

A Brief History of American Literature

Richard Gray

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

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Preface and Acknowledgments

In this history of American literature, I have tried to be responsive to the immense changes that have occurred over the past thirty years in the study of American literature. In particular, I have tried to register the plurality of American culture and American writing: the continued inventing of communities, and the sustained imagining of nations, that constitute the literary history of the United States. My aim here has been to provide the reader with a reasonably concise but also coherent narrative that concentrates on significant and symptomatic writers while also registering the range and variety of American writing. My focus has necessarily been on major authors and the particular texts that are generally considered to be their most important or representative work. I have also, however, looked at less central or canonical writers whose work demands the attention of anyone wanting to understand the full scope of American literature: work that illustrates important literary or cultural trends or helps to measure the multicultural character of American writing. In sum, my aim has been to offer as succinct an account as possible of the major achievements in American literature and of American difference: what it is that distinguishes the American literary tradition and also what it is that makes it extraordinarily, fruitfully diverse.

I have accumulated many debts in the course of working on this book. In particular, I would like to thank friends at the British Academy, including Andrew Hook, Jon Stallworthy, and Wynn Thomas; colleagues and friends at other universities, among them Kasia Boddy, Susan Castillo, Henry Claridge, Richard Ellis, the late Kate Fullbrook, Mick Gidley, Sharon Monteith, Judie Newman, Helen Taylor, and Nahem Yousaf; and colleagues and friends in other parts of Europe and in Asia and the United States, especially Saki Bercovitch, Bob Brinkmeyer, the late George Dekker, Jan Nordby Gretlund, Lothar Honnighausen, Bob Lee, Marjorie Perloff, and Waldemar Zacharasiewicz. Among my colleagues in the Department of Literature, I owe a special debt of thanks to Herbie Butterfield and Owen Robinson; I also owe special thanks to my many doctoral students who, over the years, have been gainfully employed in trying to keep my brain functioning. Sincere thanks are also due to Emma Bennett, the very best of editors, at Blackwell for steering this book to completion, to Theo Savvas for helping so much and so efficiently with the research and preparation, to Nick Hartley for his informed and invaluable advice on illustrations, and to Jack Messenger for being such an excellent copyeditor. On a more personal note, I would like to thank my older daughter, Catharine, for her quick wit, warmth, intelligence, and understanding, and for providing me with the very best of son-in-laws, Ricky Baldwin, and two perfect grandsons, Izzy and Sam; my older son, Ben, for his thoughtfulness, courage,

commitment, and good company; my younger daughter, Jessica, for her lively intelligence, grace, and kindness, as well as her refusal to take anything I say on trust; and my younger son, Jack, who, being without language, constantly reminds me that there are other, deeper ways of communicating. Finally, as always, I owe the deepest debt of all to my wife, Sheona, for her patience, her good humor, her clarity and tenderness of spirit, and for her love and support, for always being there when I need her. Without her, this book would never have been completed: which is why, quite naturally, it is dedicated to her.

I

The First Americans

American Literature During the Colonial and Revolutionary Periods

Imagining Eden

“America is a poem in our eyes: its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres.” The words are those of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and they sum up that desire to turn the New World into words which has seized the imagination of so many Americans. But “America” was only one of the several names for a dream dreamed in the first instance by Europeans. “He invented America: a very great man,” one character observes of Christopher Columbus in a Henry James novel; and so, in a sense, he did. Columbus, however, was following a prototype devised long before him and surviving long after him, the idea of a new land outside and beyond history: “a Virgin COUNTRY,” to quote one early, English settler, “so preserved by Nature out of a desire to show mankind fallen into the Old Age of Creation, what a brow of fertility and beauty she was adorned with when the world was vigorous and youthfull.” For a while, this imaginary America obliterated the history of those who had lived American lives long before the Europeans came. And, as Emerson’s invocation of “America . . . a poem” discloses, it also erased much sense of American literature as anything other than the writing into existence of a New Eden.

Writing of the Colonial and Revolutionary Periods

Puritan narratives

There were, of course, those who dissented from this vision of a providential plan, stretching back to Eden and forward to its recovery in America. They included those Native Americans for whom the arrival of the white man was an announcement of the apocalypse. As one of them, an Iriquois chief called Handsome Lake, put it at the end of the eighteenth century, “white men came swarming into the country bringing with them cards, money, fiddles, whiskey, and blood corruption.” They included those countless, uncounted African Americans brought over to America against their will, starting with the importation aboard a Dutch vessel of “Twenty Negars” into

Jamestown, Virginia in 1619. They even included some European settlers, those for whom life in America was not the tale of useful toil rewarded that John Smith so enthusiastically told. And this was especially the case with settlers of very limited means, like those who went over as indentured servants, promising their labor in America as payment for their passage there. Dominant that vision was, though, and in its English forms, along with the writings of John Smith (1580–1631), it was given most powerful expression in the work of William Bradford (1590–1657) and John Winthrop (1588–1649). Bradford was one of the Puritan Separatists who set sail from Leyden in 1620 and disembarked at Plymouth. He became governor in 1621 and remained in that position until his death in 1657. In 1630 he wrote the first book of his history, *Of Plymouth Plantation*; working on it sporadically, he brought his account of the colony up to 1646, but he never managed to finish it. Nevertheless, it remains a monumental achievement. At the very beginning of *Of Plymouth Plantation*, Bradford announces that he will write in the Puritan “plain style, with singular regard to the simple truth in all things,” as far as his “slender judgement” will permit. This assures a tone of humility, and a narrative that cleaves to concrete images and facts. But it still allows Bradford to unravel the providential plan that he, like other Puritans, saw at work in history. The book is not just a plain, unvarnished chronicle of events in the colony year by year. It is an attempt to decipher the meaning of those events, God’s design for his “saints,” that exclusive, elect group of believers destined for eternal salvation. The “special work of God’s providence,” as Bradford calls it, is a subject of constant analysis and meditation in *Of Plymouth Plantation*. Bradford’s account of the arrival of the Pilgrim Fathers in the New World is notable, for instance, for the emphasis he puts on the perils of the “wilderness.” “For the season was winter,” he points out, “and they that know the winters of that country know them to be sharp and violent.” The survival of the Puritans during and after the long voyage to the New World is seen as part of the divine plan. For Bradford, America was no blessed garden originally, but the civilizing mission of himself and his colony was to make it one: to turn it into evidence of their election and God’s infinite power and benevolence.

This inclination or need to see history in providential terms sets up interesting tensions and has powerful consequences, in Bradford’s book and similar Puritan narratives. *Of Plymouth Plantation* includes, as it must, many tales of human error and wickedness, and Bradford often has immense difficulty in explaining just how they form part of God’s design. He can, of course, and does fall back on the primal fact of original sin. He can see natural disasters issuing from “the mighty hand of the Lord” as a sign of His displeasure and a test for His people; it is notable that the Godly weather storms and sickness far better than the Godless do in this book, not least because, as Bradford tells it, the Godly have a sense of community and faith in the ultimate benevolence of things to sustain them. Nevertheless, Bradford is hard put to it to explain to himself and the reader why “sundry notorious sins” break out so often in the colony. Is it that “the Devil may carry a greater spite against the churches of Christ and the Gospel here . . .?” Bradford wonders. Perhaps, he suggests, it is simply that “here . . . is not more evils in this kind” but just clearer perception of them; “they are here more discovered and seen and made public by due search, inquisition and due punishment.” Bradford admits himself perplexed. And the fact that he does so adds dramatic tension to the narrative. Like so many great American stories, *Of Plymouth Plantation* is a search

FIGURE NOT AVAILABLE IN ELECTRONIC VERSION

for meaning. It has a narrator looking for what might lie behind the mask of the material event: groping, in the narrative present, for the possible significance of what happened in the past.

Which suggests another pivotal aspect of Bradford's book and so much Puritan narrative. According to the Puritan idea of providence at work in history, every material event does have meaning; and it is up to the recorder of that event to find out what it is. At times, that may be difficult. At others, it is easy. Bradford has no problem, for example, in explaining the slaughter of four hundred of the Pecquot tribe, and the burning of their village, by the English. The battle is seen as one in a long line waged by God's chosen people, part of the providential plan; and Bradford regards it as entirely appropriate that, once it is over, the victors should give "the praise thereof to God, who had wrought so wonderfully for them." Whether difficult or not, however, this habit of interpreting events with the help of a providential vocabulary was to have a profound impact on American writing – just as, for that matter, the moralizing tendency and the preference for fact rather than fiction, "God's truth" over "men's lies," also were.

Of Plymouth Plantation might emphasize the sometimes mysterious workings of providence. That, however, does not lead it to an optimistic, millennial vision of the future. On the contrary, as the narrative proceeds, it grows ever more elegiac. Bradford notes the passing of what he calls "the Common Course and Condition." As the material progress of the colony languishes, he records, "the Governor" – that is, Bradford himself – "gave way that they should set corn every man for his own particular"; every family is allowed "a parcel of land, according to the proportion of

their number.” The communal nature of the project is correspondingly diluted. The communitarian spirit of the first generation of immigrants, those like Bradford himself whom he calls “Pilgrims,” slowly vanishes. The next generation moves off in search of better land and further prosperity; “and thus,” Bradford laments, “was this poor church left, like an ancient mother grown old and forsaken of her children.” The passing of the first generation and the passage of the second generation to other places and greater wealth inspires Bradford to that sense of elegy that was to become characteristic of narratives dramatizing the pursuit of dreams in America. It also pushes *Of Plymouth Plantation* towards a revelation of the central paradox in the literature of immigration – to be revealed again and again in American books – that material success leads somehow to spiritual failure.

Ten years after Bradford and his fellow Pilgrims landed at Plymouth, John Winthrop left for New England with nearly four hundred other Congregationalist Puritans. The Massachusetts Bay Company had been granted the right by charter to settle there and, prior to sailing, Winthrop had been elected Governor of the Colony, a post he was to hold for twelve of the nineteen remaining years of his life. As early as 1622, Winthrop had called England “this sinfull land”; and, playing variations on the by now common themes of poverty and unemployment, declared that “this Land grows weary of her Inhabitants.” Now, in 1630, aboard the *Arbella* bound for the New World, Winthrop took the opportunity to preach a lay sermon, *A Modell of Christian Charity*, about the good society he and his fellow voyagers were about to build. As Winthrop saw it, they had an enormous responsibility. They had entered into a contract with God of the same kind He had once had with the Israelites, according to which He would protect them if they followed His word. Not only the eyes of God but “the eyes of all people are upon us,” Winthrop declared. They were a special few, chosen for an errand into the wilderness. That made their responsibility all the greater; the divine punishment was inevitably worse for the chosen people than for the unbelievers.

Written as a series of questions, answers, and objections that reflect Winthrop’s legal training, *A Modell of Christian Charity* is, in effect, a plea for a community in which “the care of the public must oversway all private respects.” It is fired with a sense of mission and visionary example. “Wee shall finde that the God of Israell is among us, when tenn of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies,” Winthrop explained; “wee must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill.” To achieve this divinely sanctioned utopia, he pointed out to all those aboard the *Arbella*, “wee must delight in each other, make others Condicions our owne . . . allwayes having before our eyes our Commission and Community in the worke, our Community as members of the same body.” This utopia would represent a translation of the ideal into the real, a fulfillment of the prophecies of the past, “a story and a by-word through the world” in the present, and a beacon for the future. It would not exclude social difference and distinction. But it would be united as the various organs of the human body were.

Along with the sense of providence and special mission, Winthrop shared with Bradford the aim of decoding the divine purpose, searching for the spiritual meanings behind material facts. He was also capable of a similar humility. His spiritual autobiography, for instance, *John Winthrop’s Christian Experience* – which was written in 1637 and recounts his childhood and early manhood – makes no secret of his belief that he was inclined to “all kind of wickednesse” in his youth, then was allowed to come “to

some peace and comfort in God” through no merit of his own. But there was a greater argumentativeness in Winthrop, more of an inclination towards analysis and debate. This comes out in his journal, which he began aboard the *Arbella*, and in some of his public utterances. In both a journal entry for 1645, for instance, and a speech delivered in the same year, Winthrop developed his contention that true community did not exclude social difference and required authority. This he did by distinguishing between what he called natural and civil liberty. Natural liberty he defined in his journal as something “common to man with beasts and other creatures.” This liberty, he wrote, was “incompatible and inconsistent with authority and cannot endure the least restraint.” Civil liberty, however, was “maintained and exercised in a way of subjection to authority”; it was the liberty to do what was “good, just, and honest.” It was “the same kind of liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free,” Winthrop argued. “Such is the liberty of the church under the authority of Christ,” and also of the “true wife” under the authority of her husband.” Like the true church or true wife, the colonist should choose this liberty, even rejoice in it, and so find a perfect freedom in true service.

Challenges to the Puritan oligarchy

John Winthrop found good reason for his belief in authority, and further demands on his capacity for argument, when faced with the challenge of Anne Hutchinson (1591–1643). A woman whom Winthrop himself described in his journal as being “of ready wit and bold spirit,” Hutchinson insisted that good works were no sign of God’s blessing. Since the elect were guaranteed salvation, she argued, the mediating role of the church between God and man became obsolete. This represented a serious challenge to the power of the Puritan oligarchy, which of course had Winthrop at its head. It could hardly be countenanced by them and so, eventually, Hutchinson was banished. Along with banishment went argument: Winthrop clearly believed that he had to meet the challenge posed by Hutchinson in other ways, and his responses in his work were several. In his spiritual autobiography, for instance, he pointedly dwells on how, as he puts it, “it pleased the Lord in my family exercise to manifest unto mee the difference between the Covenant of Grace and the Covenant of workes.” This was because, as he saw it, Hutchinson’s heresy was based on a misinterpretation of the Covenant of Grace. He also dwells on his own personal experience of the importance of doing good. In a different vein, but for a similar purpose, in one entry in his journal for 1638, Winthrop reports a story that, while traveling to Providence after banishment, Hutchinson “was delivered of a monstrous birth” consisting of “twenty-seven several lumps of man’s seed, without any alteration or mixture of anything from the woman.” This, Winthrop notes, was interpreted at the time as a sign of possible “error.” Rumor and argument, personal experience and forensic expertise are all deployed in Winthrop’s writings to meet the challenges he saw to his ideal community of the “City upon a Hill.” The threat to the dominant theme of civilizing and Christianizing mission is, in effect, there, not only in Bradford’s elegies for a communitarian ideal abandoned, but also in Winthrop’s urgent attempts to meet and counter that threat by any rhetorical means necessary.

William Bradford also had to face challenges, threats to the purity and integrity of his colony; and Anne Hutchinson was not the only, or even perhaps the most serious,

challenge to the project announced on board the *Arbella*. The settlement Bradford headed for so long saw a threat in the shape of Thomas Morton (1579?–1642?); and the colony governed by Winthrop had to face what Winthrop himself described as the “divers new and dangerous opinions” of Roger Williams (1603?–1683). Both Morton and Williams wrote about the beliefs that brought them into conflict with the Puritan establishment; and, in doing so, they measured the sheer diversity of opinion and vision among English colonists, even in New England. Thomas Morton set himself up in 1626 as head of a trading post at Passonagessit which he renamed “Ma-re Mount.” There, he soon offended his Puritan neighbors at Plymouth by erecting a maypole, reveling with the Indians and, at least according to Bradford (who indicated his disapproval by calling the place where Morton lived “Merry-mount”), selling the “barbarous savages” guns. To stop what Bradford called Morton’s “riotous prodigality and excess,” the Puritans led by Miles Standish arrested him and sent him back to England in 1628. He was to return twice, the first time to be rearrested and returned to England again and the second to be imprisoned for slander. Before returning the second time, though, he wrote his only literary work, *New English Canaan*, a satirical attack on Puritanism and the Separatists in particular, which was published in 1637.

In *New English Canaan*, Morton provides a secular, alternative version of how he came to set up “Ma-re Mount,” how he was arrested and then banished. It offers a sharp contrast to the account of those same events given in *Of Plymouth Plantation*. As Bradford describes it, Morton became “Lord of Misrule” at “Merry-mount,” and “maintained (as it were) a School of Atheism.” Inviting “the Indian women for their consorts” and then dancing around the maypole, Morton and his companions cavorted “like so many fairies, or furies, rather.” Worse still, Bradford reports, “this wicked man” Morton sold “evil instruments” of war to the Indians: “O, the horribleness of this villainy!” Morton makes no mention of this charge. What he does do, however, is describe how he and his fellows set up a maypole “after the old English custom” and then, “with the help of Salvages, that came thether of purpose to see the manner of our Revels,” indulge in some “harmeles mirth.” A sense of shared values is clearly suggested between the Anglicanism of Morton and his colleagues and the natural religion of the Native Americans. There is a core of common humanity here, a respect for ordinary pleasures, for custom, traditional authority and, not least, for the laws of hospitality that, according to Morton, the Puritans lack. The Puritans are said to fear natural pleasure, they are treacherous and inhospitable: Morton describes them, for instance, killing their Indian guests, having invited them to a feast. Respecting neither their divinely appointed leader, the king, nor the authority of church tradition, they live only for what they claim is the “spirit” but Morton believes is material gain, the accumulation of power and property.

New English Canaan, as its title implies, is a promotional tract as well as a satire. It sets out to show that New England is indeed a Canaan or Promised Land, a naturally abundant world inhabited by friendly and even noble savages. Deserving British colonization, all that hampers its proper development, Morton argues, is the religious fanaticism of the Separatists and other Puritans. Morton divides his book in three. A celebration of what he calls “the happy life of the Salvages,” and their natural wisdom, occupies the first section, while the second is devoted to the natural wealth of the region. The satire is concentrated in the third section of what is not so much a history as

a series of loosely related anecdotes. Here, Morton describes the general inhumanity of the Puritans and then uses the mock-heroic mode to dramatize his own personal conflicts with the Separatists. Morton himself is ironically referred to as “the Great Monster” and Miles Standish, his principal opponent and captor, “Captain Shrimp.” And, true to the conventions of mock-heroic, the mock-hero Shrimp emerges as the real villain, while the mock-villain becomes the actual hero, a defender of traditional Native American and English customs as well as a victim of Puritan zeal and bigotry. But that humor can scarcely conceal Morton’s bitterness. Confined on an island, just before his removal to England, Morton reveals, he was brought “bottles of strong liquor” and other comforts by “Salvages”; by such gifts, they showed just how much they were willing to “unite themselves in a league of brotherhood with him.” “So full of humanity are these infidels before those Christians,” he remarks acidly. At such moments, Morton appears to sense just how far removed his vision of English settlement is from the dominant one. Between him and the Native Americans, as he sees it, runs a current of empathy; while between him and most of his fellow colonists there is only enmity – and, on the Puritan side at least, fear and envy.

That William Bradford feared and hated Morton is pretty evident. It is also clear that he had some grudging respect for Roger Williams, describing him as “godly and zealous” but “very unsettled in judgement” and holding “strange opinions.” The strange opinions Williams held led to him being sentenced to deportation back to England in 1635. To avoid this, he fled into the wilderness to a Native American settlement. Purchasing land from the Nassagansetts, he founded Providence, Rhode Island, as a haven of dissent to which Anne Hutchinson came with many other runaways, religious exiles, and dissenters. Williams believed, and argued for his belief, that the Puritans should become Separatists. This clearly threatened the charter under which the Massachusetts Bay colonists had come over in 1630, including Williams himself, since it denied the royal prerogative. He also insisted that the Massachusetts Bay Company charter itself was invalid because a Christian king had no right over heathen lands. That he had no right, according to Williams, sprang from Williams’s seminal belief, and the one that got him into most trouble: the separation of church and state and, more generally, of spiritual from material matters. Christianity had to be free from secular interests, Williams declared, and from the “foul embrace” of civil authority. The elect had to be free from civil constraints in their search for divine truth; and the civil magistrates had no power to adjudicate over matters of belief and conscience. All this Williams argued in his most famous work, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution*, published in 1644. Here, in a dialogue between Truth and Peace, he pled for liberty of conscience as a natural right. He also contended that, since government is given power by the people, most of whom are unregenerate, it could not intervene in religious matters because the unregenerate had no authority to do so. But religious freedom did not mean civil anarchy. On the contrary, as he wrote in his letter “To the Town of Providence” in 1655, liberty of conscience and civil obedience should go hand in hand. Williams used the analogy of the ocean voyage. “There goes many a Ship to Sea, with many a Hundred Souls in One Ship,” he observed. They could include all kinds of faiths. “Notwithstanding this liberty,” Williams pointed out, “the Commander of this Ship ought to command the Ship’s Course. This was “a true Picture of a Common-Wealth, or an human Combination, or Society.”

Like Thomas Morton, Williams was also drawn to the Native Americans: those whom writers like Bradford and Winthrop tended to dismiss as “savage barbarians.” His first work, *A Key into the Language of America*, published in 1643, actually focuses attention on them. “I present you with a *key*,” Williams tells his readers in the preface; “this *key*, respects the *Native Language* of it, and happily may unlocke some Rarities concerning the *Natives* themselves, not yet discovered.” Each chapter of Williams’s *Key* begins with an “Implicit Dialogue,” a list of words associated with a particular topic, the Nassagansett words on the left and their English equivalents on the right. This is followed by an “Observation” on the topic; and the topics in these chapters range from food, clothing, marriage, trade, and war to beliefs about nature, dreams, and religion. A “generall Observation” is then drawn, with cultural inferences and moral lessons being offered through meditation and analogy. Finally, there is a conclusion in the form of a poem that contrasts Indian and “English-man.” These poems, in particular, show Williams torn between his admiration for the natural virtues of Native Americans, and their harmony with nature, and his belief that the “*Natives*” are, after all, pagans and so consigned to damnation. Implicit here, in fact, and elsewhere in the *Key* is an irony at work in a great deal of writing about the “noble savage.” His natural nobility is conceded, even celebrated; but the need for him to be civilized and converted has to be acknowledged too. Civilized, however, he would invariably lose those native virtues that make him an object of admiration in the first place. And he could not then be used as Williams frequently uses him here, as a handy tool for attacking the degenerate habits of society. Williams’s *Key* is an immense and imaginative project, founded on a recognition many later writers were to follow that the right tool for unlocking the secrets of America is a language actually forged there. But it remains divided between the natural and the civilized, the native and the colonist, the “false” and the “true.” Which is not at all to its disadvantage: quite the opposite, that is the source of its interest – the measure of its dramatic tension and the mark of its authenticity.

Some colonial poetry

While Puritans were willing to concede the usefulness of history of the kind Bradford wrote or of sermons and rhetorical stratagems of the sort Winthrop favored, they were often less enthusiastic about poetry. “Be not so set upon poetry, as to be always poring on the passionate and measure pages,” the New England cleric Cotton Mather warned; “beware of a boundless and sickly appetite for the reading of . . . poems . . . and let not the Circean cup intoxicate you.” Of the verse that survives from this period, however, most of the finest and most popular among contemporaries inclines to the theological. The most popular is represented by *The Day of Doom*, a resounding epic about Judgment Day written by Michael Wigglesworth (1631–1705), *The Bay Psalm Book* (1640), and *The New England Primer* (1683?). *The Day of Doom* was the biggest selling poem in colonial America. In 224 stanzas in ballad meter, Wigglesworth presents the principal Puritan beliefs, mostly through a debate between sinners and Christ. A simple diction, driving rhythms, and constant marginal references to biblical sources are all part of Wigglesworth’s didactic purpose. This is poetry intended to drive home its message, to convert some and to restore the religious enthusiasm of others. Many Puritan readers committed portions of the poem to memory; still more read it aloud to

their families. The sheer simplicity and fervor of its message made it an ideal instrument for communicating and confirming faith. So it is, perhaps, hardly surprising that Cotton Mather could put aside his distrust of poetry when it came to a work like *The Day of Doom*. At Wigglesworth's death, in fact, Mather confessed his admiration for the poet: who, Mather said, had written for "the Edification of such Readers, as are for Truth's dressed up in *Plaine Meeter*."

Even more popular than *The Day of Doom*, however, were *The Bay Psalm Book* and *The New England Primer*. Only the Bible was more widely owned in colonial New England. *The Bay Psalm Book* was the first publishing project of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and offered the psalms of David translated into idiomatic English and adapted to the basic hymn stanza form of four lines with eight beats in each line and regular rhymes. The work was a collaborative one, produced by twelve New England divines. And one of them, John Cotton, explained in the preface that what they had in mind was "Conscience rather than Elegance, fidelity rather than poetry." "We have . . . done our endeavour to make a plain and familiar translation," Cotton wrote. "If therefore the verses are not always so smooth and elegant as some may desire . . . , let them consider that God's Altar need not our polishings." What was needed, Cotton insisted, was "a plain translation." And, if the constraints imposed by the hymn stanza form led sometimes to a tortured syntax, then neither the translators nor the audience appear to have minded. The psalms were intended to be sung both in church and at home, and they were. *The Bay Psalm Book* was meant to popularize and promote faith, and it did. Printed in England and Scotland as well as the colonies, it went through more than fifty editions over the century following its first appearance. It perfectly illustrated the Puritan belief in an indelible, divinely ordained connection between the mundane and the miraculous, the language and habits of everyday and the apprehension of eternity. And it enabled vast numbers of people, as Cotton put it, to "sing the Lord's songs . . . in our English tongue."

The New England Primer had a similar purpose and success. Here, the aim was to give every child "and apprentice" the chance to read the catechism and digest improving moral precepts. With the help of an illustrated alphabet, poems, moral statements, and a formal catechism, the young reader was to learn how to read and how to live according to the tenets of Puritan faith. So, for instance, the alphabet was introduced through a series of rhymes designed to offer moral and religious instruction. The letter "A," for example, was introduced through the rhyme, "In *Adams* Fall/We sinned all." Clearly, the *Primer* sprang from a belief in the value of widespread literacy as a means of achieving public order and personal salvation. Equally clearly, as time passed and the *Primer* went through numerous revisions, the revised versions reflected altering priorities. The 1758 revision, for instance, declares a preference for "more grand noble Words" rather than "diminutive Terms"; a 1770 version describes literacy as more a means of advancement than a route to salvation; and an 1800 edition opts for milder versified illustrations of the alphabet ("A was an apple pie"). But this tendency to change in response to changing times was a reason for the durability and immense popularity of the *Primer*: between 1683 and 1830, in fact, it sold over five million copies. And, at its inception at least, it was further testament to the Puritan belief that man's word, even in verse, could be used as a vehicle for God's truth.

That belief was not contested by the two finest poets of the colonial period, Anne Bradstreet (1612?–1672) and Edward Taylor (1642?–1729). It was, however, set in tension with other impulses and needs that helped make their poetry exceptionally vivid and dramatic. With Bradstreet, many of the impulses, and the tensions they generated, sprang from the simple fact that she was a woman. Bradstreet came with her husband to Massachusetts in 1630, in the group led by John Winthrop. Many years later, she wrote to her children that at first her “heart rose” when she “came into this country” and “found a new world and new manners.” “But,” she added, “after I was convinced it was the way of God, I submitted to it and joined the church in Boston.” What she had to submit to was the orthodoxies of faith and behavior prescribed by the Puritan fathers. Along with this submission to patriarchal authority, both civil and religious, went acknowledgment of – or, at least, lip service to – the notion that, as a woman, her

FIGURE NOT AVAILABLE IN ELECTRONIC VERSION

primary duties were to her family, as housekeeper, wife, and mother. Bradstreet raised eight children. Despite this, she found time to write poetry that was eventually published in London in 1650 as *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America*. Publication was arranged by Bradstreet's brother-in-law, who added a preface in which he felt obliged to point out that the poetry had not been written to the neglect of family duties.

Writing in a climate of expectations such as this, Bradstreet made deft poetic use of what many readers of the time would have seen as her oxymoronic title of woman poet. One of her strategies was deference. In "The Prologue" to *The Tenth Muse*, for instance, Bradstreet admitted that "To sing of wars, captains, and of kings,/Of cities founded, commonwealths begun," was the province of men. Her "mean pen," she assured the reader, would deal with other matters; her "lowly lines" would concern themselves with humbler subjects. The deference, however, was partly assumed. It was, or became, a rhetorical device; a confession of humility could and did frequently lead on to the claim that her voice had its own song to sing in the great chorus. "I heard the merry grasshopper . . . sing,/" she wrote in "Contemplations," "The black-clad cricket bear a second part." "Shall creatures abject thus their voices raise/,," she asked, "And in their kind resound their Maker's praise,/Whilst I, as mute, can warble forth higher lays?" Playing upon what her readers, and to a certain extent what she herself, expected of a female, she also aligned her creativity as a woman with her creativity as a writer. So, in "The Author to her Book" (apparently written in 1666 when a second edition of her work was being considered), her poems became the "ill-form'd offspring" of her "feeble brain," of whom she was proud despite their evident weaknesses. "If for thy father asked," she tells her poems, "say thou had'st none:/And for thy mother, she alas is poor,/Which caus'd her thus to send thee out of door." Identifying herself as a singular and single mother here, Bradstreet plays gently but ironically with Puritan sensibilities, including her own. This is a gesture of at once humility and pride, since it remains unclear whether Bradstreet's "ill-form'd offspring" have no father in law or in fact. They might be illegitimate or miraculous. Perhaps they are both.

An edition of the poems of Bradstreet was published in Boston six years after her death, with a lot of new material, as *Several Poems Compiled with Great Variety of Wit and Learning*. It contains most of her finest work. It is here, in particular, that the several tensions in her writing emerge: between conventional subject matter and personal experience, submission to and rebellion against her lot as a woman in a patriarchal society, preparation for the afterlife and the pleasures of this world, and between simple humility and pride. The focus switches from the public to the private, as she writes about childbirth ("Before the Birth of One of Her Children"), married love ("To My Dear and Loving Husband"), her family growing up ("In reference to Her Children, 23 June, 1659"), about personal loss and disaster ("Upon the Burning of Our House, July 10th, 1666") and, in particular, about bereavement ("In memory of My Dear Grandchild Elizabeth Bradstreet, Who Deceased August, 1665, Being a Year and Half Old"). What is especially effective and memorable about, say, the poems of married love is their unabashed intimacy. "If ever two were one, then surely we./If ever man were loved by wife then thee," she writes in "To My Dear and Loving Husband." And, in "A Letter to Her Husband, Absent Upon Public Employment," she consoles herself while her beloved is gone by looking at their children: "true living pictures of

their father's face," as she calls them, "fruits which through thy heat I bore." There is ample time to dwell here on what Bradstreet calls her "magazine of earthly store," and to reflect that, even when she is "ta'en away unto eternity," testimony to the pleasures of the things and thoughts of time will survive – in the "dear remains" of her "little babes" and her verse. And the one dear remain will find delight and instruction in the other. "This book by any yet unread,/I leave for you when I am dead,/" she writes in a poem addressed "To My Dear Children," "That being gone, here you may find/What was your living mother's mind."

A similar sense of intimacy and engagement is one of the secrets of the work of Edward Taylor, which was virtually unpublished during his lifetime – a collected edition, *The Poetical Works of Edward Taylor*, did not appear, in fact, until 1939. Like Bradstreet, Taylor was born in England; he then left to join the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1668. After studying at Harvard, he settled into the profession of minister for the rest of his life. Marrying twice, he fathered fourteen children, many of whom died in infancy. He began writing poetry even before he joined his small, frontier congregation in Westfield, but his earliest work tended towards the public and conventional. It was not until 1674 that, experimenting with different forms and styles, he started over the next eight or nine years to write in a more personal and memorable vein: love poems to his wife-to-be ("Were but my Muse an Huswife Good"), spiritual meditations on natural events or as Taylor called them "occurants" ("The Ebb & Flow"), and emblematic, allegorical accounts of the smaller creatures of nature and domestic objects ("Huswifery"). These poems already manifest some of Taylor's characteristic poetic habits. "Upon A Spider Catching a Fly," for instance, written around 1680–1682, begins with the kind of minute particularization of nature that was to become typical of later New England poets like Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost: "Thou Sorrow, venom elfe/Is this thy ploy,/To spin a web out of thyselfe/To catch a Fly?/For Why?" Gradually, the intimate tone of address is switched to God, who is asked to "break the Cord" with which "Hells Spider," the Devil, would "tangle Adams race." What is memorable about the poem is how closely Taylor attends to both the material facts of the spider and the spiritual truth it is chosen to emblemize: symbolic meaning is not developed at the expense of concrete event. And what is just as memorable is the way Taylor uses an elaborate conceit and intricate stanzaic form as both a discipline to his meditations and a means of channeling, then relaxing emotion. So, in the final stanza, the poet anticipates eventually singing to the glory of God, "when perchance on high" – "And thankfully,/" he concludes, "For joy." And that short last line, consisting of just two words, at once acts as a counterpoint to the conclusion of the first stanza ("For why?") and allows Taylor to end his poem on a moment of pure, spiritual elation.

The experience of faith was, in fact, central to Taylor's life and his work. About 1647, he began writing metrical paraphrases of the Psalms. Recalling the *Bay Psalm Book*, it is nevertheless in these poems that Taylor's distinctively meditative voice starts to be given freer rein. More important, he also began to bring together his vision of the history of salvation to produce his first major work, *Gods Determinations touching his Elect*. A collection of thirty-five poems, this traces the "Glorious Handywork" of creation, dramatizes a debate between Justice and Mercy over the fate of mankind, then describes the combat between Christ and Satan for human souls. Some years after beginning *Gods*

Determinations, in 1682, Taylor turned to what is his finest longer work, *Preparatory Meditations before My Approach to the Lords Supper*. Usually composed after he had prepared a sermon or preaching notes, the 217 poems comprising this sequence are personal meditations “Chiefly upon the Doctrine preached upon the Day of administration.” In them, Taylor tries to learn lessons gathered from the Sacrament day’s biblical text, which also acts as the poem’s title. They are at once a form of spiritual discipline, with the poet subjecting himself to rigorous self-examination; petitions to God to prepare him for the immediate task of preaching and administering the Lord’s Supper; and a private diary or confession of faith. And, as in so many of his poems, Taylor uses an intricate verse form, elaborate word-play and imagery to organize his meditations and release his emotions.

Taylor belongs in a great tradition of meditative writing, one that includes the English poets George Herbert and John Donne, and an equally great tradition of New England writing: one in which the imaginative anticipation of dying becomes a means of understanding how to live. So it is perhaps not surprising that, after suffering a severe illness in 1720, he wrote three versions of “A Valediction to all the World preparatory for Death 3d of the 11th 1720” and two versions of “A Fig for thee Oh! Death.” What perhaps is surprising, and moving, is how these poems acknowledge the loveliness of the world while bidding it farewell. The strength of his feeling for the things of the earth, and even more for family and vocation, becomes here a measure of the strength of his faith. It is only faith, evidently, and the firm conviction that (as he puts it in one of the *Preparatory Meditations*) his heart “loaded with love” will “ascend/Up to . . . its bridegroom, bright, & Friend” that makes him content to give up all that he has not only come to know but also to cherish. In Taylor’s poems, we find not so much conflict as continuity; not tension but a resolution founded on tough reasoning and vigorous emotion, patient attention to the ordinary and passionate meditation on the mysterious – above all, on a firmly grounded, fervently sustained faith. He loves the world, in short, but he loves God more.

Enemies within and without

The Puritan faith that Edward Taylor expressed and represented so vividly found itself challenged, very often, by enemies within and without. As for the enemies outside the Puritan community, they included above all the people the settlers had displaced, the Native Americans. And the challenge posed by what one Puritan called “this barbarous Enemy” was most eloquently expressed by those who had come under the enemy’s power, however briefly. In February, 1676, a woman named Mary White Rowlandson (1637?–1711) was captured by a group of Narragansett Indians, along with her children. Many of her neighbors and relatives were also captured or killed, one of her children died soon after being captured, and the other two became separated from her. Rowlandson herself was finally released and returned to her husband in the following May; and the release of her two surviving children was effected several weeks later. Six years after this, she published an account of her experience, the full title of which gives some flavor of its approach and a clue to its purpose: *The Sovereignty and Goodness of GOD, Together With the Faithfulness of His Promises Displayed: Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration of Mrs Mary Rowlandson*. The book was immensely

popular, and remained so on into the nineteenth century; and it helped to inaugurate a peculiarly American literary form, the captivity narrative. There had been captivity narratives since the earliest period of European exploration, but Rowlandson's account established both the appeal of such narratives and the form they would usually take: combining, as it does, a vivid portrait of her sufferings and losses with an emphatic interpretation of their meaning. The moral framework of the *Narrative* is, in fact, clearly and instructively dualistic: on the one side are the "Pagans" and on the other the Christians. The Native Americans are, variously, "ravenous Beasts," "Wolves," "black creatures" resembling the Devil in their cruelty, savagery, and capacity for lying. Christians like Rowlandson who suffer at their hands are upheld only by "the wonderfull mercy of God" and the "remarkable passages of providence" that enable them to survive and sustain their faith.

As for the enemies within, nothing illustrated the Puritan fear of them more than the notorious witch trials that took place in Salem, Massachusetts in 1692, during the course of which 19 people were hanged, one was pressed to death, 55 were frightened or tortured into confessions of guilt, 150 were imprisoned, and more than 200 were named as deserving arrest. What brought those trials about, the sense of a special mission now threatened and the search for a conspiracy, an enemy to blame and purge from the commonwealth, is revealed in a work first published in 1693, *The Wonders of the Invisible World* by Cotton Mather (1663–1728). Mather, the grandson of two important religious leaders of the first generation of Puritan immigrants (including John Cotton, after whom he was named), wrote his book at the instigation of the Salem judges. "The New Englanders are a people of God settled in those, which were once the devil's territories," Mather announces. For Mather, the people, mostly women, tried and convicted at Salem represent a "terrible plague of evil angels." They form part of "an horrible plot against the country" which "if it were not seasonably discovered, would probably blow up, and pull down all the churches." A feeling of immediate crisis and longer-term decline is explained as the result of a conspiracy, the work of enemy insiders who need to be discovered and despatched if the community is to recover, then realize its earlier utopian promise. It is the dark side of the American dream, the search for someone or something to blame when that dream appears to be failing. Mather was sounding a sinister chord here that was to be echoed by many later Americans, and opening up a vein of reasoning and belief that subsequent American writers were to subject to intense, imaginative analysis.

But Cotton Mather was more than just the author of one of the first American versions of the conspiracy theory. He produced over 400 publications during his lifetime. Among them were influential scientific works, like *The Christian Philosopher* (1720), and works promoting "reforming societies" such as *Bonifacius; or, Essays to Do Good* (1710), a book that had an important impact on Benjamin Franklin. He also encouraged missionary work among African American slaves, in *The Negro Christianized* (1706), and among Native Americans, in *India Christiana* (1721). But here, too, in his encouragement of Christian missions to those outside the true faith a darker side of Puritanism, or at least of the Cotton Mather strain, is evident. Mather's belief in the supreme importance of conversion led him, after all, to claim that a slave taught the true faith was far better off than a free black; and it sprang, in the first place, from a low opinion of both African and Native Americans, bordering on contempt. For example, in

his life of John Eliot, “the apostle of the Indians” whom Nathaniel Hawthorne was later to praise, Mather made no secret of his belief that “the natives of the country now possessed by New Englanders” had been “forlorn and wretched” ever since “their first herding here.” They were “miserable savages,” “stupid and senseless,” Mather declared. They had “no *arts*,” “except just so far as to maintain their brutish conversation,” “little, if any, tradition . . . worthy of . . . notice.” Such were “the miserable people” Eliot set out to save and, in view of their condition, he had “a double work incumbent on him.” He had, Mather concluded, “to make men” of the Native Americans “ere he could hope to see them saints”; they had to be “*civilized* ere they could be *Christianized*.”

Mather’s account of Eliot’s work among the Indians shows just how much for him, as for other early European settlers, the projects of civilization and conversion, creating wealth and doing good, went hand in hand. It comes from his longest and arguably most interesting work, *Magnalia Christi Americana; or, the Ecclesiastical History of New England*, published in 1702. This book is an immensely detailed history of New England and a series of eminent lives, and it reflects Mather’s belief that the past should be used to instruct the present and guide the future. Each hero chosen for description and eulogy, like Eliot, is made to fit a common saintly pattern, from the portrait of his conversion to his deathbed scene. Yet each is given his own distinctive characteristics, often expressive of Mather’s own reforming interests and always illustrating his fundamental conviction that, as he puts it, “The *First Age* was the *Golden Age*.” This is exemplary history, then. It is also an American epic, one of the very first, in which the author sets about capturing in words what he sees as the promise of the nation. “I WRITE the *Wonders* of the CHRISTIAN RELIGION,” Mather announces in “A General Introduction” to *Magnalia Christi Americana*, “flying from the Depravations of *Europe*, to the *American Strand*.” The echo of the *Aeneid* is an intimation of what Mather is after. He is hoping to link the story of his people to earlier epic migrations. As later references to the “*American Desert*” testify, he is also suggesting a direct analogy with the journey of God’s chosen people to the Promised Land. His subject is a matter of both history and belief: like so many later writers of American epic, in other words, he is intent on describing both an actual and a possible America.

Not everyone involved in the Salem witchcraft trials remained convinced that they were justified by the need to expose a dangerous enemy within. Among those who came to see them as a serious error of judgment, and morality, was one of the judges at the trials, Samuel Sewall (1652–1730). An intensely thoughtful man, Sewall wrote a journal from 1673 to 1728, which was eventually published as *The Diary of Samuel Sewall* in 1973. It offers an insight into the intimate thoughts, the trials and private tribulations of someone living at a time when Puritanism no longer exerted the power it once did over either the civil or religious life of New England. Sewall notes how in 1697 he felt compelled to make a public retraction of his actions as one of the Salem judges, “asking pardon of man” for his part in the proceedings against supposed witches, and, he adds, “especially desiring prayers that God, who has an Unlimited Authority, would pardon that Sin” he had committed. He also records how eventually, following the dictates of his conscience, he felt “call’d” to write something against “the Trade fetching Negroes from Guinea.” “I had a strong inclination to Write something about it,” he relates in an entry for June 19, 1700, “but it wore off.” Only five days after this,

however, a work authored by Sewall attacking the entire practice of slavery, *The Selling of Joseph: A Memorial*, was published in Boston. In it, he attacked slavery as a violation of biblical precept and practice, against natural justice since “all men, as they are the Sons of Adam, are Coheirs; and have equal Right unto Liberty,” and destructive of the morals of both slaves and masters.” Sewall was a man eager to seek divine counsel on all matters before acting. This was the case whether the matter was a great public one, like the issues of witchcraft and the slave trade, or a more private one, such as the question of his marrying for a third time. His journals reveal the more private side of Puritanism: a daily search for the right path to follow in order to make the individual journey part of the divine plan. They also reveal a habit of meditation, a scrupulously detailed mapping of personal experiences, even the most intimate, that was to remain ingrained in American writing long after the Puritan hegemony had vanished.

Trends towards the secular and resistance

The travel journals of two other writers, Sarah Kemble Knight (1666–1727) and William Byrd of Westover (1674–1744), suggest the increasingly secular tendencies of this period. Both Knight and Byrd wrote accounts of their journeys through parts of America that tend to concentrate on the social, the curious people and manners they encountered along the way. There is relatively little concern, of the kind shown in earlier European accounts of travels in the New World, with the abundance of nature, seen as either Eden or Wilderness. Nor is there any sense at all of being steered by providence: God may be mentioned in these journals, but rarely as a protective guide. Knight composed her journal as a description of a trip she took from Boston to New York and then back again in 1704–1705. It did not reach printed form until the next century, when it appeared as *The Journals of Madam Knight* (1825): but it was “published” in the way many manuscripts were at the time, by being circulated among friends. Her writings reveal a lively, humorous, gossipy woman alert to the comedy and occasional beauty of life in early America – and aware, too, of the slightly comic figure she herself sometimes cuts, “sitting Stedy,” as she puts it, “on my Nagg.” She describes in detail how she is kept awake at night in a local inn by the drunken arguments of “some of the Town tope-ers in [the] next Room.” She records, with a mixture of disbelief and amused disgust, meeting a family that is “the picture of poverty” living in a “little Hutt” that was “one of the wretchedest I ever saw.” Sometimes, Knight is struck by the beauty of the landscape she passes through. She recalls, for instance, how moved she was by the sight of the woods lit up by the moon – or, as she has it, by “Cynthia,” “the kind Conductress of the night.” Even here, however, the terms in which she expresses her excitement are a sign of her true allegiances. “The Tall and thick trees at a distance,” she explains, “when the moon glar’d through the branches, fill’d my Imagination with the pleasant delusion of a Sumptuous city, fill’d with famous Buildings and churches.” Nature is most beautiful, evidently, when it evokes thoughts of culture; “the dolesome woods,” as she calls them elsewhere in her journal, are at their best when they excite memories of, or better still lead to, town.

The situation is more complicated with William Byrd of Westover. Born the heir of a large estate in Virginia, Byrd was educated in England and only made Virginia his permanent home in 1726. Byrd claimed, in one of his letters (published eventually in

1777 in *The Correspondence of the Three William Byrds*), that in America he lived “like . . . the patriarchs.” And, to the extent that this was possible in a new country, he certainly did. For he was one of the leading members of what eventually became known as the “first families of Virginia,” those people who formed the ruling class by the end of the eighteenth century – in the colony of Virginia and, arguably, elsewhere in the South. The “first families” claimed to be of noble English origin. Some of them no doubt were. But it is likely that the majority of them were, as one contemporary writer Robert Beverley II (1673–1722) put it in *The History and Present State of Virginia* (1722), “of low Circumstances . . . such as were willing to seek their Fortunes in a Foreign Country.” Whatever their origins, they had to work hard since as one of them, William Fitzhugh (1651–1701), pointed out in a letter written in 1691, “without a constant care and diligent Eye, a well-made plantation will run to Ruin.” “‘Tis no small satisfaction to me,” another great landowner, Robert “King” Carter (1663–1732), wrote in 1720, “to have a pennyworth for my penny”; and to this end he, and other Virginia gentlemen like him, were painstaking in the supervision of their landholdings. Nevertheless, they were keen to use their painstakingly acquired wealth to assume the manners and prerogatives of an aristocracy, among which was the appearance of a kind of aristocratic indolence – what one writer of the time, Hugh Jones (1670–1760), described in *The Present State of Virginia* (1724) as the gentleman’s “easy way of living.”

Byrd, of course, did not have to struggle to acquire wealth, he inherited it. Once he had done so, however, he worked hard to sustain that wealth and even acquire more. He personally supervised his properties, once he settled in Virginia, arranging for the planting of crops, orchards, and gardens; he also attended to his duties within his own community and in the county and the colony. And he was just as intent as his wealthy neighbors were on assuming the appearance of idle nobility. When writing back to friends in England, for instance, he tended to turn his life in Virginia into a version of the pastoral. As his small hymns to the garden of the South in his letters suggest, the desire to paint plantation life as a kind of idyll sprang from two, related things, for Byrd and others like him: a feeling of exile from the centers of cultural activity and a desire to distance the specters of provincialism and money-grubbing. Exiled from the “polite pleasures” of the mother country, in a place that he once described as the “great wilderness” of America, Byrd was prompted to describe his plantation home as a place of natural abundance, ripe simplicity, and indolence. Describing it in this way, he also separated himself from the work ethic that prevailed further north. A clear dividing line was being drawn between him – and the life he and his social equals in Virginia led – and, on the one hand, England, and on the other, New England. In the process, Byrd was dreaming and articulating what was surely to become the dominant image of the South.

Byrd is mainly remembered now for *The History of the Dividing Line betwixt Virginia and North Carolina*, the account of his participation in the 1728 survey of the southern border of Virginia. In this travel journal, written in 1729 and first published in 1841, Byrd considers a number of divisions quite apart from the one announced in the title. He talks, for instance, about the difference or division between the “Frugal and Industrious” settlers of the northern colonies and the less energetic settlers to the south. “For this reason,” he explains, “New England improved much faster than Virginia.” He talks about the division between Indians and whites, particularly the early

European explorers. The Indians, Byrd reflects, “are healthy & Strong, with Constitutions untainted by Lewdness.” “I cannot think,” he adds, “the Indians were much greater Heathens than the first Adventurers.” He talks about the divisions between men and women. “The distemper of laziness seizes the men,” in the backwoods, he suggests, “much oftener than the women.” And he talks about the differences, the division between his homeplace and North Carolina. For him, North Carolina is “Lubberland.” “Plenty and a warm sun,” Byrd avers, confirm all North Carolinians, and especially the men, “in their disposition to laziness for their whole lives”; “they loiter away their lives, like Solomon’s sluggard, with their arms across, and at the winding up of the year scarcely have bread to eat.”

Byrd’s comic description of the inhabitants of North Carolina anticipates the Southwestern humorists of the nineteenth century, and all those other American storytellers who have made fun of life off the beaten track. It is also sparked off by one of a series of divisions in *The History of the Dividing Line* that are determined by the difference between sloth and industry: perhaps reflecting Byrd’s suspicion that his own life, the contrast between its surfaces and its reality, measures a similar gap. Quite apart from such dividing lines, Byrd’s account of his journey is as frank and lively as Knight’s is. And the tone is even franker and livelier in *The Secret History of the Dividing Line*, an account of the same expedition as the one *The History of the Dividing Line* covers, first published in 1929. In *The Secret History*, as its title implies, what Byrd dwells on is the private exploits of the surveyors: their drinking, gambling, joking, squabbling and their encounters with more than one “dark angel” or “tallow-faced wench.” Throughout his adventures, “Steddy,” as Byrd calls himself in both histories, keeps his course and maintains his balance: negotiating his journey through divisions with the appearance of consummate ease.

Of course, the ease was very often just that, a matter of appearance, here in the histories of the dividing line and elsewhere. Or, if not that simply, it was a matter of conscious, calculated choice. As an alternative to the ruminative Puritan or the industrious Northerner, Byrd and others like him modeled themselves on the idea of the indolent, elegant aristocrat: just as, as an alternative to the noise and bustle of London, they modeled their accounts of their homeplace in imitation of the pastoral ideal. The divisions and accommodations they were forced into, or on occasion chose, were the product of the conflict between their origins and aspirations. They were also a consequence of the differences they perceived between the world they were making in their part of the American colonies and the ones being made in other parts. And they were also, and not least, a probable response to their own sense that the blood of others was on their hands. Anticipating the later Southern argument in defense of slavery, they turned their slaves, rhetorically, into “children” who positively needed the feudal institution of an extended family, with a benevolent patriarch at its head, for guidance, support, and protection. In the process, they had an enormous impact on how writers write and many others talk about one vital part of the American nation.

The trend towards the secular in the work of Knight and Byrd is also noticeable in the poetry of the period. Cotton Mather had attacked poetry as the food of “a boundless and sickly appetite,” for its fictive origins and sensual appeal. Benjamin Franklin, the presiding genius of the American Enlightenment, was inclined to dismiss it because it was not immediately useful, functional. However, to this charge that poetry makes