

# *Upon What Pretext?: The Book and Literary History*

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IN REJECTING the Roman Catholic church's claims to authority, John Calvin considered the contention that without the Church there would be no Bible. The Church maintained that its authority was needed to validate the divine origin of Scriptures and so distinguish canonical from spurious texts. Although the Holy Spirit is the author of the Bible, the argument ran, its authorship is not distinguishable from mere human authorship except through the application of the authority conferred on the Church; so that, in effect, the original author—etymologically, a redundant term in that author is originator, but, in the context, a necessary term—so that the original author is recognized as such only after an authority authorizes the recognition. The first author, that is, is dependent upon the secondary authority for his primacy, with the paradoxical result that the original becomes known as such only at the third stage of a series: first, texts of uncertain authorship; second, the authority of the Church; third, the authorship of the Holy Spirit, once the authority asserts it to be authentic.

Facing this circumstance, Calvin wrote:

Who can assure us that the Scriptures proceeded from God; who guarantee that they have come down safe and unimpaired to our times; who persuade us that *this* book is to be received with reverence, and *that one* expunged from the list, did not the Church regulate all these things with certainty? On the determination of the Church, therefore, it is said, depend both the reverence which is due to Scripture and the books which are to

be admitted into the canon. Thus profane men seeking under the pretext of the Church [the Latin is *sub Ecclesiae praetextus*] to introduce unbridled tyranny, care not in what absurdities they entangle themselves and others, provided they extort from the simple this one acknowledgment—viz., that there is nothing which the Church cannot do.<sup>1</sup>

When Calvin accuses profane men of exercising tyranny under the pretext of the Church, by pretext he most obviously means a false reason put forth to hide the real one. But pretext has other meanings that are applicable both to Calvin's argument and our present interests. A pretext is something that precedes the text, and the Church certainly set itself up as a pretext, since without its previous authorization the text was not a text. This sense of even the text of texts, the Bible, needing a pretext is one that I wish to pursue further with regard to other books, because as a literary historian addressing some of the issues surrounding the history of the book in America, one kind of question I have to ask is: what are the pretexts for the existence of books in the colonial and early national periods?

But we are not yet done with Calvin because American culture continued to be concerned with him through the first centuries of its life. And so I wish to identify yet a third and perhaps the most literal meaning of pretext. *Texo* is Latin for *I weave*—a text being words woven together even as textile is cloth woven together—and *praetexo* means *I weave in front*, that is, *I weave a border*. In the making of cloth there cannot be a text without a pretext, cannot be a woven fabric without a margin. This kind of pretext also bears on our considerations as we see when we return to Calvin.

Calvin cannot discard the Church's authority to establish the canonical Scriptures without replacing it with another authority, because to do so would be, in effect, to discard the Holy Bible itself. Famously, he put in the Church's place the testi-

<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., trans. Henry Beveridge (London, 1953), 1:69.

mony of the Spirit: 'Let it therefore be held as fixed that those who are inwardly taught by the Holy Spirit acquiesce implicitly in Scripture; that Scripture, carrying its own evidence along with it, deigns not to submit to proofs and arguments, but owes the full conviction with which we ought to receive it to the testimony of the Spirit.'<sup>2</sup> The contention is radical (although stemming ultimately, it may be argued, from Augustine) in that it annihilates historical time by making the author constantly present to authorize his authorship. It is also of enormous historical consequence. Two centuries later, for example, Jonathan Edwards writes, 'There is such a thing, if the Scriptures are of any use to teach us anything, as a spiritual, supernatural understanding of divine things that is peculiar to the saints, and those which are not saints have nothing of.'<sup>3</sup> And with the same force he employs in echoing Calvin, by making each saint an authority because informed by the presence within him of the author himself, he closes down the possibility of conflicts in interpretation that might arise from there being as many authors as there are saints. Edwards declares, 'From what has been said of the nature of spiritual understanding, it appears that spiritual understanding does not consist in any new doctrinal knowledge, or in having suggested to the mind any new proposition, not before read or heard of.'<sup>4</sup>

Such confidence in the completeness and clarity of scriptural teaching derives from confidence in the testimony of the Spirit, a phenomenon that Edwards with his characteristic precision is at some pains to distinguish from similar but different phenomena. Although it follows logically from the nature of the Spirit's testimony that saints will concur in their view of the Bible, however, in practice a literate and zealous group of believers are all too prone to disagreements. What Edwards

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven, 1959), p. 270.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 278.

does not mention—but what is crucial to the religious community's harmony—is the practical circumstance of its members accepting a set of conventions about how to read the Bible, even though in so doing they believe themselves only to be exercising an intuition uninformed by human agreements. Harmony, that is, depends upon a pretext functioning to regulate the possible meanings of the text, even as the Roman Catholic church served others with a pretext.

The Puritans' pretext may be readily if not completely grasped by glancing at the Geneva Bible. Turning its pages even without reading, one is struck by the manner in which the text is surrounded, as if swallowed, by accompanying texts in typefaces other than that of the text itself. In both left and right margins commentaries pile upon one another in stacks a half-inch wide (in the 1560 edition), blackening the usually white space, and key phrases set in large type dominate the top margins of the pages. If pretext also means margin, here is a text with the most abundant pretext imaginable. And that pretext, in the sense of border, is also, of course, a pre-text, a coming before the text to authenticate and structure it. In addition to the marginalia that cross-refer passages and gloss phrases, the pretext of the Geneva Bible consists of woodcuts, maps, arguments heading each book and chapter, tables of proper names and 'principal things,' a listing of the years and times from Adam to Christ, and an ordering of the years and events of Paul's life from his conversion to his death. Small wonder that when the Geneva version was disappearing from circulation in England in favor of the King James version, generated in good part by the king's scorn for the Geneva annotations, the people, according to Thomas Fuller, complained that they 'could not see into the sense of Scripture for lack of the spectacles of these Geneva annotations.'<sup>5</sup>

I do not mean to say that the marginalia of the Geneva Bible

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Lloyd E. Berg, 'Introduction to the Facsimile Edition,' *The Geneva Bible* (Madison, Wis., 1969), p. 23.

provide a complete indication of the pretext of the American Puritans. For one thing, although the most used, it was not the exclusive Bible. For another, it was available in many different versions. Between its first publication in 1560 and the appearance of the King James version in 1611, over 120 editions appeared in folio, quarto, octavo, duodecimo, and sextodecimo pages and with constantly altered commentaries, which, in the main, grew increasingly antiepiscopal over that period. But the margins of the Geneva Bible do offer a unique picture of the emergence of a reading culture, guiding us to the kinds of questions the reading mind raised and the information with which that mind was stored. Calvin had accused the Church of tyrannizing over the simple. If, in the last analysis, one can point out that the arguments, key phrases, tables, and commentaries of the Geneva Bible also combine to exercise control over the simple, still at least one important distinction must be drawn. The simple are now readers who are approached through the printed word, rather than a wordless mass acted upon by a lettered few. To regulate their lives through structuring the way they are to read a text is also to admit them to the space between the text and reflection upon it, a space that even the most crowded margin cannot quite fill. John Foxe said: 'The Lord began to work for His church not with sword and target . . . but with printing, writing and reading. How many printing presses there be in the world, so many block-houses there be against the high castle of St. Angelo, so that either the pope must abolish knowledge and printing or printing at length will root him out.'<sup>6</sup> Like all other advancements in weaponry, however, printing did not remain the exclusive possession of but one side in a controversy; no textual nonproliferation treaty prevailed. Books were instruments in the promulgation of the true religion, so that, conversely, books represented the greatest threat to one or another version of that enterprise, since

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in William Haller, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs and the Elect Nation* (London, 1963), p. 110.

they could work silently behind the closed doors of a community that seemed united in the forum.

The most obvious pretext in colonial America was, of course, the religious one, and such a pretext, in the main, bound the book to the shared beliefs of most members of the community, rather than permitting the book to present readers with material that differed ideologically from what nonreaders held. In the first hundred years of New England settlement, sermons were a staple product of the printing industry; the presses, that is, duplicated works originally presented orally and also, in great part, spun out from notes rather than scripted. This points us to the circumstance that although from the outset the book was an important element in Puritan culture, it was not aimed at one stratum of the society—the literary—but was continuous with the oral culture of the entire society. Eventually, writers of books were to address readers, but for over a century there was a dominant literature in which speakers addressed hearers. The printed work, through the sheer fact of its being printed, opened the way for a literary culture, but since it repeated what had been spoken and, more importantly, did so in accordance with the conventions that governed oral delivery to a mixed assembly of habitual readers, occasional readers, infrequent readers, and illiterates, to a much larger extent it used the medium to reinforce the bonds the society had developed through oral relations. Even so complex a writer as Jonathan Edwards can be found making use of such phrases as 'here, for the sake of the more illiterate reader, I will explain what I mean.'<sup>7</sup>

When we look at the works of history written by the American Puritans, books that by definition could not have been derived from sermons, we see that nevertheless they are shaped as oral performances. Edward Johnson, for example, advances one after another of the events he chronicles through the inter-polation of lively dialogues that combine to affirm that those

<sup>7</sup> Edwards, *Religious Affections*, p. 254.

who undertook the migration did so as members of a community united by relations that had been established through common speech. Even the motives that they took from reading the Bible are not represented as having been received through pondering the printed word but rather as having been received through hearing a speaking voice. Jesus stirs up his heralds to proclaim: 'Oh yes! oh yes! oh yes! All you the people of Christ that are here Oppressed . . . gather yourselves together . . . as you shall be shipped for his service in the Western World.' The listeners talk back: 'Can it possible be the mind of Christ . . . that now so many . . . should turne their backs,'<sup>8</sup> and they are answered by the further speech of the heralds. No great exercise of imagination is required to recover from these hypothetical dialogues the sense of a group of actual people talking over their specific condition, weighing their options, and arriving at a consensus that was eventually to bind them into a society with a distinctive culture. And, to the same point, the authorial voice that invokes such a society includes the reader in it, calling upon him to 'Attend,' 'Behold,' 'Consider,' and 'rejoyce.'<sup>9</sup>

In his lavish indulgence in literary allusion, tireless unreeling of convoluted syntax, and insistent display of polylingualism, Cotton Mather may well be taken to exemplify the detachment of the literary from the oral. Yet his *Magnalia Christi Americana* starts with the epic convention of the writer as an oral transmitter of all known history, from the moment when the divinity created the natural world through the election of a special people with a special history; and throughout his book Mather relies heavily on anecdote, folklore, and hearsay to inform his work. He does not use evidence to construct a rationale for New England; rather, that rationale is a given, and he goes to the record of writings and the oral tradition to demonstrate that the given has been fulfilled.

<sup>8</sup> *Jobnson's Wonder-Working Providence*, ed., J. Franklin Jameson (New York, 1910), p. 24.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

I do not wish to say that the books of Johnson and Mather are other than books or that they are addressed to other than readers. But they illustrate that the religious pretext determined a rhetoric that regarded the book's audience as sharers of its ideology, as possessed of a spirit that validated the text. Moreover, they indicate that the principal relation of the book to society was that of documenting the perception of reality common to members of all classes within it. Books did not distinguish a literary culture as a discrete part of the larger society.

That such a distinction developed seems clear, although it grew by degrees rather than emerged at a specific moment. Cotton Mather's erstwhile auditor, Benjamin Franklin, stands as evidence of this, not just in his adult years when he is a professional printer but even in his pliant adolescence. A runaway apprentice, seventeen years old, he stops at Dr. Brown's inn ten miles from Burlington and, as he tells us, Dr. Brown 'entered into conversation with me while I took some refreshment, and finding I had read a little became very sociable and friendly.'<sup>10</sup> A year later, in New York, en route to Boston he reports, 'The then governor of New York, Burnet (son of Bishop Burnet), hearing from the captain that a young man, one of his passengers, had a great many books, desired he would bring me to see him. . . . The Governor treated me with great civility, showed me his library, which was a very large one, and we had a good deal of conversation about books and authors.'<sup>11</sup> His knowledge of books served young Franklin's movement up the social ladder, admitting him to the fellowship of the relatively few who were also collectors and readers, and who, in the main, were of the higher classes. Without impugning Franklin's own literary genius and his genuine love

<sup>10</sup> *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin: A Genetic Text*, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay and Paul M. Zall (Knoxville, 1981), pp. 22-23. This is a diplomatic edition and the quotations I make from it are my own version of the fuller text found in the cited pages.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

of reading, we note that in his adult life books continued for him to be associated with those a degree or two above the social situation he would have occupied had he not succeeded in identifying himself with them. For instance, finding his position as clerk of the general assembly endangered by the opposition of a 'gentleman of fortune and education, with talents that were likely to give him, in time, great influence,' he set out to gain his favor, but not, as he says, 'by paying any servile respect to him.' Rather, he asked to borrow a 'scarce and curious book' the gentleman had in his library, and this led to further acquaintanceship, friendship, and the gentleman's firm and continuing political support of Franklin. The moral of the tale, says Franklin, is the maxim 'He that has once done you a kindness will be more ready to do you another, than he whom you yourself have obliged.'<sup>12</sup> Without disputing this, however, we may add another: 'A love for and knowledge of books will admit you to circles from which you are otherwise socially excluded.'

Benjamin Franklin's participation in a pretext that served to differentiate readers as sharers of a culture separate from that of most in their society was tied initially to his physical movement from Boston to Philadelphia. In a manner of speaking, he had moved from a provincial society to a colonial society. The former, while tied to England, nevertheless maintained an identity essentially distinct from the English daily reality, one, therefore, resistant to the distinctions prevalent in English society. The latter, the colonial society, was far more directly reflective of English class distinctions. Getting ahead in it meant developing affiliations with the dominant class, and, as young Franklin perceived, his love of books was one such affiliation. Although all members of the upper class were not readers and collectors of books, still, these activities had strong class associations in the colonial society of Philadelphia as opposed to the essentially classless nature of advanced literacy

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 100-1.

in Boston, where for nearly a century reading had reinforced a shared body of ideas rather than separated readers from non-readers. The divide between such a readership, coextensive with the bases of society, and a literary culture characteristic of only one part of society is not strictly chronological. The two circumstances coexisted.

From this coexistence, however, a distinctive, general American literary culture did begin to take shape, as Franklin's adult career indicates. In 1732, he commences *Poor Richard's Almanack*, considering it, he says, to be 'a proper vehicle for conveying instruction among the common people, who bought scarce any other books.'<sup>13</sup> His perception is that the kind of reading best suited to the everyday life of the common man is different from the books that better-off, better-educated, more-leisured people read. Into the gap between the many who read little more than almanacs and the few who read books, Franklin seeks to insert a third class of readers through the development of library companies and philosophical societies. The members of such associations are tradesmen and craftsmen with a strong pragmatic sense of what they wish to take from a book; their use for it distinguishes them both from the social class of the almanac readers and the social class of the leisured readers of books, even as it promotes a new kind of book, new texts, that is, from the new pretext.

Franklin may be taken to illustrate this middle group that he did so much to consolidate, although it would be incorrect to confine him to it, since, with his characteristic proteanism, he also made the almanacs and contributed to belles lettres. Still, as a spokesman for this group, he emphasized its pragmatic demands on the book, and it is in this capacity that he admits that 'a book, indeed, sometimes debauched me from my work' but hastens to assure us that 'that was seldom, snug, and gave no scandal.'<sup>14</sup> The debauching book, we thus assume, was not of the kind the new audience required.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

The paramount importance of Franklin's identification of a new and influential class of readers is that this led him to discern that print itself was a pretext for a class of texts that grew from its very nature—its capacity to diffuse information rather than confirm and elaborate beliefs. Ideally, a book was something other than the promulgation in print of discourses shaped by an oral tradition and could generate a culture that separated its readers from nonreaders, not as a leisured but as a literate class. 'Amplification, or the Art of Saying Little in Much,' he writes, 'should only be allowed to Speakers.' He then goes on to describe what men may speak but should never put down in print, and in so doing provides a stronger ground than I have given for my assertion that even the extravagantly literate Cotton Mather writes from an oral rather than a print tradition. 'Let them have the Liberty,' he says of speakers:

of repeating the same Sentence in other Words; let them put an Adjective to every Substantive, and double every Substantive with a Synonima, for this is more agreeable than hauking, spitting, taking Snuff, or other Means of concealing Hesitation. Let them multiply Definitions, Comparisons, Similitudes, and Examples. Permit them to make a Detail of Causes and Effects, enumerate all the Consequences, and express one Half by Metaphor and Circumlocution. Nay, allow the Preacher to tell us whatever a Thing is negatively, before he begins to tell what it is affirmatively; and suffer him to divide and subdivide as far as *Two and fiftietbly*.<sup>15</sup>

But when a discourse is to be printed, 'bound down upon Paper,' as Franklin puts it, the brief, the perspicuous, and the direct is called for.

This critique is aimed principally at preachers, but Franklin also addresses that other group of notable orators, the lawyers, when he says of their books, 'You must abridge the Performances to understand them; and when you find how little there

<sup>15</sup> 'On Literary Style,' in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Leonard W. Labaree (New Haven, 1959-), 1:330.

is in a Writing of vast Bulk, you will be as much surpriz'd as a Stranger at the Opening of a Pumpkin.<sup>16</sup>

If John Foxe saw printing as the great instrument that would awaken men to religious truth, Franklin saw it as the great instrument that would awaken them to social truth. But social truth, unlike religious, was not conceived of as a monism. Its validation was not located in spiritual intuition but in rational understanding, and most often in that region of the rational called common sense. Republican ideology seized upon the printed word's capacity for diffusion and made it the principal instrument by means of which the citizens of the new Republic could be maintained in a condition of virtue, alert to detect the slightest sign of renascent tyranny.<sup>17</sup> However, the emphasis on printing's capacity to diffuse ideas—since it grew from the identification of a large, new class of readers, Franklin's middling class—also came increasingly to treat that group as the very definition of the American, and so to push out of literary consideration both the barely literate, who would soon, it was believed, rise into that group, and the leisured readers of belles lettres whose reading habits, it was believed, would be changed by the changed political condition of the nation. The political ideology most commonly associated with the Jeffersonian party thus returned unconsciously from the print tradition that had fueled its fervor to the oral tradition, because its pretext, like the earlier religious pretext, was that all elements of society were essentially of one mind on all vital ideological matters. C. J. Ingersoll, delivering the annual oration to the American Philosophical Society in 1823, proclaimed: 'The average of intellect and intellectual power in the United States, surpasses that of any part of Europe. But the range is

<sup>16</sup> 'On Amplification,' *ibid.*, 2:146.

<sup>17</sup> In his unpublished dissertation 'The Letters of the Republic: Literature and Print in Republican America' (Johns Hopkins University, 1985), Michael Warner examines in depth issues such as diffusion. I am indebted to his work for valuable suggestions on a number of topics that I merely touch on here.

not, in general, so great, either above or below the horizontal line.<sup>18</sup>

Federalists were not easy with the situation. Fisher Ames had grumbled, 'The question is not, what proportion are stone blind, or how many can see, when the sun shines, but what geniuses have arisen among us, like the sun and stars to shed life and splendor on our hemisphere.'<sup>19</sup> What Ames was addressing was the question of what rank America would maintain in the world for genius and literary attainments. His inquiry is not specifically concerned with books, but it does point to the dissolution in the Republic of the very oldest of all pretexts for literary works, that supplied by literary works themselves. Such a pretext depended upon the existence of a society articulated into classes, with the topmost affording patronage to literary art. As political parties arose in America in the wake of the French Revolution, different views about the right organization of society generated correspondingly contrasting views of the nature of national letters. Not only were specific literary works political, but the act of writing itself, regardless of content, was politicized.

In the early national period, some who aspired to a literary culture above Ingersoll's horizontal line turned to Germany, where learning did not appear, as it did in England, to be tied to inherited privilege. After his first sight of the library at the University of Göttingen, George Ticknor realized, as he said, that 'we found new professorships and build new colleges in abundance, but we buy no books.' 'I cannot better explain to you,' he wrote the Harvard librarian in 1816, 'the difference between our university in Cambridge and the one here, then by telling you that I hardly say too much when I say that it *consists* in the Library, and that in Cambridge the Library is

<sup>18</sup> C. J. Ingersoll, *A Discourse Concerning the Influence of America on the Mind* (Philadelphia, 1823), p. 13.

<sup>19</sup> 'American Literature,' *Works of Fisher Ames*, 2 vols., ed. W. B. Allen (Indianapolis, 1983), 1:23.

one of the last things thought and talked about,—that here they have forty professors and more than two hundred thousand volumes to instruct them, and in Cambridge twenty professors and less than twenty thousand volumes.<sup>20</sup>

The pretext that Ticknor wished to promote was one that saw the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake as consistent with the aspirations of a democratic people. But the Germany in which books abounded was far from democratic and the impressive literary activity that it contained—for the only culture that values books of the past is one that energetically produces the books of the present—depended in good part upon the political stagnation of its petty duchies. Ticknor sensed this political dimension when, in 1815, he wrote to Thomas Jefferson, 'Every day books appear on government and religion which in the rest of Europe would be suppressed by the state and in America would be put into the great *catalogus expurgatorius* of public opinion but which here are read as any other books and judged according to their literary and philosophical merit.'<sup>21</sup> In other words, the price of literary industry in Germany was the national acceptance of the social inconsequentiality of what was produced. Or, put another way, a learned industry was possible so long as the general population paid it no mind.

In general, the politicization of literary culture in the first decades of the nineteenth century followed the difference between the two major political parties. Federalist belief in the essential continuity of the British and American systems led to a valuing of similarities in their cultures, and American literature was seen as writing that was in accordance with the standards and conventions of English literature. These arose, it was argued, from the human condition and were modified by those English traits of civilization that the Americans in-

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Orin William Long, *Literary Pioneers* (Cambridge, Mass., 1935), pp. 12-13.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

herited from the English and held in common with them. An opponent, however, might well note that such standards and conventions had evolved as an inseparable part of specific social attitudes and structures, and that there could be no acceptance of the one without an endorsement of the other. The Democrats asserted that for the first time in modern history human nature was offered an opportunity in America to discover itself free from arbitrary social restraints, and that this made obsolete the literary conventions that had been developed in the service of aristocratic political systems. As James Madison said: 'The utterance of the national mind in America would be through small literature, rather than large, enduring works. After the schools and pulpits of the Union are all supplied, there will remain an immense number of educated sons of men of small property, who will have things to say, and all who can write will.'<sup>22</sup>

The literary dimension of Federalism is illustrated by John Thornton Kirkland, president of Harvard, who wrote: 'We are becoming familiar with wealth. Out of wealth grows luxury. If those enjoyments that flow from literature and taste are not emulated, we shall be exposed to that enervating and debasing luxury, the object of which is sensual indulgence, its immediate effect, vice, and its ultimate issue, publick degradation and ruin.'<sup>23</sup> Kirkland thus accepted the connection between literature and privilege but assigned it a vital political function because, willy-nilly, wealth will create an American aristocracy, and it will be far more dangerous than the older type of inherited aristocracy if it is not informed by taste.

In the shared outlook of such as Ames and Kirkland was the recognition of the inevitable layering of American society, a view that the Democrats were in theory reluctant to accept. Accordingly, they were challenged by the large gap that opened

<sup>22</sup> Harriet Martineau, *Retrospect of Western Travel*, 3 vols. (London, 1901), 1:202.

<sup>23</sup> Lewis P. Simpson, ed., *The Federalist Literary Mind* (Baton Rouge, 1962), p. 144.

between the middling society they promoted and the value of high learning and literature. Education was supposed to close the gap for all. But Jefferson's plan for education in Virginia, for example, in which social gradation is replaced by a rational, statistical system of selection through testing merit, carries in the very perfection of its symmetry signs of its impracticality. The progression of the worthy from common schooling to the university takes place in a vacuum from which all social determinants have been extracted. Moreover, in identifying the more learned as essentially of the same class as all others in society, such thought relapsed into the ideology of an outdated oral culture in which books reinforced rather than challenged or altered common beliefs. In theory, the common man was supposed to be adequate to whatever intellectual demands could be placed upon him. But in practice the writing addressed to him resembles oratory in congratulating him on his present condition rather than in guiding him to its inadequacies and a consequent improvement.

With political division an inevitable part of American life, some were beginning to perceive that the unity of American culture, the society's sense of self, would have to be furnished by something other than political belief. William Ellery Channing, Federalist by birth and social allegiance yet republican in his attachment to the writings of Rousseau, Price, Wollstonecraft, and Godwin, entered into a career in the ministry because he believed rational religion could be shown to provide Americans with a unifying definition such as that once offered by political ideology. In the event, his labors on behalf of religion as culture resulted in his establishing the Unitarian church as the most prominent force in the moral and intellectual life of New England, if not America. But in 1839, twenty years after the celebrated Baltimore sermon that gave Unitarianism its defining shape, Channing reviewed its progress with dismay at how effortlessly it had lapsed into a sect. It represented, he said, 'a protest of the understanding against absurd

dogma, rather than a work of deep religious principle.<sup>24</sup> He insisted that the minister's function was that of being a guide to the common culture, rather than the agent of a new church parallel with other churches in its relation to society.

In pursuit of his ideal of religion as culture, Channing championed the position that American men of letters need not, on one hand, develop a reliance on, let alone come only from, the wealthy class, nor, on the other, depend upon pleasing the multitude. Himself a gifted orator in a society that accorded leadership to masters of the spoken word, Channing also saw that reading was bound to overtake and surpass hearing in importance, and he welcomed the consequences. Literature, he said, 'is a much higher work than the communication of a gifted intellect in discourse.'<sup>25</sup> This is not just because writing can reach a wider audience than speaking, but because the literary word is superior in kind to the spoken word. For Channing, literature is thought compressed by lucid order and attractive form into a powerful concentrate able to expand and multiply in the solution of the reader's mind, whereas oratory is thought diluted for easy, instant, and temporary assimilation. The former can elevate the reader to a higher level than that on which it finds him, whereas the latter must remain on the level of the hearer.

Accordingly, Channing deplored the fact that Americans, even as they clamored against foreign manufactures, produced only oratory and imported from Europe 'the nobler and more important fabrics,'<sup>26</sup> that is, books. He believed that 'works of taste and genius, and profound investigations of philosophy, can only be estimated and enjoyed through a culture and power corresponding to that from which they sprung'<sup>27</sup>; so that to

<sup>24</sup> William Henry Channing, *Memoir of William Ellery Channing*, 3 vols., (Boston, 1848), 2:394.

<sup>25</sup> 'National Literature,' in *The Works of William E. Channing, D.D.*, 6 vols. (Boston, 1847), 1:248.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 260.

rely upon an imported culture was to assume attitudes unsuited to America. And accordingly, Channing himself sought to make a mark as a literary essayist. He was so successful in the endeavor that in the 1820s and 1830s he was commonly regarded as one of America's three great literary men, together with Irving and Bryant.

With Channing our chapter would seem to be complete: the religious pretext of the Puritans yielded to the political pretext of republicanism; this, in turn, fractured into mere politics; and religion reemerged not as a reassertion of the religious spirit as such but as the basis for a separate literary culture in which the reading and making of books were central. This culture mediated between the members of society and the world, providing a measure of their common differentiation from natural circumstance. But even as Channing's career was at its peak, a sometime disciple of his turned on his ideas, or, if you prefer, moved beyond them, and announced that in America 'instead of Man Thinking we have the bookworm. Hence, the book-learned class, who value books as such; not as related to nature and the human constitution, but as making a sort of Third Estate with the world and the soul. Hence, the restorers of readings, the emendators, the bibliomaniacs of all degrees.'<sup>28</sup> What Ralph Waldo Emerson thus termed a 'Third Estate' had been scarcely won before he attacked it, refusing to accept a third to the first of man and the second of nature. Books, he said, 'are for nothing but to inspire.'<sup>29</sup> They are for 'the scholar's idle times,'<sup>30</sup> and even then, he declared, 'the discerning will read in his Plato or Shakespeare, only that least part,—only the authentic utterances of the oracle;—all the rest he rejects, were it never so many times Plato's or Shakespeare's.'<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'The American Scholar,' in *Essays & Lectures*, Library of America edition (New York, 1983), p. 57.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

The 'authentic utterances of the oracle' has a familiar ring to it, returning us as it does to the testimony of the Spirit and the dependence of author upon authority seated in the reader rather than in authorship. This return, moreover, occurs, as literary history maintains, not as a retrograde motion in the narrative of the painful emergence of a national literature, but as the central act in the shaping of the American literary tradition. The consequences of Emerson's thought, reflected in Thoreau and Whitman, refracted in Hawthorne, Melville, Dickinson, and the Jameses, constitutes the weightier part of those books that America regards as its classic literature. Yet the selfsame thought challenges the integrity of books and advises society to locate its sense of self elsewhere.

This is not necessarily a contradiction, but it is certainly a paradox. The history of American literature and the history of the book do not run parallel but diverge and, at times, collide. There is a larger history that may comprehend these different histories, but it is yet to be written. Before it can be written it must be envisioned, and my observations have been meant to serve this end. My talk of pretexts, then, finally amounts to yet another pretext, one for which such a history will supply the text.

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