stuff of television, film, and the Internet.<sup>7</sup> The movement away from literature as a source of cultural information is one result of a national fever to identify and uproot a systemic racial mythology seemingly concentrated and intensified in belles lettres.

The theoretical revolution did its work by calling into question underlying racial assumptions of grammar, usage, syntax, and rhetoric, and by showing how a network of hidden racial biases controlled reader response. The archival phase of organizing the suppressed or unacknowledged literature of women, and of racial and ethnic minority writing, is nearing its end. We are approaching the time when groups will have reconstructed their own mythologies, thus shifting the Anglo-American myth from its central role to being one among many arguments of American identity.

The result will be a fluid hierarchy of social niches in which the

<sup>7</sup> Craig J. Harper, *Artificial Mythologies: A Guide to Cultural Invention* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

plurality will redistribute itself, creating new social relations that will resemble the indeterminate structures of postmodern writing, whose forms were already self-consciously political. On the one hand, groups will have reinvented their heritage and identity and found their legitimacy in America in the absence of a larger, disenfranchising myth. On the other, an underlying relativity of cultural origins and folkways tends to weaken the bonds of group cohesion and to atomize society. Political correctness has become the new social protocol for sublimating race and gender conflicts.

But social realignment occurs in an era of increasing corporate power, with the active participation of government in shaping a new image of America as a dealer in goods and services to a global market. There is a distinct commercial advantage in dropping the image of America as a single racial monotype and promoting a racially diverse national persona to sell its goods to the world. The origins of America are inscribed in the first myth, whose hero is the Protestant English pioneer; the global community has now called for a second American who combines the races and stands for a future of fluid borderless dimensions.