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More Notes for a Work Upon the Origin and Nature of Puritanism

The Puritan background.—Dr. Leon Kellner, in his small but extremely acute work upon the history of American literature, accurately sets forth the causes behind the almost total lack of aesthetic aspiration among the original Puritans. The causes behind the same deficiency in the citizens of the new republic are quite as manifest. These citizens, in the overwhelming majority—and despite much hollow romance about fugitive aristocrats—were men of the simplest peasant stocks, and with traditions of unbroken aesthetic bleakness behind them. Moreover, they were face to face with the exigent problems of existence in a country that had yet to reach any coherence of social organization, and was but imperfectly explored, delimited and defended, and they were without the inspirational influence of a court and an aristocracy, for the only aristocrats they knew were, on the one hand, the characteristically ignorant junkers of the great estates, and, on the other hand, the even more boorish magnates of the city bourgeoisie. Above all, they were incessantly hag-ridden by political difficulties, both internal and external, of an inordinate complexity, and these occupied all the leisure they could steal from the laborious work of every day. It is difficult for an American of the present time, for all the tumult of our campaigns, to understand the capital part that politics played in American thought and life in the days before the Civil War. Setting aside religion, it was literally the only concern of the people. All men of ability and ambition turned to it for self-expression; it engaged the press to the exclusion of everything else; drawing the best literary talent into its service—Franklin, Jefferson and Lincoln may well stand as examples—it left the cultivation of belles lettres to women and second-rate men. And when, breaking through these bonds of indifference, some chance first-rate man gave himself over to a purely aesthetic expression, his reward was not only neglect, but even a sort of ignominy, as if such enterprises were not for men of self-respect. I need not point to Poe and Whitman, the one almost allowed to starve and the other proceeded against with the utmost rigors of outraged Philistinism.

II

Literature, in brief, was clearly disassociated from the actual struggle for existence. Save one counts in such crude political tracts as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, one finds it difficult, sweeping the whole literary history of that period, to find a single work offering an artistic presentation of the life that Americans were then living. Later on the time found historians and interpreters, and in one work, at least, to wit, *Huckleberry Finn*, there appeared the elements of the grand literature that is perhaps to come; but no such impulse to representation showed itself contemporaneously; there was not even the crude sentimentalization of here and now that one finds in the popular novels of today.

Fenimore Cooper filled his romances not with the people about him, but with the Indians beyond the sky-line, and made them half fabulous to boot. Irving told fairy tales about the forgotten Knickerbockers; Hawthorne turned backward to the Puritans of Plymouth Rock; Longfellow to the Acadians and the prehistoric Indians; Emerson took flight from

earth altogether; even Poe sought refuge in a land of fantasy. It was only the frank second-raters—e.g., Whittier—who ventured to turn the life around them to literary uses, and the banality of the result is a sufficient indication of the crudeness of contemporary taste, and the mean position assigned to the art of letters. This was preeminently the era of the moral tale, the Sunday-school book. Literature was conceived, not as a thing in itself, but merely as a handmaiden to politics or religion. The great celebrity of Emerson in New England was not the celebrity of a literary artist, but that of a theologian and metaphysician; he was esteemed in much the same way that Jonathan Edwards had been esteemed. Even down to our own time, indeed, his vague and empty philosophizing has been put above his undeniable capacity for graceful utterance, and it remained for Dr. Kellner to consider him purely as a literary artist, and to give him due praise for his undeniable skill.

III

The Civil War brought that era of utter sterility to an end. The shock of it completely reorganized the American scheme of things, and even made certain important changes in the national Puritanism, or, at all events, in its machinery. Whitman, whose career straddled, so to speak, the four years of the war, was the leader—and, for a long while, the only trooper—of a double revolt. On the one hand he offered a courageous challenge to the intolerable prudishness and dirty-mindedness of Puritanism, and on the other hand he boldly sought the themes and even the modes of expression of his poetry in the arduous, contentious and highly melodramatic life that lay all about him. Whitman, however, was clearly before his time. His countrymen could see him only as immoralist; save for a pitiful few of them, they were dead to any understanding of his stature as artist, and even unaware that such a category of men existed. He was put down as an invader of the public decencies, a disturber of the public peace; even his eloquent war poems, surely the best of all his work, were insufficient to get him a hearing; the sentimental rubbish of “The Blue and the Gray” and the supernaturalism of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” were far more to the public taste.

Where Whitman failed, indeed, all subsequent explorers of the same field have failed with him, and the great war has left no more mark upon American letters than if it had never been fought. Nothing remotely approaching the bulk and beam of Tolstoi's *War and Peace*, or, to descend to a smaller scale, Zola's *The Attack on the Mill*, has come out of it. Its appeal to the national imagination was undoubtedly of the most profound character; it colored politics for 50 years, and is today a dominating influence in the thought of whole sections of the American people. But in all that stirring up there was no upheaval of artistic consciousness, for the plain reason that there was no artistic consciousness there to heave up, and so all we have in the way of Civil War literature is a few conventional melodramas, a few forgotten short stories by Ambrose Bierce and Stephen Crane and a half dozen idiotic popular songs in the manner of Randall's “Maryland, My Maryland.”

In the '70s and '80s, with the appearance of such men as Henry James, William Dean Howells, Mark Twain and Bret Harte, a better day seemed to be dawning. Here, after a full century of infantile romanticizing, were four men who at least deserved respectful consideration as literary artists, and, what is more, three of them turned from the conventionalized themes of the past to the teeming and colorful life that lay under their noses. But this promise of better things was soon found to be no more than a promise. Mark Twain, after *The Gilded Age*, slipped back into romanticism, and was presently in there before the Civil War, and finally in the Middle Ages. Harte, a brilliant technician, like O. Henry after him, had displayed his whole stock when he had shown his technique; histories were not even superficially true to the life they presumed to depict; one searched them in vain for an interpretation of it; they were simply idle tales.

As for Howells and James, both quickly showed that timorousness and reticence which are the distinguishing marks of the Puritan, even in his most intellectual incarnations. The American scene that they depicted with such meticulous care was chiefly peopled with marionettes; they shrank, characteristically, from those larger clashes of will and emotion which one finds in all truly first rate literature; in particular, they shrank from any interpretation of life which grounded itself upon any sense of its endless and inexplicable tragedy. In the vast combat of instincts and aspirations about them they saw only a feeble jousting of comedians. Their reaction to it was not visible in pity, but merely in giggles. Here again one saw the Philistine distrust of a square facing of the facts of existence; the Philistine exaltation of empty social customs, moralities and formulae; the imbecile assumption that, since God was in His Heaven, all was essentially well with the world; in brief, one saw what Nietzsche called "the green-grazing contentment of the herd," and of its prophets and artists no less than of its constituent nonentities.

V

But in addition to this Puritan impulse from within, there is laid upon American literature the heavy hand of a Puritan authority from without, and no examination of the history and condition of that literature can be of much value which does not take it constantly into account, and establish the means of its influence and operation. The one, of course, has depended upon the other. A people unconvinced of the pervasiveness of sin, the supreme importance of moral problems, the need of harsh and inquisitorial laws—in brief, of the whole Puritan theological and political apparatus—would never have permitted the growth of such curious flowers as Comstockery, so obnoxious and so incomprehensible to all foreigners.

There has never been any question before the American public, whether political or economic, religious or military, which did not resolve itself, soon or late, into a moral question. Even so dull a row as that over the currency produced its vast crop of saints and succubi, of martyrs and Pontius Pilates, of crimes, heathenries and crowns of thorns. Nor has there ever been any surcease of that spiritual eagerness which lay at the bottom of the original Puritan's moral obsession; the American has remained, from the very beginning, a man genuinely interested in the eternal mysteries, and fearful of missing their correct solution. The frank theocracy of the New England colonies had scarcely succumbed to the libertarianism of a godless Crown before there came the Great Awakening of 1734, with its orgies of homiletics and its restorational talmudism to the first place among polite sciences. The Revolution, of course, brought a setback: the colonists faced so urgent a need of unity in politics that they declared a sort of *Treuga Dei* in religion, and that truce, armed though it was, left its imprint upon the First Amendment to the Constitution. But immediately the young Republic emerged from the stresses of adolescence, a missionary army took to the field again, and before long the Asbury revival was paling that of Whitefield, Wesley and Jonathan Edwards, not only in its hortatory violence but also in the length of its lists of slain.

Thereafter, down to the outbreak of the Civil War, the country was rocked, again and again, by furious attacks upon the devil. On the one hand, this great campaign took a purely theological form with a hundred new and fantastic creeds as its fruits; on the other hand, it crystallized into the hysterical temperance movement the '30s and '40s, which penetrated to the very floor of Congress and put "dry" laws upon the statute books of 10 states; and on the third hand, as it were, it established a prudery in speech and thought from which we are still but half delivered. Such ancient and innocent words as "bitch" and "bastard" disappeared from the American language; Bartlett tells us, indeed, in his *Dictionary of Americanisms*, that even "bull" was softened to "male cow." This was the Golden Age of euphemism, as it was

of euphuism; the worst inventions of the English mid-Victorians were adopted and improved. The word “woman” became a term of opprobrium, verging close upon downright libel; legs became the inimitable “limbs”; the “stomach” began to run from the “bosom” to the pelvic arch; pantaloons faded into “unmentionables”; the newspapers spun their parts of speech into such gossamer webs as “a statutory offense,” “a house of questionable repute” and “an interesting condition.”

And meanwhile the Good Templars and Sons of Temperance swarmed in the land like a plague of locusts. There was not a hamlet without its uniformed phalanx, its affecting exhibit of reformed drunkards. The Kentucky Legislature succumbed to a traveling recruiting officer, and two-thirds of the members signed the pledge. The national House of Representatives took recess after recess to hear eminent excoriators of the Rum Demon, and more than a dozen of its members forsook their duties to carry the new gospel to the bucolic heathen—the vanguard, one may note in passing, of innumerable Chautauquans of later years.