The American Mythic Network: A Comparative Exploration into Mythological and Ideological Perspectives on American Culture and the Operation of Literature Within It.

By Edward Wright

Submitted to meet the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English, University of Sydney, 1999.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr David Kelly for his critical acumen, intellectual generosity and for helping me believe in the possibility of pulling off this enterprise. I would also like to thank Natalya Lusty for her critical comments on aspects of the work and encouragement, particularly in the final stages.

In what was frequently an impecunious and solitary period, I would like to thank my family and friends for their help and encouragements at innumerable moments over the course of the degree, particularly my parents, Helen and Trick Wright, my brothers and sister, Seb Smee, Victoria Johnstone, Steve Cannane and Tom Roth, although there have been many others.

Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Chapter One 9

A comparative consideration of ideology and mythology from a theoretical and historical perspective.

Chapter Two 60

The foundations of the American mythic network.

1. Mythic Foundations, States of Nature and the Nation 70
2. America's Mythic Foundations as Tensional Discourse 89
3. The Composition and Continuities of the American Mythic Network 124

Chapter Three 145

Transformations in the American mythic network through modernisation in the Gilded Age, with a focus on the realist novel in the cultural complex of the mythic network.

1. The American Mythic Network as a Middle Class Imaginary 153
2. Transformations in the American Mythic Network During the Gilded Age 162
3. The Novel in Relation to Gilded Age Social Transformations and the American Mythic Network 185
4. The Tensional Mythic Network and Horatio Alger's Republican Virtue 197
5. Dreiser, Social Distinction and the Modern American Mythic Network 209
6. The Novel's Reflexive Operations in the Modern American Mythic Network 240

Chapter Four 255

The American mythic network in postmodernity, with an interrogation of the role of the American novel within it, particularly Tom Wolfe's, *Bonfire of the Vanities.*

1. New York and the Modern American Mythic Network 292

2. Tom Wolfe, Contemporary American Literature and the Modern American Mythic Network 309

Conclusion 345

Bibliography 348

Introduction

This thesis has its origins in the intention to explore aspects of New York fiction in the 1980s. In the course of researching the literary heritage of New York, as a backdrop to my study, I was fascinated by the extent to which the fictions I was reading tended to speak both within themselves and among themselves to a broader level of cultural consciousness which in this work I have termed the American mythic network. This phenomenon was particularly marked because it was something that was considerably less apparent in my knowledge and experience of my own society, Australia. When I embarked on a research trip to the United States for three months in 1997, I was also struck by the extent to which this consciousness pervaded American culture, its media, its political rhetoric, its mode of distributing the social space and the everyday interactions of its people. As a consequence I became increasingly intrigued by how this phenomenon could be conceptualised and how this conceptualisation might be relevant to a reading of American fiction.

In the course of my research I soon realised that the markedness of this phenomenon in American culture had had an analogous effect on critical and scholarly discourse about America, and that this consciousness has been a consistent area of exploration in the interdisciplinary field of American Studies. Coming from a background in literary criticism, I found myself engaging with the classic texts of what has become known as 1950s myth criticism, works including R.W.B. Lewis' *American Adam*, Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* and Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land*. My

encounter with these texts produced a number of questions which I have attempted to answer below. While many of the insights of this myth criticism remained fresh for me, in my further reading it became apparent that the positions they took had been superseded on a number of fronts. The most obvious of these was the replacement of the idea of myth by the concept of ideology. This seemed to be the consequence of two distinct but nonetheless interrelated sets of historical circumstances. The first is a matter of shifting critical contexts, which can be related to the influence of Marxist criticism in the academies from the mid 1960s on. While Marx had always had an influence in American Studies, for instance in Vernon Parrington's *Main Currents in American Thought*, the counter-cultural movement in the humanities in the 1960s and 1970s tended in part to distance itself from the perceived conservatism of some Cold War criticism by the deployment of Marxist theorists such as Louis Althusser, Lukacs, Gramsci and Herbert Marcuse. As a consequence aspects of American culture which were once analysed through the prism of myth increasingly came to be considered in terms of ideology. This shift was further magnified by an emerging tendency of literary criticism to figure itself as political action. Literary texts and the criticism of them increasingly became a realm of a virtual politics whose relays to the politics of actual social change were complex and not always unproblematic. This also tended to affirm the ascendancy of ideology over myth as a mode of cultural conceptualisation, a tendency which survived as post-structuralist criticism came to dominate the humanities from the 1980s on.

The other factor at work here that became increasingly apparent in my reading was the extent to which the opposition of myth and ideology seemed to follow a division between the pre-modern and the modern. At the level of the conceptualisation of

cultures this was a consequence of the continued presence of Enlightenment trajectories in the discourses of the humanities, although the power and reach of these beliefs was and remains far broader. The modern western world with its goal of a rational society was not interested in thinking about itself in terms of myth. Myth was relegated to the study of primitive societies, comparative religion and the classical past, or alternatively a way of identifying retrograde thinking and practices in the modern domain. From this perspective, one of the strengths of the myth school of criticism was its almost exclusive focus on the canon of classic American literature, a period which largely predates the urbanisation and industrialisation which took hold in America after the Civil War. In turn this dichotomy has fitted neatly into a historical narrative which sees the Gilded Age in America as a period of rupture where the ideals of the foundation of the American republic were sacrificed by the imperatives of the industrial capitalist complex. While the ideals of the Republic remained, the perceived impossibility of their implementation often meant that they were nostalgically reinscribed in cultural considerations as myth and, furthermore, as a myth which spoke for the lost potential of the foundational dream. As such the republican myth became a site from which internal criticisms of the new industrialised and imperial America which emerged from the Gilded Age could be launched.

While this cross-temporal comparison is a valid function of a mythic network, the complex of narratives which can be located around the phenomena of myth, its replacement by ideology, America and the modern, create some important questions which frame the investigations in this thesis. One of them derives from an awareness

of a paradox in the thinking of Claude Levi-Strauss.[1] If mythic networks are in a state of constant transformation, as he argues in his study of the role of myth in primitive societies, then why in modern societies, as he also argues, is myth replaced by politics and its adjunct, ideology. I became interested in thinking about how transformative mythic networks might be conceptualised in the context of modern western cultures. Myth and mythic networks, it seemed, might be a productive way of thinking multivalently about culture, a way of looking at the complexity of cultural connections without the binary and oppositional tendencies implicit in the heritage of ideological thought. From my research in American literature and culture, I became interested in how the insights of the myth school of criticism might be applied to modern America and its literature as a way of exploring the potential of transformative mythic networks as a conceptual tool in the exegesis and analysis of contemporary American culture.

Whereas 1950s myth criticism had concentrated on classic American literature, alternatively known as the American literary renaissance, in looking to understand transformations in the mythic network, The Gilded Age and the operations of the realist and naturalist novel seemed to be particularly crucial. I did not want particularly to add to the wealth of scholarship on classic American literature as this was territory that from a mythic perspective seemed fairly well delineated. Nonetheless, it also felt important to articulate and retheorise aspects of the foundation myths of America in the light of developments in thinking since the 1950s. This was necessary in order to consolidate a position of the American mythic

[1] This paradox can be found in Claude Levi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," in *Journal of American Folklore,* Vol.LXXVIII, No.270, 1955, 428-444, which argues the relacement of myth with politics. Compare with Claude Levi-Strauss, *From Honey to Ashes* [1966], trans. John and Doreen Weightman (Harper and Row, New York: 1973) p.354, which argues the transformative nature of mythic networks.

network's transformation about the locus of modernisation. It is essential to have a perspective on what was before its transformations can be understood.

Any study of transformation is ultimately to do with patterns of continuity and their relationship to patterns of change. My inquiries into mythic networks ended up where my research interests had started, with the conditions of American postmodernity and how this is represented in some New York fictions of the 1980s. Other than on the grounds of personal intellectual satisfaction, my reason for doing this is to consolidate a perspective on the American mythic network by the extension of my consideration of it into three historical periods, the pre-modern, modern and postmodern. At the broadest level in my investigations of New York and its fiction in the 1980s I am setting up a framework for investigating the usefulness of myth in the understanding of postmodern culture. It is also a way of assessing the pervasiveness of modern transformations of the mythic network into the postmodern era. From a literary perspective I am specifically interested in how the mythic perspective I have taken impacts upon debates concerning the appropriateness of the realist novel to the postmodern world, and more broadly the role of the novel itself.

The chapters in this thesis are broadly organised around the series of arguments I have outlined above. Chapter One deals with how to define myth on its own terms, in relation to ideology and the concept of the mythic network. It deals with the complex heritages of meaning for these large and slippery concepts, and it also deals with the heritage of myth's mistreatment in the consideration of modern western cultures. In Chapter Two I develop these formal considerations into a figuring of the idea of mythic networks through looking at the foundation of the American republic. I discuss

the historical context of the foundation and how it relates to Benedict Anderson's notion of the nation as an "imagined community", and the way the national mythic network operates as a determinant in the distribution of the social space.[2] I also look at some contemporary debates, such as arguments of original intention, and how they point to the continued significance of and interpretative problems with the mythic foundation in current American society.

In Chapter Three I move to a consideration of how the American mythic network changed under the conditions of modernisation. Here my inquiry is concerned with the relays between a number of distinct phenomena. As a way of countering the nostalgia for the dream of an originary America, I consider how America as a modern nation was made possible by the technological advances which occurred in the Gilded Age. In conjunction with this I look at how discourses such as Social Darwinism were involved in refiguring the American mythic network by refiguring its foundations. I also consider how the American mythic network has tended to be centred in questions of the constitution and identity of the middle classes. In formulating an idea of what a modern mythic network might be, it is important to consider the relays by which the emergence of an urbanised consumer society affected the distribution of the social space, by the institution of new modes of social distinction. In this chapter, I argue how this evidences an interpenetration of the mythic and the material in the form of the modern commodity. In my analysis of literary texts, I look at attitudes towards these transformations in texts by Horatio Alger, W.D. Howells and Theodore Dreiser, and the way that the novel functioned as a technology for the imagining of national

---

[2] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (Verso, London and New York: 1993).

and urban communities. Finally, I discuss how the novel itself is a form whose consumption confers social distinction, as a way of moving towards a consideration of how it and the literary cultural complex in general function reflexively as observer and participant in the domain marked by the commodity and the emergence of modern modes of social distinction.

Chapter Four is concerned with how transformations in the modern American mythic network can be figured in terms of America and its significance in the postmodern era. While many conceptions of the postmodern have tended to emphasise a sense of rupture with the modern, I was struck in my investigations by the continuities between modern and postmodern America. In this chapter I look at the privileging of certain perspectives within the American humanities and some literary aspects of contemporary American Studies as a way of challenging again the vogue of ideology as a conceptual tool in the interpretation of contemporary American culture. Finally, I provide a reading of Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*, which shows the continued validity of the realist novel as a form for imagining community in the postmodern era, and how this might be connected to my figuring of the role of the mythic perspective in the interpretation of contemporary culture.[3]

I would like to stress how this work is designed around a series of questions, for which there are no definitive or final positions. In my deployment of the mythic network as a conceptual tool in the analysis of American society and its cultural forms, I am attempting to bring to the fore connections which have remained

[3] Tom Wolfe, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (Picador, London: 1988).

underutilised in the development of social understanding. I consider the following chapters to be exploratory in their exegesis with the intention of foregrounding the fact that for all the efforts and expenditure of belief since the Enlightenment, society is as irrational as it ever was. I have conceived this work as an acceptance of this fact and as a beginning to an understanding of some of the reasons why.

Chapter One

It is sometimes tempting to think of the contemporary as radically severed from all that has gone before. In the modern world we are used to talking of the anomie of the individual in the face of collapsing tradition, or the existential angst of the harried subject living among the rush of the modern metropolis. Philosophers talk about the whirlpool effect of societies where changes are unable to settle into the familiar before being superseded too.[1] Many look back with fondness at the apparent simplicities of the past - the small tightly knit communities, the sense of having time - all of course from the perspective of the many advantages modernity has brought to the western lifestyle. As Frank Kermode has eloquently argued, there is always the temptation of people to perceive the present as enduring a state of social crisis.[2] Out of this sense of crisis, there are always calls for a return to traditional values, or alternatively for even more change in order that a social vision be fully brought to fruition. Of course, social visions can easily be overtaken by their unintended effects. Dreams of reason and utopian revolution too frequently lead to new modes of exploitation or the shedding of unnecessary blood. Conversely it is unlikely that situations can be "saved" by a conscious regression to superseded values in the hope that the conditions of the world will follow. Nonetheless these values continue to have an impact and it is difficult to argue that they are ever completely superseded. If they are available to our

---

[1] See for instance the work of Jean Baudrillard and his concept of fatal theory in *Fatal Strategies* [1983], trans. P. Beitchman and W.G.J. Niesluchowski, ed. J. Fleming (Semiotext(e), New York: 1990) or "The Anorexic Ruins" in eds D. Kamper and C. Wulf, *Looking Back at the End of the World* (Semiotext(e)), New York: 1989)
[2] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford University Press: 1967).

imaginations then it is fair to say they are still in play as far as the constitution of society and culture are concerned. This in turn proposes further questions. To what extent, for instance, does a society continue to play out the values of its origins and history? In this thesis I intend to explore aspects of these issues and quandaries through the cultural - and particularly literary - networks of America in an attempt to further the understanding of such matters.

For centuries philosophers have been arguing that the only certainty is change itself. As Heraclitus, the pre-socratic Greek philosopher argued, you cannot step into the same river twice. Modernity has constituted an era where change as a principle has been valorised. Until recently progress has been accorded a moral status. Complex theories of history and the dialectic have emerged to interpret social change, however inappropriately, within the realm of intended effects. The "intentional fallacy" applies as much to the reading of real actions in history as it does to the writing of novels. As a consequence, theories of modernity have tended to underestimate the power of continuity. Part of this thesis is therefore concerned with redressing a perceived imbalance between change and continuity in contemporary cultural thought.

Because my entry into these issues has been through an attempt to understand the relationship of American literature and society in the 1980s, I have found myself led to an attempt to understand the symbolic order of America and the role of change and continuity within it. This has taken me from New York fiction of the 1980s back to the foundational era of the American Republic via the era known as The Gilded Age. To understand patterns of continuity and change demands to an extent a trans-historical perspective. In doing so I have tried to look at the ways in which the nativity

of the American nation enacted symbolic principles which continue to pervade American life today, and also how some of America's foundational values have been circumscribed by the conditions of America's development and its current imperial prowess.

In dealing with the symbolic network of America, the immediate term that comes to mind is the American Dream. The "American Dream" is one of those difficult concepts that is continually evoked yet proves unwieldy and elusive under attempts to pin it down. Its tendency to produce itself across an enormous range of contexts is discomfiting, as it is doubtful that any version of the American Dream is entirely the same. Although the term was first deployed by Henry Adams in his *History of the USA* (1884), many, if not most, of the values and narratives considered integral to "the American Dream" substantially predate this. In fact by the time Adams coined the term some of the conditions which provided the context for these values and narratives had been largely superseded in American history.[3] Nonetheless the term possesses some semantic and associational attractions. The American Dream carries with it the mythic sense of dreaming as a collective cultural imaginary in the way that Australian Aboriginal cultures often refer to their mythological corpus as "The Dreaming." Moreover, there is no emphasis placed upon the rational in dreaming. It is a zone where paradoxes abound and can be made sense of without necessarily being resolved. The American Dream also captures the sense of individual aspirations, which are so important to the way American society operates. This is important

[3] For a brief and by no means exhaustive account of the genealogy of the usage of the term "American Dream" see Vyacheslav Shestakov, "American Dream and American Culture", in ed. Tibor Frank, *The Origins and Originality of American Culture: Papers Presented at the International Conference in American Studies, Budapest, 9-11 April, 1980* (Akademiai Kiado, Budapest: 1984) pp.583-590.

because it provides a conceptual connection between the individual and the collective: the patterns of their interaction being crucial to the operations and uniqueness of the American symbolic network.

As an umbrella concept, "the American Dream" draws a variety of narratives and values within its meanings. There is, however, no need to be overly concerned from a critical perspective with the potential for internal tensions and contradictions, as these tensions are a large part of the American Dream's tenacity as a producer of American meaning. It is inherently polyvalent and pluralist, a massive cumulation of influences and inferences that traverses the entire temporal span of European settlement in America, and its myriad reproductions of itself throughout American history are *essentially* related to the dynamics of American culture. It is capable of reproducing itself at virtually any point in the matrix of American culture, from the blockbuster film, the high literary masterpiece, the shampoo commercial, the sermon, the TV soapie, the academic monograph, the theme park, the presidential address, the pop song, the newspaper, and so on; to the talk, thoughts, dreams and actions of hundreds of millions of American subjects, living and dead, and most likely hundreds of millions of non-American subjects who have dreamed of America as the place where they are not.

One approach to the conceptualisation of the American Dream is to think of it as a mythic network. Although the American Dream is often identified with the mythic, the implications of this have not been fully articulated. In this chapter I intend to develop the idea of the mythic network in general and argue why mythic frameworks can be preferable to ideological frameworks, even in modern and postmodern

contexts, and particularly in terms of the symbolic operations of America. I also intend to mount a defence of the mythic perspective as an approach to contemporary culture by showing how the mythic has been debased by the heritage of its critical and philosophical reception in discourse grounded in the rational obsessions of the Enlightenment. This will provide a degree of theoretical underpinning for the more historically and textually specific explorations of American culture in the following chapters.

While this chapter will focus on the intricacies of the mythic, it is important to note how strongly contingent my conception of the mythic is upon the idea of the network. Although the mythic is the more contentious term of the two, the very idea of the cultural network is a difficult one to grasp in all its intricacies. As it adds richness and complexity to models of culture, the cultural network also brings with it problems of analytical clarity. There has in recent times been considerable work in the theory of networks. Indeed the term "network" has become a buzzword in a number of contemporary domains. The proliferation of networks such as the internet and its subsidiary networks through the technological phenomena of the "Information Age" and the foregrounding of the network as a map of inter-personal relationships, particularly in professional cultures, are just two examples of the way networks are influencing the form, content and representation of contemporary western culture.

The difficulties of thinking the social in terms of networks has never been more elegantly and succinctly expressed than by Norbert Elias when he argues:

> Our tools of thinking are not mobile enough adequately to grasp network phenomena, our words not yet supple enough to express this simple state of affairs simply. To get a closer view of this kind of interrelationship one might think of the object from which the concept of the network is derived, a woven net. In such a net there are many individual threads linked together. Yet neither the totality of the net, nor the form taken by each thread in it, can be understood in terms of a single thread alone or even all the threads considered singly; it is understood solely in terms of the way they are linked, their relationship to each other. This linking gives rise to a system of tensions to which each single thread contributes, each in a somewhat different manner according to its place and function in the totality of the net. The form of the individual thread changes if the tension and structure of the whole net change. Yet this net is nothing other than a linking of individual threads; and within the whole each thread still forms a unity in itself; it has a unique position and form within it.
>
> This is no more than an image, rigid and inadequate like all images of this kind. But as a model for thinking about human networks it is sufficient to give a somewhat clearer idea of the manner in which a net of many units gives rise to an order which cannot be studied in the individual units. However, the relations between people can never be expressed in simple spatial forms. And it is a static model. It serves its purpose somewhat better if one imagines the net in constant movement as an incessant weaving and unweaving of connections.[4]

There are several things worth remarking upon here. Elias' model of the network perceives the positioning of individual strands according to "a system of tensions." This is crucial because it tends to counter dialectical models of reading culture. There are too many points of influence for a dialectical model of tension to be adequate. Furthermore the network is set in space-time (they are shapes which alter in time) whereas dialectical models of culture are largely set in time (the struggle and synthesis of opposites). Network models of culture from this perspective are I believe more open to ideas of continuity and more elastic in the consideration of the recrudescences and recontextualisations which are marked in the operations of cultures.

---

[4] Norbert Elias, *The Society of Individuals* [1987], trans. Edmund Jephcott (Basil Blackwell, Oxford: 1991) p.32.

The difficulty about thinking in networks, which Elias recognises, is that of accounting for the effects of the network's reorganisation as there is no still point from which to observe and measure change. This becomes more difficult the more dynamic the system is, which is one reason why the spatial social models of structuralism have tended to operate most clearly in terms of pre-modern societies. While binary explanations are revealed as inadequate by the network schema, there remains a recognition by Elias of the contingencies and approximations involved in the representation of living networks. The approximate nature of network analysis is consequently exacerbated by the factors of scale, diversity and rate of change, three critical reasons for the difficulty of either governing or comprehending modern western societies, and concomitantly reason for the unfashionableness of the macrocosmic perspective in much contemporary critical thought. On the other hand the network model with its dynamic multiplicity of cause and effect reminds us there is much important work remaining in cultural analysis that, however incompletely and approximately, attempts to understand phenomena in terms of an image of the whole. It is this conceptually intangible notion of the whole - the sum of all the connections in the American mythic network and an understanding of their movements - which lies like an unfinishable thought and an invisible inspiration in many of the explorations this thesis chooses to make.

The concepts of myth and networks work well together precisely because of their ultimate orientation towards the whole. With myth too this can create definitional difficulties. As Eric Gould argues:

> The temptation is to say that given theories of its thematic form and its importance as a theory of the imagination [and I would argue culture too], myth is now so encyclopaedic a term that it means everything or nothing. We can find in it whatever we want to say is essential about the way humans try to interpret their place on earth. Myth is a synthesis of values which uniquely manages to mean most things to most men.[5]

This difficulty of defining myth is discussed succinctly by William G. Doty in the first chapter of his excellent *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals.*[6] Doty argues convincingly against monomythic interpretations of myth systems in favour of an inclusive rather than exclusive definition of myth. Monomythic mythographies have been many and varied. Joseph Campbell's renowned *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* is perhaps a classic example of how mythographies can tend to universalise out of the specific.[7] Monomythic theories such as Campbell's have tended to extrapolate from the specific to the universal by means of dialectical encounters. While such insights are rich and valuable within themselves they tend to obscure the idea of the mythic network as a system of tensions with the colonising impulses of privileging a particular mode of mythic narrative and the resolutions it entails. In introducing a *comprehensive working definition* of myth, Doty adumbrates the position that:

> Rather than simple and easily memorized statements that suggest that myth does this. . . or that, a definition is provided here that includes many more factors than normally are included in traditional definitions. **It should provide a step towards an inclusive matrix for understanding many types of myths,** myths that function differently within different social settings yet share a sufficient number of common features among those of the definition to be recognizable as "myth".[8]

---

[5] Eric Gould, *Mythical Intentions in Modern Literature* (Princeton University Press: 1981) p.5.
[6] William G. Doty, *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals* (University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa: 1986).
[7] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* [1949], 2nd edition (Princeton University Press: 1968).
[8] Doty, pp.10-11.

The critical term which I have emphasised here is that of the inclusive matrix. Mythic networks are themselves inclusive matrices, and this will become increasingly apparent in my specific consideration of the American Dream. Doty's subsequent outline of a comprehensive working definition is worth including here in order to provide a template for the particular aspects of myth I wish to discuss in relation to the American Dream and, secondly, as a launching pad for consideration of the uniqueness of the American mythic network. In the initial sentence of his definition, Doty claims that:

> A mythological corpus consists of (1) a usually complex network of myths that are (2) culturally important (3) imaginal (4) stories, conveying by means of (5) metaphoric or symbolic diction, (6) graphic imagery, and (7) emotional conviction and participation, (8) the primal, foundational accounts (9) of aspects of the real, experienced world and (10) humankind's roles and relative statuses within it.[9]

It will be worthwhile here to briefly trace how Doty's definitional components can be situated individually in relation to the American Dream as a mythic network. From Doty we can argue that the American Dream is precisely "a complex network of myths." The rags to riches or success myth is, for instance, an integral component of the American Dream, as are the liberal decrees of Enlightenment humanism, which resonate from the constitution throughout American culture. Other obvious components of the American Dream, which have their own sets of narratives, are the Frontier Myth and the myth of The Promised Land. This list is by no means exhaustive and I will be looking in detail at the composition of the American mythic network in Chapter Two.

---

[9] Doty, p.11.

To consider the American mythic network demands not only an identification and understanding of its individual mythic fields but also the ways in which they interrelate. While there has been considerable scholarship into specific aspects of the American Dream, the study of the interrelationship of its mythic components has remained relatively underdeveloped. As Doty argues:

> Within a [mythic] network, various myths may actualize parts of the underlying cultural worldview. Seldom does a single myth actualize the entire worldview, because that seems to require a collection of many interlocked stories, a canon rather than one sample.[10]

The American Dream might therefore be seen as a canon of myths which generates an American worldview through the interlocking of mythic subsets, the Frontier Myth for example, each of which is a collection of individual mythic units or mythemes. It is possible then to see the American Dream as a superset which contains a series of meta-narratives about America, which in turn are an aggregation of smaller sets of mythic narratives. In the case of The Frontier Myth, for example, we can locate these smaller sets in stories about pioneers or cowboys, or at a more abstract level, the ideological narrative of Manifest Destiny. The nature of this interlocking is however in no way as neat as the term might suggest. On a technical level it should be noted that relationships in networks do not follow a neat hierarchical structure. While there may be macromyths composed of sets of mythemes, the interaction of these stories is in practice far messier than say the straight interplay between the Frontier Myth and the political values of the American Republic.

James Oliver Robertson has argued that:

---

[10] Doty, p.12.

> A myth is a story often told or an oft told story referred to by label or allusion which explains a problem. . .Very often, the problem being solved by a myth is a contradiction or a paradox, something which is beyond the power of reason or rational logic to resolve. But the telling of the story, or the re-creation of a vivid and familiar image which is part of a myth, carries with it - for those who are accustomed to the myth, those who believe - a satisfying sense that the contradiction has been resolved, the elements of the paradox have been reconciled.[11]

Robertson is right to observe the prevalence in mythic discourse of paradox and contradiction. The American mythic network carries a number of significant internal contradictions which are manifested at all levels of its narratives. Yet Robertson is somewhat astray in his belief that mythic discourse necessarily resolves or reconciles these contradictions, paradoxes and oppositions. On the contrary, mythic discourse tends to be energised by its internal contradictions. Ontologically, myth is, as Doty argues, "tensional fiction."[12] The interlocking which Doty talks about is thus a dynamic rather than static conceptual meshing, which is driven to a large extent by the suspended irresolution of its central contradictions. From this it is easy to see how well notions of myth fit into Elias' idea of the network.

The complications of the American mythic network and its dynamic tensional nature are not confined to the conflicting content of individual mythic narratives. In addition to the raw stories of the myths themselves there are also matters of form and mode to be considered, and there are tensions at play here as well. Just as the ancient Greeks had a variety of forms with a specific function in their mythic network, form is an important consideration in modern mythic networks as well. Mythic matter is

---

[11] James Oliver Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality* (Hill and Wang, New York: 1980) p.6.
[12] Doty, p.245.

conveyed in a multitude of forms: everyday conversation, television, the classroom, highbrow literature and music, just to name a few. Forms produce their own system of tensions in terms of the configuration of the mythic network. In Chapters Three and Four, for instance, I will be arguing how the form of the American realist novel has played a tensional role in the American mythic network.

Doty's definition of myth proceeds to state that a myth network should be culturally important, and although this may seem a truism, the subsequent way that he constructs his conception of cultural importance is interesting for the light it can shed on the peculiarity of the American Dream. By "cultural importance" Doty posits a differentiation between "private fictions" and myth "as quintessential story or stories that uniquely represent particular societies."[13] Although perhaps a valid division in terms of most mythic networks, it is a problematic one in terms of the American Dream. This is largely because "individualism" features as a central tenet of the American Dream. Stories in the mythological corpus of the American Dream tend to focus, though not completely, on the mythologised achievements of historical individuals rather than the limited pantheon of deities and heroes as is frequently the case in the mythic corpuses of older societies. This can be detected, for example, in the narratives of rags to riches or success which are an integral aspect of the American Dream. The heroic qualities of success are generally invested in a series of individuals, rather than herded into any one particular story. Even when they are, as in the myth of Abraham Lincoln and the log cabin, this is done to suggest the universal possibility of living out such a story. Although iconic representations of success have been mythologised over the course of American history, the American Dream is also a

[13] Doty, p.13.

set of mythic narratives, whose magnetism derives from its potential for actual realisation at the level of the individual. In this sense the myth is re-enacted at the level of the real community and the individuals who populate it. Furthermore both the fictional and exemplary historical versions of the narrative have tended to emphasise the individual's transition from "ordinary Joe" to the enhanced or magnified figure of success. Mythic status is acquired, whether in real terms or not, by a narrative in which the relation of the individual to the community is reconfigured. Although the rags to riches myth is a central myth of the American Dream, the division between the notions of "private fiction" and "quintessential story" is blurred by the specific conditions of how the mythic narrative is produced and received within its broad cultural context. This has tended to make the short story and the novel - with its traditional emphasis on first person or omniscient third person narratives (with access to the internal thought processes of its subjects) - an especially suited medium for the proliferation, interrogation and critique of the mythic values of the American Dream.

Doty's requirement that myth be "imaginal" is also instructive. He argues that:

> Images are the means by which social meanings are invented. . .constructed, and conveyed. We may speak of imaginal "fictions", understanding fiction not as a pejorative term for the unreal but with reference to its roots in the Latin participle **fictus**, from **fingo**, hence "something made, constructed." Imaginal expressions and stories are the embodiments in which interpretations are applied schematically to experienced reality; meanings are "invented" and "fictionalized" onto the world.[14]

This understanding of myth is crucial to a corrective perception of its operation in modern cultures. Throughout modernity, myth has frequently received a bad press, most obviously in the general usage of myth to indicate the unreal, but just as

[14] Doty, pp.14-15.

importantly in the way it has been used to signify the non-rational and non-modern. The view that myth is pre-scientific, an archaic epistemological phase in theories of social evolution, a field of false consciousness within the predominantly Marxist definition of ideology, or an anti-historical confection have all been used to denigrate the vital and continuing operation of mythic networks in contemporary culture. One of the central tenets of many postmodern critiques of the modern project has been to deconstruct the way these discourses have privileged themselves through the arrogation of a special relationship with objective reality or truth. Furthermore, the prevailing contemporary view that social reality is indisputably a construct is conducive to a re-evaluation of how mythic networks are instrumental in the formation of cultures whether they be primitive, ancient or modern. I will be returning to a discussion of the way that modern teleologies have attempted to marginalise myth in the consideration of modern western societies later in this chapter. However, it is important to note here that I am not arguing that the centrality of a mythic network such as the American Dream in the construction of American culture means that the American Dream can be directly identified with social reality as it is. There is a perpetual tension between perceptions of the American Dream and the social reality of America, of which the American Dream is a foundational constituent. Nonetheless social reality proceeds within the frameworks of what Benedict Anderson has called "imagined communities", and the mythic network is crucial to the way in which these communities are imagined into being.[15] At the same time the American mythic network has been transformed by the impact of historical and material circumstances. Mythic networks can be greatly elastic and their relationship with social reality is best

---

[15] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, London, New York: 1993). For a discussion of this see Chapter Two below.

understood for the moment by the dynamics implied by the image of the feed-back loop: where the myth and reality of American society have a symbiotic constructional relationship that has spiralled over the span of European settlement in Northern America.

Doty proceeds to argue that myths are "stories" conveying meaning through "metaphorical and symbolic diction, graphic imagery, and emotional conviction and participation." The first two modes are self-evident, as is perhaps the third, although it is worth emphasising this third term in order to foreground the tenacity of a mythic network's lodgement in the psyche of its society's subjects. As such a mythic network operates in the psyche at a level that is deeper than rational discourse. Furthermore, it is tempting to suggest that purportedly rational ideologies generally enact their survival by their ability to mythologise their discourse; to build and sell themselves as "stories" whose meaning is framed by a set of narrative choices such as the construction of teleologies where interpretations of the past and imaginaries of the future are utilised in the construction of continuums which are deployed to frame and define the present. Importantly, the effectiveness of these stories can be measured by their ability to retain peoples' emotional conviction in them over time. In the case of the American Dream, which has incorporated much of the supposed rationality of Enlightenment discourse, this emotional conviction can be seen in many real life accounts of Americans' relationship to the discourses of the dream. This is partly why those for whom the individual American dream has not come true can still manage to believe in it. There are paradoxes to be found here too, such as the counter-culture figure who becomes rich arguing against the materialistic tenets of the American Dream. In such cases it is difficult to know how much an unconscious commitment to

the success impulse in the American Dream is involved in the commercial success of its critique.[16]

I have mentioned briefly how modern ideologies tend to function through the telos of a projected future. In contrast, as Doty argues, mythic networks tend to validate themselves through their ability to provide "primal, foundational accounts" of a culture. The obvious examples of this are the accounts of origins provided by creation myths, religious narratives which proffer an interpretation of what is empirically or historically unknowable. The American Dream occupies a particularly interesting position in regard to foundational mythology. In Chapter Two I will discuss how aspects of the American Dream can be perceived as a foundational mythology, yet paradoxically these foundational myths are partly constituted by the discourses of the Enlightenment with their future-oriented teleological visions. In this sense America is the first culture largely founded upon modern values.

Within Doty's definition myths are perceived as belonging to the "real experienced world." As he argues:

> The participant in the mythical cosmos ingredient to the network of myths does not perceive the represented events, persons, times, and so on, as primarily unreal or imaginary but sees them as reflections of what actually transpires on some level. In general mythical personages are believed to have really existed, or really to exist in the mythic chronology. But such perception has reference to "mythic chronology," and that sort of time is "time experienced as bearing meaning."[17]

What Doty is arguing here is that the mythic network provides a framework by which the present can be measured against the past. In terms of its foundational components,

[16] Some of these complexities are evidenced in Michael Lee Cohen, *The Twenty-Something American Dream: A Cross-Country Quest for a Generation* (Plume, New York, 1994).

the American Dream is unusual as it exists predominantly within the framework of tangible history. This, however, needs to be qualified by the recognition that the foundational ingredients of the myth network are partly translocations of Judeo-Christian narratives into the spaces of the New World. The Puritans' conceptualisation of themselves as a Chosen People in a Promised Land, of themselves as the Children of Israel and of America as the New Canaan were recontextualisations of biblical myths which had stark material consequences. Yet even within the schema of a largely available history there is a tendency to organise people and events within a "mythic chronology" as "time experienced as bearing meaning." Malcolm Bradbury, for instance, has commented on the tendency of American authors to see "history less as process than as myth," and it is a tendency which is probably national rather than purely literary.[18] A central reason for this tendency can be extrapolated from Doty's argument that:

> As part of the real experienced world, myths may establish a temporal network, an interior chronological continuum between contemporary and primal times and providing relative rankings of "our time" to "as in days of yore."[19]

To a large extent the American Dream has been utilised by Americans as a way of evaluating their historical progress and the state of society at any given time. In times of disillusionment particularly, the American Dream and the mythical chronological continuum it presents is used to propagate arguments that society is on the wrong path. More often than not this involves the reassertion of principles viewed as integral

---

[17] Doty, pp. 26-7.

[18] Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern American Novel* (Oxford UP: 1992) p.viii. See also James O. Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality*, pp.56-65, for a discussion of the way the founding fathers have been mythologized. The historically false, mythically significant tale of George Washington and the cherry tree is a fine example of how a myth diverges from historical fact in its production of cultural values.

to the nation's foundational values. Christopher Lasch's advocation of populism in *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (particularly Chapter 5) and the Communitarian position advocated by writers such as Robert Bellah, Amitai Etzioni and Alan Wolfe, with their appeals to a Jeffersonian ethics are contemporary written examples of this practice. The positions these writers argue are historical positions in the sense that they are recapitulations and refinements of positions which have been advocated at various times in American History as far back as in the structural disputes of the original New England colonies.[20] It is possible also to surmise from this process that foundational mythic values are a framework setting limits to the kinds of responses which can be enacted by a culture in the face of perceived social crisis. The foundation myth constructs, in the words of Richard Slotkin, a "vector of society's historical destiny," a field of future possibility which limits the directions a society can take without losing the identity which is inscribed in the mythic versions of its origins.[21] I will be returning to this in greater detail in Chapter Two.

The final two sentences of Doty's definition of myth point out that:

> Mythologies may (11) convey the political or moral values of a culture and (12) provide systems of interpreting (13) individual experience within a universal perspective, which may (14) include the intervention of superhuman entities as well as (15) aspects of the natural and cultural orders. Myths may be enacted or reflected in (16) rituals, ceremonies, and dramas, and (17) they may provide materials for secondary elaboration, the constituent mythemes having become

---

[19] Doty, p.27.
[20] See Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (W.W. Norton, New York, 1995), Robert Bellah, *The Good Society* (New York, 1991), Amitai Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community: Rights, Responsibilities, and the Communitarian Agenda.* (Crown Publishers, New York 1993) and Alan Wolfe, *Whose Keeper?: Social Science and Moral Obligation* (UCP, Berkeley, 1989).
[21] Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization 1800-1890* (Atheneum, New York, 1985) p.19.

> merely images or reference points for a subsequent story, such as a folktale, historical legend, novella, or prophecy.[22]

There are several points to be made regarding the aptness of this definition in regard to the American Dream. That mythologies may convey political and moral values is indisputable. However, in a modern mythic network such as the American Dream, the values conveyed and in particular the modes of conveyance are somewhat different. As I have argued, the American Dream is capable of manifesting itself at any point in the matrix of American culture. In this sense, although there are rituals, ceremonies and dramas (Thanksgiving Day dinner, for instance,) which enact aspects of the mythic network, it is perhaps in less formalised contexts that the mythic network is most strongly manifested. Again this is partly because the American mythic network conveys a set of values collectively held which nonetheless argue the primacy of the individual. Indeed, one of the central tensions of American culture is how this valorisation of the individual by the discourses of the American Dream can be reconciled with the social imperatives of an effectively functioning collective. The attempts of American culture to achieve this and some of the balances struck are crucial examples of how the American mythic network functions as a tensional system.

To return to Doty, I would argue that the role of "superhuman entities" in the mythology of the American Dream is also limited. As George Bataille (following Max Weber) has argued, the Calvinist vision of the deity which is at the core of the religious component of the American Dream is one where God has largely been

[22] Doty, p.11.

removed from direct involvement in the world.[23] With the exception perhaps of stories involving superheroes, the protagonists in the mythic narratives of the American Dream are conspicuously human. Its narratives are particularly concerned with human ontogeny. The bestowing of heroic status within them is arbitrated from the context of a magnified sense of the characters' individual humanity and their wrestle with the individually manifested but universally posited foibles and strengths that the Enlightenment belief in human potential entails.[24] This combination of modern individualism and the lack of superhuman entities points to the observation that the American Dream as a mythic network is not comprised of a set of master-stories, in which personified superhuman figures pass moral and political values back to the human world. What we see instead is blank narrative forms or plot structures which are prolific in terms of the number of protagonists they generate. Horatio Alger, for example, with whom the rag to riches myth is virtually (if somewhat erroneously) synonymous, wrote over ninety novels; essentially the same plot structure with a different hero and setting each time. Although the heroes in these narratives can be considered archetypal figures, they are so in the way that they embody the American Dream as an individual rather than collective ethic.[25] The prevalence of generical narratives in American literature and film is also evidence of this predilection. Genres such as the rags to riches (contemporary examples include the novels of Sidney Sheldon or Irving Wallace), Western or Gangster narratives are important mythic

---

[23] George Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, Vol.1 [1949], trans. Robert Hurley (Zone Books, New York: 1988). It should also be mentioned here that the secularised deity of Calvinism has not been without competition in the religious discourses of American culture. Although it is well established that the Calvinist version of the deity has dominated in the development of the American Dream, the biblically literal movements of Christian fundamentalism have been influential throughout the history of American culture as the long fight between creationism and evolutionism for example evidences.

[24] For a discussion of the origins of the superhero narrative see Robert Jewett and John S. Lawrence, *The American Monomyth* (Anchor Press/Doubleday, New York, 1977) pp.59-63, and particularly pp.185-197.

[25] For further discussion of Horatio Alger see Chapter Three below.

vehicles in the framework of American culture. This confirms the argument that the mythic corpus is largely invested in what Doty terms "secondary elaborations", although in the case of American mythology this is a somewhat misleading term to the extent that these elaborations are not necessarily preceded by primary mythic elaborations. The American Dream is a mythical network that operates in terms of "folktale, historical legend, novella, or prophecy" to name just a few of its modes. The peculiarity of this situation arises specifically from the context of the American Dream as a mythic network for a culture whose values are fundamentally modern.

Doty's complex definition of myth is a useful way of beginning to contextualise the American Dream as a specific operative mythic network and I will be returning to discuss the particularities of the American Dream within this framework in chapters Two and Three. Before engaging with these particularities, however, it is necessary to engage with some further theoretical issues in order to come eventually to an understanding of the significance of myth in the operations and explication of contemporary culture. To discuss the mythicity of modern western cultures is to place oneself necessarily in an adversarial position in relation to the dominant strains of modern thought which have emanated from the Enlightenment. Within the modern schema, myth is relegated to the status of an irrational discourse, a product of an immature society, a superseded stage in the march of human progress. It is a realm of falsehoods and childish belief, the static imaginary of the savage mind, and it exists in contrast to the reified "rational" teleologies of science and history.[26] Although 19th century ambivalence to the processes of modernity - evident in the anti-modern angles

---

[26] The phrase "savage mind" belongs to Levi-Strauss, and it must be said his position on the relationship between science and myth is complex. Levi-Strauss attempts to rescue myth or savage thought from its inferiority within the historical production of progress. Where thinkers such as Marx or philosophical schools such as the positivists maintain a chronologised distinction between myth and their idealised

of romanticism and the traditional classical bias of the humanities, in addition to the emergence of anthropology as a consequence of Europe's increasing colonial reach - saw a heightening of interest in myths, mythicity was predominantly if not exclusively framed by its subjective inferiority and opposition to the privileged terms of history and science. When it is invoked by these discourses, it is usually to show the inferiority of other cultures against the gleaming brilliance of western thought, or to argue that the objective reality and destiny of human progress (a teleological version of Plato's forms) has been hidden by the social practices of the time. In the first instance, myth is a stage of history we have apparently left behind. In the second, it is a way of explaining, in the same way as Marx's conception of ideology as false consciousness, the continual aberrancy between modern ideal and the actuality of the social forms generated by modernity. In the following pages I will be dealing with aspects of this negative configuration of myth against science and history. From this discussion I will be arguing my preference for reading American culture from the perspective of mythic rather than ideological networks.

---

narratives of modernity, Levi-Strauss - thinking in the more spatial framework of structuralism - attempts to construct a meeting of myth and science. As he argues in the final paragraph of *The Savage Mind* [1962], trans. not acknowledged (George Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London: 1974):

> We have had to wait until the middle of this century for the crossing of long separated paths: that which arrives at the physical world by the detour of communication, and that which as we have recently come to know, arrives at the world of communication by the detour of the physical. The entire process of human knowledge thus assumes the character of a closed system. And we therefore remain faithful to the inspiration of the savage mind when we recognise that, by an encounter it alone could have foreseen, the most modern form of the scientific spirit will have contributed to legitimize the principles of savage thought and to re-establish it in its rightful place. (269)

This an attempt at a Hegelian synthesis of myth and science, a brilliant manoeuvre, but one none the less which ultimately conforms to Hegelian notions of the enlightenment as human progress. Myth, in this sense, is reconstituted within the discourse of epistemological progress, precisely because of the way Levi-Strauss argues that he has made it available to science, or more specifically structuralism's construction of itself as human science. The entire concept of the human sciences is indicative however of the enlightenment endeavour and one, as post-structuralist writings have argued , that is fundamentally flawed.

The crucial term of the Enlightenment was reason, yet it in its impact upon the development of modern society, it is science, a branch of Enlightenment reason, which has had the greatest effect. In the relatively short period of roughly two hundred years the physical conditions of western existence have changed enormously. Electricity, the mass production factory, the automobile, the railroad, human flight, the telegraph, telephone, television, the computer and so on, each indispensable to the identification and functioning of our contemporary society, have all emerged in this short time. They are the products of our science; its applied consequences in the domain of technology, and their impact upon our lives can hardly be overestimated. Science has also profoundly altered the way we perceive our relationship to ourselves, our world and the universe. The emergence of evolutionary theory, for instance, has displaced the Bible as the dominant western narrative of human origins (even if the actual plot line remains provisional). Similarly, narratives of modern physics have displaced God's role as the creator of the universe without being able to agree on a replacement. It is easy then to see how strong the temptation has been for co-terminous modern theories of the individual and society to draw upon the authority of science in their endeavours to position their stories favourably within the rapidly changing environment of the modern world. And it must also be remarked how this process of cross-validation between the physical sciences and what uneasily purports to be human science has produced skewed rationalities which have nonetheless proved themselves extremely influential in the identity of the modern Western world.

The modern authority of science had predictable consequences for the way the mythic has been perceived in the secular exegesis of the modern condition. Myth acquired a pejorative connotation as false and dysfunctional belief. Science, on the other hand,

was invested with the capacity to discover the objective truth of the world. However, the opposition of science and myth is itself a false one. There are valid reasons to suggest that the stuff of science is in various ways also the stuff of myth and that the denial by science of its mythicity leads only to the paradoxical situation of a "myth of mythlessness."[27] As James Robertson has argued:

> The complex body of mythology which Americans - and many others in the world - call "science" is a modern variant of a much older myth of Western rationalism, the myth of finding law. Modern science began its evolution approximately contemporaneously with the European discovery, invasion and settlement of the New World, and it has, therefore, been a part of American mythology from the very beginning. With science, new Western myths of time as a progression grew; new myths of "evidence" (or "data") as the objects and relationships of objects in the physical universe, as well as new myths of knowledge as the description, cataloguing, accumulation, and arrangement of observations and experiments, gradually developed. . .
>
> One of the most powerful, far-reaching, and long-lasting myths in all of Western culture is the myth of finding law. It is so powerful and deep-seated that all who participate in western rationalism, certainly all Americans, believe that it is not myth at all but reality. The end and goal of all human reason, according to that myth, the basis of all rational thought and of all logic is the discovery of law - not its creation, or development, but its discovery. Laws, like the Western Hemisphere before Columbus, exist. They operate, whether human beings know them or not. They are the basis of all that transpires in the universe.
>
> These laws are not always self-evident, but they are truths. . .They make certain things "necessary." Human beings can find those laws - as Columbus discovered America - by the use of reason, the collection of evidence, and by action based on reason and evidence ("experimental" action). By thought, reason, and communication, human beings can make laws explicable to themselves, once they are discovered. Furthermore laws are useful because life can be adjusted more closely to their operation once they have been found.
>
> The processes by which laws have been found, explained, and made useful to human beings have varied. . .since the ancient Greeks first made the myth explicit. In different times and different places "all sane men agree," the "Ideal," "God has revealed," "it is customary," "reason demonstrates," "the evidence proves," and "science has shown" have described the process of finding law. But the underlying

[27] See Jewett and Lawrence, *The American Monomyth*, pp.17-20, and p.250 for their discussion and definition of this term respectively.

> myth, that there is law to be found in the universe which requires explication and which requires human obedience, is fundamental in Western culture.[28]

Robertson's point is that the modern scientific endeavour operates in a mythic capacity. In terms of Doty's definition, scientific narratives such as evolution or the physical origin of the universe and the earth are mythic because they provide us with "the primal, foundational accounts of aspects of the real, experienced world and humankind's roles and relative status within it." The mythicity of such narratives can be explained through the way they emanate out of what Eric Gould has termed, "the ontological gap between event and meaning."[29] This gap refers to the fact that at some point these origins, which far exceed the human timeframe, are unknowable. Consequently, even the most empirically founded scientific account of origins of the universe is dependent to an extent upon the logics of narrative in order to place in sequence what is known and supposed, and thus provide a convincing account of unknowable originary events. This process which demands working backward through this ontological gap also makes possible the situation where contemporary contexts can be influential in the form that a myth of origin takes, therefore determining to an extent the way the unknowable is interpreted into being. An example of this in the American mythic network is how changes in material circumstances have affected the configuration of the "state of nature" which is one of the bases of the American polity.[30]

---

[28] Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality*, pp.280-1.

[29] Gould, *Mythical Intentions in Modern Literature*, p.6.

[30] For further discussion of the state of nature in the American mythic network see both Chapter 2 - for the role of state-of-nature theory in the foundational mythology of America - and Chapter 3 for changes in the conception of the state of nature under Social Darwinism and industrialisation.

Scientific perspectives on the identity of natural laws have a mythic functionality which crosses over into the intra-cultural beliefs of a society. Within the frame of modernity, the scientific version of the physical universe has not remained constant. We have exchanged the Newtonian for the Einsteinian view of the universe, and whereas the Newtonian view posited a set of physical laws which appeared commandment-like to explain the natural world, the Einsteinian collapse of the distinction between space and time imposed a relativistic rather than absolute vision of the universe. The shift in this primal foundational account has had a marked effect on the way we identify as a culture with the world, which is another way of saying, in justification of the mythic perspective, that our science and its accounts of foundations are interlinked in a multitude of complex ways with discourses more oriented towards the specifically human dynamics of culture. It would not be outlandish, for example, to broadly analogise the shift from Newton's to Einstein's version of universal laws with the cultural shift from the confident assertions of modern theories with their assumption of human progress and the inherently diffident aura of what has come to be known as postmodernity. It is here where the inestimably multifarious strands which constitute the mythic network as a system of tensions prove how difficult it is to establish accurate conceptions of cause and effect in the network and of the actual shape of the network itself, which is too vast to reveal itself in its entirety to the gaze of the outsider's overview.

It is also worth observing that science's position in modernity is somewhat paradoxical. At the same time as "pure" science has reached towards the discovery of the natural laws of the universe and life on earth, "applied" science, i.e. technology, has continuously drawn modern society away from the state of nature. The Western

world as it exists today, and particularly America, whose built environment does not substantially pre-date modernity, would be unrecognisable to pre-modern man. The technological imperative of modernity has continually validated itself by invoking the desire for the human world to escape the limits imposed upon it by the dictates and force of nature. Life in a contemporary Western metropolis is regulated by patterns and rhythms which have to various degrees come to parallel, mimic, subsume or subvert their natural precursors. Economic patterns with their combination of cyclic and linear dynamics and the significance of economic indicators such as the Dow Jones industrial index, as can be seen in the experience of New York in the 1980s and the literature depicting it, have assumed some of the mythic significance traditionally accorded to seasons and the complexities of the weather as arbiters of a nation's mood. Barthes, though, is partly correct in his argument that myth "consists in overturning culture into nature or, at least, the social, the cultural, the ideological, the historical into the natural." [31] The example of the way the stock market oscillates between its bull and bear phases is an example of how the dynamics of the capitalist system are mythicised as natural forces. But the argument Barthes deploys relies on the purity of the nature versus culture binarism. The movement of myth to naturalise is not simply the process of the reduction of the world to the bourgeois status quo which he implies. In fact it can also be argued that this metaphorical positioning of the modern into the context of the natural is a way of constructing a continuum between past and present, a way of accommodating man and the psychological heritage of his/her engagement with nature with the structures and systems of the modern environment. It can be a way of making sense of the present using the instinctive

[31] Roland Barthes, "Change the Object Itself" in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, (Flamingo, London: 1977) p.165.

resources of the past, and a way of slowly transforming these instincts in the adaptation of the individual psyches to the modern world. Furthermore appropriations of the natural, as we see in phrases such as "the urban jungle", can function as a critical tool which points to shortfalls in the social system, although as with the mythic in general, there is considerable turbulence in the way the phrase can resonate, particularly within the context of the American city and the prejudices of modernist teleologies.

The modern world has also meant that the everyday experience of urban dwellers is increasingly defined in terms of second nature (the built environment and culture) and third nature (the vectors of the information age).[32] But it must be remembered that nature - whose mode is constant change - is experienced in relative terms. Man transforms nature merely by entering it and even the rudiments of human habitation involve a degree of second nature effects: tools, language, shelter etc. It may also seem logical to consider that the human world is just as much a part of the natural world as the built environment of any other creature. What is the difference in this scheme of categorisation (other than scale) between the naturalness of the beehive, the city or the anthill? It is perhaps only anthropocentrism which forces the binary attribution of one to nature and the other to human culture.

In human terms, however, there are observable ratios of first to second nature in the varying habitats in which human life is set: the difference between the city and country or of the Developed and Underdeveloped worlds are two examples. In the urban environments of the western world there is a tendency for second nature to

[32] For further adumbration of these terms (which originated with Hegel and the German Idealists) see McKenzie Wark, "Third Nature" in *Cultural Studies,* Vol.8, No.1, Jan., 1994, 115-132.

replace aspects of first nature. Artificial lighting has for instance mitigated the natural effect of day and night, with the further consequence of diminishing the visibility of the night sky (and symbolically the cosmos). Heating and air-conditioning regulate indoor temperatures. The creation of energy is abstracted from its usage. Days can be organised by radio and television programs. Cities pulse with the rhythms of their rush hours and our psychologies are affected, for good or bad, by the scale induced abstractions and close anonymity (made feasible through technology) which frame our experience of life as a collective performance.[33]

When Barthes mounts his critique of myth as a form which is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things, it must be remembered that many of the things which constitute the everyday reality of the world and our interpretation of it have a limited historical basis.[34] Nonetheless we experience these things as natural. Furthermore, technology has specifically aimed itself at overcoming the historical constraints of man in relation to nature. The teleology of progress has essentially been a narrative of the transcendence of nature by man. As Fredric Jameson has argued, in trying to characterise the postmodern:

> In modernism. . .some residual zones of "nature" or "being", of the old, the older, the archaic, still subsist; culture can do something to that nature and work at transforming that "referent." Postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good. It is a more fully

---

[33] It should be noted that since the Ancient Greeks, "human nature" has been set in opposition to "nature". For an overview of this argument and an exploration of how this might affect the differentiation of modern and primitive man and the place of technology in the construction of modern society see Daniel Bell's essay, "Technology, Nature and Society: The Vicissitudes of Three World Views and the Confusion of Realms" in Daniel Bell, *Sociological Journeys: Essays 1960-80* (Heinemann, London: 1980) pp.3-33.

[34] Roland Barthes, "Myth Today" in *Mythologies* [1957], trans. Annette Lavers (Jonathan Cape, London: 1972).

> human world than the older one, but one in which "culture" has become a veritable "second nature."[35]

While there are problems with this dichotomy between culture and nature as I have argued above, there is nonetheless historical verity in Jameson's position. Modern urban lives are less directly contingent upon natural forces than before. What Jameson's position also suggests is the role myth might play as a bridge between the natural and the cultural. When myth reaches to naturalise things, it is performing the constantly transforming task of accommodating man to his changing environment, "to provide," to return to Doty's definition, "systems of interpreting individual experience within a universal perspective." Myth is equally capable of naturalising the cultural and of culturing the natural. In this sense the mythic is a grey area through which there is constant double movement. Barthes' attempt in "Myth Today" to squeeze the operations of myth into an attempt of bourgeois ideology to maintain a status quo is misleading and a consequence of his fidelity to the Marxist heritage of worshipping history as the scientifically founded objective reality of class struggle. Barthes fails to see that the Marxist dream of history is inextricably connected with the meta-narratives of human progress, in which technology has had the greatest material effect. In many cases it is technology which has performed this loss of the historical quality of things that is a well-documented phenomenon of the postmodern condition. Myth is finally too complex, ambivalent and elusive to be so easily pigeon-holed, and although Barthes' *Mythologies* represent one of the seminal forays into the subject of modern

---

[35] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Verso, London: 1991) p.ix.

mythology, his partiality in both aspect and drive means his claims have to be considered with some circumspection.[36]

This lurking weakness in Barthes' thinking, which has propelled the pejorative connotation of myth into the postmodern age, needs to be dealt with in terms of the contradictions inherent in Marx's writing. To begin with there is the problem of "History" or "Metahistory" in the teleological sense derived from German Idealism, Hegel and Marx and "history" in the raw sense of what Michael Bell has described "as the unimaginably vast series of events and processes making up collective human life."[37] Without wishing to go too far into historiographical arguments it is quite clear within the context of modernity that these two histories are a mismatch. As Paul Carter has argued:

> Faced with unfinished history, the historian may be tempted to play scientist; to plot a curve that he or she hopes will intersect with some future happening, in the way chemists classically could deduce the properties of a not-yet-found element from its position in the Periodic Table, or astronomers from orbital perturbations known to them could determine where to look for an undiscovered planet. However historical trends just don't seem to work that way. Again and again, in American history - and in other histories as well - the most honest reaction is one that breaks the chain of logic: "But whoever would have expected that?" History, John Dewey wisely observed eighty years ago, does not settle controverted questions; it changes the subject and takes up something else.[38]

This plotting of curves is exactly the kind of endeavour which Marx's conflagration of the historical and the scientific produces. Of course Marx was not the only culprit.

---

[36] A counter to Barthes' position on myth can be found in Michael Bell's *Literature, Modernism and Myth* (Cambridge University Press: 1997) which presents an insightful recuperation of the role of myth in the modern and postmodern eras, using Nietzsche's dissident modernism as its springboard. I will be discussing his argument in greater detail, specifically regarding the differences between myth and ideology, below.

[37] For a valuable critique of 19th century historical thought see Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (John Hopkins UP, Baltimore: 1973).

[38] Paul Carter, *Revolt Against Destiny: An Intellectual History of The United States* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1989) p.267.

Politically conservative advocates of Social Darwinism, for instance, have fallen into the same trap.[39] Indeed it is arguable that this sort of thinking was part of the 19th century *Zeitgeist* in general. To be fair also to Barthes, it can be said that this disparity has become increasingly obvious since the 1970s with the cultural shifts that have loosely been labelled the postmodern, although this in itself is a considerable domain of intellectual conflict. Critics of "History" such as Nietzsche and Spengler have been aware of this since the 19th century, although it is really only in recent times that the weight of empirical data has tended to defuse the dynamics of modernity's progressive teleology. The paradox with the loss of the historical quality of things is that in many ways it is "History, the science of human progress, which is responsible. One of the most extreme formulations of this framing of the loss of history can be located in the oeuvre of Jean Baudrillard and his theorisation of the condition of hyperlety; but it is a factor of contemporary society commonly commented upon, if mostly more moderately, across a broad spectrum of postmodern thinkers. Speaking briefly, Baudrillard's theory of hyperlety positions the rate of change in cultures as the key factor in the loss of history. Baudrillard argues throughout his work that the dynamic of change is exponential, and that as it accelerates, the more history is lost, the less resistance there is to the further acceleration of change. The present situation, Baudrillard somewhat apocalyptically posits, is that this process is irrevocable. Progress occurs, but the process can no longer be controlled by the rational actions of

---

[39] For a discussion of Social Darwinism, particularly in the relationship of Herbert Spencer's thought to Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, see Chapter 3.

men. It has taken on a life of its own and is taking us to the inevitable brink of cultural implosion.[40]

In sympathy with this danger is Berman's slightly more optimistic perspective in *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* which argues the necessity of maintaining our connection with the contradictory dynamics of modernism as a defence against the vicious infinite progression Baudrillard conceptualises in his work.[41] In both cases the awareness is of the danger of society losing its historical underpinnings. However, to accord this loss of historical perspective as a function of the mythic, as Barthes does, is not strictly accurate. While it may be true that the mythic can be ambivalent in relation to the historical quality of things, it can also act to preserve historical values. In traditional societies for instance, myth has generally functioned as a preserver of values. Indeed, this conservative capacity of the mythic has been instrumental in its denigration by the progressive forces of modernity and has led to the mistaken but frequent rendition by mythographers and anthropologists of primitive cultures as closed societies. Mythic discourse, with its cyclical movement between present and foundation is designed, as Doty argues, to present "time experienced as bearing meaning."[42] In this sense myth utilises history to build patterns of meaning which are transported over time.

---

[40] Baudrillard's writings which deal with this model include *Fatal Strategies* [1983], trans. P. Beitchman and W.G.J. Niesluchowski, ed. J.Fleming (Semiotext(e), New York: 1990), *In The Shadow of the Silent Majorities* [1982], trans. Paul Foss, John Johnston, Paul Patton (Semiotext(e), New York: 1983) and "The Anorexic Ruins," in eds D. Kamper and C. Wulf, *Looking Back at the End of the World* (Semiotext(e), New York: 1989).

[41] Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (Simon and Schuster, New York: 1982). It is worthwhile also noting here that Baudrillard can be characterised as a disillusioned Marxist. For an introductory discussion of this see Mike Gane's *Baudrillard: Critical and Fatal Theory* (Routledge, London: 1991), particularly the introduction and Chapters Three, Four and Five.

[42] Doty, p.27.

One of the problems with Barthes' idea of history can be illustrated through Berman's brilliant reading of Marx, which reveals the contradictions inherent in his perspective on the bourgeoisie as ruling class in relationship to his projected teleology of social evolution. What Berman argues via Marx is that capitalism thrives on permanent upheaval and that as a consequence, readings of the bourgeoisie as a conservative ruling class are misplaced in the sense that the bourgeoisie are driven by a specific mode of nihilism. In order to perpetuate their material success, capitalism demands that the bourgeoisie destroy what they create in order to create space for further creation. This brings into question Marx's theory of crisis within capitalism leading to the ascension of the proletariat and the instigation of a utopic communal society. As Berman argues:

> It may be true that, as Marx says, these forms of adaptation only "pave the way for more extensive and more destructive crises." But, given the bourgeois capacity to make destruction and chaos pay, there is no apparent reason why these crises can't spiral on endlessly, smashing people, families, corporations, towns, but leaving the structures of bourgeois social life and power intact.[43]

Barthes' attitude towards myth is in this sense a misreading of modernity - a failure to understand the dynamism of the capitalist mechanism and its destructive capacity, a myopia which is induced by the doctrinal fidelity to Marx's assertion of a utopian terminus to the maelstroms of modernity. Barthes argues in "Myth Today" that myth and the language of revolution are oppositional forces. He reasons there is:

> one language which is not mythical, it is the language of man as a producer:wherever man speaks in order to transform reality and no longer to preserve it as an image, wherever he links his language to the making of things,

[43] Berman, p.103. For the full argument see Chapter Two, particularly pp. 90-98 and pp.120-130.

> meta-language is referred to a language-object, and myth is impossible. This is why revolutionary language proper cannot be mythical. Revolution is defined as a cathartic act meant to reveal the political load of the world: it makes the world; and its language, all of it, is functionally absorbed in this making. It is because it generates speech which is fully, that is to say initially and finally, political, and not, like myth speech which is initially political and finally natural, that Revolution excludes myth. Just as bourgeois ex-nomination characterizes at once bourgeois ideology and myth itself, revolutionary denomination identifies revolution and the absence of myth. The bourgeoisie hides the fact that it is the bourgeoisie and thereby produces myth; revolution announces itself openly as revolution and thereby abolishes myth.[44]

There are several problems with this formulation. As Berman has argued bourgeois capitalism has its own revolutionary trajectories. What is crucial is that these trajectories also have their own mythologies, something which will become apparent in my discussion of the Gilded Age in Chapter Three. Certainly in America, which (as will be argued in Chapter Two) was founded precisely on modern values, there is a link between the mythic and the de-historicising tendencies of modernism as they relate to the discourses of progress and the endless proliferative dynamic of modernity, energised by the destruction of the old and its replacement with the new. Furthermore, the reasoning by which Barthes arrives at the non-mythicity of the language of revolution points to other faults in the position he takes against myth. Bourgeois capitalism is essentially a mode of organising man as a producer: its discourse functions to facilitate these productive structures. Also, as I will argue further below, this language is an aspect of how we do make the world and denies the crucial role myth has not just in interpreting the natural world, but in constructing the categories under which the social world takes shape.

---

[44] Barthes, "Myth Today" p.146.

Barthes also asserts that myth is an ineffective zone for the practice of social criticism.[45] The mythic is invested with the type of double-consciousness which Michael Bell derives from his discussion of Thomas Mann.[46] This sort of double consciousness enables the space of critique to emerge from the subject's oscillation between the acceptance of a world view and the realisation that world views are fictional constructs. It is through this double-consciousness or dual awareness that the American Dream as a mythic network can be engaged to argue modernity, but also to critique it. These sorts of oscillation are demanded by the fact that the societies we live in are simultaneously real and imaginary, something captured in Benedict Anderson's notion of the imagined community, which I will be discussing in further detail in the next chapter. What I would also like to suggest here is the extent to which the mythic is capable of mediating the grey area of organising the imaginary into the real: the tensional processes involved in these constructions can be made more accessible by taking a mythic perspective on the analysis of culture.

In "Change the Object Itself," a revisitation of the arguments in "Myth Today," Barthes claims that:

> What is nothing but a product of class division and its moral, cultural and aesthetic consequences is presented (stated) as being 'a matter of course'; under the effect of mythical inversion, the quite contingent foundations of the utterance become Common Sense, The Right Reason, the Norm, General Opinion, in short the doxa (which is the secular figure of the origin.)[47]

---

[45] Barthes, "Myth Today" p.135.

[46] See Michael Bell, p.2 and pp.225-31.

[47] Roland Barthes, "Change the Object Itself", in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, (Flamingo, London: 1982) p.165.

The problems with this perspective are significant. As I have argued, to naturalise things, to make them a *matter of course* is the nature of the mythic itself. It is wholly unreasonable to assume that this is specific to the operations of bourgeois mythicity or that myth is inherently a bourgeois phenomenon. The radicalism of the bourgeois dynamic, the rapacity of bourgeois driven capitalism and the tensional position of modern mythic networks such as the American Dream in relationship to them suggest some of the problems with Barthes' overly ideological formulation of the mythic. Furthermore there is the problem of "History": the belief out of Hegel in a "law" of human improvement driven by the erroneous belief in the eventual ability of society to organise itself according to scientific principles and its specific version within the heritage of Marxist thought. Berman, along with writers such as David Harvey, in rescuing Marx and the dynamic contradictions integral to his thought from the stranglehold of Marxist orthodoxy have restored the mythical energy and perspicacity of Marx's writing as both emblematic and critical of modernity, and a launching pad for consideration of the peculiarities of contemporary culture. In his writing on myth, Barthes, on the other hand, is indicative of the problems caused by a commitment to the closed hermeneutic circle which set Marxist doctrine as its *doxa*, and which is every bit as limited as his construction of a skewed partial perception of the operations of the mythic in contemporary society.

The argument of the last few pages has been an attempt to recuperate myth from the way it has been negatively positioned in relation to modernity and its idolised concepts of science, progress, history. This recuperation is an important one, a necessary introductory rubric in a consideration of the American Dream, because the American Dream is a mythic network which has incorporated in its discourse these

valorised tenets of modern self-belief. In wanting to look at the American Dream and how it interacts with Late Capitalism it is essential to overcome the opposition of the modern to myth, because the modern constitutes a mythic network in itself. Before I turn to a specific discussion of the American mythic network and its tensional relationship with the mythic values of modernity there is, however, another crucial definitional point to be considered, which pertains to the relationship of myth and ideology. From this base I will show why ultimately it is more fruitful to consider American culture in terms of the former rather than the latter.

As with myth, the definition of ideology is complex. The term originated with Destutt de Tracy in the late 18th century and as such it is a child of Enlightenment thought. De Tracy originally designated the term to nominate a new science to be concerned with the origin of ideas. Thus from the outset, ideology carries the trace of the concatenation of the human with the scientific. This original application of the term, however, had a limited life span and by the 20th century, the signification of ideology had swelled to constitute perhaps the central domain in which the conflicts of modern political thought were played. In his *Analysis of Ideology*, Raymond Boudon provides a cogent account of how the term came to mean different things to different people as it developed throughout the modern period. Boudon argues that the term began to acquire its current meanings accidentally when Napoleon criticised De Tracy and Volney as *ideologues*, people who attempted to substitute realpolitik with abstract considerations. As Boudon claims:

> From that time on, ideology signified those abstract (and rather dubious) theories allegedly based on reason or science, which tried to map out the social order and guide political action. . .[and that] The reason why this meaning of the word gained currency is again because it corresponded to a reality - the idea, which had gained ground from Locke through Rousseau to Adam Smith, that it is possible, useful,

> and proper to look for the laws of the social world, just as Newton had looked for the laws of nature.[48]

In this sense of the term, as conceived by the seminal figures of the French Enlightenment and British liberalism, there is a clear connection between ideology and the attempt of modernity to find the "law" of human society. Again, the importance of the scientism of the term cannot be over-emphasised.

This version of ideology was in many ways inverted by Marx in his use of the term to indicate "false consciousness". It is linked with his central metaphor of the *camera obscura* whereby ideology can be conceived as the false ideas that are generated from people's relative positions in the material processes of capitalism. In many ways, this conception of ideology is similar to the way myth was primarily conceived within the dominant discourses of modernity, albeit from a different perspective. In this schema ideology like myth operates as a veil which obscures the discovery and operation of society according to social laws which, it is claimed, are founded in objective reality and available to the enquiry of the scientific gaze. The problem for these theorisations of the social, as I have argued above, is that the lofty assumption of the scientific gaze is an arrogation which fails to act from the awareness of its own mythic or ideological underpinnings. It is an arrogation that has been called into question scientifically by Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, which points to the ambivalences and inaccuracies of the participant observer. It is a principle which has considerable validity for those

[48] Raymond Boudon, *The Analysis of Ideology* [1986], trans. Malcolm Slater, (Polity Press, Cambridge: 1989) p.25.

embarking upon research into the humanities as well, meaning not the degeneration into an intellectual free-for-all but that one should be sceptical concerning one's own positions. This in a nutshell is the demand of double-consciousness.

Marx's conception of ideology is complicated both by the development of the concept within Marxism and its use by the opponents of Marxism. The heritage of this argument is far too complex to fully engage with here, yet I would like briefly to comment upon the way that the meaning of ideology has tended to broaden since the early part of this century, because of an increasing acceptance of ideas of cultural relativity. Among the many theorists who have embraced this shift are Marxists such as Louis Althusser and non-Marxists such as Karl Mannheim, Clifford Geertz and Edward Shils. Boudon characterises this shift as a movement away from the consideration of ideology within the binarism of true and false.[49] Instead, ideology comes to represent conceptual value systems, partially or fully held by a society. In this sense, ideology approaches the mythic as it moves towards a status as a worldview. Various commentators have taken this magnification of the concept of ideology to argue the validity of its replacement of myth in the consideration of contemporary society. Even a modern champion of myth such as Levi-Strauss alludes to this when he argues that myth has largely been replaced by politics in modern societies.[50] Most notable perhaps of these attempts is Geertz's equation of ideology with the realm of symbolic action in *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Geertz, however, is ambivalent about the use of ideology to describe this realm, arguing that:

---

[49] Boudon, pp.3-71.

[50] Claude Levi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," in *Journal of American Folklore,* Vol.LXXVIII, No.270, 1955, 428-444.

> It is also possible, of course, that the term "ideology" should simply be dropped from scientific discourse altogether and left to its polemical fate – as "superstition" in fact has been. But, as there seems to be nothing at the moment with which to replace it and as it is at least partially established in the technical lexicon of the social sciences, it seems more advisable to proceed with the attempt to defuse it.[51]

Yet the uncertainties engendered by postmodernity (a loss of confidence in the scientificity of the social) and the loss of the dominant left/right ideological binarism, largely as a result of the collapse of communism, have strengthened the reasons to be ambivalent about the use of ideology to describe cultural patterns and groupings. Myth is an apter mode for thinking about contemporary culture because it foregrounds the multitudinous nature of tension in cultural networks, rather than ideology's tendency towards the adversarial expressed dualistically.

The dichotomy between true and false has persisted in the way that the deployment of ideology in western society (as opposed to anthropological investigations of the "other") has primarily involved the critique of one ideology by another in a format by which the ideological status of the aggressor is suppressed by the interstition of a truth claim or its moral derivation in the form of an abstracted or "universal" right. The somewhat contradictory position Michael Bell takes towards this is instructive:

> Over the latter part of the century, however, 'myth' has given way to' ideology' as the favoured term to denote the implicit structure of a world view. The shift from myth to ideology represents a vital gain in demystification, and it would be senseless to argue simply for a recovery of the earlier term. What does matter is to recover its meaning and see that an over-exclusive focus on ideology is a reduction of the properly mythopoeic consciousness of modernism. A host of commentators has observed that ideology critique is logically parasitic in that it has to stand upon an implicit world of values. It is also historically parasitic in that the recognition of living within implicit understandings was partly imbibed from the literature and thought of modernism, which therefore represents the unconscious of ideology

[51] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books, New York: 1973) p.200.

> critique. And, owing to this suppression of ancestry, the attention to 'ideology' now acts as a means of ideological foreclosure. Unlike the mythopoeic self awareness, it typically offers to expose false consciousness in others; it is not designed to promote awareness of its own implicit dimensions except through the circularity of 'consciousness raising'.[52]

What Bell is critiquing is the lack of the faculty of self-awareness, or as I have argued above, double-consciousness, on the part of ideology. This faculty of ideology is well-stated in Raymond Boudon's paraphrasing of Edward Shils' observation that:

> Compared with outlooks (which the Germans call Weltanschauungen), ideologies are distinguished by the specific nature of their formulation; but they are also more closed, inflexible, and resistant to innovation.[53]

This leaning of ideology towards closure tends to produce the repression of its internal contradictions. This tends to undermine the full consideration of the tensional networks which constitute society. It is a position that moves instinctively towards doctrine, which in turn produces inflexibility and the resistance of ideology to its permeation by external conditions. Subsequently ideology tends towards a kind of self-asphyxiation, produced by its unwillingness or inability to innovate. This problematic tendency of ideology has been magnified of course by the exponential rate of change which has characterised both the modern and postmodern. In this ideology is very different to myth, which tends towards inclusiveness and the acceptance of its internal contradictions. This difference can be etymologically traced back to the Ancient Greeks in the distinction they made between *logos* and *mythos*.[54] The narrative structure of myth permits a greater dynamism than can be permitted by

---

[52] Michael Bell, p.226.
[53] Boudon, p.20. He is paraphrasing Shils' entry on Ideology in the *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences.*
[54] See Doty, p.3.

the developmental demands of internal logical consistency that is placed upon ideology. In this sense ideology, as can be seen in Berman's approach to Marxism, is most dynamic when it is at its most mythic, that is in the early phases before it has been acted upon by the *logos* and its oppositions have been suppressed. This difference between myth and ideology can be summarised by the observation that whereas the nature of ideology is to make decisions that perform exclusions in their quest for internal cohesion, myth seems to be content to leave its contradictions in a state of indeterminate play, a state of affairs which corresponds to the notion of *tensional fiction*, as I have discussed above. It is precisely this which generates the internal conditions from which the mythic perspective gains its *self-awareness.* The significance of this in thinking about the American Dream will become evident in Chapter Two.

Bell's notion of historical parasitism is also worth remarking upon. The lack of ideology's self-awareness, Bell argues (above), tends to suppress a recognition of itself as a product of historical context.[55] Central to this suppression is the fact that ideology is specifically a modern construct arising, as I have argued, out of the Enlightenment belief in reason and science. In this sense it faces some of the problems of argument which I have outlined more generally in relation to modernity above, particularly in the way ideologies can be seen as suppressing the mythicity of their origins. As a conceptual product of modernity, ideology has an affinity with it that may be difficult to shake. In this sense, in looking at the American Dream, which in many ways embodies the modern project, the mythic perspective is preferable to an ideological

[55] This forms an interesting counterpoint to Barthes' argument concerning the anti-historical impulse of the mythic.

analysis in the sense that it permits the broad scope to follow how American literature has been fundamentally occupied with the play of contradiction that is situated within the Dream itself and also in the space between the Dream and the historical and current perceptions of social reality. The mythic perspective has then the advantage of its inclusive nature and openness which the ideological perspective, as can be seen, for example in Fredric Jameson's tangled attempts to modernise the postmodern, does not necessarily have. This advantage could be characterised as the "looseness" of myth.

Before moving to a discussion of the American Dream, I would like to make one final point regarding my privileging of the mythic in relation to the ideological perspective in this thesis, which has to do with the historical context of its eventual destination: New York fiction in the 1980s. My point here is that in the shift from the modern to the postmodern there are indications that the political wranglings, for good or bad, between modern ideologies have been subsumed as the centrepiece in social thought. As a corollary it would be fair to suggest that the traditional modern division of politics between the left and right and their ideologies is no longer a sufficient mode for the analysis of culture and society. To a certain extent, this is the thesis argued by Lyotard and others which sets the collapse of modern meta-narratives as the marker of the postmodern. However, it is important to differentiate my position towards ideology from that advocated in Daniel Bell's seminal essay, *The End of Ideology in the West.* Talking about the 50s Bell advocated that:

> The old ideologies have lost their truth and their power to persuade. . .[and that] few serious minds believe any longer that one can set down "blueprints" and through "social engineering" bring about a new utopia of social harmony.

Certainly it is difficult, if not impossible, to argue that the modern dream of bringing society to a utopian condition through its development according to models of rational thought remains achievable, and as such the modern dream is dead. It is difficult even to understand from the contemporary perspective the degree of belief which has been invested in this dream. In this sense, Bell has accurately anticipated this aspect of postmodernity. Yet the cultural shifts which took place particularly in the 1980s also point to how Bell has failed to anticipate the consequences of the decline in the believability of modernity's ideological concepts. Bell attempted to cement his "end of ideology" with the further argument that:

> At the same time, the older "counter-beliefs" have lost their intellectual force as well. Few "classic" liberals insist that the State should play no role in the economy, and few serious conservatives, at least in England and on the Continent, believe that the Welfare state is "the road to serfdom."[56]

Bell posits an "end of ideology" by intellectual consensus without bothering to consider the impact of the barbarians. The form of the rise of economic rationalism with its underpinnings in classical via monetarist economics and the appeal to market forces as the final arbiter of social good and truth, the privatisation of public utilities, the rise of multinational corporations and the subsequent diminution of the authority of the state, indicate quite clearly that liberalism, particularly in its economic aspects, has in many ways triumphed as the decline of leftist ideology left a political vacuum. Further, the emergence of political positions such as the environmental movement which uses science to argue anti-modern positions has further confused the demarcation of the political spectrum between left and right. This can be seen for

---

[56] Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Free Press, New York: 1962) p.402, also the quote above.

example in the way that the territory has shifted around the concepts of conservatism and progressivism, bringing confusion to the conventional identification patterns in the political sphere. This apparent pluralisation of ideology, with every ideology carrying its unique baggage of tensions and contradictions, leads to a consideration of networks rather than oppositions as the most effective mode of cultural analysis. In this sense ideologies, by their cross-hatching and proliferation, have tended to supersede the conditions under which they appeared at their most powerful. What Daniel Bell failed to anticipate is a situation where the dynamics of the capitalist market place have become the social reality, or at least seriously impinge upon the social reality of virtually everywhere in the contemporary world. Further, I would argue that this is another reason to look at culture from a mythical rather than an ideological perspective, in that the critical ideologies of the left have lost their sting, in many ways precisely because of their tendency towards the doctrinal in an era of profound cultural shifts. So in this sense, particularly in analyses of literature with its emphasis on narrative and affiliation with the indeterminate, mythicity with its appeal to origins yet its looseness under the demands of historical change, is a more effective approach to the vagaries of contemporary America.

It is also interesting to note how Bell argued in the same essay that the analysis of ideology belongs properly in the discussion of the intelligentsia, claiming: "one can say that what the priest is to religion, the intellectual is to ideology."[57] Although Bell, perhaps following Mannheim, is an extreme example of intellectual "exceptionalism", the tendency has always been there for ideology to valorise both itself and the

[57] ibid. p.394.

intellectual in the name of its cause. On the other hand, the mythic is invoked across the whole spectrum of culture, as we can see in the case of the American mythic network. The impossibility of avoiding implication in the late capitalist dynamics of contemporary society renders this exaltation of the intellectual more of a furphy than it ever was.[58] It is produced precisely by the lack of "double-consciousness"; the failure to recognise one's own tensional position in the networks of culture and the effect this may have on shaping the information feeding back into these networks through intellectual work. Working from a mythic perspective - with its willingness to be contradictory, its capacity to encompass the irrational and rational on a more equal footing than ideology and its facility for double awareness - can be a particularly fertile mode of explicating and critiquing from an internal position the movements of contemporary culture. It is a way ultimately of accommodating and utilising the uncertainties inherent to Heisenbergian subjectivities. Further, as Richard Slotkin has argued persuasively, in particular reference to America, at the end of his epic exploration of Frontier Mythology:

> We are in a "liminal" moment of our cultural history. We are in the process of giving up a myth/ideology that no longer helps us see our way through the modern world, but lack a comparably authoritative system of beliefs to replace what we have lost. . .[A] good deal of the creative energy of the intellectual establishment goes into the criticism and demystification of old myths. This critical mood both reflects and adds to a public skepticism that is the product of hard experience. But the history of humanity gives us no reason to suppose that we will ever cease to mythologize and mystify the origin and history of our societies. Critical projects of demystification are in the long run, merely part of the process through which existing myths are creatively revised and adjusted to changing circumstances.
>
> In that long run, our choice is not between myth and a world without myth, but between productive revisions of myth - which open the system and permit it to adjust its beliefs (and the fictions that carry them) to changing realities - and the

[58] The implication of the intellectual in the bourgeois system was something Berman argues Marx himself was keenly aware of. See Berman, pp.115-120.

> rigid defense of existing systems, the refusal of change, which binds us to dead or destructive patterns of action and belief that are out of phase with social and environmental reality.[59]

Slotkin's argument here points to the imbalance produced by perspectives of ideology and the intellectual such as Daniel Bell's. What it also does is implicitly critique the value of Michael Bell's argument (above) that "the shift from myth to ideology represents a vital gain in demystification." There will be no rationally enlightened society which exists beyond the mystique of the mythic, and thus the progressive nuance of Bell's association of demystification with gain is a false one, a symptom of the modern urge to automatically assert change with progress. Furthermore Slotkin's criticism of rigidity can be applied to the defensive dynamics of position maintenance often undertaken within the humanities itself. One only has to read Fredric Jameson on postmodernism, and his tangled angst- and ego-ridden attempts to feed Marxism into it, to see the difficulties that can ensue from the supercession of intellectual investments.

In this sense my objection to ideology is partially generational. To maintain ideology as the central criterion in cultural criticism creates the problem that in contemporary society we all exist, whether we like it or not, within the dominant ideology that is a manifestation of the liberal-capitalist experience. I would not deny the historical relevance of ideological critiques of modernity. Indeed, it is impossible for even the most conservative scholar to think about liberal-capitalism without gesturing in some way to Marx, in the same way as the influence of Freud has meant that to some extent

---

[59] Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Harper Perennial, New York: 1993) pp.654-5.

we are all Freudian subjects. Yet at the same time it is difficult to believe in Marxist projections, just as much of Freud's work appears blatantly far-fetched and ludicrous. My problem here with ideology is that the tendency of individual ideologies to press for internal consistency by the process of exclusion makes it difficult to perform the outside-looking-in method of critique which Michael Bell argues is the modus operandi of ideology. Rather the process of double-awareness which Michael Bell argues is a feature of the mythical perspective seems a better methodology for an open critical engagement with the dilemmas of contemporary life.

My next and final objection to ideology is more philosophically based and concerns the previously discussed opposition between the logos and the mythos. This, for instance, forms the crucial distinction in Richard Slotkin's distinction between ideology and mythology. Slotkin argues that:

> It is particularly important to distinguish what I would call the mode of "ideology proper" from the mode of mythmaking. The vehicles of ideology proper are discursive and argumentative in form, and are typified by the rhetorical structure of the credo, manifesto, polemic and sermon. The language of myth is indirect, metaphorical and narrative in structure. It renders ideology in the form of symbol, exemplum and fable, and poetically evokes fantasy, memory and sentiment. The logic of myth is the logic of metaphor and narrative. It depends less upon analytical reason than on an instant and intuitive understanding and acceptance of a given meaning.[60]

However, as I have intimated elsewhere in this chapter, it is an opposition which creates an abstracted critical convenience rather than an indication of the way things work. In his discussion of archetypal mythologies, Slotkin criticises archetypes because they are not natural. What I would also suggest is that in a strange way, ideas (as they are collected under the umbrella of ideology) are not natural, in that they are

generally abstracted from empirical observation, or more broadly, sensation which brings us back to the original formulation of Destutt de Tracy's conception of ideology. Ideas can also be abstracted from narrative processes. I have discussed in some detail above how, in the case of the Enlightenment, ideology is often a metaphor for the placement of events into narrative sequence. In terms of semiotics, we have the situation, perhaps, where narrative structure is a grammar of ideology, which affords the arbitrary concept meaning through its positioning in a series of signs. Furthermore, to find their currency and expression in the social domain ideas and ideologies are dependent upon language, which forces their contamination with the figures of rhetoric which are essential to the linguistic creation of meaning, such as the exemplum, the metaphor, the analogy.[61] There is a persistent assumption in this thinking of myth and ideology which accords ideology *a priori* status over narrative. It is a classic case of what Jacques Derrida has termed "logocentrism": the assumption which harks back to Plato's idealism is a problematic one which has pervaded modern discourse. The problematic status of this *a priori* idealism can be seen in the way all cultures have historically resorted to a mythic foundation, and it is to this notion of foundational mythology that I will be turning in my discussion of the American Dream in Chapter Two.

In the following chapters I will be tracing some of the above arguments, particularly in relation to a perspective on American culture. In the next chapter I will be looking at the origins of the American mythic network and in the following chapters will be tracing the role and response of the American mythic network to change, and some of

---

[60] Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment*, p.22.
[61] See for instance Michele le Doueff, *The Philosophical Imaginary* [1980], trans. Colin Gordon (Athlone Press, London: 1989) for a discussion on how philosophical ideas are dependent upon language and the deployment of rhetorical figures, hence how the logos cannot stand alone.

the implications this can have for the reading of American literature. By doing so I will show how the broad theoretical questions explored in this chapter can be contextualised within the frameworks of specific cultures and their narrative forms. It is a way of arguing that the mythic perspective should not be confined to pre-modern cultures; that the workings of modern societies and the understanding of them also have much to gain from the exploration of their mythic networks. I have argued above that the mythic perspective is more open to the tensional networks which Norbert Elias has identified as integral to the complex composition of social phenomena and their interrelationships. Following Michael Bell, I have suggested that a mythic perspective is also more open to the double consciousness which demands a scholar's awareness of their own positioning within these networks. In doing so I hope to eschew the idea that the macro-cultural perspective is outmoded, and the explorations and approximations that follow are partly to argue that there is as much work to be done in understanding the ways big pictures are put together as there is in the equally necessary detailing of the many smaller pictures which affect our lives and culture. This is because of the nature of networks themselves, and the extremely complex ways in which causality, shaping and connections operate within them. While some of the matters discussed in this chapter will not directly be referenced in subsequent chapters, it is nonetheless crucial that they are, so to speak, operating in the background of the following discussion in order to facilitate the pulling of the multi-faceted concerns of this thesis into an approximated shape.

Chapter Two

> The American nation, historically considered, abounds in tensions and contradictions: religion and rationality; revolution and order; science and free will. But the American people as a whole have not found it necessary to make a choice between any of these. In fact, although perhaps unconsciously, they have found it necessary not to make a choice, but to keep these polarities going as proof against the declension of either part of each dualism - science into paralyzing determinism, revolution into anarchy, religion into superstition. The indivisibility of the "one nation" to which they pledge allegiance is that of a three-legged stool; take away any one of the legs, and the stool cannot stand.[1]

As I have argued in the previous chapter, the realm of the mythic is precisely the realm of suspended oppositions, paradoxes and tensional fictions. Paul Carter's perceptive characterisation cited above indicates just some of the tensions and paradoxes which are central to the identity of American culture. In this chapter I intend to present a way of reading America as a mythic culture. Of course it is possible to argue that every culture is a mythic culture. Yet Carter's argument foregrounds an aspect of the mythic which is particularly apposite to a consideration of American culture. His argument points to an American culture where exclusively ideological versions of culture tend to break down. In general terms this points to the propensity of myth to defy the neat convergence of the Hegelian triad - thesis, antithesis, synthesis - the bulwark of dialectical theories of historical progress. The suspension of opposites which Carter alludes to is different to the idea of synthesis as it does not imply resolution.
This is compatible with the notion of mythic networks I have developed in the previous chapter. I am talking here of a connectional study. It is important to

chapter. I am talking here of a connectional study. It is important to distinguish this from ideas of synthesis. The modes of connection are broad - agreement and opposition being the most obvious; but in a polyvalent as opposed to dualistic perspective, through modes of constraint, tempering, facilitation, transformation, melding, intersection and tangentiality, to name but some. However penetrating and rhetorically powerful dualist or dialectical models of culture are, they are also reductive in that they fail to adequately present the messy and often enigmatic complexity of the interaction of many discourses in the fields through which society is enacted and imagined. Again it is worth remembering Norbert Elias' idea of human networks.[2]

In this chapter I intend to move from the general theoretical considerations of Chapter One to consider how the mythic perspective is a particularly valuable framework in the specific consideration and identification of American society and culture. To begin with I will be looking at the birth of America's mythic network, a consideration of the American Dream as a foundational mythology, and how this foundational discourse is essential to the *imagined community* of the American nation and to the conception of an "American people."[3] Through this I intend to show how the constituting of the American nation and people has prescribed a mythically founded mode of relating which is integral to the performance of American culture. Subsequently I want to look at the constituent discourses of the American Dream through this mode of relationship, with particular emphasis on the interrelationship of these discourses in

---

[2] Norbert Elias, *The Society of Individuals* [1987], trans. Edmund Jephcott (Basil Blackwell, Oxford: 1991) p.32. For a discussion of this see Chapter One above.

[3] The term belongs to Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (Verso, London and New York: 1993), a text whose incisive arguments I will be discussing in greater detail below.

their performance of the suspensional mechanics of the national myth. Although there are many insightful works on individual aspects of the American myth, with a few notable exceptions there is a lack of work on the way they are interconnected. I intend in this chapter to go some of the way towards filling this absence. It would however be churlish not to recognise some of the notable exceptions from the outset. Most obvious perhaps is the myth school in American studies which includes the 1950s work of Henry Nash Smith and R.W.B. Lewis through to later works such as Richard Slotkin's Frontier trilogy.[4] While these scholars have tended to focus on individual aspects of the American myth, in many ways this work belongs as a development in their tradition, which I will be discussing in greater detail below. Another scholar in the field of American Studies who deserves initial attention is the historian Michael Kammen, whose oeuvre consistently emphasises the paradoxical and connectional aspects between themes of American culture. While Kammen tends to restrict his discussion to figures such as the syzygy, the conjunction of two organisms without loss of identity or bi-formity, there is an implication in his analysis of such relations of an even less stable pluralised mode of inter-connection. In *Spheres of Liberty*, for instance, there is an implicitly plural recognition of the way the definition of liberty has been pulled into various shapes by its relationship with other central concepts in the American belief system such as order, authority, justice and equality. Also important in this discussion is his argument that variations in the meaning of liberty are "not only diachronic (changing uses over time), but also synchronic (divergent

[4] Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: the Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Wesleyan University Press, Middletown Conn.: 1973), *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (Atheneum, New York: 1985), *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Harper Perennial, New York: 1993); Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land* (Vintage Books, New York: 1950); R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1955).

applications of the term occurring simultaneously."[5] This shows the inherent plurality of meaning in some of the key terms in the American mythic network and the capacity of these meanings to generate tensions and connection. I am also indebted throughout this work to Kammen's colossal and quite phenomenal work, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture*, which shows the historical extent of American self-consciousness in the processes of national identity, albeit from a less theoretical perspective than I have taken.[6]

Finally I will be introducing the importance of American literature as a mythic vehicle which has operated centrally in the performance of the American Dream, the identification of American culture, and also as a discourse which continually mediates between the mythic vision of America and the historical contexts of outcomes and events in the social reality of the American experience. As many commentators have observed, American culture is a particularly textual culture, and I will be looking at some of the reasons why this might be the case, and how this relates to the specific form of the American mythic network. It is a way of working towards the consideration of how certain novels of the 1980s have configured the American Dream in relation to what Richard Slotkin has described as:

> a "liminal" moment of our cultural history. . .the process of giving up a myth/ideology that no longer helps us see our way through the modern world, but lack[ing] a comparably authoritative system of beliefs to replace what we have lost.[7]

---

[5] Michael Kammen, *Spheres of Liberty: Changing Perceptions of Liberty in American Culture* (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison: 1986) p.17.
[6] Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York: 1991). See also *People of Paradox: An Inquiry in to the Origins of American Civilization* (Vintage, New York: 1972).
[7] Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Harper Perennial, New York: 1993) pp.654-5.

It is a liminal moment which can be characterised as representative of the set of social and cultural conditions which can be marked variously as the postmodern or late-capitalist condition. Indeed as we will see, the mutation over time of aspects of the American Dream has played a crucial role in the eventuation and nature of that specific cultural moment.

Before I embark on an account of America's foundational mythology it is necessary to emphasise some aspects of the approach to myth I have introduced in the preceding chapter. To begin I have argued that the Enlightenment and modern discourses which have advocated reason and science as a post-mythic method of organising human society have themselves a mythical base. As I shall show in this chapter, this is particularly evident in the foundation of the United States. Secondly, it is also important to remember that mythic networks are cultural bodies which are processual as opposed to static. As Claude Levi-Strauss has argued:

> A mythic system can only be grasped in a process of becoming; not as something inert and stable but in a process of perpetual transformation.[8]

Again we are reminded of Norbert Elias' configuration of human networks which I have discussed in Chapter One. Furthermore, the process of transformation is not necessarily an even one. A mythic network is a many-speeded entity. The rate of change may be gradual or abrupt and can operate in a number of ways. Mythic

---

[8] Claude Levi-Strauss, *From Honey to Ashes* [1966], trans. John and Doreen Weightman (Harper and Row, New York: 1973) p.354. See also my discussion in Chapter One.

transformations may involve the construction of new myths, the fragmentation or abandonment of old ones, the re-ordering of the importance of myths within the system, and shifts in the connectional matrix of the network itself. In the latter case new nodal points may be forged, and old ones frayed or severed. This can be argued as indicative of the conditions of all mythic networks. Yet in the case of modern mythic networks there are additional complexities to be considered. To begin with, aspects of the network refuse to consider themselves as myth. Although many mythic networks - I am thinking particularly of religious cosmologies - have pertained to an exclusive knowledge of the absolute truth, the explicitly anti-mythical model of rational transcendence, when coupled with doctrines of materialism and the tendency of scientific thought to divide things (as the Latin root of the word suggests), has produced a different shape of mythic network which we, living in the midst of it, will perhaps never be able to fully articulate. This difficulty is matched by the phenomenal rate of change in the material conditions of modern societies, which is in turn compounded by the scale of the society itself. Contemporary America, its concentrations and its Americans themselves would be unrecognisable, for instance, to the likes of Thomas Jefferson. The position of myth in regard to this is ambiguous, the effect many-faceted. It can be argued that the rate of social change means that there is no opportunity for mythic networks to achieve a relative degree of stability at any given point in time. The process of becoming is accelerated to the extent that mythic values are outmoded by circumstance at earlier phases in their becoming. Although mythic networks are to be viewed as processes of becoming, there are surely different rates of becoming and different conditions of myth according to these rates. Yet, despite the difficulties the size and speed of modern cultures pose to myth, it can also be argued that the modern mythic networks (at least partially, and certainly a

significant part) are instruments in the advocation of these changes. The set of modern myths which can collectively be described as myths of progress are an obvious case in point and it is probably in America where these myths have received their strongest 20th century articulation. This point has been made by William McNeill in a particularly insightful essay, "The Care and Repair of Public Myth". McNeill frames this difficulty in terms of cultural pluralism and the liberal notion of the marketplace of ideas. He argues that:

> The efficiency of such a free market obviously depends on how long it may take for the process of testing and confirmation - or rejection - to work itself out. In rapidly changing conditions, when more and more dimensions of social life are in motion and become subject to deliberate manipulation, there may not be enough time to test new formulations before they must again be altered to match newer and ever-changing circumstances. Worn-out old myths may then continue to receive lip service, but the spontaneity and force attained when people truly believe and hope and act in unison will surely seep away.[9]

It is this condition for which arguments for post-mythic conditions may perhaps be made, rather than the transcendence of the mythic itself. As I argue, this situation becomes even more complicated when this style of change is instigated and energised by some of the society's own central myths.

Further complicating this picture is that modern mythic networks have coincided with immense changes in the way that information circulates in a society. The effects of this also have to be considered, although it is not my explicit intention (for reasons of their magnitude) to do so exhaustively in this thesis. Finally it must be said that the

[9] William McNeil, "The Care and Repair of Public Myth," in *Mythistory and Other Essays* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1986) p.26.

difficulties mythic discourse faces in the modern world cannot be interpreted as a transcendence of the mythic by the rational. Can we truly argue that the world today (and its societies and their inhabitants) is, as the Enlightenment believed it would be, any more logical than the world at any other given time? At one level the quest for specialisation that has marked the modern attempt to make society rational has led to explosions of irrationality in the repressions and omissions rationality has been forced to make in order to make its sense. These explosions are furthermore as integral to the experience of modernity as the structures of rationality from which they have escaped. One advantage of the mythic is that does not force the separation of the rational and irrational. The difficulty of comprehending the American mythic network stems more from the speed of social change driven by the dogma of progress in tandem with the capitalist dynamic of perpetual revolution. The latter is itself a complicated arrangement of material and mythic phenomena, which relates in a complex manner with other central discourses of the American mythic network. In short the American myth is causally implicated in the sites of its own difficulty.

Another aspect of myth that is important to emphasise is its status as tensional discourse. Paul Carter implies above that it is the sustained irresolution of dualisms which are central to what might be called The American Way. Although I would not want to confine this process purely to a dualistic model, the important thing to consider is that tension within a mythic network, whether oppositional or not, is just as likely to hold the network together as it is to pull it apart. The ability of myth to function paradoxically or as a system of interdependent and overlapping metaphors is vital to our capacity to perceive cultures and the total of their disparate (and sometimes openly antagonistic elements) as (at least) a semi-coherent whole. Even in

multi-cultural societies such as America, there is still something in addition to the fact of physical co-habitation that marks Americans apart from other citizens of the world's nations. What this model of myth as tensional discourse suggests, of course, and what is equally implied in its aspect of perpetual transformation, is that myth is a contestable discourse. By this I mean that the capacity of individual myths to sustain oppositions in their narrative frames also applies to mythic networks as a whole. As I will argue this capacity is enhanced in America, where the mythic network embodies the principles of capitalist competition and liberal democracy. Obviously there are tensions between these aspects of American culture as they are embodied in the American Dream, and it should be added that societies are rarely harmonious. Also the very nature of these values, with their emphasis on individual autonomy, leads to a mode of cultural relations which is partly hinged upon the dynamics of open contest. Indeed it is the pre-existence of this mode of cultural relations which in part made America so receptive to industrial capitalism when it arrived.

One of the central paradoxes of a mythic network is that although it is in a state of perpetual becoming, it still refers to mythic origins. As William Doty has argued:

> Myths are perceived as essential accounts, the primary stories of a culture, the stories that shape and expose its most important framing images and self-conceptions, its "roots". . .Rather than chronological or logical primacy of place, such roots are what matter to a culture; and myths and rituals promise continuity with what is radically essential to "our life," to humanness as it is defined in the culture. . .Myths are resolutely chauvinistic in such matters: whatever cannot be related to origins in the primal accounts will have to be justified by often elaborate secondary interpretation. This phenomenon may be sited quite readily in attempts to base modern social legislation upon what is said to be implicit in the national constitution; cognitive dissonance arises whenever the contemporary social setting

> differs so radically from that presupposed in the foundational document that sufficient reinterpretation seems impossible.[10]

The advantage of seeing a mythic network as in perpetual transformation is that it allows myths to continually mediate between the past and the present. The primary myths of a culture, such as the foundations of the American Republic are also involved in this process. Although the events invoked in foundation myths will often remain the same, different emphases in the mythic narrative can serve the function of revising the foundation to keep it applicable to the changing contexts of the present. However, as Doty suggests there is a limit to the ability of foundational myths to stretch across cultural contexts. When this limit is exceeded, he argues, cognitive dissonance is produced. This is similar to Slotkin's idea of a culture's "liminal moment." Of course it is difficult to exactly situate these points. These moments perhaps only really become apparent from a retrospective awareness that a culture's mythic network has fundamentally changed. Even then there are always remnants of the old mythology in the new. As in James Oliver Robertson's idea of the "myth of finding law," it can be a case of a new way of filling an old form, or it may be a new mode of narrative itself built from the remnants of the old.[11] What is important to remember is that myths do not simply emerge from nowhere but are built upon the resources made available to them by their antecedents. As the case of the American foundation evidences, the birth of a mythic network is not the miraculous emergence of an entity from a vacuum, but more a reorganisation of already available discourse. Yet, at the same time there is the tendency of the mythic network to mythologise its

---

[10] William G. Doty, *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals* (University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa: 1986) pp.25-6.
[11] Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality*, pp.280-1. See Chapter One above.

foundation in terms of the completely new, to gain dynamic thrust from the retrospective severing of its links with the old. Before I discuss this further, however, I would like to discuss how we might configure the foundations of the mythic network that constitutes the American Dream.

1

Mythic Foundations, States of Nature and the Nation

Following the theory of Jean-Luc Nancy, there is little doubt that foundational mythologies are central to the performance of community and the distribution of individuals within the social space. As Nancy contends:

> Myth is of and from the origin, it relates to a mythic foundation, and through this relation it founds itself (a consciousness, a people, a narrative).[12]

Myth is the connective tissue that operates to bring individual elements into the functioning form of the socius. In founding "a consciousness, a people, a narrative," myth effectively establishes a culture, a polity and the discourses of its being. Nancy's argument also points to the circularity of the relationship between society and its foundation myth. It is a version of the classic chicken and the egg paradox. Although myth founds the society, it is only at the birth of a society that its foundation myths are enacted. Logically speaking, the myth and the society are co-terminous: so how does a myth actually found society? Nancy gets around this paradox by pointing to the

[12] Jean-Luc Nancy, "Myth Interrupted" in *The Inoperable Community* [1986], trans. Peter Connor (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and Oxford: 1991) p.45.

mythic foundation, a foundation prior to society which is contained within the myth; which indeed can only be accessed through the myth. Implicit in this assumption is the Derridean notion that the origin is an unreachable site which can only be detected in the traces of the texts (in the broadest sense) that succeed it. As we have seen in Chapter One, myth occupies, in the words of Eric Gould, "the ontological gap between event and meaning."[13] The mythic foundation, in this sense, conventionally lies outside of the reach of known history.

The essentiality of a founding myth in the construction of a society has been recognised as far back as Plato's implicit recognition of the limits of the logos by his assertion of the "Magnificent Myth" or "Noble Lie" as the means for establishing the ordering of the social space in his theoretical republic.[14] It is worthwhile here to briefly adumbrate some of the features of Plato's myth as a preparatory analogy to the position of America's founding fathers. A foundation myth par excellence, the Noble Lie performs the function of creating a social space by distributing individual subjects into a hierarchical series of relations within it. Plato's myth is simple, elegant and impossibly ruthless in its idealism. Citizens are graded, according to their ability, into classes defined by their social function (Ruler, Auxiliary, Worker) which are symbolised by the distribution of innate (God-given) metallic qualities (Gold, Silver, Iron/Bronze) over the citizenry.[15] The myth is meritocratic to an extent in its

---

[13] Eric Gould, *Mythical Intentions in Modern Literature*, p.6.

[14] See *The Republic,* trans. Desmond Lee (Penguin Classics: 1977) pp.177-83.

[15] The use of the gold and silver analogy has also appeared in the mythic symbol of America as the (s)melting pot. See for instance this articulation of the melting pot by Emerson:

> As in the old burning of the Temple at Corinth, by the melting and intermixture of silver gold and other metals a new compound more precious than any, called Corinthian brass, was formed: so in this country, - asylum of all nations, - the energy of Irish, Germans, Swedes, Poles, and Cossacks, and all the European tribes, - of the Africans, and the Polynesians, - will construct a new race, a new

recognition of the need for limited mobility between classes on the basis that gold children are not always born to gold parents and so on. Indeed, the ability to recognise the metallicised merits of individuals is the foremost duty assigned by Plato to the Guardians. The consequence of straying from this mythic distribution of the social space is framed by the prophetic threat of the society's ruination.

What Plato is talking about here is not so much a foundation myth in terms of origins, but one of distributions. Although the origin is necessarily invoked in the attribution of the symbolic distribution to the manufacture of men by God, it is of secondary importance to the function of the myth in effecting the real distribution of the social space. This distribution takes place through the construction of orders of symbolic representation - in this case the merits conferred by the relative value of metals and the guardians being able to read this order in the wider citizenry. The primary import of the story is not its cosmological underpinnings, but its usefulness in effecting the optimal organisation of the socius. In this origins can even be determined - within the mythic framework - by the intended structure of society in the present or the future. The function of the origin (in this case God) is to authorise, hence legitimise the social distribution that the myth enacts. This priority in the mythic function is confirmed by Socrate's reply when Glaucon asks whether there is any way of making the people believe the Noble Lie. Socrates responds, "Not in the first generation. . . but you might

---

religion, a new state, a new literature, which will be as vigorous as the new Europe which came out of the smelting-pot of the Dark Ages.

Cited (unreferenced) in, Michael Lind, *The Next American Nation: The New Nationalism and the Fourth American Revolution* (Free Press, New York: 1997) p.298 This is a classic example of how the symbols of the American myth organised themselves from those of antecedent cultures, yet adapted them to suit a new purpose.

succeed with the second and later generations."[16] This pragmatic perspective is also particularly interesting because it introduces the mythic pattern of relationships between repetition, authority and the potential to consciously inculcate belief in the formation of a social order. As Socrates argues, the more the myth is repeated in time and the further the myth is removed from the actuality of its birth (the greater the difference between the event of its fabrication and its meaning) the more plausible it becomes.

In many ways this process can be correlated with Barthes' notion of the tendency of myth to naturalise things. This tendency can also be located in the conceptual foundations of America, especially in its appeal to the authority of natural rights. Yet it is not an outcome, as Socrates implies, that is guaranteed. The distance between the creation of the myth and the historical context of its current belief can indeed help to naturalise the myth as a given in the underpinnings of a society. The survival of myths is however contingent upon their ability to remain pertinent through the transformation of the social world over time. Myths have to be somewhat elastic in order to survive and this is part of the reason for the transformative and tensional nature of mythic networks. It can be suggested that if foundation myths are abandoned, however, the specific identity of the society they have enacted no longer prevails. Of course this is precisely the intention of Plato. His advocation of the Noble Lie is based on the realisation that in order to enact the thoroughly efficient society of his theory, he must first break the distributive patterns of the old society through the fabrication and legitimation of a new foundation myth.

---

[16] *The Republic*, p.182.

Plato's Realpolitik challenges Barthes' assertion in "Myth Today" that the language of revolution is not mythical. Barthes argues that:

> Revolution is defined as a cathartic act meant to reveal the political load of the world: it makes the world; and its language, all of it is fundamentally absorbed in the making. It is because it generates speech which is fully, that is to say initially and finally, political, and not, like myth, speech which is initially political and finally natural, that Revolution excludes myth.[17]

The history of revolutions argues strongly for the mythicity of its speech. The attempts of successful revolutions to legitimise (naturalise?) themselves is well known, as is the movement from revolution to orthodoxy. Indeed as Raymond Williams has usefully remarked, the word "revolution" has always carried the connotation, albeit often suppressed, of a circularity of process.[18]

As an analogy, Plato's conception of the Noble Lie is worth keeping in mind. At a certain level his theoretical construction of a republic corresponds to the practical task the American founding fathers had of constructing their republic. Indeed as Bernard Bailyn has argued, participants in the debates over the nature of government and states around the American revolution were prone to citing Plato as an authority in their arguments, albeit with frequent inaccuracy and/or ambivalence. Indeed Thomas Jefferson, according to Bailyn, concluded that *The Dialogues* consisted of the "sophisms, futilities, and incomprehensibilities of a foggy mind," whereas John Adams:

---

[17] Roland Barthes, "Myth Today" in *Mythologies* [1957], trans. Annette Lavers (Jonathan Cape, London: 1972). p.146.
[18] Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (Fontana, London: 1976) pp.226-30.

> who in 1774 had cited Plato as an advocate of equality and self-government. . .was so shocked when he finally studied the philosopher that he concluded that *The Republic* must have been meant as a satire.[19]

The political journalist Theodore White has written:

> Americans are not a people like the French, Germans or Japanese, whose genes have been mixing with kindred genes for thousands of years. Americans are held together only by ideas, the clashing ideas of opportunity and equality - as it were, by a culture of hope.[20]

As White implies, the birth of the United States was a conscious foundation. In this sense it is possible to read the establishment of the United States of America as the first modern application of a republican theory whose heritage can be traced back to Plato and Aristotle. Yet, although there is this heritage, the complexity and status of the American Dream as a foundational mythology differs significantly from the relative theoretical ease with which Plato was able to assert his comparatively simple foundation myth of The Noble Lie.

What is crucial to understand here is that the foundation of the United States involved the construction of a radically new form of polity. Whereas Plato was able to base his theory on the already existing phenomena of the Greek city state with their defined polities and personal characteristics, the United States arguably constituted a new mode of society and it is to the considerations of its specifics that I would now like to

---

[19] Bailyn, Bernard, *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass.: 1967) pp.24-5.

[20] Cited in Michael Lee Cohen, *The Twenty-Something American Dream: A Cross-Country Quest for a Generation* (Plume, New York: 1993) p.306.

turn. The important similarity remains, however, that like Plato, the American Founding Fathers were consciously attempting to form a new society. In this, their attempts at instituting a foundation differ from traditional anthropological notions of foundational mythologies, which are marked mainly in terms of the implied organicism of the pre-literate and the folkloric. Central to both is the vital fact that the predominant medium through which these attempts (theoretical or actualised) were made, was the written word.

It may seem tautological to describe the birth of the United States through the union of the thirteen states as the birth of a nation, but as Benedict Anderson has suggested nations are a distinct form of polity which belong uniquely to the modern world. Anderson has usefully defined the nation as "an imagined political community. . .imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign."[21] It is worth briefly examining exactly what Anderson means by these terms as it implies the crucial interdependence of the political and symbolic in the way that nations are perceived. Firstly he argues that nations are imagined:

> because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.[22]

This is not an unusual social phenomenon in itself. As Anderson further states all communities, even perhaps "primordial villages of face-to-face-contact" are imagined, which is another way of saying that the idea of community cannot be separated from

[21] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p.6.
[22] Anderson, p.6.

the necessity of their being imagined. What the nation presents us with is a new style as well as a new scale through which the relationship of community is imagined. In addition to the fact that they are imagined, nations are communities:

> because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship.[23]

In simple terms this means that citizens of a nation necessarily perceive their fellow citizens, despite their relative statuses within the polity, as one of their own. According to Anderson, what specifically distinguishes the nation is that it is a new style of "imagined community."[24] Anderson's definition proceeds to posit that nations imagine themselves as both "limited" and "sovereign." By limited, he means that even the largest of nations have "finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations." In this sense, he argues:

> No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind. The most messianic nationalists do not dream of a day when all the members of the human race will join their nation in the way that it was possible, in certain epochs, for, say, Christians to dream of a wholly Christian planet.[25]

This may be true in a strictly physical sense, yet the imperialistic tendencies in the export of modes of the American imaginary in the current globalising culture, can be used to render the argument problematic. The style of being American, or the values perceived as elemental to the identity of the American nation have been vigorously

---

[23] Anderson, p.7.
[24] In arguing against Ernest Gellner's claim that "nationalism. . .invents nations where they do not exist", Anderson responds that "Communities are distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined." Anderson, p.6.
[25] Anderson, p.7.

propounded throughout the world over the course of the 20th century. This process has had its cultural, economic, political and physical (including military) aspects. In the latter case, wars such as Vietnam and the rationale given for America's involvement in them can be construed as the willingness of America to violate the physical territory of other nations in order to protect the potential for the development of the American way within them. It can be argued that such actions were reactively framed within the American perception of the necessity to counter the supranational intentions of theoretical communism, and specifically the imperialism of the USSR's foreign agenda (hence the domino theory). Either way, it is important to realise here that the symbolic values which facilitate the imagined communities of nations are often more ambitious than the limits of the territories within which they are initially defined. This argument is of course qualified by its postmodern context in which globalisation and transnational economic arrangements are putting the identity and active capacities of nation states at risk, something I will discussing at length in Chapter Four. These issues were yet to arise at the time of the American foundation.

Nations (as opposed to their more transportable modes of social being) can generally be conceived as imagined communities which have a limited physical or geographical reality. Yet at the same time this reality, as is exemplified by the expansion of the original thirteen states to the current composition of the United States, can be elastic. As Henry Nash Smith has noted there was doubt in the early history of westward expansion as to whether the republican mode of sovereignty could survive beyond a certain geographical scale. One of Thomas Jefferson's most influential acolytes and a champion of westward expansion, Thomas Hart Benton, believed for instance that the Pacific territories of the North American continent would necessarily be constituted as

a separate yet sympathetic republic to the United States.[26] The increasing scale of America and its physical elasticity was to play a crucial role in the distribution of social subjects in the social space, and also in the representative orders, both political and symbolic, that were put in place to effect the idea of America as a national community.

Just as a nation is an imagined community because it is a collective entity where the individual exists with no immediate knowledge of most of his fellow countrymen, it can also be considered imaginary in the sense that it is unlikely that any one subject has a complete experience of the geographical space his/her nation occupies. In America, for instance, space has been mediated through the narratives of the Wilderness, the Garden and Frontier mythologies.[27] Henry Steele Commager has made the observation that whereas in Europe topography tends to be local (applicable to the people who directly inhabit it), in America it tends to be national so that "the whole country 'from sea to shining sea' belongs to the whole people."[28] Ultimately, what eventuates is that the symbolic significance invested in real space in the formation of nations means that the symbolic and physical realms become intertwined in the emotional attachment that the individual's sense of belonging to a nation prescribes. Furthermore, national geographical space is incorporated into the patterns of representation which construct the symbolic idea of the nation. In America, as in most nations, national identity is partly conveyed through the way the people relate

---

[26] See Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land* (Vintage Books, New York: 1950) p.28. In this sense the mode of sovereignty and the geographical scale of nations (at least in the theory) are conceptually intertwined. Of course the most dramatic irruption of these tensions can be located in the events of the Civil War.
[27] Interestingly, many of America's 19th century mythologisers of the west were easterners with limited or no experience of the physical west. See Marcus Klein's *Eastern, Westerns and Private Eyes: American Matters, 1870-1900* (University of Wisconsin Press: 1994).
[28] Henry S. Commager, *The Search for a Usable Past* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York: 1967) pp.20-1.

themselves to the physical space and in doing so construct symbolic meaning from it. It is from this nexus of the physical and the symbolic that notions of the Garden, Wilderness and Frontier derive. And as I will argue later in this chapter, these notions have had important effects on the way certain political and economic patterns of distribution have become entrenched as part of the American Way and the Dream that underpins it.

Anderson's definition proceeds to consider how the nation is imagined as sovereign. The central reason for this, he argues:

> because the concept [the nation] was born in an age in which Enlightenment and revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical
>
> dynastic realm. Coming to their maturity at a stage of human history when even the most devout adherents of any universal religion were inescapably confronted with the living pluralism of such religions, and the allomorphism between each faith's ontological claims and territorial stretch, nations dream of being free, and, if under God, directly so. The gage and emblem of this freedom is the sovereign state.[29]

Here Anderson is introducing the central idea in his thesis that the emergence of the nation as a concept and the intensity with which it has established itself as the dominant political mode of ordering the world which we recognise as ours, was made possible by a specific set of historical circumstances. We are dealing here with the notion of the epistemic shift which Foucault and others have marked as the birth of the modern. In Anderson's words:

[29] Anderson, p.7.

> In Western Europe the eighteenth century marks not only the dawn of the age of nationalism but the dusk of religious modes of thought. The century of the Enlightenment, of rationalist secularism, brought with its own modern darkness. With the ebbing of religious belief, the suffering which in part composed belief did not disappear. Disintegration of paradise: nothing makes fatality more arbitrary. Absurdity of salvation: nothing makes another style of continuity more necessary. What then was required was a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning. As we shall see, few things were (are) better suited to this end than an idea of nation. If nation-states are widely conceded to be 'new' and 'historical,' the nations to which they give expression always loom out of an immemorial past, and, still more important, glide into a limitless future. It is the magic of nationalism to turn chance into destiny. . .
>
> Needless to say, I am not claiming that the appearance of nationalism towards the end of the eighteenth century was 'produced' by the erosion of religious certainties, or that this erosion does not itself require a complex explanation. Nor am I suggesting that somehow nationalism historically 'supersedes' religion. What I am proposing is that nationalism has to be understood by aligning it, not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which - as well as against which - it came into being.[30]

What is particularly instructive about Anderson's formulation of the cultural roots of nationalism and the nation is that it orientates them firmly towards the mythical and against the ideological. As Jean-Luc Nancy implies in the citation above, the formation of any coherent community is necessarily a mythic operation. Indeed, as the events of the modern era increasingly show, it is through the imagined community of the nation that the values articulated by political ideologies have received their modern social reality.[31] Which is to say that ideology is at this level embedded in the mythic.[32]

---

[30] Anderson, pp.11-12.

[31] Anderson, pp.1-4.

[32] Which is again why Geertz's conception of ideology should more properly be termed the mythic. See Chapter One.

The nation, argues Anderson, in offering a new mode of continuity, provided a way out of the existential absurdity produced by the progressive dissipation of the existential security enshrined in the mythic operations of religious faith. Whereas the temporally limited works of men once derived meaning beyond their limitations through the continuity accorded to them within the schema of the works of God, meaning began to be derived in such terms as contribution to the nation, or dying for your country. The emotional need for individuals to see themselves as part of a meaningful collective was increasingly invested in the figures of nations. Anderson's formulation, as he recognises, cannot simply be mapped onto the modern world from the perspective of a coherent and consistent epistemic shift. It would be a mistake, for instance, to argue that the weakening of religion necessarily corresponds to an end in the belief in universalising discourses. In fact much of Enlightenment discourse with its pretension to a knowledge of "natural man" for instance, the liberal discourses of rationalism and progress, or indeed the discourses of Marx, have staked their authority on claims of universal applicability. It has to be said though that the rise of the nation and nationalism has fundamentally destabilised the universalising claims of these discourses, with their mythic and emotional emphases tending in reality to be more seductive than the abstract claims of reasoned arguments.[33] Indeed nationalism has proved an enigmatic and frequently disenchanting phenomenon for those whose adherence to such discourses is purist. Yet it is crucial to recognise that the relationship between these discourses in the specific formation of nations is far more

---

[33] The geopolitics of the 1990s have seen a huge resurgence of nationalism, particularly after the collapse of the eastern bloc. Yet the dependence of communism on ideas of nationalism can be traced to Stalin's compromise move of socialism in one country in the 1920s as a response to Trotsky's plan of perpetual revolution. Countering this contemporary resurgence is the momentum of transnational capitalism, which, in an implied form of economic blackmail, has severely diminished the power for many national governments to make decisions.

complex than an argument of simple oppositions suggests. What also becomes crucial is the recognition that the liminal moments of the postmodern in Western societies are marked politically, economically and culturally - through effects such as continuing communications revolution and the concomitant tendency of globalisation - by a dispersion or at least a reconfiguration of the nation's potency as a style of imagined community. This is something I will be dealing with specifically in later chapters.

The events of the American Revolutionary era seen from the perspective of Anderson's insights, provide a fascinating history of the modern nation in the early stages of its genesis. The foundation of the United States is a case in point of the complex relationship of Enlightenment discourse with the emerging concept of nationhood. In many senses the United States can be considered the world's first nation. Although the Declaration of Independence in 1776 can be considered the product of an argument between the American colonies and the English parent over taxation matters, it draws its authority largely from the context of universalist Enlightenment discourse. Since Anderson prefaces his concept of the nation with the word political, I would like to briefly discuss the political environment out of which the two most central founding documents, the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution, derived their authority, as it is also within these documents (and the debates that surrounded them) that some of the deeper paradoxes of the American Dream initially emerge. From this discussion, I hope to explore some of the complex connections between the political, historical and mythic which have emanated from this foundation as a way of working towards an understanding of how the United States can be conceptualised through Anderson's notion of the nation as "imagined community." Following that, I will move to a discussion of how the United

States, once founded, consolidated itself through an expansion of its mythic network, in preparation for my discussions of the role that literature played in the burgeoning of the American Dream.

In declaring the thirteen colonies independent from England, the Founding Fathers were placed in the position of having to establish an alternative authority to the tripartite British political system of crown, aristocracy and parliament. The authority they chose derived directly from the Enlightenment's theories of natural man. In the Declaration of Independence, drafted by Thomas Jefferson and adopted with some amendments by the Revolutionary congress, the "laws of nature and of nature's God" are invoked as the authority entitling the scission. What confronts us in the Declaration is a specifically Enlightenment version of the mythic foundation, or as I have argued in Chapter One, what James Oliver Robertson has described as the myth of finding law, which is of course what the formation of societies is largely about.[34] The reach beyond the known annals of history to a state of nature is precisely the sort of mythic foundation that Jean-Luc Nancy discusses in *The Inoperative Community.* It corresponds fundamentally to the unknowable time of human affairs which precedes the bringing of people together into a community, an event which the Enlightenment political theorists referred to as the original social contract. Although not all the Enlightenment's social theorists agreed on the specifics of this foundation, the state of nature and original social contract were contestable postulates that were widely accepted as the domain in which arguments over political form (specifically monarchy or democracy) and the order of social and economic distribution could take place. We

[34] James Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality*, pp.280-1.

can, for example, compare and contrast the theories of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau who used the same template of the transition from state of nature to social contract, yet with significantly different imaginaries of both the state of nature and the transition to society in order to claim authority for their differing belief in the values and political structure that their societies should have. Locke used it to justify liberal society and vindicate the changes in English political structure emanating from the Glorious Revolution. In the *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes used the state of nature to defend the monarchy. In his *Discours sur l'origine et les fondemens de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1755), Rousseau, on the other hand, constructed his bizarre imaginary of man in the state of nature in order to develop his thesis of the corruptive effect of society on man.[35]

On the democratic side, this use of the idea of the state of nature received one of its most influential articulations in John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* (1689). Locke argued that:

> To understand political power, right, and derive it from its original, we must consider what state all men are naturally in, and that is, a state of perfect freedom to order their actions, and dispose of their possessions and persons, as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature; without asking leave, or depending upon the will of any other man.
>
> A state also of equality, wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another; there being nothing more evident, then the creatures of the same species and rank, promiscuously born to all the same advantages of nature, and the use of the same faculties, should also be equal one amongst another without subordination or subjection; unless the lord and master of them all [God] should by any manifestation of his will, set one above another, and confer on him,

[35] John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* [1690], in ed. Steven M. Cahn, *Classics of Modern Political Theory* (Oxford University Press: 1997), Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondemens de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* [1755], trans. D. Cress (Hackett, Indianapolis: 1992), Thomas Hobbes, *The Leviathan* [1651] (Scolar Press, Menston: 1969).

> by an evident and clear appointment, an undoubted right to dominion and sovereignty.[36]

The state of nature is a fiction Locke deploys to construct - whether consciously or not - a sense of universal values which will be useful in the advocation of particular modes of political distribution, namely the emerging liberal-democratic nexus of freedom and equality. By appealing to the state of nature and the powers of reason, natural rights philosophy constructs a narrative of authority which displaces the appeal of absolute monarchy to origins in the fiction of the Divine Right of Kings.[37] Admittedly, Locke leaves open the possibility that God might want things otherwise. In the Declaration of Independence, however, this avenue is effectively curtailed by the fusion of the "laws of nature" with the authority of "Nature's God." This can be interpreted to mean either God being beholden to nature, or that God's will is consonant with and directly expressed through natural law. In the light of the historical context the latter seems more likely. Significantly, the Declaration also carries in it the natural rights idea of the innate equality of men in its acknowledgement that "all man are created equal." Further, the notion of liberty is also derived from Locke's assumption of a perfect state of freedom, and expanded upon by Jefferson to include the other inalienable rights of "life" (also to be found in Locke) and the "pursuit of happiness."

In Chapter VIII of the *Second Treatise*, Locke goes on to theorise the reasons for the establishment of civil or political society. The only way, he argues:

---

[36] John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, p.219.
[37] Cahn notes that the first of Locke's treatises was a direct reply to the divine right royalist of the civil war, Sir Robert Filmer. See *Classics of Modern Political Theory*, p.214.

> whereby any one divests himself of his natural liberty, and puts on the bonds of civil society, is by agreeing with other men to join in and unite into a community, for their comfortable, safe and peacable living amongst another, in a secure enjoyment of their properties, and a greater security against any, that are not of it. This any number of men may do, because it injures not the freedom of the rest; they are left as they were in the liberty of the state of nature. When any number of men have so consented to make one community or government, they are thereby presently incorporated, and make one body politic, wherein the majority have a right to act and conclude the rest.[38]

Here we are presented with the conditions which Locke imagined as the instigation of civil society. With the a priori assumption of equality and freedom it becomes natural that the mode of enacting civil society should necessarily be one of consent; hence the still pervasive notion of society as a voluntary compact. However, it should be remarked that not all of the Enlightenment theorists of the social contract necessarily agreed with this sanguine formulation of the birth of civil society. Indeed Rousseau, in what was a precursor to the nostalgic immersion in the state of nature by the romantics, argued that the social contract was the beginning of the corruption of man's innate equality. Another position can be found in David Hume's perceptive engagement with the motivations of such natural rights philosophy in his essay, *Of The Original Contract* (1777), which intimated the inherent relativity of assertions about the state of nature in terms of the political divisions in Britain. Hume argued that:

> As no party, in the present age, can well support itself, without a philosophical or speculative system of principles, annexed to its political or practical one; we accordingly find, that each of the factions, into which this nation is divided, has

---

[38] ibid. p.245.

> reared up a fabric of the former kind, in order to protect and cover that scheme of actions, which it pursues.[39]

Hume's shrewd recognition of the utility of speculative systems in the practise of politics, resembles in a sense Plato's pragmatic assertion of the Noble Lie as a crucial instrument in the formation of societies, and can be read as a qualification of Locke's more philosophically doctrinal deployment of the state of nature. Hume proceeds to cannily argue the practical limits of Lockean state-of-nature theory through the observation that the values of freedom, equality and the necessity of consent in the formation of human societies are conspicuous by their absence in the annals of human history. It is an observation that Locke himself had felt compelled to mount a defence against in the treatise.[40] Hume argued effectively that:

> It is in vain to say, that all governments are or should be, at first, founded on popular consent, as much as the necessity of human affairs will admit. This favours entirely my pretension. I maintain that human affairs will never admit of this consent; seldom of the appearance of it. But that conquest or usurpation, that is, in plain terms, force, by dissolving the ancient governments, is the origin of almost all the new ones, which were ever established in the world. And that in the few cases, where consent may seem to have taken place, it was commonly so irregular, so confined, or so much intermixed either with fraud or violence that it cannot have any great authority.
>
> My intention here is not to exclude the consent of the people from being one just foundation of government where it has its place. It is surely the best and most sacred of any. I only pretend, that it has seldom had place in any degree, and never almost in its full extent. And that therefore some other foundation of government must also be admitted.[41]

---

[39] David Hume, *Of The Original Contract* [1748], in ed. Steven M. Cahn, *Classics of Modern Political Theory* (Oxford University Press: 1997) p.505.
[40] See ibid. pp.506-515 for Hume's engaging and alert presentation of this problem. For Locke's defence see Chapter VIII, para. 100-22, *Classics of Modern Political Theory*, pp.246-54.
[41] ibid. p.509.

Hume attacks the a priori status of the original contract by arguing its truancy from the annals of recorded history.[42] In the context of the foundation of America, we can glean from this statement of Hume the beginnings of America's own sense of its apartness from the imperfections of European history. What has become known as the doctrine of American exceptionalism can at least be traced to the belief of the Founding Fathers that America was an opportunity for a society to transcend the persistent corruption of the original contract in the prevailing political forms of their European antecedents. In a sense this can be interpreted as a continuation of the quest of the Pilgrim Fathers for religious freedom and also of the liberal constitutions whichalready existed in the constitutions of some of the thirteen colonies. Yet, at the same time, in declaring independence, there was also the sense developing of America as a place removed from the strictures of historical experience, or alternatively situated in the nascent stages of a new phase in history, which we now refer to as the modern.

2

America's Mythic Foundations as Tensional Discourse

The scientism of Jefferson's *Zeitgeist* has been explored in Garry Wills' thorough but sometimes narrowing treatment of the circumstances and influences of the

---

[42] Jeremy Bentham went one step further when he branded the original contract as a fiction. See "A Fragment on Government" [1776], in ed. W. Harrison, *A Fragment on Government and Principles of Morals and Legislations* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford: 1948).

Here Bentham's notion of fiction is disparaging, as it is in opposition to reason. Nonetheless it constitutes a recognition of the importance of narrative and fiction in the mythic foundation of societies, and it may well be argued that these foundations precede the operations of reason, and are ultimately more important than reason in their impact on the shape societies take.

Declaration, *Inventing America.*[43] The founding of the United States can be considered, as Wills' title suggests, from the perspective of a political or scientific experiment.[44] Throughout the revolutionary era, up to the establishing of the constitution and beyond there was considerable debate on how to apply social contract theory and how the principles of republics and democracy could be practically implemented. Hurdles between the theoretical and the actual had to be surmounted - for example, ways had to be found to invent a system which would function beyond the limited scale that thinkers such as Montesquieu believed circumscribed the potential of republics. Indeed as Pocock and Ball have written, the revolutionary era and the constitution of the United States necessitated considerable conceptual change in the terms by which such thinking was conducted.[45] It could further be said that it was a type of conceptual change which expressed itself in terms of process, thus creating a political system which would be able to adapt to the changing conditions of American modernisation. As Michael Kammen has suggested the constitution was designed by the Founding Fathers to be a "Machine which would go of itself."[46] Documents such as *The Federalist* can rightfully be considered

---

[43] Garry Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (Athlone Press, London: 1978). See also James Ceaser, *Reconstructing America* (Yale University Press, New Haven: 1997), especially pp.44-65, on Jefferson and *The Federalist* and the experimentalism inherent in their establishment of the nation through the application of "political science."

[44] Wills is thorough on the scientism of Jefferson's mind and its penchant for believing *a la* Condillac (and others) in the potential of a "political mathematics." See *Inventing America*, particularly pp. 95-110 and pp.132-148.

[45] See the introduction to J.G.A. Pocock and Terence Ball, eds, *Conceptual Change and the Constitution* (University Press of Kansas, Lawrence: 1998) and the essays within it, particularly James Farr, "Conceptual Change and Constitutional Innovation," Gerald Stourz, "Constitution: Changing Meanings of the Term from the Early Seventeenth to the Late Eighteenth Century,"and J.G.A. Pocock, "States, Republics, and Empires: The American Founding in Early Modern Perspective." Of course, Benedict Anderson's tracing of the nation concept in *Imagined Communities* is also invaluable here as a complementary inquiry into the context in which these conceptual changes took place. See particularly pp.1-65. See also Terence Ball, James Farr and Russell Hanson, eds, *Political Innovation and Social Change* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York; 1989) for an example of this approach on a broader scale.

[46] Michael Kammen, *A Machine that Would Go of Itself: The Constitution in American Culture* (Knopf, New York: 1986).

masterpieces of modern political thought. Many, though not all, of America's revolutionaries and indeed many of Europe's Enlightenment figures came to see America as a territory in which the new developments in political philosophy could be realised. Nonetheless in America there was also a sustained conservative opposition led by former revolutionary luminaries such as John Adams, to what Merle Curti has categorised as the growth of intellectual democracy, cultural nationalism and the expansion of Enlightenment thought.[47]

It must be emphasised that the foundations of this experiment, the state of nature and its laws, were fundamentally mythic in both their form and effect. Furthermore, this notion of America as an opportunity for natural reason and its values to order new social forms was compounded by its partial compatibility with the puritan vision of America as The Promised Land, particularly in the late 18th century when theological doctrines such as universalism, unitarianism and deism were emerging to counter the Calvinist doctrines of predestination and inherited sin, and thus to facilitate the conjunction of religion and reason as they are represented in the Declaration's *Nature's God.* What is also interesting in this situation is that less theologically compatible aspects of the Enlightenment such as materialism failed to have as great an impact on American culture as these rationalised theologies. This points to a query regarding the conventionally agreed-upon idea that the Enlightenment marked the progressive secularisation of religion by modernity. It might also be said that the emerging idea of America partly constituted a mythic imagining of the secular, through religion but also

---

[47] See Merle Curti's discussion of this in *The Growth of American Thought*, 3rd edition (Harper and Row, New York: 1964) pp. 123-204 and particularly on the growth of intellectual democracy pp.128-137, cultural nationalism pp.137-148, and the expansion of Enlightenment thought pp.149-177. For accounts of the conservative reaction see pp.178-201.

through the emotional fields being organised into the modern imagined community of the nation.[48] I am not suggesting that these processes of mutual modification between the religious and the secular were clean. On the contrary it was a hotly contested relationship, with continually shifting patterns of consonance and dissonance. The picture is further complicated by the emergence of natural science as a discourse with the potential to damage not just religious belief, but also, as James Ceaser has argued, the values of natural rights philosophy, too. In *Reconstructing America* he identifies early instances of this clash between natural rights and natural science in Jefferson's attitudes towards slavery and in *The Federalist's* rejection of natural science as a discourse appropriate to the organisation of political society. In these instances there is an anticipation of the far more serious clash between religion, natural rights and natural science, when it did come to affect the ordering of the polity with the emergence of Social Darwinism in the Gilded Age.[49]

Actual works of scholarship on the Declaration of Independence are relatively few in comparison to the significant positions it occupies as the marker of the scission with Britain and as a symbolic charter of the values the new nation would embody. Certainly by comparison with the wealth of writing on the constitution, the Declaration appears to have been relatively neglected. As Garry Wills has complained "the declaration is constantly invoked but rarely studied."[50] In *Inventing America*, Wills proceeds to give a number of reasons why this might be the case, some of which I will discuss in detail below. Yet he tends to miss the most obvious reason: that the

[48] See Curti, pp.150-159.
[49] James Ceaser, *Reconstructing America*, pp.46-63.
[50] Wills, p.xxiv. Again I would recommend here Michael Kammen's excellent *A Machine that Would Go of Itself: The Constitution in American Culture* which discusses the complexities surrounding the constitution and the heritage of the literature about the constitution in considerable historical detail.

Declaration has been naturalised (in precisely the sense of naturalisation that Barthes indicates as an operation of the mythic) within American culture.[51] Although Barthes has argued this process negatively, the way the Declaration has been naturalised within American culture suggests the positive power this tendency of myth can exert in the operations of a society, assuming one is interested in the broader welfare of its citizens. As the persistence of the Declaration as a symbol of America evidences, this tendency of myth to naturalise is both most marked and most necessary at the level of foundations.

While it may be argued that the claim to self-evidence in the Declaration points to Barthes' contention that the tendency of myth to naturalise makes myth incontestable discourse, this is only the case if the broader contexts of the Declaration's deployment are not fully considered. To correct these omissions suggests the extent to which the Declaration has functioned as contestable discourse, albeit not always within the adversarial framework of the dialectic. To begin with, it has to be remembered that the Declaration is a text and that some of the terms involved are complex in their individual meaning and tensional in their relationship to other key terms in the text. The difficulties discussed above in determining the meaning of the state of nature are an obvious example of how contestability operates internally in the mythic foundation. It is important here to take into consideration the fact that networks are tensional by their very nature. Within a mythic network, therefore, myths tend to affect the shape of other myths, and there is contest in the way a society determines the limits and shape of the mythic network. Furthermore, as has been argued above, a mythic network is

---

[51] See "Change the Object Itself," pp.165-9, in *Image Music Text,* trans. Stephen Heath (Flamingo, London: 1984). See also Chapter One for my discussion of Barthes' position on myth.

important in managing the relationship of the present to the past. This too carries the potential for considerable dissonance and the capacity to generate tension as an operation of the mythic. If these aspects are considered for their cross-proliferative potential as well, it soon becomes clear how much of mythic discourse is, contrary to Barthes'assertions, contestable.

The Declaration of Independence is a mythic document, which refers directly to the real historical moment of the birth of the nation and brings to this origin the values of the mythic foundation. This partly explains the frequency of its invocation across the spectrum of American discourse and the lack of criticism generally surrounding it. Take for instance James Ceaser, who while reluctantly criticising Jefferson is still able to assert with considerable emotional conviction and within the supposedly dry realms of academic discourse that "No greater document exists in the annals of human freedom than the Declaration of Independence."[52] The continued appeal of the Declaration through its significance in the American mythic network is a factor Wills has ignored in his arguments -particularly in terms of the transformative nature of mythic networks and their constituent parts. *Inventing America* is a text which assiduously attempts to negate the mythicity of the Declaration. Yet as Ceaser's 1997 faith in the status of the Declaration indicates, it is an attempt firmly grounded in futility. The Declaration (with the constitution) is the text most strongly tied to the foundational mythology and mythic foundation of America, as they have been outlined above, and I would like to briefly deal with some of Wills' contentions as a way of reading the inevitability of the mythic in the functioning of American culture.

[52] Ceaser, *Reconstructing America*, p.453.

What Wills argues is indicative of a particular way of writing history which hopes for the limited reconstitution of such mythically charged documents within the framework of the "original intentions" of its authors. This is an idea I find difficult to countenance, coming from a background of contemporary literary theory. As Edward Said has persuasively argued, an intention:

> is a notion that includes everything that later develops out of it, no matter how eccentric the development or inconsistent the result.[53]

There is no reason why Said's position cannot be applied to the foundational documents of the United States as they are texts as much as any other. Nonetheless, the idea of "original intentions" has been championed in certain quarters of American Studies, most notably in arguments concerning the meaning of the constitution.[54] Harry W. Jaffa has brought together some of the positions in this debate, commenting on Reagan's Attorney General Meese's call for Supreme Court judges to exercise judicial restraint by basing their judgements on the original intentions of the Founding Fathers rather than their own subjective biases.[55] Terence Ball on the other hand has argued that such a return to original intentions is impossible because the conceptual change in the contestable terms of the constitution is irrevocable.[56] As Michael Kammen argues concerning the Constitution:

[53] Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (John Hopkins UP, Baltimore: 1978) p.12.
[54] For a gloss on this fashion see J.G.A. Pocock and Terence Ball, eds, *Conceptual Change and the Constitution*, pp. 7-11.
[55] Harry V. Jaffa et al., *Original Intent and the Framers of the Constitution* (Regnery Gateway, Washington DC, Lanham MD.: 1994).
[56] Terence Ball, *Reappraising Political Theory: Revisionist Studies in the History of Political Thought* (Clarendon Press, Oxford: 1995) pp.250-72.

> The varied ways in which jurists interpret and politicians construe the Constitution have, in a sense, become an extension of it. They thereby comprise an integral part of constitutionalism in The United States.[57]

What this suggests in a way is that the mythic function of foundation documents means that they grow with the subsequent history of their usage. Furthermore, the openness of some of the terms contained in America's foundation documents means that the original intentions of the Founding Fathers are always going to be coloured by the contexts through which they are invoked. As Kammen further argues this openness has enabled an often highly flexible deployment of the constitution and the attitudes of the Founding Fathers towards it in order to justify positions they themselves would have been appalled by. Kammen argues that:

> Most Americans fail to appreciate the extent to which they have accepted a passel of constitutional fictions. Although these are not entirely false, neither are they historically sound. . .Attempts by scholars during the past half century to extend this trend - to "dispose of historical and legal myths,"as one of them put it - have barely altered public perceptions.[58]

Here again there is a degree of misunderstanding concerning the mythic function of the Constitution, of the way in which the constitution functions as tensional discourse, drawing a nation together into a symbolic shape which has its contradictions, tensions and dissonances. Kammen considers his study an attempt "to describe the place of the constitution in the public consciousness and symbolic life of the American people." He argues that this includes "the perceptions and misperceptions, uses and abuses,

---

[57] Michael Kammen, *A Machine That would Go of Itself*, p.12.
[58] ibid. p.13.

knowledge and ignorance of ordinary Americans."[59] The capacity for misconception of the significance of mythic foundations by both the public and their experts cannot be retrieved by reference to the original intentions of the founding fathers because they have been incorporated into the tensional network of the foundation itself. In this sense mythic foundations exist in the present, not just as documents which can be fixed by reference to the historical conditions of their origins.

The appeal to "original intentions" also fails to comprehend the self-transformative capacity of myth over history. The presumption that the real and the symbolic America as James Caesar has defined them, can be separated through the liberation of the real from the symbolic, by a reimmersion in historical fact is a fatuous one, as the idea of the imagined community implies.[60] The reason, ultimately, why I want to discuss this particular book by Garry Wills is that it strongly evidences (albeit by negation of its approach) the benefits of accepting the mythic framework of American culture as opposed to fighting against it, whether from the objective historical perspective or ideological perspective, and at the same time demonstrates the equivalent benefit of using the strategies of reflexivity or double-consciousness I have discussed in Chapter One in order to create the space for critical thinking.

Wills' book makes its attack on several fronts. One of his central arguments can be read as an attempt to detach the Declaration of Independence from the orthodoxy he argues is derived from Carl Becker's famous version of it as a manifestation of

---

[59] ibid. p.xi.
[60] James Ceaser, *Reconstructing America: the Symbol of America in Modern Thought* (Yale University Press, New Haven CT: 1997) pp.1-18.

Lockean philosophy.[61] In attempting to defuse this thesis, Wills argues variously and in detail how other Enlightenment theorists were more prominent on Jefferson's shelves, among the books he bought in later life, and in the reading suggestions he gave to friends. Without wishing to question the historical veracity of Wills' finely detailed research, it is worth pointing to his citing of Jefferson's reply to accusations that he had directly plagiarised Locke in the writing of the Declaration. Jefferson claimed that:

> All its authority rests then on the harmonizing sentiments of the day, whether expressed in conversation, in letters, printed essays, or in the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney etc.[62]

Jefferson's response tends to contradict the bibliographical specificity with which Wills attempts to deny the influence of Lockean natural rights theory in the substance of the Declaration. What Jefferson's comment instead suggests is the way the Declaration claimed its authority from the atmosphere of some of the ideas and philosophical and political positions which had a broad currency at the time, and were conducive precisely to the establishment of independence. We are presented here with an example of Hume's recognition of the political usefulness of speculative systems. Jefferson's approach was one of "harmonizing sentiments": it is an approach which correlates with the mythic function of bringing a people together in the sense of Jean-Luc Nancy's mythic foundation. The sources that Jefferson refers to are common

---

[61] Carl Becker, *The Declaration of Independence* [1922] (Vintage, New York: 1942). See also J.G.A. Pocock's essay, "States, Republics, and Empires: The American Founding in Early Modern Perspective" in J.G.A. Pocock and Terence Ball, eds, *Conceptual Change and the Constitution* (University Press of Kansas, Lawrence: 1988) particularly pp.57-61 for an analysis of the Declaration in relation to Lockean theory.

[62] Thomas Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson,* 10 Vols, ed. Paul Ford (Putnam, London and New York: 1904-5) cited in Wills, *Inventing America*, p.172.

reference points (among the educated at least) in an era which is marked by an unusual philosophical fervour. Part of this fervour involved a widespread engagement with the Enlightenment theories of natural rights and social contracts. The position Bernard Bailyn takes is closer to the mark in regard to the pervasiveness of these discourses, when he argues:

> Despite the efforts that have been made to discount the influence of the "glittering generalities" of the European Enlightenment on eighteenth-century Americans, their influence remains, and is profoundly illustrated in the political literature. It is not simply that the great virtuosi of the American Enlightenment - Franklin, Adams, Jefferson - cited the classic Enlightenment texts and fought for the legal recognition of natural rights and for the elimination of institutions and practices associated with the *ancien regime*. They did so; but they were not alone. The ideas and writings of the leading secular figures of the European Enlightenment. . .were quoted everywhere in the colonies, by everyone who claimed a broad awareness. In pamphlet after pamphlet the American writers cited Locke on natural rights and on the social and government contract, Montesquieu and later Delolme on the character of British liberty and on the institutional requirements for its attainment, . . .Grotius, Pufendorf, Burlamaqui, and Vattel on the laws of nature and of nations, and on the principles of civil government. The pervasiveness of such citations is at times astonishing.[63]

It is also important to note that the brevity of the document in terms of its citation of Enlightenment precepts, makes it difficult to attribute precise philosophical meaning to its terms. As Wills himself argues:

> The Declaration, precisely because it was a propaganda document was addressed to the widest possible audience - to the whole "candid world," to that mankind whose opinion deserves a decent respect.[64]

[63] Bernard Bailyn, *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, pp.26-7.
[64] Wills, p.341.

The openness of the terms of the Declaration tends to elide differences between the existing versions of natural rights philosophy. The potential tensions in its authority remained initially inchoate, yet available for subsequent contextualisation within the tensional relationships between the symbolic ideal of America and its realities, as well as for the playing out of tensions within the field of the mythic itself. It is exactly this openness of the document, its ability to be invoked across historical contexts, that made it particularly suitable for its incorporation over time into a cornerstone of the American Dream. Americans over history have looked to the Declaration for ideas on who they are and what they mean. The fact that the issuance of the Declaration is predicated on the "Authority of the good People of these Colonies" framed from the outset the urge for the development of strategies, narratives and symbols which would build the notion of the people of the thirteen colonies as an imagined national community. The style of the imagined community we see as America validates the importance of such endeavours. As Theodore White reminds us, America is ultimately a community whose bindings can be found in the domain of consciously inculcated and subsequently mythicised philosophical ideas. Here again we can see the similarity with the project of Plato's Republic. Further, as Merle Curti has suggested, the Declaration's values were being cited in arguments over the definition and composition of American society as far back as the 1780s, particularly concerning the ethical problem of slavery. Jefferson, for instance, thought that slavery should be abolished, but that the freed slaves should be expelled and forced either back to Africa or into forming their own American Republic. Indeed Jefferson's original draft of the Declaration included a condemnation of slavery, which was later omitted due to protest from the states of South Carolina and Georgia, with the support of some of the slave trading northern states. The exclusion of the African-American elements of

society from the natural rights enshrined in the Declaration which continues to torment American culture today was a risk the Founding Fathers were to varying degrees aware of.[65] What this suggests is that the history of the Declaration is from the outset a history of mythical, tensional discourse. Its invocation of the authority of natural rights philosophy, with its emphasis on the values of equality, liberty and the individual, came to be mythologised as a symbol or ideal for the modes of social distribution and relations in the nation it brought into being, and as grounds for critique of the perceived inadequacies of actual patterns of distribution which subsequently took shape. With this in mind it becomes increasingly difficult toagree with Wills' thrust towards the original intentions of the author and signatories of the Declaration. A significant factor in the mythic heritage of the Declaration is the sheen of atemporality which surrounds its appeal to natural rights. Wills has observed, albeit critically, that the declaration:

> gave men a kind of overnight antiquity and tradition because it was outside time's more immediate and practical challenges. The Declaration had already begun to live as a "conservative" symbol of past action, responding to the congressional desire for an at least "symbolic" charter.[66]

This facility of the Declaration to exist outside the immediate challenges of its time is indubitably one of the reasons why it was easily appropriated by the mythic discourses of the American Dream, and has become perhaps the most important symbolic document in the history of the United States. This capacity to be positioned outside of

---

[65] Curti, *The Growth of American Thought*, pp.163-4.

[66] Wills, p.341. The dichotomy between practical action and symbol which Wills deploys to diminish the importance of the Declaration's symbolic effect has been written about as an aspect of American character by Merle Curti in *American Paradox: The Conflict of Thought and Action* (Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ.: 1956).

time, whether accidental or intentional, actually enables it to function as a mythic foundation in the sense I have discussed above. Balanced against the historical founding on the Fourth of July (and there is argument too as to the veracity of this particular date) is this sense of the Declaration speaking values which pertain to utopian spaces.[67] At one level of the macrocosmic narrative of modern American society there is the Utopian space of the state of nature with its universals of liberty and equality. However, when this foundation becomes tied to the modern narrative of progress, as for instance in Tom Paine's *Rights of Man*, a sense is created of these utopian universals as a social goal, a predetermined endpoint where the realisation of a society according to principles of natural reason is held to validate the development of American society. America is from this perspective in the process of evolving toward perfection. Operating a utopian continuum between these origins and ends is the continuous discourse of America as the Promised Land; an exceptional place in both actuality and potential, marked in the mind of its inhabitants with the special benediction of Providence. If we return to Doty's definition of myth in Chapter One we are reminded how:

> As part of the real experienced world, myths may establish a temporal network, an interior chronological continuum between contemporary and primal times and providing relative rankings of "our time" to "as in days of yore". . .[68]

The heritage of the Declaration is partly how it has been used as a mythic chronology to measure "the times" against each other and the utopian aspects of symbolic

---

[67] Wills discusses the doubt over dates in the history of the Declaration on pp.335-344. See also Marshall Smelser, "The Glorious Fourth - or Glorious Second, or Eighth," pp.101-6, in N. Cords and P. Gerster, eds, *Myth and the American Experience*, Vol.1 (Glencoe Publishing, Encino CA: 1978).
[68] Doty, *Mythography*, p.27. See Chapter One for an analysis of this.

America. In this sense the Declaration and its values function as timeless mechanisms in the narratives which drive American culture.

One of the necessary capacities of foundational mythologies is the ability to be repeated through time and maintain their significance through these repetitions. As Jean-Luc Nancy has argued:

> We know the scene: there is a gathering, and someone is telling a story. We do not know yet whether these people gathered together form an assembly, if they are a horde or a tribe. But we call them brothers and sisters because they are gathered together and because they are listening to the same story. . .It is the story of their origin, of where they came from, or of how they come from the Origin itself - them, or their mates, or their names, or the authority figure among them. And so at the same time it is the story of the beginning of the world, of the beginning of their assembling together, or of the beginning of the narrative itself. . .It is an ancient, immemorial scene, and it does not take place just once, but repeats itself indefinitely, with regularity, at every gathering of the hordes, who come to learn of their tribal origins, of their origins in brotherhood, in peoples, or in cities - gathered around fires burning everywhere in the mists of time.[69]

The strange thing about the Declaration of Independence read through the light of this statement is that it articulates a foundation that is not an "ancient immemorial scene", but one which is directly available through written history. The appeal to the "immemorial" is contained within the appropriation of natural laws which pertain to the eternal. However, the availability of the Declaration in written form points to the peculiarly textual nature of the development of the American Dream, and I will be discussing some of the reasons and significances of this later in this chapter. Within this peculiar context, it is the ability of the Declaration to be outside of time that has made it such a potent mythic force. The mythic use of the Declaration to articulate

[69] Nancy, Jean-Luc, "Myth Interrupted", pp.43-44.

America as a single entity indicates not a misreading of the Declaration, as Wills charges, but a pragmatic recognition of its symbolic efficacy in the performance of unity in what is ultimately an imagined community. A powerful example of this is Abraham Lincoln's invocation of the Declaration in his Gettysburg Address. At one level the Declaration has put in place the mythic foundation of natural law, and at another it stands as a mythic symbol for the historical act of the founding of the nation. Furthermore in its mythic function it has been able on occasions to bring these values into play at crucial historical moments. Here it might be argued that the values of the foundation exist in a form of perpetual present.

It is precisely this history of the Declaration as mythic document which Wills has railed against. He wants to return the text "to the drier air" of Jefferson's 18th century scientism as if the Age of Reason might be able to subvert mythic appropriations of the text.[70] The heritage of mythic "misreadings" of the text which he traces particularly to Lincoln's invocation of the moral values of the declaration in the Gettysburg Address, can be somehow "solved" by a return to the rational scepticism of the Enlightenment in America. Wills argues that Lincoln erred in using the Gettysburg Address for the purpose of "recontracting our society on the basis of the Declaration as our fundamental charter."[71] As a consequence this has led to the downgrading of the Constitution and the consolidation of:

> A belief in our extraordinary birth, outside the processes of time, [which] has led us to think of ourselves as a nation apart, with a special destiny, the hope of all those outside America's shores.[72]

---

[70] Wills, p.xxiv.
[71] Wills, p.xxiv.
[72] Wills, p.xix.

While there may be considerable and continuing reasons for concern about the activities of America within and outside of its borders and of the hypocritical positions taken by American governments and organisations on the basis of this belief, it is a mistake to identify the ethical with the facts and the unethical and erroneous with the mythic. The fact that Lincoln's mythic deployment of the Declaration helped to bring an end to slavery is testament to the sometime positive power of this myth, as has been the ebullience of America's cultural output and the new forms it has generated. As I have argued, the whole idea of natural rights philosophy depends upon the mythic foundations of the state of nature and the original contract. In addition to this it is also important, following Elias and Levi-Strauss, that Declaration is taken as a cornerstone in an American mythic network that is in a state of perpetual transformation. Its efficacy as myth is partly its ability to adapt to changing historical contexts in a nation which itself is a constantly changing community. Furthermore, it is unreasonable to suggest that the Enlightenment in America was necessarily as "dry" as Wills would want us to believe. Put simply, reason was an emotional issue. In an era where our excitement with reason and progress has been somewhat jaded by both the immensity of scientific achievement and the failure of the Enlightenment's promise, it is difficult perhaps to empathise with the 18th century belief that reason would be able to work out man and his world. Yet, we still only have to read Tom Paine's *The Rights of Man* to see the excitement with which this belief was felt, and the religious fervour which marked the Enlightenment's often evangelical reason.[73]

[73] Tom Paine, *The Rights of Man* [1791] (Dent, London: 1915). For a brief but useful discussion of Paine in regards to the mythicity of American discourse see Terence Ball's *Reappraising Political Theory: Revisionist Studies in the History of Political Thought* (Clarendon Press, Oxford: 1995) pp.277-85.

Wills then proceeds to argue that the declaration was essentially a pragmatic document agreed upon by the members of the revolutionary congress. He contends that:

> The men who debated and passed the Declaration of Independence did not think of it as one of the more important duties on their crowded agenda. They were not trying to enunciate a new theory of government, or to found a nation, or write a national charter. . .
>
> About the motive for declaring independence there can be no doubt. . .It was not done to found a new nation. . .It was not done to make the colonies self-governing. . .It was not to bind other colonies more securely to one's own. No - there was only one motive, dwelt on repeatedly by both friends and foes of the move, that made declaring independence look attractive. It was a necessary step for the securing of foreign aid in the ongoing war effort.[74]

Wills is attempting here to undermine the effect of the Declaration through arguments of its authors' intentions. Yet this is not a sensible mode of argument. Even if the intention of the convention was merely to write an extemporaneous document in order to obtain the status under international law where France could provide them military aid (without being deemed to be interfering in Britain's internal affairs), the effect of this was the foundation of a nation. It is impossible to effectively undermine the Declaration's subsequent symbolic magnitude with an appeal to original intentions. As Jefferson's position in hindsight, quoted above, suggests, it became more than these limited original intentions even to its authors, and then again more over the course of its invocation by subsequent generations. The Declaration in this sense transcends the opposition of true and false, to which Wills through historical context has attempted to

---

[74] Wills, p.325.

pin it. To a large extent, even if Wills was right, it would be a matter of cultural insignificance.

Furthermore the relationship between authorial intentions and texts is never clean. As Edward Said has argued:

> No one can doubt that there is an original (in the vague, somewhat passive sense of that word) if not a beginning connection between text and individual author, yet to readers, as even to a writing author, a text is not whole, but distorted. For writing is not coterminous with nature, and therefore it deforms its subjects (life, liberty, happiness) more than it forms them. Reading and writing have this in common: they are particular distortions of general realities.[75]

While I would argue that Anderson's notion of the imagined community causes problems for the clear distinction Said makes between nature or reality and the products of writing, particularly in cases such as foundational documents, Said's position is a theoretical vindication of the ultimate fruitlessness of "original intentions" as a pursuit, as we can see in the case of Jefferson's changing perspective towards the Declaration. Furthermore as I (following Said) have argued above, original intentions come to include all that comes after them. Texts then exceed the often unstable or transitory perspectives of their authors towards them and come to constitute the sum of all their readings. This position has a context in Michael Kammen's idea of a popular history of the Constitution, which I have discussed above. This in turn leads to a necessary awareness of the thickness of mythic discourse and of its capacity to be reinvented or recontextualised to both effect and account for changes in the patterns of a society's social relations.

---

[75] Said, *Beginnings*, pp.58-9.

This discussion of the Declaration brings to light a peculiarity of American history that has been touched upon in Henry Steele Commager's seminal essay, "The Search for a Usable Past".[76] When Wills is discussing the tendency of the Declaration to lend the founding Fathers an "overnight antiquity" he is pointing to the fact that unlike European culture, America, which became the first modern nation, had a limited history from which to construct its sense of nationality.

As Commager has remarked the peculiarity of America is that:

> In the Old World the nation came before the state; in America the state came before the nation. In the Old World, nations grew out of well-prepared soil, built upon a foundation of history and traditions; in America the foundations were still to be laid, the seeds still to be planted, the traditions still to be formed.[77]

There have been various criticisms of the priority given to the political foundation of the United States from within American Studies. Michael Lind, for instance, has recently criticised what he calls the "democratic universalist" school of American identity:

> the claim that the United States is not a nation-state at all, but a purely political association of individuals united only by common democratic ideals.[78]

More important according to Lind is the consideration of broader cultural factors, the national language and folkways. He argues that:

> There is more to the national culture than the national language, though the language is both the primary index of nationality and its major means of transmission. In addition, there are folkways - not abstract moral codes, but particular ways of acting, ways of dressing, conventions of masculinity and

[76] Henry Steele Commager, *The Search for a Usable Past* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York: 1967) pp.3-27.
[77] Commager, *The Search for a Usable Past*, p.3.
[78] Lind, *The Next America*, p.218.

> femininity, ways of celebrating major events like births, marriages and funerals, particular kinds of sports and recreations, conceptions of the proper boundaries between the secular and religious spheres. And there is also a body of material - ranging from historical events that everyone is expected to know about to widely shared but ephemeral knowledge of sports and cinema and music - that might be called common knowledge. Common language, common folkways, common knowledge - these rather than race or religion or political philosophy, are what identify a member of the American cultural nation.[79]

Although there is some truth to Lind's proposition, it does tend to obscure the fact that the political idea of America is central to the mode by which Americans relate to one another. His argument that there is "a common inherited American national culture, quite apart from the inherited liberal, democratic and constitutional political tradition," fails to understand how the political and the cultural are inextricably interwoven.[80] I would not want to deny the importance of folkways, yet it is arguable a national folkway can fully exist prior to the political foundation of the nation-state.[81] Indeed in the first instance it was taxation which brought the colonies together against the mother country and taxation is clearly a matter of state. The history of colonial America suggests the vast difference and lack of common culture between, say, Puritan New England and the South. Michael Kammen (borrowing from Ortega y Gasset) has spoken of Colonial America as:

> "a series of watertight compartments," none of which felt very much "curiosity towards events in the domain of the others". . .[who lacking] a figurative spinal column. . .all too easily slipped in and out of relation to one another because they were not firmly connected.[82]

---

[79] Lind, *The Next America*, p.266.
[80] Lind, *The Next America*, p.269.
[81] It is important also to recognise here the sheer variety of American folkways organised about ethnic and geographical specificities.
[82] Michael Kammen, *People of Paradox: An Inquiry Concerning the Origins of American Civilization* (Vintage, New York: 1973) p.57.

It is also important to remember the extent to which the political values of the foundation were incorporated into the relations of everyday American life. The informal way Americans address each other, the public friendliness and directness of Americans, their rhetorical self-confidence are directly related to the ideas of equality and liberty as enshrined in the Declaration and the Constitution.

In this sense the political foundation has inculcated a mode of relations which manifests itself in the "national language" which Lind argues is "the primary index of nationality and the major means of its transmission." This would suggest that Lind's position has drastically underestimated the importance of the political foundation. Closer to the mark is the Israeli scholar Yehoshua Arieli in his conclusion that:

> The revolutionary severance from the mother country that created the American nation compelled it to adopt the universal values and norms of the rights of man and of natural law, not only as the basis of independent statehood but as the definition of its own identity. Political emancipation involved a radical break with the past that made it imperative to define the character of the new nation. Universal and rational modes of thought, which had served Americans in their struggle against England, enabled them to interpret their own pattern of life, institutions, and traditions. Though neither deliberate nor conscious of its own direction, this revolutionary elan, which had broken historical continuities, established in America a new pattern of social life explainable by the natural-rights theory. The pattern of disrupting historical continuities inherent in colonization and legitimized by the revolution was repeated with every new wave of immigrants and the westward movement of settlement. Successive groups of new arrivals sought national and social equality by formulating their identity in terms of the universal norms of a moral and social order that gave them equality of status, liberty of expression, and the right to consider themselves citizens.
>
> The revolutionary heritage was therefore permanently attached to the Jeffersonian tradition, which had identified American nationality with the ideas of a natural equalitarian order. With the spread of political democracy, the concept of the American society as a system of liberty and equality became the dominant concept of national identity. The growth of nationalism and the great crisis of the Civil War

> made it more necessary than ever to find terms to describe adequately this national consciousness and to serve as symbols of identification.[83]

Arieli's position concurs with Commager's in emphasising the fact that the political foundation breached the historical continuities of colonial America, and as a consequence also produced the necessity of inventing a new way of imagining the American. Because natural-rights philosophy was the authority by which this breach was legitimized, it became fundamental to the way this new imagining acquired its form. However, these claims of legitimacy were framed by the authority of the American people, and Lind is at least partially correct in reminding us of the broad spectrum of discourse from which the consciousness of a people emerges. Although Commager's formula of the state before the nation is problematic in terms of the way Benedict Anderson has defined the specific "imagined community" of the nation, the point remains valid that while the Constitution inaugurated the United States, there was no comparable sense of the American people on whose authority the constitution had been made.[84] Commager points to this lack by citing eminent 19th-century European thinkers such as Edmund Burke, Schlegel, Mazzini, John Stuart Mill and Ernst Renan and the emphasis they placed upon a communal past as the spine of

---

[83] Yehoshua Arieli, "Individualism and National Identity" in eds R. Curry and L. Goodheart, *American Chameleon: Individualism in Trans-national Context* (Kent State University Press, Ohio: 1991) p.185.
[84] The problem in Commager's formulation is that the nation according to Anderson is a specifically modern mode of imagined community. A better way of formulating Commager's point which remains valid, is to think that the American state came before the American people, before a distinct sense of a national American identity. This fact is interesting because the state was inaugurated in the name of the people, which perhaps explains the urgency Commager locates in the early 19th century's creation of a usable past in the service of forming a national identity.

nationalism. "Awareness of past glories and sufferings," "common memories," "ancestral past" are central to these thinkers imagining the community of the nation. In the words of John Stuart Mill:

> The strongest cause [for the feeling of nationality] is identity of political antecedents, the possession of a national history, and consequent community of recollections, collective pride and humiliation, pleasure and regret.[85]

In order to create the American people, upon whom the political authority of the state rested, there was a need to create structures of feeling which would define what it meant to be American. The lack of historical weight, the source of much of the resonance of European nationalism, had several crucial bearings on the development of American national identity. It is striking how quickly American culture has been to mythicise many of its events (the notion of the "living legend," for instance) and also how strenuously it has continued to engage its mythic network in the construction of the meaning of American experience. Commager's ruminations on the search for a usable past provide a vital clue to why this might be the case.

Confronted by the need to create the people that had been invoked as the authority for the already established state there was the pressing need to fill the absence perceived as the lack of a significant history. Commager argues that there were three positions available to the fledgling nation and that to an extent, despite the contradictory potential among these options, all three were utilised to varying degrees. One option was to argue that the lack of history was a benefit, a way of escaping the corruption of old world societies. Another was to argue that the history of Europe was available to America and further, that because the composition of America contained people of

---

[85] Commager, *The Search for a Usable Past*, pp.3-5.

different European nationalities America was superior in its access to a wider range of histories than the individual cultures from where these histories originated. There were also arguments, Commager observes, combining these two ideas, where European history became the negative contrast to the bold leap into the future which America represented. The third option, argues Commager, was to make use of what history America actually possessed as its own. As Commager has argued:

> Nothing in the history of American nationalism is more impressive than the speed and lavishness with which Americans provided themselves with a usable past: history, legends, symbols, paintings, sculpture, monuments, shrines, holy days, ballads, patriotic songs, heroes, and - with some difficulty - villains.[86]

Lacking the depth of historical time which underpins older cultures, American history tended to achieve its weight through the conscious mythologisation of the figures involved in its seminal events. This process has been compounded by the way in which these figures have become representative in this mythologisation of the ideas which Theodore White (cited above) has observed are the peculiar underpinning of America. There is a tendency in American culture to represent the past as the mythologised embodiment of ideas through a pantheon of legendary figures. As Michael Kammen has noted members of American society "have loved to read about heroes, heroines, and prominent families of high achievers."[87] We can see this in the American idea of the Hall of Fame, and the reverence shown for fame itself, manifested for instance in the current obsession with the lives of movie stars.

---

[86] Commager, *The Search for a Usable Past,* p.14.
[87] Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, p.221.

I will be talking about aspects of this tendency both in terms of the way it connects with aspects of social distribution and American literature in the following chapters, but for now it is worth commenting briefly on this phenomenon in terms of the broad context of national identity. The effect of what might be called the Hall of Fame approach to cultural identity is that the mythic, philosophical and historical are difficult to separate if we are to talk about the way America has come to imagine itself as a national community. The philosophical basis of American independence is presented to us, for instance, as aspects of the personalities of Jefferson or Madison. Even further we can look to the way that Parson Weem's fictive idealisation of George Washington has come to be represented as a true story to generations of American schoolchildren. In a slightly different vein, we only have to mention the name Horatio Alger for the phrase "rags to riches" to be evoked. We can also see this in the way the figures of the Founding Fathers, or of Abraham Lincoln, Roosevelt or more recently John F. Kennedy or Martin Luther King have been deployed in the discourses, political or otherwise, of American culture. This nexus of the philosophical, the historical and the mythic or fictive can be traced in other cultures as well; yet the connections seem more pronounced - or at least accessible - in American culture than most. Again this is partially because of the terms under which the nation was constituted. To begin with, America as the first modern nation always possessed a secular component. The temptation to valorise the deeds of secular individuals corresponds to this aspect of American identity. Furthermore, it can be suggested that this process is compatible with the ethos of equality of opportunity. Abraham Lincoln's transition from the log cabin to the White House is perhaps the classic example of this. Such myths confirm the realm of possibility of succeeding even when it becomes obvious that not everyone in the society is going to succeed. The

celebration of contemporaneity in American culture can be linked also with Edenic imaginary of the New World, in contradistinction to the postlapsarian consciousness of the old. Part of the self-consciousness invested in discourses of American identity can be attributed to the way they have marked themselves off from Europe as the beginning of a new type of society. The fact that America has remained an immigrant society means this sense of new beginning has persisted over the course of American history.[88] As Henry Steele Commager has argued:

> The task of providing themselves with a historical past was peculiarly difficult for Americans because it was not something that could be taken for granted, as with most peoples, or arranged once and for all. It was something that had to be done over and over again, for each new wave of newcomers, and that had to be kept up to date, as it were, continually reinvigorated and modernized. Above all, it had to be a past which contained an ample supply of easily grasped common denominators for a heterogeneous people, English and German, Irish and Norse, white and black, gentile and Jew, Protestant, Mormon and Catholic, old stock and newcomer. Almost inevitably the common denominators tended to be pictorial and symbolic: the Pilgrims and Valley Forge, Washington and Lincoln, cowboy and Indian, and along with them ideas and institutions like Democracy, Liberty, Equality, the American Dream, and the American Way of Life.[89]

What is important to note here is that the founding of the American people as the imagined community of the American nation has been a process rather than a specific moment in time. In order to perform the necessity of incorporating a vast number of immigrants with a wide diversity of cultural heritages, the mode of imagining had to appeal to a common denominator capable of convincing people of the values of their Americanness. This demand was a consequence of a limited time span to work with and of the need for it to be mythologised in order to obtain the resonance which in

---

[88] In 1998, for instance, The United States gained 800 000 new citizens in addition to a large number of illegal and temporary immigrants.
[89] Commager, *The Search for a Usable Past,* p.22.

Europe was provided by a deeper historical timeframe. The mythicised versions of the seminal events in the history of the American nation's becoming, as Commager suggests in his comments about the continual need for reinvigoration and modernisation, were more responsive to contemporary contexts, because they were based in ideas rather than traditions, and also because of their proximity to the present.

Of course, America is not the only immigrant society born out of an original status as a series of English colonies. And it is here in comparison to countries such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada that the Enlightenment based intentionality and revolutionary mode of the American foundation are foregrounded in the peculiar way a sense of American identity (American exceptionalism, for instance) has developed. The proximity of the present and past also means that America's history is an unusually well-documented history (something I will be touching on below), which has also produced the effect that it continues to be relevant, hence appealed to, contested and used as analogy in the discursive strategies of the present day. It would be difficult for instance to imagine an English Prime Minister invoking the historical authority of Lord Nelson or Oliver Cromwell in a political address to the nation. Not nearly so difficult, however, to find an American President referring to George Washington or Abraham Lincoln.

It is important here to remember the transformative capacity of myth. As Levi-Strauss has argued, myths should be treated not as static, steady state discourses; but as narratives which are processual through their relation to the historically changing

arena of social context.[90] American history and myth (in their newness) have proved to be relatively volatile, as might be expected from the rapidly developing culture they inhabit. They have had to change as they develop, apply their powers of imagining community to a broad range of peoples in a world of rapidly multiplying contexts. As Commager suggests, one of the strategies by which this has been performed is that of the common denominator, which itself is compatible with the democratic ethic under which the state was constituted. The list he provides as examples suggests how these common reference points have been constructed through the presentation of history as symbol, or one might say as myth. Further, this need for a common denominator creates an interpretative openness which advantages the transformative function of myth. From the convergence of these factors we get a sense of how Garry Wills' argument that Lincoln was misreading the Declaration at Gettysburg is actually a misreading by Wills at the contextual level of American culture itself. William McNeill provides an excellent context for an understanding of and historiographical correction to this misreading when he argues:

> The main reason for eschewing macro-historical synthesis is the mistaken notion that generalization inevitably involves error, while accuracy increases with detail. Getting at the sources and staying close to them seemed a sure way to truth a century ago when academic departments of history were set up. Industrious transcription of dead men's opinions therefore became the hallmark of historical scholarship. It still provides a convenient substitute for thought, despite historical quantifiers and other methodological innovators. Yet an infinitude of new sources, each of them revealing new details, does not automatically increase the stock of historical truth. More data may merely diminish the intelligibility of the past, and, carried to an extreme, the multiplication of facts reduces historical study to triviality.[91]

---

[90] See Claude Levi-Strauss, *From Honey to Ashes*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (Harper and Row, New York: 1973) p.354.
[91] William McNeill, *Mythistory and Other Essays* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1986) p.34.

While the details and sources of America's mythic network are interesting in themselves, it is probably more important to understand how these myths have been deployed in the service of the imagined community of the American nation than to get bogged down in the intricacies of more trivial errors and ambiguities.

Another important feature of Commager's discussion is his observation that both American history and nationalism have been consciously created. As he argues:

> The sentiment of American nationalism was, to an extraordinary degree, a literary creation, and. . .the national memory was a literary and, in a sense, a contrived memory. The contrast here with the Old World is sharp. There the image was conjured up and sustained by a thousand testimonials: folklore and folk song, the vernacular and the patois. . .To be sure, literature came to play a role, but only when it was quarried from cultural foundations that went deep. In America the image of the past was largely the creation of the poets and storytellers, and chiefly of the New-England - New York group who flourished between the War of 1812 and the War for the Union: Irving, Cooper and Bryant; Longfellow, Hawthorne, and Whittier; Emerson, Lowell and Holmes. These were the Founding Fathers of American literary nationalism, and their achievement was scarcely less remarkable than that of the Founding Fathers of political nationalism.[92]

This tends to contradict Commager's assertion (cited above) that the mode of the common denominators of the American past were "pictorial", and it is perhaps better to use the term symbolic which embraces both visual and textual representations. It is worthwhile remembering here Michael Lind's argument concerning folkways as a qualification of Commager's position. Nonetheless, Commager's idea of contrived

---

[92] *The Search for a Usable Past*, pp.25-6. For a variation of Commager's adumbration of the literary creation of American nationalism, see Larzer Ziff, *Literary Democracy: The Declaration of Cultural Independence in America* (Viking Press, New York: 1981). Against Commager he argues that writers such as Bryant, Cooper and Irving were too beholden to English literary models to truly be "American" writers, despite their impressive achievements. Instead Ziff locates the great panic of 1837 as the marker for a literary quickening which led to the emergence of a truly American literature. Both writers however argue that this process finished in the 1860s as a different kind of America emerged from the Civil War.

memory, or alternatively manufactured memory is a crucial insight into the workings and elasticity of the American mythic network.

Just as the foundation of the state was a conscious move, America had to manufacture a symbolic or mythicised history through which its nationalism could be articulated and apprehended by its people. While visual representations were important much of this manufacturing occurred through textual mediums, such as the political pamphlet, the newspaper, magazines and the novel. As Benedict Anderson has argued the emergence of both the newspaper and the novel "provided the technical means for 're-presenting' the kind of imagined community that is the nation."[93] Anderson's premise is based upon the idea that these forms of imagining were integral to a new version of simultaneity through which mutually incognisant members of society could be connected through the narrative connection of temporal coincidence. Most obviously in the case of the newspaper, disparate events are connected through their appearance within the temporal span of the paper's coverage. As Anderson argues:

> The idea of a social organism moving calendrically through homogenous, empty time [the way that subjects are presented in both the newspaper and the traditional novel] is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which is also conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history. An American will never meet, or even know the names of more than a handful of his 240 000 [000 sic] - odd fellow-Americans. He has no idea of what they are up to at any one time. But he has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity.[94]

---

[93] Anderson, *Imagined Communities* p.25.
[94] ibid., p.26. It is interesting to consider the different sorts of imagined communities that 20th century technologies such as radio, television and the internet have produced. I will be discussing aspects of this in Chapter Four.

The fact that the newspaper and the novel are identified by Anderson as the crucial technologies which have facilitated the imagined community of the nation means that there is inevitably a blurring of the fictive and the factual. An example of this is the journalistic origins of American naturalism at the end of the 19th century, something which has been replayed in the context of the New Journalism of the 1960s. There is remarkable cross-pollination in the fields of textual production in American culture which harks back even to the pamphleteering of the revolutionary era and the fact that the physical production of texts in early America was subject to varied job lots and whims of individual printers.

Furthermore, the significance of texts in the representation of the imagined community of the modern nation and specifically in the creation of the idea of the American nation has meant that the demarcation between the mythic, the historic and the fictive can never be completely clear. Michael Lind has remarked on the textuality of American culture that:

> Calvinism and the common law together have produced what is, perhaps, the most biblicist national culture in the world. For Americans all moral revolutions begin with reading or rereading some set of scriptures - the True, Uncorrupted, Ancient Constitution. This text-obsessed mentality is shared even by would-be American radicals. Every national grammar contains within it an understanding of how revolutions are made. . .Only in the United States, which is unique in this respect even in the English-speaking world, do radicals - true to the spirit of John Knox and Edward Coke - think that the way to start a revolution is to revise the curriculum of public education, the "canon" (the very term evokes the Protestant Reformers). Apart from the substitution of Maya Angelou for Julia Ward Howe in classroom recitation, what could be more Anglomorph, more Protestantoid.[95]

---

[95] Lind, *The Next America*, p.272.

Although Lind is a bit excessive in his driving of this text-obsessedness to a purely Anglo-Protestant source it is important to note the primacy of textuality in the way American culture has developed. As Philip Bobbitt has argued:

> It was not until the end of the eighteenth century, that is rather recently, that a state was governed according to a written constitution. The United States was the first state to attempt a written constitution.[96]

If we consider also that American history and in particular its political history has been comprehensively recorded in texts, in conjunction with Commager's observation that the American national identity was largely a literary creation, it becomes apparent how crucial the hermeneutic tradition of textual interpretation has been to the functioning of American society. Michael Kammen's *Changing Spheres of Liberty* provides a superb example of some of the effects this has produced in terms of the way the Supreme Court has interpreted the notion of liberty as it is enshrined in the fifth and fourteenth amendments of the constitution. Both the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, the markers of America's political foundation, are written texts. As Kammen's exploration of "liberty" suggests, the textual emphasis of America's political identity produces ambiguity because of the very fact that everything hinges upon words.[97] What we are confronted with is a nation functioning at its symbolic level as a semiotic system, where there is a constant battle over how the arbitrariness of the sign (particularly with such abstract notions of liberty) can be modified in terms of its signification in order to fit into the relational series of the

---

[96] Philip Bobbitt, *Constitutional Interpretation* (Blackwell, Oxford: 1991) p.3.
[97] Michael Kammen, *Changing Spheres of Liberty* (University of Wisconsin Press: 1986) What is also interesting in this book is the presentation of the way the idea of an American liberty emerged in the culture. See particularly, pp. 86-93.

other signs which compose the discourse of American values and identity. At the same time we also have to remember that it is a system so complex, or simply so enormous, that it can only ever be contemplated at an abstract level by large-scale approximation. Nonetheless there are advantages to this approach. Difficulties too, as it is often only in specific contexts where these things receive their clarity.

The problems of textuality make American culture difficult to pin down. From Anderson I have argued that America can be conceived of as a national imagined community. For this community to function there is a need for a functioning symbolic network, which for reasons outlined above I have termed a mythic network. As I have argued the foundational moments and their representative founders and documents present a limit to the way that this symbolic network can be imagined. Yet in my reading of Wills, I have argued that the texts which mark the foundation cannot be constrained to the context of their author's original intentions, as a symbolic or mythic network is necessarily in a state of perpetual transformation. It is a position not dissimilar from the problematic position of the author-text relationship in contemporary literary criticism. Furthermore, the values of the Declaration and Constitution have been used deconstructively against the Founding Fathers. Jefferson's racism, for instance, is problematic in terms of the values of the Declaration that he wrote. This tends to work against the valorisation of original intentions. The availability of historical documentation has produced a dissonance between the myth and biographical reality of the characters who populate America's legendary pantheon. Quite understandably perhaps, the real historical figures have never been able to live up to the ideal of reason's perfection which is embodied in the philosophical foundations of the nation, and in whose Hall of Fame they stand. Similarly, texts such

as *The Federalist* were among the first to conceive of themselves as political science, and to admit the role of rhetoric in the function of this science.[98] Also, as Michael Kammen has noted, in the 19th century there emerges the strong sense of history as a civil religion.[99] There is then a dissonance between the real and the imagined or symbolic. Yet at the same time the symbolic is real in that it is the sole mode by which the nation can be imagined. As the reflexive nature of political science and the idea of history as a secular or civil religion suggest, modern societies are reflexive in the sense that there is a formative loop between the theoretical, the rhetorical and the real, and in this context it is impossible to fully separate these forces. Also the sense of America as an experiment means that there is a constant process of measuring outcomes - what sort of society has been produced from the implementation of ideas - against the theoretical intentions and values on whose authority the experiment has been instigated. And it must be remembered that the experiment has not occurred in a controlled environment. The experiment of the nation is far too complex a phenomenon to be either fully understood or controlled. Indeed the larger and more complicated societies become, the more they seem to have their own trajectory which is apart from the intentions of their citizens or leaders. Further, at the broadest possible level, we are confronted with the same problem, in the sense that reality is always mediated through our organisation of it into symbolic systems. Yet these systems themselves, although limited, are also infinite. As scholarship in textual studies has shown, the meaning of a text is indeterminate, relying on the subjective position of the reader for its meaning to be articulated. In the same way, it can be argued that the meaning of American culture and the representations of this meaning

[98] James Ceaser, *Reconstructing America*, pp.53-61.
[99] Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, pp.194-227.

are also limited, but infinite in the applied context of the indeterminacy of language. Further, it would also be possible to say that this indeterminacy is foregrounded in a modern culture where the balance of values is oriented towards the new and dynamic as opposed to the conservative and static. Although all mythic networks are in a state of perpetual transformation, there are differences in the rates that these transformations occur. I will be examining the paticularities of transformation in the American mythic network further in Chapters Three and Four. In order to do this, however, it is first necessary to expand my analysis of the mythic foundations of America into an exploration of some of the other keystones in the American mythic network.

3

The Composition and Continuities of the American Mythic Network

The lack of a deeply entrenched collective past has often been mythologised as an advantage which America held over the rest of the world. There were strong anti-historic impulses involved in the establishing of the national American myth. An aspect of this is the way the idea of America has tended to be predicated in terms of the present or future instead of the past. As Horst Russnitz has observed:

> In Europe the dreamers located their ideal order for the most part in the distant past or future, or - and frequently on top of this - in some unattainable geographical realm, and made of it the ideal counterpart and point of orientation for experienced reality. The pioneers of the 'new worlds' on the other hand thought rather less about distant territories and more about orientation in the here and now; rather than simply project their hopes and longings into the far reaches of time and place, they tended to think of their own geographical refuge as the Promised Land. Their concrete political demands reflected, and drew their legitimation from, a teleological concept of national history, and it is for this reason too that the phases

> of nationalism in the 'new worlds' have always been marked by reflection on what constitutes national identity, and by the articulation of visions of the future: by the question, in other words, whether and to what extent history and politics were in step with the national utopian dream.[100]

Russnitz's argument points to several important aspects of the American mythic network. In addition to the teleological emphasis upon the future, he also argues that the dreams of New World societies were also placed in the here and now. This implies the fact that the dreams of America have frequently existed, to an extent, in terms of space as well as time. Furthermore, this orientation towards the here and now, Russnitz argues, is also marked by "reflection on what constitutes national identity." You could say that America is a culture in a state of permanent self-analysis as to whether it is living up to the ideals of its establishment. Here the idea of America as an experiment is instructive: again we get a sense of the continual reflective debate within America as to what exactly it should mean and how these meanings should be realised. In the following pages I would like to discuss some of the tendencies Russnitz has identified.

To begin with there is the sense, which dates back to the Founding Fathers, of America existing outside of history. In this configuration of American identity, America consisted of an opportunity for a society to be constructed that was not infected by the corrupt historical weight of the old orders. The fact that the values by which this society would be constructed were primarily appropriated from Europe is

---

[100] Horst Russnitz, "Dreams in Austerica: A Preliminary Comparison of the Australian and the American Dream" in *Anglie: -Zeitschrift fur Englische Philologie*, Tubingen, 113:1, 1995, 41-70, p.41.

circumvented by the appeal to the mythic foundation of the state of nature. This theme has played an important role in the mythicity of American culture. The idea of the American Adam first critically captured by American studies in the R.W.B. Lewis book of the same name can be used in explanation of a number of the traits which compose the American character and the American Dream. Lewis claimed the American Adam represented:

> a radically new personality, the hero of a new adventure: an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources.[101]

This image can be traced through American history: from the backwoodsmen of Cooper's *Leatherstocking* novels, to the lone cowboy, to the alienated detective, there is always this mode of heroism which is characterised in terms of a rugged individualism. In Frontier mythology these heroes are often presented in terms of their preference for wilderness as opposed to society.[102] As American society became industrialised, heroes emerged who were configured as innocents locked into solitary conflict with the necessary corruption of modern society. In this sense the trace of innocence or virtue, qualities whose authority is derived from Christianity's pre-lapsarian fiction or Enlightenment philosophy's state of nature, are played as individual tensional points against the social fabric.

---

[101] R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1955) p.5.

[102] See for instance Henry Nash Smith on "The Sons of Leatherstocking," in *Virgin Land* (Vintage, New York: 1950) pp.54-137.

To the contemporary reader, this configuration will be problematic because of its overt patriarchal emphasis. However there is definitely a strong patriarchal tinge to the mythicity of America. The whole mythologisation of the Founding Fathers suggests a different kind of virgin birth. It is a cultural birth apart from the feminine monopoly on physical reproduction. The emphasis on the individual "untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family" further locates this birth away from the influence of the feminine. As Jewett and Lawrence in their study of American heroism have argued, the realm of intimate sexual relations is perceived as a threat to the sustained performance of the outsider life of the masculine American hero.[103] This predilection has also been explored in Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel,* which discusses the exclusively masculine worlds in the literary canon of the American renaissance.[104] Indeed in terms of Eden, it is Eve who is the danger, and thus it is not difficult to see how the claim of America's birth to an absence of prior corruption may have produced this complex misogynistic strain in the nation's mythic discourse.

The initial vision of the Founding Fathers for America was of an agrarian based democracy. It was a vision ultimately contradicted by the tendency of industrialised capitalism to concentrate population, power and wealth. As this transformation of American society evolved, the clinical but essentially optimistic assumptions of Locke's contract theory tended to shift in tone towards Rousseau's romantic infusion of a sense of loss into the transition from the state of nature into civil society. The

[103] R. Jewett and S. Lawrence, *The American Monomyth* (Anchor Press/Doubleday, Garden City NY: 1977), particularly pp.216-222.
[104] Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (Criterion Books, New York: 1960).

divide which Lewis perceives in 19th century American culture between the party of memory and the party of hope, a division which can be largely configured in terms of an opposition between Enlightenment optimism and Puritan pessimism concerning the nature and potential of men, tended to fragment into a more complex series of tensions as the conditions of progress under industrialisation cast shadows on the ability of progress to achieve its ideals in an integrated form - with tensions arising for instance between material progress and the more philosophical aspects of the Enlightenment project.

This tendency to glorify the values of the state of nature has had an important influence on the form America's political culture has taken. The suspicion of government (and of taxation) which continues to pervade American society - the Unabomber, Waco Cult and Oklahoma bombers being the lunatic fringe of a widely held attitude - goes back to the compromise voluntary decision of the constitution makers to implement a relatively weak government, which its current detractors argue has ballooned out of control. Indeed the use of the state of nature as the authority for the overthrowing of the British government also had the effect of creating scepticism in the Republican tradition of government in general. Jefferson, for instance, had a generational theory of society in which he argued new laws and constitutions should be formed every nineteen years.[105] The tension between liberty and order, which Michael Kammen for one has traced as a theme through American history, suggests that the natural rights appeal to the voluntary status of the social contract, implies a degree of doubt in the ultimate authority of the government.[106]

---

[105] See Wills, *Inventing America,* pp.123-131.
[106] Kammen, *Spheres of Liberty.*

Russnitz's observation that the new world societies, deprived of the historical resonance of Europe, tended to think of themselves in terms of the future is paradoxical in its relation to the notion of the American as Adamic. On the one hand there is the mythic foundation of the American as an Adam of pre-social origins whose reference is the philosophical imaginary of the state of nature. On the other hand there is this tendency of America to identify itself as the society of progress and the future. In this way American culture is grounded mythically rather than historically. The idea of progress, both at a personal level in terms of social mobility and at a broader cultural level in terms of modern teleologies of economic growth and development are central facets of the American Dream. The tension between these forces and the ideas of America as Edenic and of the American as Adam exemplifies the tensional nature of the mythic network. It has furthermore imbued America with a powerful sense of irresolution, particularly as the nation moved towards the status as the world's foremost industrial power towards the end of the 19th century. It is a tension that remains dynamic in American culture today.[107] In this configuration, the idea of a pre-existing perfection is locked into co-existence with that of the need for

---

[107] One among many contemporary literary engagements with this tension can be seen in Carl Hiaasen's *Skintight* (Pan, London: 1991), a sort of Log Cabin myth in reverse, where the protagonist goes from being a politician to living a life as a deliberate outcast in the Florida swamps before he is called in to perform an act of environmental rescue. Interesting here is the way that the plot revolves around a conflict between environmentalists and the corrupt nexus of politicians and developers. The challenge of the good guys is to protect the Edenic America against the bad guy's espousal of development and profit at any cost. The tension between the natural environment and development is particularly interesting from this mythic perspective. Clearly the country cannot survive without development, yet does not want to destroy its environment. The phrase "sustainable development", which has become a buzz word amongst the world's developed nations in the last ten or twenty years indicates how tensions at the mythic level of America's belief structure result in the keeping of oppositional aims in check.

Another way in which this wilderness/development concept has been configured in contemporary culture is in the inversion of the western myth in 1960s counter-culture where American middle-class youth, in the context of the Vietnam War and also the general resurgent romanticism of the era, came to identify with the Indian rather than the cowboy figure in the mythic narratives of the Frontier. For the development of this argument see particularly Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* (Harper Perennial, New York: 1993) pp.578-63.

constant expansion and development. Myra Jehlen has provided one way of looking at this in her insightful book *American Incarnation.* She argues that:

> At the heart of the American teleology was an entelechy (a perfect and complete potentiality moving of itself to its realization) that continues to animate the new discovery story, making it retrospectively evident that it was also the crux of the old...What makes the discovery work as a classic myth of origin is its projection of a new and unique, living entity, an "America" not, as O'Gorman depicted it, ready-to-be-made and complete since the creation, but completely ready-to-be-made.[108]

This subtle twist evidences how these tensions have not just managed to co-exist, but are a central dynamic of American culture and the transformations it has undergone since its inception. Although she has couched it in terms of the discovery of America as opposed to the Founding of the United States (yet mythically speaking, as Jehlen implies, the meaning of the discovery is retrospectively re-animated by the myth of the founding), Jehlen connects the paradoxical elements of the Edenic and the progressive by arguing that the American myth of origins is both an entelechy and a teleology. The complete sufficiency which can be ascribed to metaphorical notions such as the Garden of Eden and man in the pre-lapsarian state is infused with the teleological implications of being ready to be made. The state of perfection therefore is the condition of possibility for a becoming. We can see this for instance in Thomas Paine, where he argues that:

> The present age will hereafter merit to be called the Age of Reason, and the present generation will appear to the future as the Adam of a new world.[109]

---

[108] Myra Jehlen, *American Incarnation* (Harvard University Press: 1986) p.25.
[109] Tom Paine, *The Rights of Man* [1791] (Dent, London: 1915) p.455.

The difference here of course is that the Age of Reason implies a transcendence of Puritan theological arguments of the necessity of man's fall from grace and expulsion from Eden. Nonetheless, the idea of this fall from grace would become a frequent source of analogy in critiques of the difference between the ideal of America and the actual consequences of its progress.[110]

The lack of historical depth which Commager locates as a vital difference between nationalism in America and Europe also foregrounds the importance of spatiality in the discourses of the American Dream. As Richard Hofstadter has suggested:

> Time is the basic dimension of history, but the basic dimension of the American imagination is space. . .What Americans have lacked in a sense of time they have tried to make up by an enlarged sense of space. Their thoughts tend not to run backward into an antiquity they do not know but rather outward into a larger geographical theater of action, the theater not of the past but of the future. . .For Americans, uprooted from many soils and stemming from many ancestries and thrust into the open natural environment of the new continent, the very possibility of freedom quickly became associated with the presence of empty space, and also with the freedom to move, to get away from the physical proximity of others, to escape from society into the innocence of nature.[111]

Yet the innocence of nature was not without its own ambiguities. As Leo Marx has astutely observed, the innocence of nature which coalesced with the philosophical state of nature was an idealised or mythic version of nature, a vision which owed as much to the *locus amoenus* of pastoral poetry, as it did to the specificities of the

---

[110] See also Lewis' discussion of the "fortunate fall" as a motif in ante-bellum American thought in *American Adam* pp.54-73. Of course the Civil War, a fratricidal conflict, provided the biblical model of Cain and Abel, implying a less fortunate sort of fall. The emergence of American metropolises after the Civil War provided a further model for the fallen man, which I will be discussing in Chapter Three.
[111] Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians* (Knopf, New York, 1969) pp.5-6. Cited in Terence Ball, *Reappraising Political Theory: Revisionist Studies in the History of Political Thought* (Clarendon Press, Oxford: 1995) p.286.

American landscape. Furthermore it was a version of nature which was characterised, in the tradition of the Augustan golden mean, as belonging to a middle state: a nature that had been civilised, but not sophisticated, a nature of farms and hamlets as opposed to the wilderness which had terrified the early Puritans, or the corruption at the core of the large European city. It is interesting to note that this pastoral ideal is a literary imagining which can be traced back as far as Virgil. In this sense the vast spaces of America began to take European shape through the deployment of pre-existent literary tropes, much as the Wilderness had been imagined in terms of the Bible.

There are other important linkages in this spatial imagining that need to be recognised. Thomas Jefferson hoped that it was this kind of middle-state nature which would help to realise the goals of America's political foundation.[112] In a society composed of yeoman farmers each tending his own land, Jefferson saw a rural virtue which would correspond adequately to the Lockean rights he had deployed in the political foundation of the nation. What Jefferson's vision involved was a transformation of the American landscape according to the mythic template of the pastoral ideal in order to construct a society in harmony with the mythic foundation of natural rights philosophy. The absence of concentrated manufacture and the attendant problems of the division of labour and class conflict were reasons for maintaining America as an agricultural society even at an economic cost. According to Jefferson, the loss in national income would be made up in "happiness and permanence of government."[113]

---

[112] Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford University Press, New York: 1960). See particularly pp.3-33 and pp.73-144.
[113] Cited in Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, p.127.

Instead, the sturdy self-reliance of the yeoman farmer which was at the core of Jefferson's agrarian vision served as the ideal representative for the emergence of the democratic character. As Leo Marx has argued, "the mythic cult-figure" of the old pastoral (the shepherd via the yeoman) was transformed in the Jacksonian era into the familiar archetype of the "common man" or "everyman."[114] But this everyman was to be a peculiarly privileged everyman. The acquisition of space also socially ennobles its acquirer. Through the widespread availability of space in the expanding frontier, the democrat was in effect often aristocratised, by his becoming what he could not be in Europe - a landholder (and, coincidentally, a dispossessor of native Americans).

Although Jefferson stressed that his pastoral vision of America was to an extent only a theory, partly because of his belief in progress and also because of his observation of the American penchant for navigation and commerce, the relationship between the landscape (or more broadly the consciousness of space) and political form in America has remained important.[115] This provides an insight into the phenomenal extent to which the major elements of the American mythic network are interconnected. Tensions, for instance between the Adamic and progressive ideals of America, were resolved spatially by recourse to the territory of the Frontier. These tensions, which operated at levels of the physical and the symbolic, were a driving factor in the multifaceted expansionist ethos which came to be synonymous with the nation. Up until the end of the 19th century, as areas of settlement became restricted by the density of population and developed fixity in their patterns of distribution - most obviously property ownership, but also in quasi-hereditary networks of coteries and elites - the

[114] Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, pp.130-1.
[115] Again see Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, particularly pp.133-144.

demand for freedom and the Declaration-enshrined value of equality were able to be maintained by the promise of the land beyond the Frontier which remained to be settled. Those who could not find opportunity in the established territories were theoretically able to seek land and fortune in the west. This is the thesis outlined by Frederick Jackson Turner in his seminal work, *The Frontier in American History.*[116] At any given time there existed a geographically demarcated spectrum of degrees of civilisation, with the wilderness at one end and the emerging metropolises at the other, and the individual was theoretically free (with obvious exceptions) to select the one that suited him.[117] In this sense the spatial history of the Frontier consisted of a rolling origin, whereby the mythic space of the state of nature was continually being discovered, then brought under settlement into the status of the Jeffersonian pastoral ideal. Yet it was a rolling origin with a limit: as an area became oversettled or passed a threshold of population density which tipped the balance of the Golden Mean into the corruptive realms of concentrated population, the ideal could remain because land still remained to be settled. However by the end of the 19th century, as Turner's famous thesis declared, the frontier was dead.[118] As Henry Nash Smith has observed, Turner's thesis was in a way a lament for the end of the Frontier precisely because it marked the end of the symbolic possibilities of America as an agrarian ideal. What Smith argues is that Turner's thesis, surely one of the most influential works in American thought, was pervaded by an emotional allegiance to the pastoral myth. Turner's thesis has a strong correspondence with early 20th century literature. Frank Norris' *The Octopus*, for instance, chronicles the invasion of the rights of farmers and ranchers by

---

[116] Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* [1920] (Henry Holt, New York: 1940).
[117] See Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land*, particularly pp.54-88 on early myths and instances of Adamic Man in the American wilderness, and also pp.138-305 on the vision of the agrarian utopia. See also Lewis, *American Adam*, pp.90-110 and Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, pp.3-33.
[118] *Virgin Land*, pp.291-305.

the forces of big business.[119] Written some years later is John Steinbeck's phenomenal *Grapes of Wrath* which charts with disgust the desecration of the agrarian ideal and the closing of the promise of the frontier in an era of organised agricultural capitalism during the depression of the 1930s.[120]

Up until this recognition of the closing of the frontier though, the effect of the spatial form of the frontier was to sustain the possibility of equality. This spatial promise of equality can be contrasted with the temporal promises of progress. The promise of improved social forms through the Age of Reason's progressive unveiling of the rational society was quite different to Jefferson's agrarian ideal which was based upon an atemporal *locus amoenus* and offers a recipe for a relatively static civilisation. Equality, in keeping with the Lockean value of property, was measured in terms of the individual's access to land. Yet it is important to remember that the promise of equality, at least in the first century of the republic, was convincing primarily because the geographical limits of the national community were continually expanding. With reaching of the territorial limits of the nation and the industrial revolution, along with a massive increase in population towards the end of the 19th century, the spatial promise of equality was no longer as effective, and there were changes in the mythic network to reflect changes in the patterns of distribution in the national social space and the constitution (in the broad sense) of the nation.

At the same time these processes of discovery and settlement paradoxically abetted the increasing movement of America away from its mythic foundations of the state of

---

[119] Frank Norris, *The Octopus: A Story of California* (Doubleday and Page, New York: 1901).
[120] John Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath* (Heinemann, London: 1939).

nature or the Promised Land. Due to technologies which improved transportation and communication networks, such as the railway or the telegraph, territories and spaces began to lose their separateness as they became easier to physically or virtually traverse. Thus, at the same time the nation was becoming better connected through technology, this technology was undermining the possibility of the Adamic ideal which had already become an integral component of the American Dream. It was also undermining the optimum conditions for the Jeffersonian dream, which demanded a degree of seclusion of family units in order to achieve a harmonious balance between private and public life. In this sense the spatial and temporal promises of equality have had a tensional relationship in the mythic network, facets of which tended towards mutual cancellation of the conditions of their actual possibility.

The impingeing realities of development and the shrinkage in viable empty space did not necessarily diminish the importance of the idea of expansion in the American imaginary. Notions of expansion and frontiers became intrinsic to the way Americans imagined and continue to imagine themselves as both individuals and a community. Furthermore the frontier as a mythic theme has continued to pervade American culture. As various scholars have observed it remains an important aspect in the dynamic of American culture and the consciousness of it. 20th century instances of the frontier's being recontextualised include John F. Kennedy's catchcry of the New Frontier in the presidential campaign of 1960. Interestingly, in this case the frontier is temporalised as "the frontier of the 1960s, a frontier of unknown opportunities and paths, a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threats." In this sense the Frontier is the

future.[121] Terence Ball has written on Gerard O'Neill's depiction of space as "The High Frontier."[122] Another example of the frontier recontextualised can be in the American cities where notions of the mean streets and ghettos correspond to the western notions of the lawless town. In the last thirty years, the gentrification of inner-urban areas has been represented as the bourgeois conquest of the wild frontier. This is dealt with for instance in terms of New York's Lower Eastside in Joel Rose's novel *Kill the Poor.*[123] Conversely the emergence of gated suburbs and communities also deploys the frontier for its justifications. This has been explored in T. Coraghessan Boyle's recent novel *The Tortilla Curtain*, centred in California.[124] I will be discussing these aspects of the urban frontier in specific relation to Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities* in Chapter Four. Although America had become a nation which saw itself in terms of frontiers, the challenge posed by Frederick Jackson Turner's positing of the "closing" of the frontier in the 1890s meant that new contexts for these imaginings would have to be found. The growth of the metropolis, with its compressed territorial impulses sublimated into emergent forms such as the skyscraper and the abstract reach of financial and managerial networks across the country and eventually the world, is not unrelated to the closing of the frontier in the late 19th century. These processes involved a significant transfiguration of the mythic network of the American Dream and although the early dreams of America would remain in the mythic network as ideals, they were also succeeded by other myths which reflected the changes in the

[121] For a discussion of this speech see Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Harper Perennial, New York: 1993) pp.1-3 and also pp.489-504.
[122] Terence Ball, *Reappraising Political Theory*, pp.286-90.
[123] Joel Rose, *Kill the Poor* (Atlantic Monthly Press, New York: 1988). For an analysis of this phenomenon, see Neil Smith, "New City, New Frontier: The Lower East Side as Wild, Wild West" in ed. Michael Sorkin, *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space* (Noonday Press, New York: 1992) pp.61-93.
[124] T. Coraghessan Boyle, *The Tortilla Curtain* (Viking, New York: 1995).

modes of relating which began to dominate the national community from the industrial revolution on. It is to these transfigurations that I will be turning in the following chapter.

Both the Frontier and the Garden can be considered as mythicisations of real physical space which were analogous with ideas of abundance. As Leo Marx observes in his analysis of early descriptions of the American, there is a frequent implication of a cornucopian abundance of natural resources, which is compatible with the arcadian visions of the pastoral imaginary.[125] The significance of the effect of these notions of abundance in the formation of American identity has been treated expansively in David Potter's work, *People of Plenty.*[126] Written in the context of the unprecedented prosperity of the postwar era, Potter's 1954 work argued that features of American society such as social and physical mobility and democracy cannot exist independently of the idea of abundance, initially an agrarian conception, but more importantly expanded to encapsulate the nature of industrial capitalism. In establishing the significance of America's material success, Potter argued that:

> It is safe to say that the American standard of living is a resultant much less of natural resources than of the increase in capacity to produce and that this was the result, directly, of human endeavour - the ventures and struggles of the pioneer, the exertions of the workman, the ingenuity of the inventor, the drive of the enterpriser, and the economic efficiency of all kinds of Americans, who shared an addiction to hard work. These activities may themselves be the product of deterministic forces, and no implication of superior merit is necessarily involved; but at least one point emerges - namely, that American abundance has been achieved by other men at various other times throughout history, and it is not a mere matter of getting into the path of blind luck. Though based on a primary environment, abundance is

[125] Marx, *Machine in the Garden*, pp.36-40.
[126] David Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1954).

> realised through the creation of a secondary environment, and it should be regarded accordingly.[127]

Potter's argument is instructive because it emphasises the interdependency between economic success and the patterns of social organisation which determine the form of what he terms the secondary environment. Potter is obviously thinking of the abundance created by the industrial mode of economic society. It also demonstrates the availability of those values to succeeding socio-political contexts, in Potter's case particularly the context of America during the Cold War.

Potter's argument is a development of the cornucopian theme which has marked the identification of America since colonial times. Nonetheless there is a distinction here between ideas of extant abundance and created abundance, even if the latter has obviously been contingent on the former. His thesis, however, is trans-historical to the extent that the Jeffersonian agrarian ideal was composed of a worked environment. As Potter recognises and Jefferson feared, the industrialisation of American society required a reconfiguration of its foundational values. He argues a specifically American ideal of equality, demarcated from European conceptions of equality, as "parity in competition" in conjunction with a shift in the concept of liberty from its natural law basis to the idea "of freedom to grasp opportunity." In this, he argues American notions of equality and liberty have merged.[128] Furthermore this convergence can be linked through abundance and the concomitant trajectory of economic expansion to the physical and social (horizontal and vertical) mobilities

[127] Potter, *People of Plenty*, p.90.
[128] Potter, *People of Plenty*, p.92.

which are intrinsic to the mode by which individuals are distributed within the social space. This abundance driven mobility came at the cost of the "organic recognized relationship between the individual and the community," a position which can be correlated to the frequent concerns expressed in American history as to the need for a balance between order and liberty.[129] Again we are dealing with the multifarious ways in which core values of the American Dream are connected: through the economics of abundance terms such as liberty and equality undergo conceptual change, yet as they are embodied in the idea of mobility they remain linked to the forms of distribution enshrined in the Frontier mythology and America's status as an immigrant society. In this context we can also see how the symbolic and material aspects of American society and its identity are also interdependent.

Potter has also argued that abundance of American life is a major contributing factor in the sustaining of conditions that are conducive to ongoing democracy. In arguing this he tended to differ from the agrarian emphases of Jefferson, who following the Athenian model of democracy saw an excess of material abundance as a distinct threat to democracy.[130] Potter argues:

> There is a strong case, for believing that democracy is clearly most appropriate for countries which enjoy an economic surplus and least appropriate for countries where there is an economic insufficiency.[131]

---

[129] Potter, *People of Plenty*, p.103. The relationship between order and liberty is a tensional one that goes back to the Founding Fathers and beyond into colonial America. For an excellent analysis of this relationship see Michael Kammen, *Spheres of Liberty*.

[130] On the anti-materialist ethos of Athenian democracy see Eli Sagan, *The Honey and the Hemlock: Democracy and Paranoia in Ancient Athens and Modern America* (Princeton University Press, Princeton N.J.: 1991).

[131] Potter, *People of Plenty*, p.112.

Here Potter's thesis seems to be remarkably myopic. In its Cold War context it cannot but be connected to the American need to re-imagine and sell itself as the uniquely correct democratic form, against rival claims from other (e.g. Marxist) imaginings of the demos. As the democratic ideal of his predecessors suggests, there are also intrinsic problems concerning the relationship of wealth and the values of democracy. Certainly today there is increasing doubt as to how democratic the political system truly is. Much of this doubt, furthermore, concerns the issue of wealth as a barrier for the access to politics. Clearly the amount of money required to mount an election campaign restricts the type of people who can hold office and the opinions that they can hold. As the current debate in America suggests the problem of campaign funding means that a candidate has to be either independently wealthy, and thus likely to think in a particular mode of enlightened self-interest, or funded and thus compromised by a range of supporters whose donations have specific, even if undeclared agendas. There are distinct problems, therefore, as to how representative American democracy truly is. In this sense the direct mutually beneficial connection Potter has argued between democracy and abundance is problematic. Potter further fails to account for the fact that effective democracy is also related to the distribution of wealth within the society as well as the sum total of its abundance. Abundance in itself, if properly managed, is undoubtedly advantageous to the stability of any political system. The ramifications of these qualifications for the operation of the American mythic network will become clearer in the following chapters

In discussing the connections between abundance and democracy I am drifting into territory which I will be more fully exploring in later chapters. Before embarking on these discussions, and in concluding this chapter, it is worthwhile to provide a

summary sketch of the American mythic network in its foundational form. On the one hand there is the political foundation of the United States which pertains to the mythic foundation of the state of nature. From this the values of liberty, equality, democracy and justice are derived: ideals which for a while marked America as unique among the states of the world. In some ways these values converged with the Puritan myths of a Chosen People in a Promised Land, yet the American "philosophes", such as Jefferson, Madison or Tom Paine, had converted this impetus into terms that were consonant with the Enlightenment values of reason and progress and the idea of America as a political experiment privileged by a nature whose benignity is effectively personified in terms of Providence. Here we see how the philosophical basis of the American nation is connected with its religious heritage in more ways than is commonly assumed by those who have argued the Enlightenment as antithetical to religion. Indeed the context out of which the Lockean natural rights philosophy initially emerged is precisely that of England's Puritan Revolution. Yet at the same time there were differences between the Puritan vision of the world and those of the Enlightenment thinkers, as can be seen in R.W.B. Lewis' division of American 19th century thought into the parties of hope and memory. Puritan pessimism tended to articulate itself against the progress of man through the notions of inherited sin. Yet as Max Weber has convincingly argued it was the Puritan ethic which would provide the psychological and social condition for the development of capitalism. As the idea of progress became dominated by its material aspects in the emergence of industrial society, the pessimism or determinism of the Puritans becomes paradoxically linked to progress even as the ethos of their religious system was becoming increasingly secularised. These are themes to be encountered again in the following chapters. To return to the pre-industrial state of the American mythic network, we can also see how

the state of nature, which formed the mythic foundation of America as a nation, also coalesced with spatial discourses of America as a Garden, and can be read into the movements of the Frontier. Furthermore the democratic vision of the Founding Fathers which also included the natural rights notions of liberty and equality was imagined onto the landscape, as Leo Marx has argued, through recourse to the mythic vision of the pastoral ideal.

In this chapter I have argued how America can be read as a mythic culture, some of the advantages of this approach, and some of the potential disadvantages in trying to minimise American culture's mythic aspects. I have tried to show how the American mythic network is a complex web of interrelated aspects in a constant state of transformation, yet tied to the open postulates of its mythic foundation. Furthermore as I have argued these connections can be as much in tension as agreement. A mythic network need not be a unanimous or harmonious entity. It is important to remember that tensional relations are not automatically a divisive strain on the mythic network and the imagined community it represents. Within each strand of the network, there is the potential for self-contradiction. Furthermore the pattern of relations of the mythic network change over time, as do the individual elements themselves. The relationship in the American mythic network between liberty and equality, for instance, has changed as the meaning of these terms has been transferred. Even nature, which is the primordial foundational value, has transformed its meaning in the mythic network over time, and appeared in new contexts as the balance between first nature and second and third nature has shifted. Contradictions may dissolve, or alternatively as in the sense of suspended oppositions, may actually minimise changes in the mythic network by the fact of their continued irresolution. Tensions between equality and

liberty have served to keep the shape of American values, and the role of the mythic network is as much to maintain the dynamism of certain cultural tensions as to enable the imagining of a single national entity. Mythic themes will also recur in new social contexts, as in the case of the Frontier. Indeed in dynamic modern societies the tensions in the mythic or symbolic network may well be more vital than those nodal points where mythemes tend to congruence and the maintenance of the status quo. The effect of both tension and agreement, depending on the society, can either be positive or negative in terms of the culture as a whole. These ideas will become clearer as I move into an analysis of mythic transformations in the chapters to follow.

I have argued that the foundation of America has a particular form which can be fixed in terms of historical context - the Enlightenment, the age of the printed word and the emergence of modern reflexive consciousness are all factors which point to the specific way that the foundation of modern America occurred. In addition it is a foundation which pertained to a new style of imagined community, the modern community of the nation. Complicating this picture is the way America moved towards being a pluralist and dynamic society, and it is to these changes that I now turn.

Chapter Three

Having outlined the nature of mythic networks in general in Chapter One and the specific origins of the modern American mythic network in Chapter Two, in the following chapters I would like to consider how the American novel might be related as both a representation of and connectional matrix in the American mythic network in the processes of its becoming modern. In doing so I want to speculate on how novels might perform a special function in the mythic networks of modern, industrialised capitalist countries. This is a way of exploring Levi-Strauss' contentions about the mutability of mythic networks, and contesting Barthes' contentions about the non-mythicality of revolutionary language or "the language of man as a producer."[1] As Marshall Berman's brilliant reading of Marx and modernity reminds us, the capitalist mode is ultimately one of perpetual revolution, of replacing the old with the new, and in exploring the transformation of the American mythic network in response to the raw capitalism of the Gilded Age I hope to query some aspects of Barthes' extremely influential ideological reading of the mythic.[2] At the same time, it is important to remember that the mythic is a way of making narrative sense out of the sum of historical events. From this perspective I hope to expand upon the contention I have made in Chapter One that rather than the modern age involving a transcendence of myth, it has produced a new dynamically oriented form of mythic

---

[1] Roland Barthes, "Myth Today" in *Mythologies* [1957], trans. Annette Lavers (Jonathan Cape, London: 1972). p.146.
[2] Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (Simon and Schuster, New York: 1982). See Chapter Two, but also the analysis of Goethe's *Faust* in the preceding chapter for an understanding of the German developmental tradition out of which Marx worked.

network, which operates to naturalise the modern imperative of perpetual change, or in its mythic form, progress. Yet as will be shown in this chapter, the mythic also has the preservative force of remembering what was good about the old as it is superseded by the new, and is also a mode of making the new coherent through the extension of existing frames of cultural reference. This again is evidence of the way that the modern mythic network of America functions in its totality as tensional discourse.

The emergence of the novel as the pre-eminent literary form by the end of the 19th century has been linked to the advent of industrialisation.[3] The reasons for this are several: technological developments in printing which facilitated the novel as a mass commodity, improvements in national literacy rates, but also the emergence of an industrialised predominantly urban middle-class. The novel in this latter case came to perform an important role in the cultural imaginary of the Habermasian bourgeois public sphere, even if reading novels was primarily a private or domestic occupation. Contemporaneous with the processes of industrialisation was the emergence of realism as a literary mode. It was a mode which aimed to fuse the imagined and the material in its discourses of the real, and thus to provide the reader with a reflective imaginary of their environs, culture and existence.[4] In the following discussion I would like to explore some of the connections between these emergences in the context of America and its mythic network. I will be arguing that the novel performed the mythic task, or at least responded to the mythic need, of bringing disparate elements of these forces together, functioning to a certain extent as a bridge between

[3] See, for instance, Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Chatto & Windus, London: 1957).
[4] Again I should stress that I do not necessarily mean the Lacanian idea of the imaginary, although it may overlap with my consideration; but a broader use of the term which pertains to the individual's internal picture of their society and culture and the position they occupy within it.

the material and the symbolic as well as a bridge within the realms of the symbolic order itself. As Alan Trachtenberg has argued in his excellent study, *The Incorporation of America*, the Gilded Age was a turbulent era in which new myths were being created, and old ones were being relegated or transformed in their context, function and force, with "the encompassing image being that of America itself: a symbol in contention."[5] What this statement suggests is that during the Gilded Age, the task of imagining the community of the nation was changing significantly. In this chapter I want to look at how the shift from an agrarian and mercantile culture to an industrial culture, and the array of major alterations to the fabric of the nation, demanded new ways of figuring the national polity and the distribution of social space within it. In looking at some of the literature at the time against this backdrop I want to work towards an understanding of how the American mythic network can be conceptualised in terms of these transitions.

In using literature as my primary vehicle for the exploration and exposition of the mythic in American culture it is important also to define what exactly I mean by literature. Following the discourse theory of Foucault, and literary historians like Cathy Davidson and Daniel Borus who have admitted the sociology of literature into their perspectives on American literature, I would argue that literature constitutes a set of practices, which concern not just the writing of literary texts, but the environment of their publication and also arenas such as magazines and the academy where literary texts are deployed in the construction of critical formations. Just as important is the readership of texts, particularly in the 19th century which saw the emergence of

[5] Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (Hill and Wang, New York: 1982) p.8.

American literature as a distinct market. The term "literary cultural complex" might be one which aptly encompasses this range of literary activities.

Within these parameters the question, who was reading what and why are crucial to an understanding of American literature and its function within a broader social context. Although this thesis is not in itself a work of literary history as much as a gloss on the perspectives which inform literary histories, this broad definition is important, not the least because of the critical heritage in American Studies which partly frames this work. The critical discourses deployed under the umbrella term of American Studies have been and remain inseparably involved in the propagation of the American mythic network. From its origins in the nationalist need to verify a distinct American literature, which saw the beginnings of American Literary scholarship in American universities during the Gilded Age, American Studies has been energised by the quest towards a coherent national myth, and is still dependent upon the perpetuation of stories which are deeply imbued with the substance of specifically American myth.[6]

My position within the schema of this heritage can be partly interpreted as offering an updating of the myth criticism school, prevalent in American Studies during the 1950s and 1960s, whose proponents included Henry Nash Smith, R.W.B. Lewis and Leo Marx. The critical positions they have taken remain strong, precisely because of the mythic imperative of American Studies itself. As they have identified their mythic themes, they have tended to propagate them, and the role of keeping the ideational

[6] This does not account for the fascinating array of tensions and conflicts attendant from the very beginning of American literary scholarship. For a history of literary studies and American Studies see Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1987), particularly pp.209-225.

heritage of a culture alive is a respectable academic pursuit. Where these critical positions fall somewhat short is in the way they have concentrated on the American literary renaissance without seeking to understand how the American mythic network is transformed and persists, which is something another great mythographer in American Studies, Richard Slotkin, has partly redressed in terms of the frontier myth. To a certain extent, the emphases of the myth school upon the American renaissance have meant that they have inscribed the rupture of the modern to delineate the operational realms of myth. Myth in this sense is figured as an aspect of pre-industrial America which was undone by the processes of modernisation. Subsequently the recrudescence of antebellum literary and mythic values are made available to be deployed as a critique of modern American society. While this establishment of a comparative temporal continuum is a function of mythic networks, as William Doty has argued, it is ultimately inadequate to confine the operations of the American mythic network to the antebellum period.[7]

From this perspective I will be arguing in the next two chapters for the need for criticism to adopt a self-reflexive position when considering the American mythic network; a position which has the modesty to consider the critic's implication in the system he/she is attempting to analyse, one which accepts its paradoxical belonging to what Gianni Vattimo has argued is the myth of progress as demythicisation. In doing so the intent is to subvert the oppositional association between the mythic and the modern. Concomitantly in the case of American Studies as a discipline, it is important to think of how to apply myth criticism to the modern in order to question the

---

[7] William G. Doty, *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals* (University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa: 1986) p.27. See Chapter One above.

discursive residue of the adherence (largely through transcendentalism) to reactions against the modern as a moving beyond the use of myth purely for the maintenance of a nostalgic vision of a lost America.[8] In foregrounding the importance of the American literary renaissance, the myth critics in their critical reproduction of 19th century national mythologies have tended to elide the continuities implicit in the transformations of the American mythic network through phases in American history. Mythic interpretation need not be restricted to the literature of this period as if it were the assertion of a static mythic/literary origin. I should add here that the idea of distinguishing between ideology and myth in the study of this period by constructing a theoretical alliance between ideology and history against myth as Robert Clark has done is also an insufficient means of linking mythic considerations with the verities of socio-historical change.[9] The ease with which much contemporary criticism has asserted its revolutionary status on the basis of ideological interpretation without this claim being sufficiently critically assessed, except by the mutterings of reactionaries whose outlandish polemics merely cement the revolutionary assertions of their enemies, is ultimately unsatisfactory.[10] My following mythic analyses of realist

---

[8] Gianni Vattimo, "Myth and the Destiny of Secularization" in *Social Research*, Vol.52, No. 2, Summer 1985, 347-62.

[9] Robert Clark, *History, Myth and Ideology in American Fiction, 1823-52* (Macmillan, London: 1984). For this argument see the Introduction and Chapter One particularly.

[10] For critiques of this tendency towards the revolution/reaction dichotomy in literary criticism, canon formation and American Studies see Peter Carafiol, *The American Idea: Literary History* (OUP, London: 1991) Chapter One, John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1993) which tries to go beyond the radical/reactionary dichotomy in its investigation of literary canons. For a semi-balanced criticism of radical textual politics see Harold Fromm, *Academic Capitalism and Literary Value* (University of Georgia Press, Athens: 1991) Other reactionary approaches to the vogue of ideologically based textual interpretation include Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (Simon and Schuster, New York: 1987), Dinesh D'Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (The Free Press, New York: 1991), Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted our Higher Education* (Harper and Row, New York: 1990) and Alvin Kernan, *The Death of Literature* (Yale University Press, New Haven: 1990). For an insightful and useful defence of contemporary American academic practice, particularly in response to Bloom, see Lawrence Levine, *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture and History* (Beacon Press, Boston: 1996).

American novels can be read as a corrective to some of the incompleteness or inadequacies of the above approaches.

As a foreigner observing American culture my interests are perhaps somewhat different to Americans engaged in critical analysis of their culture in the arena of an American public sphere. I am not afflicted with the same drive to perform American "cultural work". America is rather an object of fascination, a point of comparison, an imaginary, and a constant imperial undercurrent both economically and culturally in Australia, the country where I live and work. As such my attitude towards the discipline of American Studies is ambivalent rather than engaged, curious as opposed to caring. While I am critically engaged with America, my work doesn't inhabit the same necessarily polemical space as that of American critics and writers. There is as much a risk of being drawn into the academic aspect of American cultural imperialism (even though it would never announce itself as that) as there is of being absorbed into any other imperialistic discourse. Furthermore, the intensity of the American polemic has a powerful pull which for the efficacy of independent external criticism has to be consciously mediated if not resisted. These reasons of outsiderdom also produce the effect of a more holistic approach to America as a phenomenon, than perhaps the more fractious effect of America as a lived experience. This is admittedly a factor in my preference for the mythic over the ideological, although it is by no means the whole story, and certainly not the primary justification of my argument.

This chapter is divided into six sections. In section one I discuss some of the reasons why the American mythic network is centred around conceptions of the middle class. I am also interested in the way the Gilded Age saw significant transformations in the

meaning of social applications of the term "middle." I also discuss how this affiliation of the mythic with the middle classes has important ramifications for the practice of cultural criticism about America in the academic humanities. In section two I adumbrate some of the major social transformations in Gilded Age America and how these might relate to shifts in the American mythic network. The changes taking place at the time were vast, yet it is important to understand that new modes of cultural continuity, broad narratives of society and connections between the material and the mythic were being generated to give these changes coherence. Section three concerns the general role of the novel as a polyvocal site for figuring the tensions brought about by social transformation. I will be looking at the novel as a participant form in the modern American mythic network and the way it can be related to other forms of modern continuity such as the nation. In section four I look specifically at the mythic operations of Horatio Alger's novels to preserve the ideal of republican virtue in a rapidly transforming world. I am particularly interested in the way his work reveals tensions in the mythic network and with its models for distributing the social space. By concentrating on Alger's negotiation of the importance of appearances I will be aiming towards an explanation of how these tensions are mediated by his narrative. Section five follows these arguments comparatively through a reading of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*. Again, I am interested in the attention Dreiser pays to appearances and how this relates to modern forms of social distinction. Most important in terms of the comparison between Alger and Dreiser is Dreiser's use of Social Darwinism as the structural principle of the novel's plot, which has an interesting effect on the figuration of social distinction in the text. Having looked at the way some Gilded Age novels represent social distinction in sections four and five, in section six I turn this back into a consideration of how the novel itself functioned to

confer social distinction and how this has been represented in Dreiser and W.D. Howells. In doing this I am interested in the way that literature has tended to consolidate the position of the middle classes at the centre of the American mythic network, and how this has ramifications for the practice of criticism in American literary studies.

1

The American Mythic Network as a Middle Class Imaginary

In looking at a variety of novels written in or about the Gilded Age, I am specifically interested in the emergence of the industrial middle to upper classes and the cultural politics of middle-class aspiration. This is because it is largely in terms of this component of the polity that the American mythic network is framed. It is also towards this sector of the polity that most literary engagements with the American mythic network have been aimed. Furthermore, it can be argued that the organisation of American society has been predicated upon the concept of the middle class. As Burton J. Bledstein has argued:

> Being middle class in America has referred to a state of mind any person can adopt and make his own. It has not referred to a person's confined position in the social structure, a position delimited by common chances in the market and by preferring occupations. The popular imagination has so closely identified being middle class with pursuing the so-called American dream that "middle class has come to be equated with a good chance for advancement, an expanding income, education, good citizenship - indeed, with democracy. . .
>
> The majority of Americans have aspired to belong to the "fortunate middle class" as the best of all possible alternatives in an imperfect world. Moreover, it has been significant that admission to this group has cut across all lines of social division: black and white, female and male, poor and rich, uneducated and educated, young

> and old, non-Protestant and Protestant. The enduring capacity of Americans with middle-class biases to ward off threatening values has been more than historical accident and luck.[11]

It is important to note that the concept of the middle class has undergone significant transformations over the course of American history. The differentiation C. Wright Mills makes between the old middle class, the small entrepreneur and the new middle class, the white collar salary man, in his classic work *White Collar Worker*, is a useful point of distinction in discussing the changing structure of American society.[12] It is a differentiation that represents an important shift in the mythic frame of American society. Broadly speaking this shift can be characterised as a movement from the independence of self-employment to the dependency of employee status. It is a movement furthermore that is matched and amplified by a number of other developments in American society and its mythic network during the Gilded Age. In the previous chapter I discussed how the yeoman farmer functioned as the ideal citizen in Jefferson's agrarian republic. Along with the small-scale entrepreneur and the professional (doctor, lawyer, teacher), the yeoman farmer was a key figure in the old middle-classes. Yet with industrialisation a new middle class arose: the white collar employee on a salary working for a company, or less often the government. This entailed significant shifts in America's mythic network, affecting the distribution of its people in the social space and the ways that they were grouped together. Specialisation, professionalisation, the emergence of the expert and the extension of corporate and bureaucratic chains of command with increased scales of production

---

[11] Burton J. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (W.W. Norton, New York: 1976) pp.6-8.

[12] C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (Oxford University Press, London: 1956). For this distinction see parts One and Two.

brought significant changes to the way "representation" functioned in terms of the broader community.[13] As a consequence these developments changed the way the community of the American nation was imagined.

Burton J. Bledstein has cogently argued how this shift in the composition of the middle classes in the 19th century was paralleled by a shift in how Americans looked at the idea of the social "middle". In 18th century and early 19th century America, the idea of the middle was related to the idea of the golden mean. As Bledstein argues:

> Middle in eighteenth century America meant rational moderation, the avoidance of extremes. No extreme more threatened the well-being of the community than the excessive accumulation of wealth that drove a man into acts of personal extravagance, luxury, dissipation, idleness, and insensitivity to the shared interests of the community.[14]

The middle classes were valorised as a means to the maintenance of the democratic ideal under which the Republic was established. This was essentially a static model of economic restraint, at the level of both the individual and the society as a whole. By the mid 19th century, the American ideal of the middle classes and their role in the functioning of society had changed significantly. As Bledstein notes, by the mid 19th century:

> "Middle" no longer referred to an equilibrium between the extreme social orders of the aristocracy and the peasantry. It referred to the individual as "escalator," moving vertically between the floors of the poor and the rich. The middle-class person traversed the widening distance between these floors as he relentlessly maintained his individual identity. He could start out his career at an impoverished

---

[13] See Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism*, for an exposition of the impact of the growth of expertise upon the Jeffersonian ideal of the independent citizen.

[14] Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism*, p.10.

> level but rise to wealth without changing his vocation, his social attitudes, his ethnic and religious associations.[15]

This movement, which was simultaneously symbolic and material, involved a reorganisation of the way the social space in America was to be distributed, and in this chapter I will be looking at how this new figuration of the middle can be analysed in terms of transformations in the American mythic network.

As with any study my scope of reference is limited, and in choosing to look primarily at the middle-class I am not trying to further privilege the people who are historically already privileged or to perpetuate the historical exclusions of American culture. The current emphasis in American Studies on the corrective introduction of minority studies has filled serious holes in our understanding, particularly of such a complex and heterogeneous culture as modern America. However, I also believe that there remain holes in the understanding of the way modern hegemonic culture has thought about itself and how this continues to affect the way society is perceived from within the confines of the academic arena, particularly in the way much humanities discourse configures itself as external to the conventions of the bourgeoisie, when the practical mechanics of the university system suggest a far more symbiotic relationship. This might suggest an affinity with writers such as Richard Rorty and Jurgen Habermas, who have argued for the continuation of bourgeois culture as an improving force in western society. I am somewhat more pessimistic about the validity of continuing to believe in the dreams of modernity, however much I sometimes yearn for the comfort of such a measure of social faith, mainly because the bourgeois public sphere

[15] Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism,* p.20.

adumbrated by Habermas in particular is based on older notions of the composition of the bourgeoisie, whose capacity for independent thought and action have been diminished through the domination of the contemporary public sphere by corporate interests and a reliance on the abstract principles of management theory and its inadequate methodologies of measurement.[16] This will be explored in the following chapter, although it is an issue already contentious in American culture during the Gilded Age.

At the same time however, it is important to recognise that the kinds of radical arguments freely occurring in poststructuralist accounts of culture have been able to occur precisely because of the existence of the bourgeois public sphere. As Michael Berube has very lucidly put it:

> Strong post-structuralism cannot think its own political conditions of possibility, precisely because its very critique of the Enlightenment is itself launched from social space cleared by the Enlightenment. In the United States, that space is also discursively constructed in a Constitution that mandates the separation of powers in a federalist state - and the consequent creation of plural public spheres.[17]

What this means is that in democratic societies we all remain to some extent indebted to the myths of the Enlightenment for the political systems that permit us to openly express and act upon our belief or disbelief in the continuing viability of the modern project. Furthermore this permission has always been a function of a bourgeois public

---

[16] Indeed the current plight of the humanities in the university in America and certainly in Australia has come about because for so long under the structure of the collegiate system it was able to perpetuate the independent position of the old style bourgeoisie. With the application of corporate management structures in recent times, this independence has been sharply eroded.

[17] Michael Berube, *Public Access: Literary Theory and American Cultural Politics* (Verso, London: 1994) p.218.

sphere, an observation which as Berube argues applies particularly strongly in the case of America. At the same time, however, there is always the qualifying argument that just because you are able to express something, doesn't imply it is more likely to come true. The unmanaged flow of information associated with the conditions of postmodernity, for instance, is equally capable of diminishing the meaning of individual arguments as they enter the public sphere. Nevertheless the point Berube makes, echoing the point philosophers such as Jurgen Habermas have been making for decades, has undeniable merit.

In American discourse there has long been the view that the fortunes of the American Dream are linked inexorably to the living conditions of the middle classes, or the degree to which every American is able to partake in the benefits exemplified by the middle-class lifestyle. In Myra Jehlen's words, America:

> was a new home that the middle class built for itself according to a design it deemed not only desirable but natural. What is generally recognised as a lack of historical sense in the national consciousness means just this.[18]

Both the template and the ideal of America are in this way centred upon the middle class. Jefferson's yeoman farmer is for instance the ideal citizen of the pre-industrial republic and remains a nostalgic ideal in American culture today. I have discussed in the previous chapter America's ambivalent relationship to the idea of history. Jehlen's incisive perception sees the middle-classes as the major subscribers to this

---

[18] Myra Jehlen, "The Novel and the American Middle Class," in eds S. Bercovitch and M. Jehlen, *Ideology and Classic American Literature* (Cambridge University Press, New York: 1986) pp.125-144, p.127.

anti-historical perspective. Furthermore, the story of the middle class, or the attainment of this status, is the goal to which many archetypal American stories of struggle aspire. Stories of immigration, of the struggle for access to college education, of the struggle of African-Americans for Civil Rights, and many of the imperatives of the feminist movement have their goals in achieving through the mythic authority of equality the benefits of the white middle-class, and in the case of feminism those of its men. Michael Berube has pertinently observed this in terms of American Studies and the American university:

> Politically activist cultural criticism (together with politically critical cultural activism) got women and minorities into universities in the first place; from that space among others, feminism and multi-culturalism retheorizes the American cultural heritage that has begotten them. In doing so these movements seek to influence American self-definition in the future by forging a revisionary account of the past.[19]

This shows how the battle to gain entry to middle-class bastions of privilege such as the universities (particularly the private American university system with its strong hierarchies of reputation) and the professional lives they qualify people for can be interpreted as an aspect of the American Dream and its individualised struggle for success. The control of academic curricula which might challenge this perspective does not, furthermore, necessarily threaten this function of the university system. The success of the bourgeois public sphere is, if anything, its capacity to absorb these influences and make the sort of transformations which ensure its regeneration and survival. All this points to an insight of Jehlen concerning 19th century America, the fact that:

---

[19] Berube, *Public Access*, p.218.

> The dominant culture seems to have been able to co-opt alternative and oppositional forms with unusual effectiveness, to the point of being able to preclude even their possibility.[20]

What Jehlen has adumbrated here is an idea that applies equally in the context of contemporary consumer capitalism. Whereas Jehlen somewhat uncertainly confines this tendency to the 19th century, I would argue it is an observation particularly valid in discussions of contemporary social tendencies, that it is precisely its permissiveness along with the pervasive reach of commodification (in the broad sense of the word) that ensures the survival of the liberal-capitalist public sphere. This will become clearer in the following chapter, but it is important to stress that this is an aspect of the perpetual revolution which is the dynamic of the modern capitalist system. Thus while the middle class has remained the template and ideal of American society, the actual configuration, lifestyle and composition of the middle class has followed the capitalist imperative, albeit sometimes reluctantly, in adapting to the naturalised inevitability of change. From this perspective, while it may be possible to argue that the elites own the means of production, they do not necessarily fully control them. It might also be added that with the development of consumer capitalism the expansion of the middle class was crucial in that it has provided much of the expanded market for the dynamic growth in production since industrialisation.

While it would be a mistake to assume that America was at any time a single society with homogeneous values, and even more of a mistake to assume this during an era of unprecedented migration as the Gilded Age was, even the most fervent critics of the white middle class bias in culture realise the extent to which its values have

[20] Jehlen, "The Novel and the American Middle Class," p.127.

dominated the dreaming of America. There is also the contentious issue as to whether the American Dream may ultimately directly apply only to the American upper and middle-classes, elastic as that middle might be. These classes, it can be argued, and the stories they have told have served as the templates for the larger conglomerate of individual stories which have made the success myth, for example, such an important and common aspect of the American mythic network.[21] Yet clearly the success myth is a pattern which divides Americans and glosses over the advantage of inherited socio-economic position. This beckons the further question as to whether in the operation of such mythic patterns of distribution, with its barriers of inclusion and exclusion, there is also, harking back to notions of the Puritan elect, a sense that the privileged function as a representative embodiment of a plausible American Dream, in the way that American politicians have purported to represent the will of the American people.[22] Democratic ideals can in this way be considered achievable if a representative section of the population enjoys the kind of life they promise.[23] This is an issue that is extremely relevant to discussions of 1980s culture, which has seen a marked increase in western societies of the gap between the rich and poor, and a shrinking of the middle classes, although the beginnings of the answers once again point to the Gilded Age.

---

[21] Compare America to Australia, where convict and labour driven mythologies have produced a far stronger sense of egalitarianism in the myths and function of culture, even though with processes of globalisation (Americanisation?) such symbolic or mythic foundations are increasingly under threat.
[22] Indeed in terms of foundational documents such as the Declaration of Independence, America's politicians were effectively the American people.
[23] While I do not agree with this on political and ethical grounds, it is interesting to note also that Athenian democracy had its slaves, while Roman democracy like modern American and European democracy had its tributary states.

My final reason for concentrating on the middle class is that this thesis involves the analysis of literature, and in particular the American novel. It is well established that the emergence of the novel in Western culture is related to the emergence of the urban bourgeoisie and the processes of the Industrial Revolution. In America, with the absence of an entrenched class system, and a strong belief in universal education, matters of literacy including literature itself were caught in the vertical whirl of social mobility that was such a dazzling aspect of the earlier phases of the modern American dream. As I shall argue the literary-cultural complex in all its facets was, and still is, both a participant and an observer of these processes, which highlights again (as do Berube's arguments concerning the public sphere and its transformations) the need for critical reflexiveness in the consideration of these matters.

2

Transformations in the American Mythic Network during the Gilded Age

The Gilded Age, which spanned the end of the Civil War into the beginning of the 20th century, is considered the period in which America became overwhelmingly industrialised, and consequently modern. The Unionists' victory in the Civil War not only operated to force the identification of America as a nation, but also ensured that North-eastern patterns of culture would dominate the way that American national identity continued to evolve. The Gilded Age brought about significant acceleration in the processes of nationalisation, urbanisation and industrialisation and the ways in which the discourses implicated in these processes derived their authority and were framed. Consequently there were major shifts in the matrix of the American mythic network. As such the Gilded Age provides a fascinating point of comparison from a

macro-cultural perspective, not only to the revolutionary era with its stories of political foundation, but to the 1980s which saw the rapid emergence or consolidation of a variety of forces we have blanketed rather loosely under terms such as postmodernism, post-industrialism and, in the humanities specifically, post-structuralism.[24] During the course of researching this thesis I have been struck by the extent to which many of these aspects of current American life have their clear beginnings in the events of the Gilded Age, and it is my attempt towards understanding the culture of America in the 1980s that has compelled me here to attempt an understanding of this other historical period as well. Indeed, it seems to me that an understanding of the Gilded Age tends to contradict any clear sense of a temporal disjunction between the modern and postmodern. The seeds of many social forms and phenomena which have been characterised as archetypically postmodern were planted during the Gilded Age. Theodore Dreiser's recognition of consumer capitalism, for instance, and the emergence of advertising as an industry as well as the birth of the department store are origins which resonate strongly, though altered and developed, in the forms of postmodern America. The same can be said for the form of the corporation as we enter an era where the multinational corporation is diminishing the modern authority of many a nation state. The collusion of Gilded Age government authorities in these processes - the railways being an obvious example - also bears an interesting affinity with our times. The scene for the authority of the contemporary corporation was set during the Gilded Age and the consolidation of state power during the progressive era, partly against the excesses of Gilded Age capitalism and

[24] Postmodernity is a slippery term whose meaning straddles a disparate variety of cultural entities and practices. The sense I am using here derives from David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Blackwell, Oxford: 1990) particularly in its emphasis of the links between the socio-economic and the cultural.

particularly trusts seems in hindsight an aberration in the tendency towards the growth of corporate power in American society and the world today.

The novels of Horatio Alger or Mark Twain's *The Gilded Age* inform us of the speculative fever of stocks and bonds which along with the boom-bust economic cycle (even when tempered by Keynesian checks) were to become a feature in 20th century America, and a dominant feature of the contemporary "globalised" world economy. In conjunction with these developments were the advent of a multitude of new technologies and mental and organisational technologies such as the birth of management science under Frederick Taylor, the growth of the service economy, the organisation of universities on the German scientific system, or the doctrines of social Darwinism. All these have been naturalised as elements in the identity of American culture and have contributed to the nature of the postmodern in what has become known as the American century.

Of course, it can be argued that picking one era from the web of historical causes and effects for the reason of comparison is an arbitrary decision, and to a certain extent that is true. Other periods of American history whose themes and literature are suggestive of the 1980s would obviously include the period encompassing the 1920s and the Great Depression. Also, in considering the 80s from the perspective of the college-educated classes, then the 60s with their romantic efflorescence and belief in the possibility of a new society, are also a vital point of comparison, albeit as a phenomenon as opposed to a romance. Unfortunately there is not space enough here to follow all these points of comparison through. At various times during the inception of this project I have considered these periods, yet finally it seemed to me that the

Gilded Age stood out, partly from the perspective of the economic phases as I have outlined above, but more perhaps because it is the first time America becomes mentally recognisable. When I am reading about the Founding era, there is that sense of the historically exotic, of reading about a different and long gone world. Yet to read the novels of W.D. Howells, for instance, is to feel that their world is recognisably our own, and the strategies used to interpret it are not markedly different from those we use today. It is a feeling that I can only describe as the feeling of being modern. And this is confirmed when we realise that many of the objects, institutions and forms of thought which are part of our everyday world originated in America during the Gilded Age.

If the degree of change in the 1980s appears daunting to us today, then the amount of change which America underwent during the Gilded Age must have been equally daunting to the inhabitants of that age. Writing on the Gilded Age has conventionally opened with the use of raw statistics, and for good reason. Changes in material conditions were immense. The population grew from 35 million to 77.5 million between 1865 and 1900. In 1870 agricultural production surpassed industrial production by about $500 million per annum. By 1900 this balance had been dramatically reversed. The annual value of industrial production in 1900 exceeded agricultural production by $13 billion to $4.7 billion, and by 1890 America (a second rate industrial power in 1860) had overtaken Britain, Germany and France, to become the largest industrial power in the world.[25] At the same time the rate of urbanisation as a result of increases in both population and industrial production was also rising

[25] For statistics and an overview see Chapter One of Sean Cashman's *America in the Gilded Age* (New York University Press: 1984).

sharply. In 1790, only 20 000 Americans lived in urban territories against the 3.7 million who lived in rural territories. Jefferson's agrarian dream was a real possibility. By 1900, the rural population had increased to 45 million, but the urban population had increased to 30 million and by 1930, the urban proportion of the population had overtaken the rural.[26] Whereas the late 18th century population of London was about a million people, the largest city in America at that time, Philadelphia, had a population of only 45 000. The 19th century saw a remarkable increase in the size and quantity of American cities, and this was a process which accelerated from the end of the Civil War. New York grew from 33 000 in 1790 to several million by the turn of the 20th century, while in the west cities sprung out of virtually nothing, the most obvious example being Chicago, whose population grew from 4 500 in 1840 to 1.7 million by 1900.[27]

It is crucial to bear in mind that throughout the 19th century Americans were effectively becoming closer to each other - even as the shifting frontier continued to expand the physical spread of the nation - and that consequently Americans were becoming increasingly interdependent. The most immediate reason for this equation was the fact of urbanisation. Not only was this a matter of lived proximity, but also one of networks such as water and sewers, the distribution of heating fuels, and towards the end of the century, electricity. Just as significant, however, was the way developments in transportation, inland water networks (such as the Erie Canal), steamships and turnpikes, but most importantly the railway, drastically reduced the

---

[26] *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1957* (Bureau of the Census, Washington: 1957).
[27] E. Monkkonen, *America Becomes Urban: The Development of U.S. Cities and Towns 1780-1980* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1988) pp.44-5.

travel time between destinations and made genuinely possible for the first time the creation of national markets, and as a direct corollary reinforced the imagined community of the nation.[28] As the nation grew physically it shrunk in terms of comparative time and was homogenised to a degree by the availability of goods on a national basis. In this sense people were able to manufacture the community of the nation through the shared experience of nationally distinct objects of consumption. This similitude in consumption was compounded by advances occurring in the means of mass production. There was more of the same product to be distributed along these networks. By the end of the century through the combination of mass production, national markets and advertising (which was also formalised as a practice during the Gilded Age), brands such as Persil soap were almost universally recognised as an intrinsic part of the American way. It is important to note the extent to which imagining the community of the American nation was achieved through the fusion of the mythic and the material: in terms of objects, objectives and processes.

The burgeoning railroad network also facilitated the actual distribution of people into newly established frontier territories. Indeed many of the railway projects received government support by the granting of land which was then sold on by the rail corporations to prospective settlers, often at exorbitant prices. In this way the railways created their own markets by establishing towns and settler regions, or reorganising

[28] For a brilliant perspective on the difficulties faced by the book trade in the early American Republic, particularly the consequences for the nascent industry of the distances between centres and the lack of effective transportation, see Chapter Two of Cathy Davidson's excellent *Revolution and the Word: the Rise of the Novel in America* (Oxford University Press, New York: 1986). What she effectively argues is that because of the costs and difficulties involved in the distribution of books, patterns of readership were generally organised on a regional basis, or a basis that reflected the availability of effective transportation. Furthermore, the prevalence of shipping as the most efficient means of goods transportation at the time meant that European books were competitive, at least in trading centres such as Boston and New York, with their locally produced counterparts.

the power relationship between those that already did exist. There are many stories for instance of towns competing for the railway to be routed through them. As such the railways were not just making the nation accessible, but actually creating it, distributing people across space and contributing in a significant fashion to the hierarchy of places at a local and national level, even if there was rampant exploitation and chicanery frequently involved in this process.[29]

Another fascinating aspect of the way the railways combined to create the nation can be seen in he creation of national timezones. It was only in 1883 that time became standardised into four zones by collective decree of the railway companies. Prior to this each district had decided its own time, meaning that the nation consisted of hundreds of time zones. What was originally known as railway time, continues to organise American national time.

The advent of the telegraph is also a crucial example of how technology served in the consolidation of the American nation. Whereas information flows were previously constrained by the physical speed of material carriers, the invention and rapid spread of the telegraph meant that towns and cities separated by days or even weeks of physical travel could exchange information within minutes. In a nation with a weak central government, a population spread over enormous distances and, until after the

---

[29] See for instance the episodes in Charles Warner and Mark Twain's 1873 satirical novel *The Gilded Age*, 2 Vols, (Harper and Brothers, New York: 1901) concerning Colonel Seller's attempts to influence the establishment of the railway at Stone's Landing (Napoleon) and the nexus between the railroad company and political corruption as explored in Seller's relationship with Senator Dilworthy. Note that the exercise was defined as a "land and railroad operation" (p.141), suggesting the extent to which the two went hand in hand. For a more sombre account of the relationship of the railways to the creation of pioneering communities see Jonathon Raban's history of the North Dakota Badlands, titled simply *Bad Land: An American Romance* (Picador, New York: 1996).

Civil War, a lack of a clearly dominant city, the telegraph served as a great instrument of unification. It also helped the establishment of newspapers, which Benedict Anderson has argued was, along with the novel, the technical means by which the modern community of the nation came to be imagined.[30] Events in California could be public knowledge in New York in the same afternoon, hence the sense of proximity and the compression of time which has always been a hallmark in considerations of modernity.

Other networks were emerging too. As C. Wright Mills more than ably demonstrated in his classic work, *White Collar*, the advent of mass production and national markets meant that the establishment of corporate chains of command and the specialisation of work functions were also bringing the nation into closer proximity.[31] Frederick Taylor's introduction of management science and the rationalisation of the factory system toward the productive model of the assembly line, as epitomised in the factories of Henry Ford early in the 20th century, increased the interdependence of elements in the workplace as specialisation and rationalised production structures reduced the decision making authority of the individual manual or clerical worker and concentrated the power of management. Increasingly these theories were also based on the macro-economic recognition that production and thus employment depended upon the ability of the economy to stimulate demand and were based also on a shift in the emphasis of economic thought from the equilibrium of classical economists to the imperatives of economic growth.[32] The processes of rationalising the workplace were

---

[30] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, London, New York: 1993).
[31] C. Wright Mills, *White Collar,* see particularly Part Two and also Part Three, pp.215-238.
[32] For an account of what constituted Fordism and its fate see David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1990) pp.121-200.

repeated not just in the factories but also in wholesale and particularly retail industries as the economies of scale of institutions such as the department store changed the consumption patterns of society. Paralleled with this were the processes of professionalisation. As Burton Bledstein has argued the professionalisation of knowledge had the effect of reducing the democratic function of the social and economic world:

> Laymen were neither prepared to comprehend the mystery of tasks which professionals performed, nor - more ominously - were they equipped to pass judgement upon special skills and technical competence. Hence, the culture of professionalism required amateurs to "trust" in the integrity of trained persons, to respect the moral authority of those whose claim to power lay in the sphere of the sacred and the charismatic. Professionals controlled the magic circle of scientific knowledge which only the few, specialized by training and indoctrination, were privileged to enter, but which all in the name of nature's universality were obligated to appreciate.[33]

All these factors, the multitude of emerging networks and rationalised concentration of economic power under the auspices of the "scientifically" managed corporation, and the hierarchy between the expert and the layman formed a matrix of compulsory connections, which to an extent produced cohesiveness and conformity for a society whose cultural origins were increasingly diverse. Yet at the same time it can also be argued that these compulsory connections freed up the social fabric from prior forms of consciously inculcated social obligation (religion for instance). To be part of a corporation either as a shareholder or employee, or in the latter case of a bureaucracy, did not necessitate allegiance to any social group, although in practice there was considerable discrimination in the way that the hierarchies of these networks were

[33] Burton J. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism*, p.90.

delineated as in the continued power of the WASP and lack of power afforded to African-Americans for instance. This theoretical shift did however contribute to the emergence of the paradoxical modern condition of unprecedented freedom underpinned by unprecedented dependency upon the impersonal networks constructed in the quest for modern material progress. In turn, of course, this new freedom would be commodified as part of the consumption based modern economy for new realms of demand and expressed as a consequence through a series of social distinctions producing consumption or "lifestyle" choices.

One of the central features of the Gilded Age was the emerging power of the private corporation. The anthropologist Dan Rose has argued the significance of the corporation as an organisational principle throughout American history, claiming the corporate form has been the primary form of American culture since its inception. In *Patterns of American Culture,* he argues that:

> America is a country that was formed out of the private sector. It was composed at first of privately chartered corporations and proprietorships organized for an overriding purpose, to realize profits off the landscape of the New World. This impetus - this motive for acquiring material affluence - continues to drive us today...From the collective efforts of the members of joint stock companies and the affluent proprietors of massive land tracts, the eastern seaboard of British North America took shape as a highly managed outpost of the rapidly rising English entrepreneurial capitalists. Their worldly success formed the very stuff of our contemporary institutions and has been preserved as implicit value in the most mundane experiences of our cultural life.[34]

Rose proceeds to argue with considerable validity that all major American institutions, government, non-profit organisation and business have adopted a corporate form, that

[34] Dan Rose, *Patterns of American Culture* (University of Pennsylvania Press: 1989) p.2.

politics is largely determined by the influence of private corporations, and that for many Americans their corporate memberships are more important in defining them than the traditional anthropological category of kinship.[35]

It is important to remember, however, that over the course of the 19th century, the corporation underwent a series of crucial transformations which significantly changed its relationship with society and the state. The early corporate form which Rose mentions was basically a charter of exclusivity granted by the British government along with a series of other benefits such as tax exemptions in order to attract and insulate the infusion of the large amounts of private capital necessary to sustain colonial enterprises in the new world. From the revolution on, the granting of corporate charters primarily devolved to the individual states. Most of the charters granted involved areas of capital intensive infrastructure, such as water, sewers and transportation. Crucially, these early corporations were chartered because of their ability to operate in the public interest. Profit was not necessarily their primary concern. In effect they were. "quasi-public agencies of the state" engaged in the provision of public utilities.[36] As the century progressed, the granting of corporate charters increasingly began to extend to the manufacturing sector, where new methods of industrial production shifted the emphasis from the small-scale proprietor-run firm (which corresponds to C. Wright Mills' idea of the old bourgeoisie) to the more concentrated and capital intensive methods of large scale machinery driven factory

---

[35] Dan Rose, *Patterns of American Culture*. See Chapter 5 pp.45-78.

[36] Stuart Bruchey, "The Historical Development of the Corporation in the United States," in eds A. Chandler, et al., *The Changing Economic Order: Readings in American Business and Economic History* (Harcourt, Brace and World, New York: 1968) pp.140-148, p.143. See also Scott Bowman, *The Modern Corporation and American Political Thought: Law, Power and Ideology* (Penn State Press, University Park PA: 1996).

production. Matched with these developments was a shift in emphasis from the corporation as a provider of public utilities, to a body whose primary motive was private profit. As the desire to incorporate increased, the states tried to circumvent the corruption often implicated in the political granting of specific charters and opposition to their monopolistic implications by legislating laws of general incorporation, which gained ascendancy over the older method by 1875. A further proliferation of the corporate form ensued, spreading increasingly to all areas of economic activity.

The increased scale of production also meant that it became necessary for corporations to institute new modes of managing their enterprises. To begin with, the large number of people with stakes in the corporation meant that the nexus between the owning and running of business increasingly came to be mediated by professional managerial staff. These people acquired the status of the expert in the way Burton Bledstein has outlined it above. In effect large corporations became the nation's first private bureaucracies. In order to maximise profits, the new managerial class deployed "scientific" management techniques in order to systematise the running of these rapidly agglomerating entities. This tended to subvert the importance of relationships between independent individuals, which was such a linchpin of the Jeffersonian democratic model. Increasingly, the individual's economic significance was signified by where they fitted in the abstract hierarchies produced by these corporate chains of command. As a consequence, the sense of mutuality, of the individual checking his own self-interest for the sake of the public good was being eroded by the emergence of the corporate form on a number of fronts: through the interstition of the manager between the owner and the worker, the statisticisation of the worker through scientific

management, and the movement of corporations towards an over-arching concern with private profit.

Another interesting point about the corporation is that although it was granted the legal status as a fictional individual with a corresponding limited liability of its shareholders, the corporation achieved a sort of continuity, which extended beyond the existence of the individuals who owned it.[37] In Chapter Two I looked at Benedict Anderson's argument concerning how the nation constituted a powerful new form of continuity, and was a substitute for the declining authority of Christianity in the Western World. The corporation was also invested with a powerful sense of continuity, which promised different sorts of identification to the nation. At one level corporations as an extension of brand loyalty were implicated in national identity. They also served as emblems of national pride. On the other hand their economic power and the continuity afforded to it, meant that the corporation had the ability to subvert the good of the national community and the individual. Indeed with the rise of the multinational corporation, the relationship between the economic interests of corporations and the national interest of the countries in which they base their operations are a perplexing combination of mutual benefit and cross-purposes. In the case of both the nation and the corporation this power is partly predicated on the theoretical immortality which underpins their trans-generational continuities.

As I have argued in the last chapter, the nation that technologies such as the railroad

[37] An interesting analogy is the indifference Pierce and Pierce display towards the fate of Sherman McCoy on the basis of his replaceability. See Chapter Four.

made possible had at least its political origins in the mythic foundation of the state of nature, both in the strictly philosophical sense and in the way America became characterised by its inhabitants in terms of the pastoral ideal, or the expectations of bounty which fuelled the westward expansion of the frontier. It is clear that there are ambivalences here between the myth of America as a republic based on Natural Rights philosophy and the consolidation of America as a nation, albeit a modern industrial one during the Gilded Age. As Mark Seltzer has claimed in the opening to his *Bodies and Machines*:

> Nothing typifies the American sense of identity more than the love of nature (nature's nation) except perhaps the love of technology (made in America).[38]

There are very good reasons for this. The construction of capitalist technologies such as the railroads, no matter how corrupt, megalomaniacal or mercenary the men and corporations involved, were as fundamental to the realisation of the American republic as a national identity as the implementation of representative democracy. It is valid to argue that the nation did not exist until it had the rail and telegraph networks to make possible the functioning of a democratic polity on such an unprecedented geographic scale. Furthermore, throughout the 19th century most Americans were highly in favour of the nation's technological potential and the pastoral ideal has faced stiff competition

---

[38] Mark Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines* (Routledge, New York: 1992) p.3. The most influential account of this seeming paradox is found in Leo Marx's still prescient *The Machine in the Garden* (OUP, Oxford: 1960). Chapter Four in particular is an excellent investigation of the development of and enthusiasm for technology in America. The openness of its investigation is also an excellent example of some of the benefits of American cultural criticism which operates from a mythic perspective. See also, however, John F. Kasson, *Civilizing the Machine: Technology and Republican Values in America 1776-1900* (Grossman, New York: 1976) for an account of the nexus both politically and imaginatively between these discourses as forces in American society.

from what Leo Marx has termed the "technological sublime."[39] At the same time, these technologies and others were radically changing the productive relations between citizens, the patterns of demographic distribution and the habits and habitats of the great majority of Americans. The emergence of metropolises, the impact of high-rise buildings (both skyscraper and tenement slum), the advent of electricity and in particular electric lighting were contemporaneous with new forms of productive relations such as the factory system and the corporation. In addition, technologies of mass production had an enormous impact across the gamut of American culture. America's status as the world's foremost industrial power by the end of the century proved cohesive in terms of national pride even as there were fierce arguments as to how the benefits of this status should be distributed.[40] To a large extent the "natural" American and the "machined" American are conflicting characters in American culture, one free and one dependent. Yet within the mythic network of America this has traditionally been resolved by the assumption that freedom can be bought (or inherited) and that the way to achieve freedom is through hard work. In this sense the "natural American" is held up to be a representative of the benefits of hard work, in terms of the idea that money equals freedom, or more accurately lack of dependency. Nature has also become a mythicised site for dropping out of society, for reflection and rejuvenation, as we can see in the transcendentalists, for instance, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, or in the sentimental realism of Upton Sinclair's socialist tract, *The Jungle*, where the protagonist, Jurgis Rudkus escapes from the brutality of Chicago for

---

[39] Leo Marx, p.4.

[40] See for instance Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America* for accounts of the struggle between capital and labor, and the role of unions, socialist and populist political parties in these struggles. For literary representations see Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (George Robertson, Melbourne: 1906), the Cowperwood novels, and Howells' *The Hazard of New Fortunes* [1890] (Signet, New York: 1965), particularly for perspectives of the middle class regarding a streetcar strike in New York, which is central to the plot of the novel.

the easier life of an itinerant agricultural labourer, and returns to the fray with his batteries recharged.[41] This latter use of nature, well within the conventions of the pastoral ideal, has been cemented as an aspect of the American mythic network with the communes of the 60s, books such as Kerouac's *On the Road* or *The Dharma Bums* or aspects of the New Age movement, just some of the multitude of points at which the myth has manifested itself in American culture.[42] Again this is evidence of my argument in Chapter One that modern myths tend to be polysemous in the way they enter into culture.

The importance of America's dependency upon technology for its realisation as a nation cannot be underestimated. What is also important to remember is that the already highly complex blend of natural philosophy and industrial technology becomes even more complicated if we start to consider the shifting meanings of some of the key terms of the original republican compact. Most obviously this concerns how Darwinian naturalist narratives of evolution made possible the recontextualisation of "nature" in discourses which participated in the ordering, justification and representation of patterns of social distribution in the modernisation of America. I am referring here particularly to Social Darwinism, whose main authorities were the Englishman, Herbert Spencer, and his American counterpart William G. Sumner, although it is important to argue that Social Darwinism was a discourse with a strong popular existence and subsequently an elastic range of applications, contextualisations, analogies and connections to a range of discourses across the social

[41] Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*, pp.253-65.
[42] Here see Leo Marx, "Pastoralism in America" in ed. M. Jehlen, *Ideology and Classical American Literature*, pp.36-69.

spectrum.[43] Narratives framed by Social Darwinism were able to configure a dynamic conception of nature which would create relays between the consumer capitalist economy and the epistemological claims of modern science. Despite the unpalatable ends to which the use of these narratives have been put, eugenics in particular, they nevertheless performed the mythic function of giving American society a sense of coherence by incorporating nature into the dynamics of progress. Furthermore, the plasticity of social evolutionary narratives meant they were able to adapt to contexts as they developed, and were thus particularly suited to the modern imperative of change as they were for driving the plots of naturalist novels. These are just some of the complex issues I will be exploring through the prisms of the mythic network and literature, and specifically Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*. However, it is necessary to emphasise the point that in dealing with these matters, the scale and skeins of the interrelationships between the contributory factors in these changes are so immense that it is difficult to do more than provide an approximate suggestion as to how America was developing in the form of the imagined community of the nation. This tends towards the acceptance of the position that histories and historical understanding are ultimately a mode of storytelling, and thus participants in a particular kind of myth or, as Gianni Vattimo argues, to accept that the context of contemporary criticism is one which inhabits a condition of weakened truth.[44]

---

[43] For the classic history of Social Darwinism in America see Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Beacon Press, Boston: 1955). See also Mike Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860-1945: Nature as Model and Nature as Threat* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 1997) and Robert Bannister, *Social Darwinism: Science and Myth in Anglo-American Social Thought* (Temple University Press, Philadelphia: 1979).
[44] Gianni Vattimo, "Myth and the Destiny of Secularization" pp. 360-2.

It is important also to note that while the scientific advances of the Enlightenment can be regarded as a genuine advance on the stock of human knowledge, this does not automatically translate to the assumption often made that either our economic system or our understanding of it are part of this. It would be more accurate to consider the emergence of the modern economic system as contiguous with the hard science of the Enlightenment project, and the forging of connections between them, such as the current hegemony of economic rationalism as a mode of social thought, as a province of mythic (though mostly materially realised) operations, whose function is partly to bring together forces which are not always directly causally related. The very idea of technology (applied science) with its myriad relays between science, progress and markets carries an implicit mythic potential; one that has been exercised over a spectrum of products from the railway and the novel to tartar-control toothpaste and digital television, and which mythically fuses the epistemological claims of science with the irrational desire based dynamics of modern consumer capitalism. Rather than replacing myth, part of the social role of technology in modern society has been to perform a mythic function.

When discussing the modern mythic network of America, it is further important to recognise that mythicity and the mechanics of modern materialism are in no way counterforces. Indeed with the increasing removal of God from the world, as in the abstraction of God as the author of the natural laws by which the world was ordered, the mythic impulse began to manifest itself in a range of alternative concepts. As Max Weber and Georges Bataille have argued, one of these concepts was the capitalist system. Following the work of Benedict Anderson I have discussed above how one of these was the nation. Yet another was the realist novel, whose omniscient,

omnipresent and mostly omnipotent narrators offered to the reader a secular substitute for God. Perhaps most crucially, the establishment of modernity saw a fusion of the mythic and the material through the investment of mythic significance in the products of the industrial capitalist process.[45] As Daniel Miller has argued, "our culture has become to an increasing degree a material culture based on an object form."[46] This has made it difficult for the mythical to be analytically disentangled in considerations of modern society, something which I suspect has led to the general preference for ideological models of social interpretation. It has always been the nature of myth that its meaning cannot be separated from the medium of its manifestation, whether it be a tribal tale or a 20th century item of consumption, whereas ideology has been accorded the status of a separate entity - it can be extracted from the world - partly, one suspects, out of its early status as a falsehood in the heritage of modern thought. In Marx for instance, ideology obscured the "real" basis of material relations. In contrast the mythic in primitive societies has been frequently considered as constitutive of material relations in societies. I am thinking here of the train of anthropological thinking which owns back to Marcel Mauss' classic exposition of the potlatch system, *The Gift*.[47] The distinction is one I would like to hold with the addition of the argument that modern western society is as mythically founded as the "traditional" societies it has been held to supersede. In this chapter then I am interested in how the mythic and the material are interrelated in the society that is constituted by the industrialisation of America during the Gilded Age.

---

[45] The early work of Jean Baudrillard is one work which investigates this. See particularly *A Critique Of the Political Economy of the Sign* [1972], trans. Charles Levin (Telos Press, St Louis Mo.: 1981).
[46] Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford: 1987) p.3.
[47] Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: the Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* [1925], trans. W.D. Halls (Routledge, London and New York: 1990). See also Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (Aldnic and Atherton, Chicago: 1972).

In looking at a modern mythic network we are forced to examine the complex interplay between material objects and the ways in which discourses of the material are constructed. The emergence of advertising as a serious player in the economic system during the Gilded Age is probably the most obvious example of the mythicisation of the material. A discourse of growing sophistication (in all senses of the word), advertising increasingly operated to further the fusion of the commodity with the sense of an individual's belonging to and their place in their immediate and broader communities.[48] Yet there are clearly other factors, less obvious perhaps but ultimately more important, to consider as an aspect of this nexus. Daniel Miller has argued, "material culture is one of the most resistant forms of cultural expression in terms of our ability to comprehend it."[49] It is important to emphasise as George Bataille (among others) has argued that economic systems in societies have typically been driven by the mythic networks which inform their patterns of distribution and modes of exchange.[50] Bataille's comparative general economy looks at the way mythic networks define a culture by their organisation of the consumption of productive surplus. Bataille reads the transition from feudalism to modernity through the perspective of Weber's association of the Protestant ethic with the spirit of capitalism, which constitutes a psychic movement on a cultural level of the spiritual into the material. While this is a crucial component in the development of modern mythic

---

[48] The study of the relationship of mythicisation of objects through advertising was pioneered by Roland Barthes. See *Mythologies*. Barthes saw advertising as the mythic discourse par excellence of capitalism. There seems no reason to dispute this insight. Where I disagree with Barthes, and I have approached this point already from a different perspective in both Chapters One and Two, is that he proceeds from this analysis to develop a critique of mythicity itself from an implicitly Marxist ideological perspective, which in its own peculiar mythos, throws up revolution as the condition for truth as opposed to myth.

[49] Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, p.3.

[50] See George Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, Vol.1 [1949], trans. Robert Hurley (Zone Books, New York: 1988). This is a brilliant theoretical and comparative account of this relationship between the mythic and the economic.

networks, this is not the only role the American mythic network has played in the formation of patterns of economic distribution. These patterns, for instance, are informed by the mythic value of equality, whether it be the goal of actual equality as in the case of progressive income tax regimes or of equality of opportunity as in the passing of anti-trust laws in America during the Gilded Age. The mythic values which reach back to the foundation have a shaping effect on the decisions America makes about what kind of society it wants to be, even if the consequences of these decisions are often different from their intended effects. Mythic values such as freedom or the valorisation of it remain significant in the mythic network of modern America.[51] As there are tensions between freedom and equality, this further suggests that the modern American mythic network and modern American society is in a natural state of tension, although it is also important to remember that it remains in motion, and is always dynamic as opposed to static with the relative degree of change being the operative variable.

One of the most salient observations Leo Marx makes in *The Machine in the Garden* concerns the effectiveness of technology as an indicator of the dynamics of human progress. In his thinking about the symbolic impact of technologies Marx shows the extent to which the material and the mythic are interfused in the modern American mythic network. Tracing his thought through the heritage of Henry Adams and John Stuart Mill, Marx argues that:

[51] The time it took for America to emerge into nationhood is evidenced by the fact that a national income tax was not introduced until 1913, even though taxation had been at the centre of the original arguments leading to the Revolutionary War.

> It is the obviousness and simplicity of the machine as a symbol of progress that accounts for its astonishing power. . .machine technology inculcates its message directly, imagistically, wordlessly. A locomotive is a perfect symbol because its meaning need not be attached to it by a poet; it is inherent in its physical attributes. To see a powerful efficient machine in the landscape is to know the superiority of the present to the past. . .During the nineteenth century, therefore, no one needs to spell out the idea of progress to Americans. They can see it, hear it, smell it, and, in a manner of speaking, feel it as the idea of history most nearly analogous with the rising tempo of life.[52]

This accentuates the need to be reminded that modern culture is a material culture and that much of its meaning and mythic operations are embedded in the objects it creates. Whether it be the railway or the kitchen wizz, technology has played a particularly important part in the mythology of modern life. As Marx argues, it is not just the use value of technologically realised objects that is important, but their symbolic influence, whether like the railroad they are standing for broad social discourses, or in the case of specific objects, the promise and social distinction of individual lives.

It is not enough however to consider only the macrocosmic function of this fusion of the mythic and material. Rather, it is something that has permeated the whole of the social system, manifesting itself at all points where goods and persons intersect, which in the modern world is nearly everywhere. This is one of the reasons why material culture has been so resistant to interpretation as a form of cultural discourse. In addition to the lingering heritage of Neo-platonism in the humanities, it has been until recently - with the increase in interdisciplinary research and the growth of Cultural Studies - difficult to force an understanding of materiality into the shapes which disciplinary inspection prefers. In a society such as America with a limited system of inherited prestige and lack of access to a unique discourse of the archaic,

[52] Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, pp.192-3.

objects and their consumption - as Thorstein Veblen was one of the first to realise with rubrics such as "conspicuous consumption" and "pecuniary emulation" - came to have a crucial role in the designation and display of social status.[53] As Marx predicted, the process of capitalism was one where the exchange value of objects extended increasingly further than their use value. Veblen realised much of this exchange value was derived from the ability of objects to confer relative status upon their owners. Compounded by the emergence of the urban system of social relations, the Gilded Age in America saw the emergence and consolidation of new modes of social distinction, based upon the individual's capacity to consume and the types of objects they consumed. Furthermore as later Marxist theorists such as Jean Baudrillard have argued, this movement from use to exchange value has instituted what Rachel Bowlby has described as "a language of money and commodities [that] has become an all-encompassing signifying system - the very texture of everyday forms of ideology."[54] For reasons I have argued in previous chapters, what Bowlby is articulating is more aptly conceptualised as a mythic rather than an ideological network. In a recent and cantankerously brilliant work, James Buchan has argued that money and credit took the place of God as the objects of the human need to have faith in the transition from mediaeval to modern society.[55] With this in mind and bearing also in mind the work of Weber and Tawney in explicating the Protestant logic of the spirit of capitalism, and again the comparative general economy of George Bataille and its analysis of the deployment of economic excess, it has become increasingly apparent that capitalism,

---

[53] Thorstein Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class* [1899] (Houghton Mifflin, Boston: 1973).
[54] Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola* (Methuen, New York: 1985) p.25. Bowlby's book is an excellent account of the relation between realism and consumer culture from a cross-cultural perspective. See also Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* for a theory of objects and their semiotic performance in the demarcation of social space.
[55] James Buchan, *Frozen Desire* (Picador, London, 1997).

if it is not actually a spiritual system, has at least adopted the form of a spiritual system in its fusion of the mythic and the material, and valorisation of the exchange value of the commodity. This fusion might be interpreted as a situation where spiritual energy has been transposed to material concerns, with the consequence that the two urges are no longer clearly delineated. As such the claims of modern thinkers that society is improving along a trajectory of growing rationality is shown to be false by the faith mechanisms of the economic system which drives the society, and the way this faith in exchange begins to manifest itself in every mode of human interaction. Whether this is an aspect of these thinkers' over-estimation of the human potential to be reasonable or an over-estimation of the importance of their own powers of reason in the scheme of things is a question that remains unresolved. As part of my exploration of this phenomenon I will now turn to an analysis of the role of literature in this most modern of situations.

3

The Novel in Relation to Gilded Age Social Transformations and the American Mythic Network

The American novel was both a technology for representing the changes that occurred during the Gilded Age and also a form whose shape was partly determined by these changes. In short this is a way of saying that its form and content were framing and also framed by the historical context of spectacular social change. The mutual shaping involved in emergent literary and broader cultural forms is one reason why novels have proved so valuable as cultural documents. The American novel - in particular its naturalist and realist strains - benefited greatly from the transformations on the social

landscape brought about by modernisation during the Gilded Age. Rachel Bowlby has argued, for instance, the novel as a nexus between industry and art, claiming:

> Of the main genres of literature, itself the most industrialized of the arts, the novel was by far the most significant in terms of sales and the most systematically organized production and distribution.[56]

Yet at the same time the American realist and naturalist novel was able to build a space for the expression of ambivalence and criticism of the social ramifications of this change. The polyvocal and polylogical capabilities of the novel form made it possible to simultaneously critique and champion changes in the structure of American society, albeit with a generally implicit hierarchy of preference concerning the perspective of characters, and almost always with the sanction of the objectivised narratorial perspective.[57] Nevertheless, the novel was an excellent form for containing the tensional dynamics I have identified in the previous chapters as characteristic of a modern mythic network. In this chapter I will be discussing a number of novelists and texts. I will be looking first at Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick*, because it is an excellent and obvious case of how American literature can be read through its function as an aspect of the American mythic network.[58] Alger's explicitly pedagogical texts, of which *Ragged Dick* was an early, energetic and best-selling example, led to his name becoming synonymous (if somewhat erroneously) with the rags to riches story that is the epitome of the American success myth. Furthermore, the explicit didactic intention of the text helps to provide a simple model of how novels may function in a modern

---

[56] Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking*, p.9.
[57] The term polylogical derives from Bakhtin's notion of the dialogical, extended beyond the dualistic or dialectical implications of the original term.
[58] Horatio Alger, jr, *Ragged Dick and Struggling Upward* [1868 in book, 1867 in serial], intro. Carl Bode (Penguin, 1985).

mythic network, and especially how they may attempt to bridge shifts in the network produced by historical change, which will help clarify the more complicated mythic positions in the discussion of subsequent texts. I will also be discussing two novels by William Dean Howells, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. I have chosen these novels because of their recognisably modern tone, even as they express serious ambivalence towards aspects of the modern American ethos, and for the fact that they are fine examples of early realist novels, showing great insight into the emerging and intricate lifestyles of the modern middle to upper classes.[59] I have chosen also to discuss Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, for good reason generally acknowledged as his masterpiece.[60] *Sister Carrie* provides an interesting counterpoint to Howells, and I will be looking at how the shift from realism to naturalism in literature mirrored the shift from providence to determinism in the American mythic network. Dreiser's novels are interesting because of their foundation in the narratives of social Darwinism, whose refiguration of nature was a crucial transformation in the composition of the American mythic network. I will be making reference also to other novels of the era such as Dreiser's Cowperwood trilogy and the evangelical socialist polemic of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle.*

I should also add that these books have been chosen because with the exception of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and *The Jungle*, set in Boston and Chicago respectively, they are all at least partially set in New York. An emphasis on New York is quite valid in a consideration of the Gilded Age as it is during this time that it consolidated its

---

[59] William Dean Howells, *The Rise Of Silas Lapham* [1885], intro. Kermit Vanderbilt (Penguin: 1983) and *The Hazard of New Fortunes* [1890] (Signet, New York: 1965).

[60] Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* [1900] (Penguin, New York: 1981). This text, commonly referred to as the Pennsylvania edition, is an unexpurgated version of the original text published in 1900.

position as America's most important port, a vital industrial centre and financial capital and emerged as America's first metropolis. As such New York is unparallelled as a site of importance in the mythic network of modern America, a destination in the dreams of immigrant and American alike, a centre for the dissemination of dreams (see, for instance, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* for the emergence of New York as the publishing capital of America), and a place equally capable of encompassing the particular modes of inhumanity and fear that were new to the modern urban world.[61] Due to these factors, New York became the central node of power in the American demographic landscape: the decisions made in New York, had a greater reach and effect than those made anywhere else in America.

In the next chapter I will be focussing on Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*, set in New York in the 1980s. I will be providing a reading of it which develops my argument in this chapter concerning the relationship between mythic networks, literature, consumerism and concentrations of financial power. By analysing aspects of the foundation of America as a republic, the transformations of the mythic network under the conditions of the Gilded Age and of the 1980s, I am setting up a comparative framework, best understood from the perspective that these eras correspond to, or are representative of, specific phases in American economic history, the pre-industrial, industrial and post-industrial. The foundational era and the aspirations of the Founding Fathers, with the pastoral imaginary of an agrarian, yeoman farmer based democracy, aspects of which I have discussed in the previous

[61] For the emerging and continuing primacy of New York in the network of American cities see Allan Pred, *Urban Growth and the Circulation of Information: The United States System of Cities 1790-1840* (Harvard UP, Cambridge Mass.: 1973).

chapter, can be considered as a predominantly pre-industrial, only partially modern phase of American culture as the description "modern" is not fully realised without industrialisation, although aspects of the modern, such as the Enlightenment, did precede the industrialisation of America (Europe too) and indeed established in complex and not always consistent ways the necessary preconditions for some of the processes which made industrialisation possible.[62] As the discussion of the previous chapter has shown, the values of revolutionary America were curiously liminal: post-reformation, post English Civil War, mercantile yet pre-industrial; poised, without clear foundations, between the pre-modern and the modern. Yet the republic which emerged out of these foundations was inevitably to be, as even Jefferson would somewhat wistfully admit, a modern nation made possible only by the material developments of the modern era. In looking at the 1980s there are judgements to be made as to the extent that the postmodern marks a rupture with the modern, and the ways this can be looked at from the perspective of literature and the mythic network. By offering this tripartite comparison I hope to make clear my central claim in this thesis that it is valid to consider modern societies and their cultural forms (in this case specifically literature) from a mythic perspective. As I have argued above, the mythic has for too long been associated in Western thought with the pre-modern and the archaic. Even if the nature of the mythic conditions out of which modern society constructs itself is radically different to more familiar notions, such as mythicity in the ancients or the tribe, a denial of the mythic is a Eurocentric blindness which prevents an effective and reflexive understanding of our culture. In this chapter, I will be

---

[62] J.G.A. Pocock, for instance, has argued with considerable validity that the America of the foundational era should be considered as early modern instead of modern. See J.G.A. Pocock, "States, Republics and Empires: The American Founding in Early Modern Perspective" in eds J.G.A. Pocock and T. Ball, *Conceptual Change and the Constitution* (University Press of Kansas, Lawrence: 1988).

looking at the consolidation of the modern American nation, the material and mythic conditions under which it was achieved and aspects of the novel's involvement in these events as part of bringing this claim to light.

The way in which literature engaged with the emergence of these phenomena casts an interesting light on both the modern American mythic network and on American literature itself. The significance of exchange value and its manifestation in the commingling of commodities and personal identities is something that was clearly realised in the literature of the Gilded Age. Undoubtedly a key factor in this was the novelty of the phenomenon and it comes as no surprise that the greatest awareness of this is in novels which deal with the explicitly modern terrain of the American city, whose serial anonymity meant that new ways of managing the distinction between persons had to be developed. In the next part of this argument I want to look at how the novel represented the mythic distributions of the emerging social order as a way of understanding the pervasiveness of the system and literature's role within it.

In looking at the novel from a mythological perspective it becomes apparent that a novel cannot be considered purely in terms of its political or class allegiance, although these play a vital role in literary practices and the interpretation of them. The problem with exclusively ideological criticism is that the conceptual heritage of ideology predisposes such approaches towards an exclusive concern with the politics of the text. While a critical emphasis on ideology can be justified as a reaction against the false literary autonomies and universalising consequences of the "New Criticism", there are significant misunderstandings of culture which are often generated by an over-emphasis on ideology in the engagement with literature. In this chapter I am

trying to displace the internal struggles of American Studies by aiming to institute a literary criticism which looks at American culture from what might be described as an implicated anthropological perspective. In doing so I will concentrate on how the novel has represented the mythicised patterns of material distribution which came into being with the modern world, and also how literature itself is implicated as a practice and a commodity in these material discourses. Before pursuing these lines of argument, I want to speculate briefly on how the 19th century American novel functioned mythically in the way it helped to bring the modern nation and the modern city into being, as a way of beginning to understand the importance of the novel's epistemological function in 19th century culture.

Benedict Anderson has observed that the emergence of the novel (along with the newspaper) "provided the technical means for 're-presenting' the kind of imagined community that is the nation."[63] Essentially Anderson is concerned here with a distinctly modern conception of time, which he describes, borrowing from Walter Benjamin, as:

> "homogeneous, empty time" in which simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfilment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar.[64]

Instead of a concept of time circumscribed by the predictive schema of the divine, modern time is a series of arbitrary measurements that are mechanically determined.

---

[63] Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, London, New York: 1993) p.25.
[64] *Imagined Communities*, p.24.

Through this there is the possibility to create a collective fiction, which facilitates through the establishment of secular patterns of temporal coincidence the particular sense of communion required by the imagined community of the nation.[65] It is a sense of time, argues Anderson, which "is based on a conception of meanwhile."[66] What we are talking about then is a sense of time in space. To borrow a term from Bakhtin, the novel's emergence provides a new type of *chronotype* which caters to the representation of the nation.[67] The novel's role in enabling this conception of time is relatively easy to see. The nature of its narrative form tends to present different people in different places at the same time. This can most obviously be seen perhaps in the puzzle structure of the crime novel, which moves towards the working out of a series of temporal coincidences and the revelation of the place of individuals at a particular time.[68] The open form of the novel's character selection and gaze suggests that the people whom it places in this contiguous relationship could be anybody, which enables the implicit construction of a general sense of contiguity. It is through these means that the novel is able to build imaginaries of the sort of shared identity that constitutes the common feeling of nationality. The novel deals primarily with a modern secular linear time which is measurable and contingent. Its fictions place people in the "real" world and bring meaning to the otherwise arbitrary and mutually anonymous fact of their co-terminous existence.[69] In doing so it manages to travel

---

[65] An interesting example of this is the standardisation of American time as railway time. See my discussion above.
[66] *Imagined Communities*, p.24.
[67] Bakthin, Mikhail, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* [1975], trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. Michael Holquist (University of Texas Press, Austin and London: 1981). See pp.84-5 for Bakhtin's outline of the chronotype as an analytical concept.
[68] Another excellent example which comes to mind is James Joyce's *Ulysses*. At a more general level there are events which mark the lives of generations; the classic baby boomer question, for instance, "Where were you when you heard Kennedy was assassinated?"
[69] The newspaper performs a similar function in a different form. A daily newspaper, for instance, reports the events of that day. In this sense simultaneity is graphically represented by the adjacent placement of reports within the timeframe of the news.

across the spectrum of society and fill in some of the gaps through the description of what the reader is otherwise unable to see as an aspect of his/her contiguous reality.

In terms of the nation, the novel is able to bridge the physical distance which is formed by the limitations of the individual's direct sensory perceptions and the experiential limits created by a variety of constraining factors which range from mortality through to the spatial constraints of work and family. The novel is able to provide an imaginary which overcomes these actual restrictions. While my argument has concentrated on how this facilitates the imagined community of the nation, it also applies to the way the novel works in terms of the phenomena of the modern city. In European history the emergence of the nation was linked to the centralisation of the state and the concomitant emergence of the metropolis based upon this concentration of power. Early nations such as France and Britain had in Paris and London dominant cities which had held that status for centuries. In America this history is somewhat different. Indeed the American experience has greater affinity with the German or Italian experience, where the nation was a self-conscious product of 19th century nationalism. But even in these countries there were in Berlin and Rome obvious pre-existing candidates for the status of primary city. In America, however, it was only with industrialisation that large cities came into existence, and it was during the Gilded Age that the population of America was speedily shifting from a rural to an urban predominance, though this did not fully occur until the 1930s. While the imaginary of small town America as the heart of American culture is a consistent attempt to circumvent this issue, the emerging significance of the novel in 19th century American culture was partly due to its capacity to imagine both the nation and the city. This capacity reflects a shift in the symbolic network from the order of the

Jeffersonian republic to the concentrations of capital which produced the American metropolis.

The consolidation of America as a nation was in this sense analogous with attempts to work out how to imagine the city. Philip Fisher has claimed that the 19th century city functions as a mediating term which is simultaneously a synecdoche for the nation and a metonymy for the individual. He argues that:

> Throughout the late 19th century the privileged setting of the city gained energy from this double role of synecdoche and metonymy. The London of Dickens, the Paris of Baudelaire, the St Petersburg of Dostoevsky, the Chicago of Dreiser - in every case the miniaturization of social and political fact is super-imposed upon the magnification of deeply interior psychological states. Both are made simultaneously concrete by the same urban details.[70]

Fisher's outline provides a clear indication of how the city might function in mythic terms. The tensional concentration of the individual and the national in the material details of the city is an example of the interpenetration of the mythic and the material in the modern world. The materiality of the city (and the novel of the city) is in this sense a mediating term between the individual and the nation. What is also interesting is the way Fisher sees this as energising the city as a topos. In my experience of New York, the city is marked precisely by its enormous energy. This is obviously a function of the concentration of capital, people and activity in the space of Manhattan, but following Fisher, I would argue also that it is an energy generated from the tension of the city's association on the one hand synecdochally with the nation and on the other metonymically with the individual.

---

[70] Philip Fisher, *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (Oxford UP: 1985) p.129.

In his analysis of the 19th century city, Fisher proceeds to argue that:

> Uniquely for America, these facts are those of incompleteness, anticipation, and what I will call "practice." By practice I mean the way in which what appear to be present actions are in fact only real when considered in relation to a future for which they are the preparation.[71]

What Fisher is talking about here is a sense of the American city as temporally incomplete in the way that the mythic network of America, due to its lack of a grounded history has always tended to predicate itself in terms of the future rather than the past. Yet there is a spatial aspect to this experience of urban incompleteness that is not unique to America, but complements the incompleteness Fisher discusses. As Hana Wirth-Nesher argues:

> Cities promise plenitude, but deliver inaccessibility. As a result the urbanite, for better or worse, is faced with a never-ending series of partial visibilities, of gaps - figures framed in the windows of highrises, crowds observed from those same windows, partly drawn blinds, taxis transporting strangers, noises from the other side of a wall, closed doors and vigilant doormen, streets on maps or around the bend but never traversed, hidden enclaves in adjacent neighbourhoods. Faced with these and unable or unwilling to ignore them, the city dweller inevitably reconstructs the inaccessible in his imagination. Because no urbanite is exempt from this partial exclusion and imaginative reconstruction, every urbanite is to some extent an outsider. . .The city dweller learns to contend with the sensation of partial exclusion, of being an outsider, by mental reconstruction of the areas to which he or she no longer has access, and also by inventing worlds to replace those that are inaccessible. The boundary between these two activities is occasionally as difficult to discern as a city's limits. And the reconstructions and inventions will depend entirely on the particular perspective of the urbanite, on the particular nature of his or her outsiderness. In other words, I am identifying the cityscape with what it conceals, by the gaps that face every city dweller. The metropolis is rendered legible, then, by multiple acts of the imagination; it is constantly invented and reinvented.[72]

---

[71] Fisher, *Hard Facts*, pp.129-30.
[72] Hana Wirth-Nesher, *City Codes: Reading the Modern Urban Novel* (Cambridge UP: 1996) p.9.

My point here is that the novel functions as a technology for the performance of these inventions and reconstructions. Furthermore it is a technology, which in the sense of Anderson makes these inventions and reconstructions communal. The city thus becomes, like the nation, an imagined community. While the spatiality of the city (as opposed to the nation) is highly compressed, this compression produces its own partialities. Lines of sight are obscured and many domains of urban activity are sealed off from the public gaze. The demographic concentration, as Georg Simmel was the first to note, also produces a certain wilful obviousness in the interaction of the city's inhabitants.[73] What the 19th century novel provides is firstly a technology of overview which succeeds the omniscient eye of God and antedates the overviews made available by the skyscraper, the aeroplane and aerial photography. Secondly, in its creation of narrative sequence it offers access to the connectional mechanics of the metropolis which is unavailable to the physically and psychologically truncated perspectives of the individual's urban experience. This facility of the novel to bring the city into being through its system of narrative connections applies to both the spatial and temporal incompleteness that have been noted as intrinsic aspects of the American urban experience. In short the novel is a powerful tool which enables immense and complex structures such as the nation or metropolis to make sense as entities in themselves. What it also crucially provides is a means of depicting and understanding the way the interrelationships of individuals are organised in these large-scale entities. In the novel nations and cities are not merely the settings for depictions from the tableaux of individual lives, but living entities in themselves.

---

[73] Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life" [1903], in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, ed. Kurt Wolff (Free Press, Glencoe Illinois: 1950).

4

The Tensional Mythic Network and Horatio Alger's Republican Virtue

One of the crucial facilities of the 19th century novel is its capacity through narrative sequencing to imagine the composition of large scale communities such as the nation and the city and the way the social space is distributed within them. Characters are frequently yoked together by the narratives of novels in a way which provokes their relative ordering according to a number of patterns of social status. In the European novel, the primary pattern is that of class. The novels of Zola or Dickens, for instance, provide an imaginary of the nation that is ordered primarily according to class. In America, however, where (as I have argued in Chapter Two) the social foundation is infused with the mythic values of equality and classlessness, the patterns of social distribution are somewhat different. Furthermore, the emergence of the 19th century metropolis with its concentrations of population, economic activity and capital created new patterns of social distribution and new systems of legibility for these distributions, which in turn affected the way communities were imagined.

A central way of reading social status was individual appearance. The two fundamental aspects to this mode of reading are natural looks and fashion. In the next sections of this chapter I want to explore this in relation to the work of Horatio Alger and Theodore Dreiser. It is important to note from the outset, however, that while the noting of appearance can also be identified in the literature of other cultures, there are several reasons why it is particularly pronounced in American culture. Most obvious is the foundation of classlessness as described above. This has produced a disposition

towards the natural in the American mythic network which strongly favours those blessed with physical beauty. Furthermore, this disposition emphasises the often tensional relationship between the "natural" virtue of physical appearance and the "natural" virtue derived from natural rights philosophy, of which the American trope of the confidence man is perhaps the sharpest example. This also proposes interesting questions concerning the relationship of external and internal character qualities in the acts of writing and reading, where visual representations of appearances in the construction of character's internal states are markedly different function from the way character is read in everyday life.

While the increasing importance of immediate appearance can be traced across 19th century western culture as a function of the constant anonymity which is itself a function of large city living, this process was more pronounced in America for a number of reasons. 19th century American cities lacked the historical foundations of older European cities. The rate of growth was furthermore exponential. Major cities such as Chicago literally appeared from nothing in the space of forty years. Furthermore the diverse ethnic composition of American cities meant that there was a lack of common heritage in the relationship between individuals which enhanced the difficulty of intuiting the thoughts of fellow citizens. As a consequence ethnic stereotyping became an issue in the internal imaginings of the national community, as opposed to a mode of increasing the internal clarity of communal identity through the strong external delineation of "the other." Finally, the extensive internal mobility of the American population, which remains a recognisable aspect of American society today, also contributed to the prevalence of anonymous encounters and interactions as a feature American life. All these factors enhanced the importance of external

appearance in the positioning of individuals in relation to each other and to notions of large modern communities as a whole. Put simply, the amplified frequency of the negotiation of strangers instituted patterns of behaviour which emphasised the importance of initial judgements in the conduct of American social life.

In Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick*, set in New York, the importance of appearance is a continual concern.[74] When Dick exchanges his bootblacking rags for one of his new friend Frank's old suits, the whole scheme of his interactions with his environment changes. On entering the hotel in his own clothes, Dick is stopped by a hotel servant and it takes the intercession of Mr Whitney before he is allowed to proceed. On the way back down with Dick now dressed up in Frank's suit, the boys meet "the same servant who had spoken to Dick a few minutes before, but there was no recognition."[75] The value of appearance is shown repeatedly in the novel. Attire is crucial to how you are recognised and by whom. Johnny Nolan also fails to recognise Dick because of his new threads, as does the man in the swindling shop. Mr Samuel Snap of Wall Street sees Dick as a financial prospect in Taylor's Saloon, and Dick amuses himself with wondering what Mr Snap might think when he sees him back in his rags, blacking boots. Finally a suit is definitely necessary if you want to shift from the blue to the white collar class, where the vital importance of attire as a mark of identity is shown by the terms themselves. The easy interchangeability of appearance as evidenced by Dick is both a product of and a metaphor for the way social mobility is valorised as the ideal pattern of social distribution in American society. It signifies

[74] Horatio Alger jr, *Ragged Dick and Struggling Upward* [1867 in serial, 1868 in book], Intro. Carl Bode (Penguin: 1985).
[75] *Ragged Dick*, p.19.

the lack of rigid class barriers and a more elastic method of negotiating the acknowledgement of social distinction. Anyone can adopt the appearance of a gentleman in Alger's America, which is another way of saying America is the place where any man with the right attitude can make it.[76]

In Alger's moral universe the significance of appearance in urban society does create dilemmas. Dick's blowup with Micky Maguire, for instance, is occasioned by his fancy attire and the "democratic" inclination of the latter towards violent levelling of his possible usurpers. As Alger explains to his reader:

> Dick's change of costume was liable to lead to one result of which he had not thought. His brother boot-blacks might think he had grown aristocratic and was putting on airs, - that he was getting above this business, and desirous to outshine his associates.

Of course, this introduces one of the central tensions in Alger's thinking, as the tale is actually very much about what Dick is doing to get above his station. Alger seems to be aware of this tension as some careful exegesis from the narrator follows:

> There was nothing of what boys call big feeling about him. He was a thorough democrat, using the word not politically, but in its proper sense, and was disposed to fraternize with all whom he styled "good fellows" without regard to their position.[77]

[76] Indeed it was often argued during the Gilded Age that initial poverty was an advantage in the seeking of success. See for instance Andrew Carnegie's influential essay, "The Advantages of Poverty" in *The Gospel of Wealth and Other Timely Essays* [1891] (Doubleday, Doran and Co., New York: 1933) pp.43-76.

[77] Alger, *Ragged Dick*, p.19.

In order to defuse the tension between notions of an egalitarian democracy and a meritocratic one, Alger is forced to resort to the bridging notion of the "good fellow", which straddles the tension between these democratic conditions. Through this concept of the good fellow Dick is able to "get above his business and outshine his associates" without being big-headed, presumably because he belongs to the subset of good fellows which runs across all levels of society.[78] In fact the characters in *Ragged Dick* can quite easily be divided into good fellows and bad fellows with perhaps the added qualification of characters such as Johnny Nolan, who are not bad, but lack energy and enterprise. This in turn presupposes a hierarchy of virtue that is separate to the hierarchy of success, and a tension between them that can only be resolved through narrative, and only remain convincing within a specific narrative resolution. This resolution can be characterised as mythic. The conflict of values remains suspended in general terms, but is resolved in this specific case in terms of the mechanics of the plot. As James Oliver Robertson has argued:

> Very often, the problem being solved by a myth is a contradiction or a paradox, something which is beyond the power of reason or rational logic to resolve. But the telling of the story, or the re-creation of a vivid and familiar image which is part of a myth, carries with it - for those who are accustomed to the myth, those who believe - a satisfying sense that the contradiction has been resolved, the elements of the paradox have been reconciled.[79]

[78] An interesting comparison here is the way Hurstwood refers to the notion of the "Good Fellow" in *Sister Carrie*. In organising for Carrie's play to be listed Hurstwood says "They're all good people. . . indicating thereby that merchants and well-positioned individuals belonged." (p.173) This could reflect the shift from the republican moralism of Alger to the materialism of Dreiser. What it does imply is an increasing correlation between money and goodness. Whereas in Alger money is, albeit unconvincingly, presented as incidental to the status of being a good fellow, in *Sister Carrie* money is perceived as the precondition for being a good fellow.

[79] James O. Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality* (Hill and Wang, New York, 1980), p.6.

This is precisely the sort of function that Alger's stories seem to perform in their attempts at maintaining against the odds an ideal world where society is arbitrated by the ethics of Republican virtue.

In her excellent discussion of Alger's fiction, Carol Nackenoff has observed how chance, virtue, and the market, and thus hierarchies of virtue and success, are brought together by the plot in a way that is accidental rather than explicitly causative.[80] I would argue this is precisely a mythic operation. The conjunction of these forces through narrative means Alger is able to posit an implicit network of causation which serves to validate the moral universe his texts are designed to exemplify. In *Ragged Dick*, for instance, Dick's success is ultimately contingent upon the unexpected reward he receives for saving the son of the merchant, Mr Rockwell. Although virtue is implicitly its own reward, Dick's heroic actions are also rewarded in terms of his life quest, to climb above his station. Interestingly he gains yet another suit, and a cash reward, but more importantly a position in Mr Rockwell's counting room at a wage beyond the going market rate for his level of entry into the workforce.

Part of the tension between virtue and success that forces the novel to plot elaborate flukes in order to bring them together has to do with the fact that Alger views virtue as a static or eternal verity of character whereas success by its very nature is contingent and dynamic. What the bridging notion of the good fellow refers to is the idea of natural virtue, or even a natural aristocracy of virtue, a borrowed classical notion which had been prevalent in American discourse since at least the foundational era.

---

[80] Carol Nackenoff, *The Fictional Republic: Horatio Alger and American Political Discourse* (Oxford University Press, New York: 1994). See Chapter 8, pp.133-161, particularly.

This idea also proposes problems for Alger's exploration of the role of appearance. There is a clear sense in Alger that although appearances are important they can also be deceiving. In *Struggling Upward*, for instance, the virtuous, naturally aristocratic, small town poor boy, Luke Larkin, is sent west on an errand by his mysterious benefactor. On the train, he meets the smartly dressed J. Madison Coleman who gets into Luke's confidence only for the purpose of swindling Luke of his possessions.[81] Coleman's appearance can be contrasted with that of Jim Travis, who tries to deprive Dick of his savings in a similar episode. In the case of Travis, however, the lowness of his character can be immediately read from his appearance. Explaining why both Dick and Fosdick eschew his amiable overtures, the narrator argues that "nature had not gifted him with many charms either of personal appearance or of manners."[82] There is a nexus here between Jim's fate as a consequence of his poor morality and Jim's fate as the natural outcome of his peculiarly ungifted nature. The reverse of this is Alger's initial description of Dick where he argues that:

> In spite of his dirt and rags there was something about Dick that was attractive. It was easy to see that if he had been clean and well-dressed he would have been decidedly good-looking. Some of his companions were sly and their faces inspired distrust; but Dick had a frank straight-forward manner that made him a favorite.[83]

Alger conflates the moral and aesthetic aspects of looking good. Appearance is a multi-levelled operation where clothing refers to the new world of social mobility, yet is still unable to disguise the natural attributes of physical features. In turn these

[81] Horatio Alger, *Struggling Upward*, intro. Carl Bode (Penguin, New York: 1985). See pp.226-42.
[82] *Ragged Dick*, p.104.
[83] *Ragged Dick*, p.4.

physical features are represented by Alger as the true guide to the moral character of an individual. While this equating of the physical with the moral has a long tradition and derives from medieval christian traditions of the legibility of good and evil, the importance of appearance in the modern American city as I have argued above foregrounds this as both a necessary consequence of and strategy for urban survival, and it is the possibilities and difficulties of reading character in this way which Alger in his pedagogical capacity is trying to explain to his reader. The conflation of the physical aesthetic with the moral quality of characters is a mythic operation and the skill Alger is trying to inculcate is the ability to distil essence from appearance with a virtue-seeking gaze.

While Alger's texts imply free choice by their existence - after all what is the point of didactic novels in a purely deterministic world - there is still a sense of determinism, of a fixed nature in the construction of personality, which harks back to Calvinism's election and forward to Dreiser's naturalism. Although suppressed by the constant assertion of the possibilities of social mobility - there are for instance constant references to the stories of men who have made it from the bottom to top of society - this hint of determinism emerges from time to time to put tension into the model of ethically founded meritocracy Alger is trying to inculcate into his readers. In turn the representation and display of this social mobility is rendered problematic in the plot by the difficulty of reconciling the importance of appearance with the possibility of its ability to shield a "bad" nature. This then speaks to the tension in the mythic network between democratic mobility and the ideal of a natural aristocracy, worlds where character is either developed by experience or innate. The problem of moral freedom is confounded by the way J. Madison Coleman is released from the constraints of his

social position merely by being able to appear as other to his nature. In a certain sense this is a freedom in itself, although in Alger's world, but not America, such freedoms are always circumscribed by an encounter with the law. What Alger argues is that there is a distinction between Dick's change of appearance and Coleman's which is defined along an axis of honest toil. Yet the reward for this toil is ultimately Dick's ability to make his climb in status permanent, while Coleman's remains fleeting and illusory. The paradox of course is that such a movement inevitably operates as a restraint against the unimpeded dynamics of the system of social mobility. The promise of permanence of social stature, and further the goal of generational continuity are emphatic brakes upon the freedom implied by social mobility, and reveal a central tension in the way the American mythic network relates to the function of social distribution.

From this series of shifting and problematic perspectives, I think we can begin to confirm the idea of the American mythic network as a set of complex tensional discourses, and that narratives of culture are both fuelled by these tensions and also often operate to give the appearance of their resolution. At first glance this version of the mythic network appears to accord with Marx's notion of ideology as that which culturally resolves social conflicts and contradictions without altering social contradiction materially. There are however some important differences. Most notable is the fact that Marx's model is inadequate in its separation of the material from the cultural. The implication of the mythic in the material and vice versa has been particularly evident in American culture, and it is ultimately a false dichotomy to separate these arenas in the construction of models of American society. Throughout this thesis I have provided examples of the way the mythic and the material interact in

the formation of social conditions and the distribution of the social space. The realm of literature is fertile with representations of the interpenetration of material and mythic modes, and as I argue below, literature itself as cultural capital and in its material manifestation as the book is also a site where the material and mythic meet. What is also apparent from the placement of Alger between Calvinism and naturalism is the way that mythic networks tend to processes of constant transformation rather than explicit revolution. Values in the network are transformed rather than discarded, and there is always the possibility for the re-emergence of an old idea in a new form which suits the changing context of specific historical moments in society. The mythic tends to be oriented towards transformative continuity, whereas the ideological, as I have argued in Chapter One, with its stricter delineation of the bounds of its discourse has tended in its recent critical context to be oriented towards rupture.

Alger's novels also show that literary texts bound in the conventions and formulae of genre fiction, which are comparatively devoid of the conscious manipulations of form which have conventionally marked out the turf of high literary endeavour, are nonetheless highly capable of, and one suspects actually bound to, complex representations of the mythic network in the performance of their plots. Alger's novels have been conventionally accorded the status of speaking for the interests of capitalism during the Gilded Age. Yet as any sensitive reading will show, this is clearly not the case. Instead Alger is engaged in the task of maintaining the notion of republican virtue in a world where the social sense of it in terms of the individual is rapidly being eradicated. Revisionist criticism by Carol Nackenoff and Gary Scharnhorst in particular has shown the extent to which Alger is defending the moral order of an earlier republic against the emergent amoral unchecked economic order of

America during the Gilded Age.[84] In this sense he belongs to the same camp, in terms of moral philosophy if not literary complexity, to moral realists such as Mark Twain and, most of all, W.D. Howells. Perhaps the most curious thing about Alger is that his subsequent mythologisation as a name synonymous with the rags to riches myth and Gilded Age capitalism is somewhat discordant with the mythic work of his didactic novels, which seem to be more about the conservation of a moral universe that was rapidly being lost to the world through the inculcation of its values in a younger generation. As John Cawelti has argued, "there is as much evidence that Alger was an important influence on future reformers as a popular model for incipient robber barons."[85] Alger shows his disapproval of some contemporary business practices in several asides in the course of *Ragged Dick*. Furthermore, the financial success of his protagonists is unashamedly moderate, and is not the final measure of either character or esteem. Indeed, it is significant that the peak of Alger's readership occurred during the progressive era of the early 20th century where government regulation with the support of the general public began to strip back the laissez-faire excesses of business and the enormous material distinction between the high and low in society that had happened during the Gilded Age, and where nostalgia for an idealised past of an even economic playing field was at a peak.[86] Again this stresses the tensional and transformative quality of the mythic network.

[84] See Gary Scharnhorst, *Horatio Alger Jr.* (Twayne Publishers, Boston: 1980) pp.117-39 for Alger's views on business. Also Nackenoff, *The Fictional Republic*, pp. 93-109.
[85] John Cawelti, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man: Changing Concepts of Success on America* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1965) p.117.
[86] See Scharnhorst, *Horatio Alger jr*, pp.140-2.

Carol Nackenoff in the conclusion to her excellent reading of Alger and his cultural significance remarks that:

> Alger's discourse is replete with tension between industrialization and community, between glitter and substance, between self-interested men and those who recognise duty, and between those who attempt to make something out of nothing and those who attempt to make something of real value. The spectrum of responses to disruption of lived experiences and understandings of the world - in these stories and in other narratives - blend reactionary and potentially progressive critiques.[87]

Here again we see how purely ideological readings of culture can be problematic. In Alger's stories, as in Howells', there is a sense of how a conservative position is sometimes the most effective position for mounting a critique against the revolutionary energy of big business and the corporation. My point here is that the ideological positions of reactionary and progressive are shown to be a false dichotomy, particularly if they are superimposed onto the orthodox stratification of the political spectrum into left and right. This has frequently been the case in the course of modernity. Most of the recent "revolutionary" economic changes in the developed world have come from the right. On the other hand the romantic movement throughout the 19th century and the resurgence of aspects of it in the 60s and in the environment movement today suggests the lasting power of conservative (as opposed to right-wing) discourse to resist and modify, if not overturn the status quo. In America particularly there has been recent interest (from politicians of both major persuasions) in the advocation of a communitarian movement by writers such as Robert Bellah and Alan Wolfe.[88] Again this sort of resistance against the

[87] Carol Nackenoff, *The Fictional Republic*, pp.261-2.
[88] See for instance Robert Bellah, *The Good Society* (New York: 1991), Amitai Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community: Rights, Responsibilities, and the Communitarian Agenda* (New York: 1993) and Alan Wolfe, *Whose Keeper?: Social Science and Moral Obligation* (Berkeley: 1989).

depersonalising consequences of modernity belongs to a tradition which can be traced back through Alger's writing to an earlier version of the American Republic. It is quite remarkable how the field of stories and ideals have survived far beyond the actual conditions of their possibility. Yet while the scale of modern America as much as anything has made this moral republicanism obsolete as a reality, it still remains as a vital checking mechanism in the mythic network of America, patrolling the dangers of over-fragmentation, and attempting to prevent the exploitation of citizen by citizen.

5

Dreiser, Social Distinction and the Modern American Mythic Network

While Alger's novels engage the American mythic network in an attempt to deploy Jeffersonian virtue in the moderation of unbridled capitalism, and thus provide their readership with a guide to the ethical negotiation of the capitalist world, the work of the naturalist writer, Theodore Dreiser, is indicative of a major transformation in the American mythic network. Whereas Alger negotiates the tensions between the emergent industrial economic order and values incorporated in the idea of natural rights, Dreiser's social vision points to a crucial shift in the conception of nature. In his appropriation of Social Darwinism as the organising principle of his plots, Dreiser represents what effectively is a shift in the American mythic network at its very foundation: the state of nature. Instead of nature constituting the grounds of limitation and individual restraint in the promise of a rational, democratic and egalitarian society, natural law under Social Darwinism points to the arch competitive mode of social distribution, survival of the fittest. This shift in the meaning of nature was

remarkably apposite for the demands of industrial capitalism and is also implicated in the generation of new connections in the American mythic network between nature, science, rationality, technology, progress and the distribution of the social space.

In Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* there is the sense that the individual life, whatever the state of its being lived, makes ultimate social sense as part of the Spencerian cosmology of evolutionary progress. In the guise of "survival of the fittest" this particular mythology was deployed to legitimise a variety of distasteful opinions and practices, including the subjection of the worker to the capitalist and the desirability of letting the poor starve in the cause of the species' gene pool.[89] Despite the complexity and often contradictory nature of arguments in the exegesis of Social Darwinism, something for which there is no time to deal with here, its incorporation into the mythic network of modern America has seen its determinist schema operate primarily as a vindication of the laissez-faire rights and strategies of big business. This is a starkly different perception of nature to the pastoral vision which drove the dream of a Jeffersonian republic. In many ways it is similar, at least in its reading of the individual, to the more pessimistic determinism of Calvinism with its millenialist tinges, and the early colonial dread of the wilderness, a fact which has been remarked upon by Henry Commager Steele.[90] Yet in keeping with the emphasis that modernity has of predicating the present upon the future, the naturalism proposed by Dreiser, following Spencer, is one that replaces the deterministic and pessimistic future of Calvinism with the more optimistic determinism of evolutionary progress in tandem with the

[89] Richard Hofstadter has argued, for instance, that one of the linchpins of Spencer's system was his belief that the pressure of subsistence was the cause of progress. See *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, pp. 38-9.
[90] Henry Steele Commager, *The American Mind* (Bantam Books, New York, 1970) pp.110-11.

Enlightenment's dream of reason. From the perspective of the American mythic network, in evolutionary narratives such as Spencer's Social Darwinism, what happens is a refiguring of the terms of the American foundation. The state of nature which informs the civility of Jeffersonian republicanism is replaced by a state of nature more akin to that first popularised by Thomas Hobbes. In this sense Social Darwinism does constitute a return to the wilderness, but a wilderness which can be figured as an element of the emerging urban domain in American life. What is new about this particular figuring is the way that it reads this wilderness back into the conditions according to which human society is conducted. Whereas Hobbes used his view of nature to justify strong government, in the Gilded Age it was the principles of competition and fragmentation which appealed to many of those engaged in the processes of making a dynamic modern society. The idea of the social contract was in this way partially, though not completely, elided. Nonetheless the advantages of these principles were framed in terms of human progress, whose ultimate goal, paradoxically, was the achievement of a harmonious and rational society.

In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser argues that:

> Our civilization is still in a middle stage - scarcely beast, in that it is no longer wholly guided by instinct; scarcely human, in that it is not yet wholly guided by reason. . .In this intermediate stage he ["man"] wavers - neither drawn in harmony by his instincts nor yet wisely putting himself into harmony by his own free will. He is even as a wisp in the wind, moved by every breath of passion, acting now by his will and now by his instincts, erring with one only to retrieve by the other, falling by one, only to rise by the other - a creature of incalculable variability. **We have the consolation of knowing that evolution is ever in action, that the ideal is a light that cannot fail.** [Dreiser's emphasis] He will not forever balance thus between good and evil. When this jangle of free will and instinct shall have been adjusted, when perfect understanding has given the former the power to replace the

> latter entirely, man will no longer vary. The needle of understanding will yet point steadfast and unwavering to the distant pole of truth.[91]

In his statement Dreiser has effectively fused reason with evolution and determinism. Whatever happens now, he seems to say, is all right because it is part of the evolutionary process; and while the situation is currently an unreasonable one, that is all right as well because ultimately mankind is moving from a state of instinctive bestiality to one of enlightened reason: "We have the consolation that evolution is ever in action and that the ideal is a light which cannot fail." In a curious way, we can see that this evolutionary ideal is a transposition into the mythic network of the Enlightenment's faith in reason of a dynamic society. Parallels can easily be found for instance with the teleology of Marx, and his assertion of capitalism as a necessary phase in the dialectical movement towards a perfect social equality. From a contemporary understanding of evolution, however, there is nothing to suggest that this becoming reasonable is the fate of mankind at all. The narrative of natural history that has been constructed out of a modern understanding of evolution shows that there is no particular logic to the development of lifeforms. Evolution consists of a series of successful accidents: it is, to use a uniquely American term, happenstance. Change is extremely complex, its causes unpredictable, the understanding of them contingent and approximate, as theories like chaos theory have shown. Furthermore, in contrast to the suppositions of Spencer (or Dreiser), it is the simpler organisms that are ultimately more enduring in the environment. Evolution is not necessarily comprised of the organisation of life into increasingly more complex forms.

---

[91] Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, p.73.

It is possible that a comet will hit the earth and wipe out the conditions under which humanity has prospered, and infinitely more likely one suspects that humanity will destroy itself at some stage through its avaricious consumption of the environment. Even more likely perhaps, according to current scientific fears, is that a virus will demolish the majority of human society. In purely human terms, theories of decline and fall, a sort of macrosocial version of the narrative Dreiser applies to Hurstwood in *Sister Carrie*, have been seriously underrated by modernity's obsession with progress. Although Social Darwinism is quite happy to transpose natural selection from biology to a rationale for capitalistic competition, Dreiser's version is still forced to adopt a different narrative for the individual and for society. As Louis Zanine has shown Dreiser was greatly disturbed by the power of Spencer's theory, and one suspects that an adherence to the light of the ideal may have been a desperate sort of faith.[92]

One of the reasons for the appeal of evolutionary narratives, whether in their biological or more specious social contexts, is their openness. By this I mean that evolutionary narratives are narratives which talk to the future, are in fact a crucial way in which modern society predicates the future, yet at the same time are sufficiently able to incorporate change, and thus to redefine their predictions of the future. In this capacity evolutionary thought is not dissimilar to notions of the will of God, or for that matter to Bakhtin's theory of why the novel is modernity's pre-eminent literary genre. Bakhtin's contention that "the generic skeleton of the novel is still far from having hardened, and we cannot foresee all its plastic possibilities" can be applied also to

[92] Louis Zanine, *Mechanism and Mysticism: The Influence of Science on the Thought and Work of Theodore Dreiser* (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia: 1993). See particularly Chapters One and Two.

narratives of progress and evolution as they were once applicable to a conception of the ineluctability of the mind of god.[93] Part of this similarity is the ability for these narratives and forms to bring the disparate together - something which has a fundamentally mythic function - although it is a paradoxical modern ability to link ideas whose function is as much to separate as to connect. What is also important is that in their "plasticity" these forms are amenable to the rapidly changing world in which they have to operate. This is a perspective Philip Fisher has identified in terms of the American city: "the way in which what appear to be present actions are in fact only real when considered in relation to a future for which they are the preparation."[94] The function of plastic forms is to prepare the present for the form of the future. In this sense the present remains partial and inadequate, but justified in this inadequacy by the promises of the future. Change is needed to legitimate these narratives' perspectives on the present, and in the Gilded Age change was unusually abundant.

The strength of the evolutionary narrative is also contingent upon its ability to perform a quasi-religious function. It has often been a mistake in thinking about modernity to assume that God just died and science took over, a story which has been spread perhaps by the quest of human sciences to prove themselves as that. However, the loss of God was a psychological shock on a level which we, never really having had God to that same all-pervasive extent, can only faintly imagine. A mythic approach to the modern suggests that God was not lost, but fragmented and recontextualised. The full loss of God would simply not have been possible, as even without God the yearning

[93] Mikhail Bakhtin, "The Epic and the Novel" in *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist (University of Texas Press, Austin, 1981) p.3.
[94] Fisher, *Hard Facts*, pp.129-30. See my above discussion of Fisher's arguments specifically regarding the city and the nation.

narratives of progress and evolution as they were once applicable to a conception of the ineluctability of the mind of god.[93] Part of this similarity is the ability for these narratives and forms to bring the disparate together - something which has a fundamentally mythic function - although it is a paradoxical modern ability to link ideas whose function is as much to separate as to connect. What is also important is that in their "plasticity" these forms are amenable to the rapidly changing world in which they have to operate. This is a perspective Philip Fisher has identified in terms of the American city: "the way in which what appear to be present actions are in fact only real when considered in relation to a future for which they are the preparation."[94] The function of plastic forms is to prepare the present for the form of the future. In this sense the present remains partial and inadequate, but justified in this inadequacy by the promises of the future. Change is needed to legitimate these narratives' perspectives on the present, and in the Gilded Age change was unusually abundant.

The strength of the evolutionary narrative is also contingent upon its ability to perform a quasi-religious function. It has often been a mistake in thinking about modernity to assume that God just died and science took over, a story which has been spread perhaps by the quest of human sciences to prove themselves as that. However, the loss of God was a psychological shock on a level which we, never really having had God to that same all-pervasive extent, can only faintly imagine. A mythic approach to the modern suggests that God was not lost, but fragmented and recontextualised. The full loss of God would simply not have been possible, as even without God the yearning

---

[93] Mikhail Bakhtin, "The Epic and the Novel" in *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist (University of Texas Press, Austin, 1981) p.3.
[94] Fisher, *Hard Facts*, pp.129-30. See my above discussion of Fisher's arguments specifically regarding the city and the nation.

for God remains. Dreiser's desperate faith in reason, the utopias and dystopias of the 19th century's speculative thinkers are after all refigurings of the religious narratives of Christian civilization. In this way God, or the set of mythic narratives which carried the conception of "him", have merely been transformed into narratives which match the demands and contingencies of modernity and its peculiar emphases, both mythic and material, upon the future tense, in precisely the way Levi-Strauss imagined the operation of a mythic network. The novel is an adept form at the rendition of these God substitutions, whether it be evolution, technological progress, corporations or the nation, partially one suspects because the novel is itself a type of God substitution, which in its polylogical nature allows the presence of other God substitutions too. In this sense modernity has proved to be polytheistic.

In the following pages I will be looking at how Theodore Dreiser's deployment of the evolutionary narratives of Spencerian Social Darwinism as the organisational principle of his novels - and *Sister Carrie* in particular - can be read as emblematic of shifts in the American mythic network between notions of republican virtue and the competitive capitalist ideal. It should be stressed that I do not propose an exhaustive critical reading of the text, rather a use of the novel to illustrate aspects of literature's operations in the broader cultural complex I have termed the modern American mythic network. In *Sister Carrie* the plot is organised about the rise of Carrie from a working class small town girl with no prospects, through various echelons of society and men, to her final position as a Broadway star. It is a process that consists of her naively mercenary building of associations with men, Drouet, Hurstwood and Ames (Mrs Vance being an exception), who are stationed above her in life. As she exhausts the potential of their social status she drops them, though it should be added that the novel

does not pass moral judgement on this practice. Carrie's rise is the archetypal story of the social climber. Older notions of republican virtue of self-restraint are obviated in favour of the potentially endless series of middle-class aspiration which is defined by the attainment of levels of social distinction and the satiation of consumption desires only for others to take their place. Counterpoised against Carrie's rise is the fall of Hurstwood, manager of a club in Chicago when he and Carrie start having an affair. Hurstwood is some years older than Carrie and his fate, especially after they leave Chicago, following Hurstwood's theft of the contents of his employer's safe, is marked by Dreiser as an inevitable decline, partly out of the natural fact of his age, but also because of his isolation from the social milieu which was the source of his repute and standing in the Chicago community. Dreiser's novel is particularly interesting because it shows how an organisational principle and major mythic narrative such as Social Darwinism is well and truly enmeshed in the web of other mythic discourses which framed the conditions of success in late 19th century America.

Dreiser's appropriation of Social Darwinism to propel the plot structure of *Sister Carrie* shows us how the mythic operations of modern society have fused together discourses and practices whose proximity is not necessarily causally direct. In this case I am referring to the way that the mythicised system of capitalist distribution with its commodified series of social distinctions has been conflated with the Enlightenment's dream of reason and the idea of nationhood to form the basis of the modern American mythic network. Although the energy of postmodern capitalism has tended to operate against the sanctity of the imagined community of the nation, in its early forms economic achievement, particularly in America, was a powerful force in engendering nationalist pride, as could be seen in the political rhetoric of such famous

declarations as Calvin Coolidge's "the business of America is business." Modernity is marked by the legitimising power of science to confer a truth claim. In Dreiser's schema this power is arrogated by the theory of Social Darwinism, in the legitimation of materialist inequality and its patterns of distribution as a "natural" fact of social organisation. I have briefly shown above how Social Darwinism is unrelated to anything that might be called the truth. Clearly its tenets and predictions are illogical despite the pseudo-scientific language in which they are couched. Yet this is not to say that social Darwinism has not been at times, and is still in certain contexts, powerfully convincing. Partially this has been because it is a mythic discourse, firstly in its own right, but secondly in the way that it provides a bridge or, in the terminology of Mark Seltzer, a relay between the scientific and the capitalistic. Indeed it is one of many relays between these two forms: technology or applied science is one, as is the pseudo-science of economics, and of course there is money. Yet within this modern American mythic network, although science and capitalism have been normalised as complementary discourses, in many senses they are not, and their relay discourses are ultimately fraught with the tensions and contradiction this association has brought.[95] In *Sister Carrie* this appears in the enigma of Bob Ames, a philosophical site in the novel that makes impossible a complete interpretation of the text, yet one which reveals a philosophic yearning on the part of the author which matches the endlessness of the material yearnings of Carrie.

Rachel Bowlby has orientated her discussion of *Sister Carrie* around the claim that:

[95] For an enjoyable denunciation of the scientific pretensions of economics see James Buchan, *Frozen Desire*, particularly pp.175-83.

> The limits of an older economy of scarcity and moral restraint have given way to the impersonality and boundless scale of monopoly capitalism, where responsibility is superseded by desire. This can be related to the change in orientation from production to consumption, as an ethics of work; individual enterprise gives way to the free-floating possibilities of a commodified world.[96]

As I have argued, these well-established transitions between phases of American capitalism have their origins in the Gilded Age. For Bowlby and many other critics these transitions are also reflected in the shift from the older style realism exemplified by Howells, with its continuing fidelity to notions of a moral order, to the supposedly harder edged naturalism of Norris, Crane and Dreiser. Although it pays to be somewhat sceptical about the suddenness of the generationalism implicit in this literary shift, the argument has been incorporated into the dominant narratives of American literary history, even if there is at least as much soft thinking in Dreiser's adherence to the schemas of Herbert Spencer's Social Darwinism as there is in Howells' moral realism. In retrospect Howells' writing seems to be more resistant than Dreiser's to the totality of the capitalist spiritual system. As I have argued in the case of Alger this shows that a division between conservative and progressive is ultimately an unreasonable gauge in the valuation of the attitude of American authors towards modernity in general and, more specifically, towards capitalism and industrialisation. Furthermore, the kind of mythic approach I am taking to the literary representation and production of culture will tend to produce a perspective that sees these apparent modes in terms of refiguring attitudes rather than as sudden shifts and suppression of prior meanings, as has been popularised by Harold Bloom's highly dialectical theory of the strong poet, for instance.[97] My argument here is that it is just as important to

---

[96] Bowlby, *Just Looking,* p.61.

[97] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* [1973], 2nd edition (Oxford University Press, New York: 1997).

consider continuities between these authors as it is to emphasise the differences in their attitude towards broader social transformations. It is an argument that the perspective of the mythic network tends to reinforce.

The validity of this position can be shown through a consideration of Bob Ames, who has posed difficulty for even the most percipient readers of *Sister Carrie*. Both Bowlby and Walter Benn Michaels have found Bob Ames so inconvenient to their systems of interpretation that he has to be excised. Bowlby has argued, for instance, that "the solid literary values represented by the mid-westerner [Ames] are simply an anachronism."[98] To a large extent in agreement, Michaels has argued that Ames represents the world of self-sufficiency, the old capitalism as opposed to the new capitalism of the consumer dependent upon desire, possession and display of commodities for their sense of identity. It is a contrast that he also applies with some accuracy to the literary distinction between the realism of Howells and Dreiser.[99] Yet in turning Ames into a "literary anachronism" - and it should be noted that Michaels is more complimentary about Howellsian moral realism than Bowlby - what neither realises is that Ames also functions as the embodiment of the reasonable man who occupies the end of Herbert Spencer's evolutionary narrative which has been appropriated by Dreiser as the structural principle for the plot of *Sister Carrie*. Ames is figured in *Sister Carrie* as a character who is "wholly guided by reason."[100] While he may resemble the virtues advocated by the old order, he is also representative of a new order at the endpoint of the eventual evolution of society into the wholly

---

[98] Bowlby, *Just Looking*, p.61.
[99] Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (University of California Press: 1987) pp.35-41.
[100] Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, p.173.

reasonable republic. This is evidenced in the novel by the fact that he comes last in the sequence of Carrie's desires. In Carrie's second dinner with Ames he argues against the possibility of achieving happiness via pecuniary emulation, saying to Carrie, "Your happiness is within yourself wholly if you will only believe it."[101] Here Ames is attempting to subvert the idea that happiness can be externally referenced through the visible power to consume. Upon his advice as to her acting career, Carrie:

> saw how careful were his words. He was not talking to hear himself talk. This was *thought*, straight from that clean, white brow. She could have kissed his hands in thankfulness.[102]

Ames is directly represented here as "thought" itself. Impervious to fashion, Ames constitutes the light of reason which Dreiser, following Spencer, anticipates as the salvation of the human race. Taking a fictional license Dreiser places Ames, the end-product of human evolution, in the here and now. It is interesting that this figure should bear a strong, but by no means complete, resemblance to the moral viewpoint of Howellsian realism. Ames is different to the extent that he is a scientist and not a capitalist, like Silas Lapham, for instance, even though he is imbued with the aura of self-sufficiency so greatly valued since the early republic, and the resistance to desire that is so much a part of the Weberian puritan-capitalist personality. It is precisely these qualities that Alger is defending and Howells is identifying as being at risk under the innovations of the Gilded Age, a tension which Dreiser solves first by projecting them into the future along the trajectory of Spencer's social evolution, and then reinserting by sleight of hand, compression of evolutionary projections and

---

[101] Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, p.482.
[102] Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, p.484.

fictional license into his plot. It is as if this model of character is the only solution going round, no matter under what guise it appears. From this it becomes apparent how the shift between republican virtue models of society and Social Darwinism are marked not just by rupture, but by their refiguring of common archetypes or themes, which is precisely the operative nature of mythic networks. The transition from Alger's or Howells' notion of republican virtue to Dreiser's rational man at the culmination of an evolutionary process, is a temporal narrative re-organisation of common elements, which hark back to Jeffersonian values, but in Dreiser's case the acceptance of the impossibility of these conditions in the present means they are preserved as a promise in the future.

Bowlby's interpretation of socio-economic transitions during the Gilded Age, although considerable, does not go far enough towards developing the nexus between individual desire and the meta-narratives which have driven modern American culture. I have already discussed Philip Fisher's contention that the 19th century American city mediates between the individual and the nation. In the case of Ames and indeed Carrie, we also get the sense of how there is a mediation taking place in the way that individual characters come to embody social trajectories and philosophical positions. In *Hard Facts*, Philip Fisher has argued that:

> What Dreiser calls yearning, and what we can see saturating his novels in the variety of forms of dreaming, acting, lying, and practising is thus a form of politics in [Hannah] Arendt's sense of the word. Politics, in this very broad meaning of the sketching of the future along with the commitment to that sketch to an extent that implies that one has already accomplished a mental departure from the present, is

> the quintessential personal and public activity of the economic world that Dreiser describes as the heart of America.[103]

What is particularly attractive about Fisher's configuration is that it includes this argument, but it also shows how the personal projections of Carrie's desire for commodities are linked not just to economic-based social forms, but to the broader myths of social desires that are predicated upon the future as well: the macromyth of progress itself, the yearning for a better world as well as the constantly expanding, ever revolutionary logic of capitalism itself. Furthermore, this broad sense of a politics is also appropriate to the understanding of the role that money, the actual commodity of exchange value, has played in the development of this society, and has continued to play, as we shall see in the ensuing discussions of the 1980s. As the economist J.M. Keynes remarked, "The importance of money essentially flows from it being a link between the present and the future."[104] In all these cases the instability, or unpleasantness of the present is vindicated or at least mitigated by the material promise of the future, an ideal which pertains to Social Darwinism, the politics of economic progress, the dynamics of capitalism and the modality of Carrie's fantastic yearnings after commodities alike. Yet this is not a scenario which pertains merely to the economic. As Benedict Anderson has argued, and I have discussed this in previous chapters, this is also indicative of the development and transferral of individual faith from religion to the modern nation. If we stop to briefly consider also the Hegelian conception of history, then it quickly becomes apparent how central this relationship

---

[103] Philip Fisher, *Hard Facts*, p.130. The idea of politics he borrows from Arendt appears in her essay "Truth and Politics" and concerns the question whether politics, because it is intrinsically oriented towards the future, is not naturally antipathetic to the truth, which in her view is concerned with the features of the actual present.

[104] J.M. Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (Macmillan, London: 1936) p.293.

of present to future is as an organising principle of the modern experience. I will be developing this argument further, but for now I wish to continue to trace its manifestation in *Sister Carrie*.

Carrie's ambition for the social distinction measured by the ownership of visible commodities, particularly luxury and fashionable commodities - in other words her drive towards pecuniary emulation and its effect of conspicuous consumption - is the fuel that drives this new economic system. James Buchan has argued that as a legacy of New England Puritanism:

> American bourgeois life consists of a series of circularities, which deliver no public satisfaction. Work is for money, money is for display, display is for work. Life is for work, work is for emulation, emulation is for health, health is for life.[105]

The first of these loops encapsulates precisely the dynamics of Carrie's consumer-capitalist existence. It is a circularity that perpetuates itself in Carrie's case through exposure to spheres of increasing consumption capacity. It is difficult to judge from the text the extent to which her upward spiral along this dynamic is one of the deliberate pursuit of happiness, and to what extent happiness is a result of it. Carrie's passage is at one level an obvious success story; as Rachel Bowlby has remarked, a deliberate reversal of the narrative trajectory of the fallen woman.[106] Yet there does not seem to be any individual notion of a plan involved. Carrie's ascent is aleatory. Her success is presented primarily as the product of her reaction and adaptation to a variety of environments and is in this sense compatible with Darwinistic doctrine. The

[105] James Buchan, *Frozen Desire*, p.236.
[106] Bowlby, *Just Looking*, p.52.

two major moves she voluntarily makes in the novel, to leave her family for Drouet, which is something of a set-up by Drouet anyway, and to leave Hurstwood are motivated purely by her embarrassment at her inferiority in the stakes of what Thorstein Veblen termed "pecuniary emulation."

I have discussed how Horatio Alger pays particular attention to the importance of appearance in *Ragged Dick.* Like Alger, Dreiser is acutely aware of the importance of codes of appearance and fashion in the distribution of social space and status in the nascent modern American society. Whereas Alger takes a didactic position in his novels that attempts to prescribe a way of reading appearance that is congruent with his republican notions of virtue, Dreiser interprets appearance through his principal vision of a society structured by Social Darwinism. In *Sister Carrie* the clothes people wear are a vital guide to judgement and interpersonal decision making, which for Carrie is crucial in working out how to survive and prosper in the city. The importance of fashion in the individual's negotiation of society is evident from the first few pages. Commenting upon the first meeting between Carrie and Drouet on the train which is taking Carrie out of her childhood and into the big city for the first time, Dreiser's narrator opines that:

> Those who have ever delved into the depths of a woman's conscience must, at some time or other, have come across that mystery of mysteries - the moral significance to her, of clothes. A woman should some day write the complete philosophy of that subject. No matter how young she is, it is one of the things she wholly comprehends. There is an indescribably faint line in the matter of man's apparel which somehow divides for her those who are worth glancing at and those who are not. Once an individual has passed this faint line on the way downward he will get no glance from her. There is another line at which the dress of a man will cause her to study her own. This line the individual at her elbow now marked for Carrie. She became conscious of an inequality. Her own plain blue dress with its black cotton

> tape trimmings realized itself to her imagination as shabby. She felt the worn state of her shoes.[107]

This passage, one of many which concern the relativity of dress standards in the novel, is a fine example of how the material and the mythic are merged in the commodity, the extent to which social identity is invested in the mythicised network of worn possessions and the importance, to the extent of it being instinctive and thus naturalised, of being able to read these signs. Indeed the whole developmental plot of the novel is manifested in the way Carrie reads these signs and reacts. Her perceived inferiority to Drouet features in her rejection of both her life before Chicago and the honest, parsimonious drudgery of life with her sister and her husband, Hanson. Furthermore it is Drouet's recognition of her desire for finery that provides him with the means of her seduction. Essentially it is seduction by the provision of the wherewithal for the purchase of fashionable items and the consumption of food in visibly fashionable places.

As the novel proceeds, it is appearance which is decisive in Carrie's preference for Hurstwood over Drouet. On the soft calf hide of Hurstwood's boots as opposed to Drouet's patent leathers, "Carrie could not help feeling that there was a distinction in favor of the soft leather, where all else was so rich."[108] The word "distinction" is shorthand for "social distinction," and is crucial because this is what struggle in the classless society, once subsistence has been reached, is all about. As Thorstein Veblen writes:

---

[107] *Sister Carrie*, p.7.
[108] *Sister Carrie*, p.94.

> Under modern conditions the struggle for existence has, in a very appreciable degree, been transformed into a struggle to keep up appearance. . .To sustain one's dignity - and to sustain one's self-respect under the eyes of people who are not socially one's immediate neighbours, it is necessary to display the token of economic worth which practically coincides. . .with economic success.[109]

Sister Carrie repeatedly shows the poignancy of Veblen's remarks. Carrie's rise in life is one that is motivated solely by the quest to climb the abstracted and relativised standard of displayed economic prestige. On the other hand, the fate of Hurstwood shows how the loss of self-respect and a concomitantly declining interest in personal appearance can contribute to the loss of the desire to survive. Indeed in the novel Hurstwood's declining appearance is metonymic for his declining power to be.

What Dreiser gives us is similar to what Alger gives us with the exception that the power of appearance has been unleashed from its tensional checking relationship with the discourse of innate republican virtue.

When Carrie comes with Hurstwood to New York, her growing awareness of their financial difficulty is exacerbated by Carrie's friendship with Mrs Vance, which stirs her material ambition by revealing the world of Broadway where "women were spending money like water" in contrast to the restricted consumption patterns of her own existence.[110] Carrie's friendship with the Vances sets in train the events which lead to her escape from a dependence upon Hurstwood's economic state, although as Rachel Bowlby has commented acutely, there is a limited reciprocity to her preparedness to carry Hurstwood with her.[111] This friendship culminates in a night on

---

[109] Thorstein Veblen, cited (unsourced) in C. Wright Mills *White Collar*, pp.255-6.
[110] *Sister Carrie*, p.326.
[111] Bowlby, *Just Looking*, p.60.

Broadway with Carrie, the Vances and Bob Ames. Carrie's perception of her inadequate position in life from her previous daytime sorties with Mrs Vance is amplified in an evening that includes a pre-theatre dinner of conspicuous and excess consumption at Sherry's, a restaurant apparently giving the fabled Delmonico's a run for the patronage of "society".[112] The novel shows that once you are on the uphill climb of fashion or more accurately, distinction, and your material desires have succeeded in overcoming the moral constraints of a prosaic provincial upbringing - Carrie's battle with her conscience is presented as a bit of a fizzer - it is difficult to know where to stop. There is always someone who seems to have more than you of what you want.

The simile of spending money like water is interesting in itself, suggesting the way money has been naturalised as the essential lubricant of the urban culture, and carrying with it also the assumption of plenitude which earlier physical discourses of America as privileged garden and the frontier myth had fostered as a part of the "American nature." This image tends to naturalise excess material consumption as an a priori facet of modern American existence, while preserving the sense of fascination Carrie has as an initiate into a social world where lavish consumption is the norm. James Buchan has observed how money in modernity came to be "identified with freedom: freedom from want and from a fixed pattern of society." Buchan's argument foregrounds the fact the bourgeois revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were concomitant with the rise of economic forms such as banks, central

---

[112] Here Dreiser explicitly discusses the enormous servings in American restaurants, which anyone who has ever dined in America will recognise as a mark of conspicuous consumption that is still, with the exception perhaps of the Perrier and salad smart set (an excessive behaviour in its conspicuous denial), a nationwide phenomenon.

banks, structured credit and industrial capitalism. Money was instrumental in dissolving the bonds of community, whether they be old style feudal communities or Jeffersonian ideals of agrarian and mercantile republics. Instead money helped institute modern myths such as freedom and mobility as the ordering principles of the social space. The role of money as the abstract value at the centre of modern economic systems enabled a reweaving of the social fabric, particularly through its ability to shift social value from absolute forms such as the possession of territory into the relative system of exchange value in which it functioned as the vital connecting tissue.[113] Yet the freedom money offers has no direct correlation with actual equality, either of distribution or even of opportunity. In a system with money as the spiritual linchpin, equality is irrelevant, if not outright antithetical to the free market system. In terms of a consumption based capitalism, the wants are deliberately illimitable. The ability to acquire status through consumption does not require the deployment of Alger's republican virtues. Increasingly freedom becomes contingent upon the capacity to consume. To be rich is to be free is a nexus (and mythic formula) that assumes increasing importance in American society, directly countermanding the republican virtues which were designed to operate as constraints upon such modes of prestige.

Buchan argues that:

> Money's neutrality, its indifference to the character and station of its temporary possessor, and the ease with which it is administered, present the possibility of freedom even to the imagination of the destitute. Naturally, for those wishes to have any conviction, somebody must be seen to be gratifying them; and societies tolerated or even worshipped the new rich in their exemplary function. The rich are

---

[113] While money has been around for thousands of years, in premodern Western societies, factors such as feudal obligation, barter, and the equation of wealth with land tended to mitigate the circulation and influence of money in a way which no longer happens in the modern world.

> loved for making actual the wishes of everybody; while the poor, conversely are despised as lackeys of unattainable desire.[114]

Sister Carrie repeatedly evidences this status system in operation. It is a system which functions both individualistically and geographically in terms of the plot. The plot reaches its apex in New York, whose extremes of wealth and subsequent spread of social distinction exceed Chicago's in the same way that those of Chicago exceed those of Columbia City. For Carrie her climb reaches its apotheosis when she becomes a "star", a figure whose role is precisely, in Buchan's words, "making actual the wishes of everybody." Dreiser's fascination with these phenomena can also be adduced from his explorations of the business tycoon in the Frank Cowperwood trilogy.

In *Sister Carrie*, Carrie's climb is delineated through a progressive series of comparisons. In Chicago, we are asked to compare the lifestyle of Carrie's sister Minnie and her husband Hanson with that of Drouet, and then of the standing of Drouet in relation to Hurstwood. The social space in Chicago seems to be compressed compared to the wide differential of New York, where the ultimate comparison is in the shift of narratorial focus between Carrie, the theatre star, and Hurstwood, the deadbeat, at the novel's end. The expansion of the social space, or gap between the rich and poor, is, however, more a function of plot than an attempt to represent the historical verities of an urbanography of the Gilded Age. Readers of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* will undoubtedly have a very different notion of the bottom end possibilities of life in late 19th century Chicago, for instance, as indeed would any student of American industrialisation. The shift, then, is perceived by Dreiser as

---

[114] James Buchan, *Frozen Desire*, p.152.

occurring at the upper end of the economic spectrum through new modes and degrees of social distinction and the distribution of wealth.

Dreiser presents a series of positions which point to stages in a transition between horizontal and vertical mobility. In the mythic iconography of America this distinction reached a turning point late in the Gilded Age with the advent of the skyscraper, and the beginnings of the Manhattan skyline at roughly the same time as Frederick Jackson Turner was announcing the closing of the frontier. At one end of the scale is the largely equalitarian Jeffersonian ideal of the yeoman farmer republic which is based on a horizontal mobility that is derived from territorial plenitude. At the other end of the scale there is New York, and especially Manhattan, in the process of becoming a metropolis. Here the mobility, like the expansion of territory, is almost entirely vertical, based upon the quest for economic and social distinction, a purely relative contest which encourages inequality in the exemplification of its possibilities, and moreover, a form of mobility which because it is entirely relative does not support the idea of external or independent stances, as with the yeoman farmer. In New York you can only be rich by virtue of the fact that someone else is poor, or successful because someone else has failed. The extremities of this are exemplified in the juxtaposed trajectories of Carrie and Hurstwood's fortunes once they reach New York. It is a system of pure interdependency, and one which concentrates this sense of dependency in the psyche of the middle class in a world where faith in money outranks both faith in God and general human trust. Yet it is important to remember that the mythic value of social mobility remains important in the ordering of the social space even though its modality has been transformed in the emergence of America as a modern nation.

In *Sister Carrie*, and this is where Dreiser's urban naturalism differs for instance from Howells' realism, Jefferson's agrarian vision is an absence, belonging to a place in the past. Yet, in a way it remains as the implied first term in the series of the transition from horizontal to vertical mobility. This is one reason why the reading of these texts through the American mythic network is so valuable. What we see is how in the Gilded Age, the extent of a place's vertical mobility, something which is contingent upon a variety of interlinked factors and their effects such as population, degree of industrialisation, urbanisation and its concentration of capital, becomes the basis for its ranking in a hierarchy of American places. While the railways were operating to bring the nation together through their geographical networks, these other factors were involved in creating series of topographical significance, which were both physical and mythic.[115] In *Sister Carrie*, for instance, there is the assumption of a dramatic difference of scale between Chicago and New York which is crucial to the realisation of plot:

> Whatever a man like Hurstwood could be in Chicago, it is very evident that he would be but an inconspicuous drop in an ocean like New York. In Chicago. . .the rich had not become so conspicuously rich as to drown all moderate incomes in obscurity. The attention of the inhabitants was not so distracted by local celebrities in the dramatic, artistic, social and religious fields to as to shut the well-positioned man from view. In Chicago the two roads to distinction were politics and trade. In New York the roads were any one of a half-hundred and each had been diligently pursued by hundreds so that celebrities were numerous. The sea was already full of whales. A common fish must needs disappear wholly from view, remain unseen. In other words, Hurstwood was nothing.[116]

Here again in Dreiser we can detect the importance of appearance. In Chicago,

---

[115] See my discussion of the mythic significance of New York in Chapter Four below.
[116] *Sister Carrie*, p.305.

Hurstwood is somebody, a prominent citizen with connections to even more prominent citizens, and the confidence and manner he derives from operating in this knowledge is what draws Carrie towards him. In New York, however, Hurstwood remains unseen and as a consequence is not merely a normal citizen, like the vast majority of New Yorkers also presumably without a public profile, but *nothing*. The onset of his unemployment sees him engage in a withdrawal from the world, which visibly manifests itself in the deterioration of his appearance. With the exception of a brief employment as a scab streetcar driver and a couple of disastrous games of poker, Hurstwood is increasingly content to stay at home even though the end of this will be ruin. In other words, Hurstwood falls out of the loop of pecuniary emulation, not caring until Carrie leaves him and he is forced to give up their apartment. After a short career as a hotel dogsbody, Hurstwood gets sick and returns to social visibility as a broken man and a bum, a figure of the urban landscape without the energy to struggle for social distinction and achieve the status of an individual through the fabric of social connection and equally important, comparison. Whereas in Chicago, people like Drouet look up to Hurstwood, in New York no one does, and Hurstwood becomes nothing precisely because of his inability to stimulate envy in other individuals. Furthermore when he reads of Carrie's success he is not envious, a sign sure enough that he has given up on the kind of life the urban American is meant to lead.

Carrie's trajectory on the other hand is one of increasing visibility, and her level of visibility is directly equivalent to her measure of success in terms both of money and of status. Her "progress" is one delineated by her climb through these spheres of civilization until she is deified by admittance into the pantheon at the very visible peak of modern America, stardom. It is made clear in the text that this particular trajectory

can only really happen in New York. Chicago doesn't have a big enough theatrical industry, and this is one of the reasons why Carrie is not as upset as she might be when Hurstwood reveals how he has deceived to get her to leave Chicago with him. Furthermore her visibility eventually functions as a beacon and vindication of the society whose peak she occupies. As James Buchan has argued above, the visibility of the rich as representatives of the actualisation of the people's wishes is crucial to the effective functioning of consumer capitalism as a spiritual system. Indeed the success myth, popularised by Alger for instance, is based more upon this system of representative possibility than one either universal possibility or actual likelihood, especially when the modest success associated with Alger's heroes is hyperbolised into the sudden and immense fortunes gained during the robber baron era.

As C. Wright Mills has argued, "in the media the life styles of the top levels are displayed to the bottom in a way and to an extent not previously the case."[117] In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser depicts the beginnings of this extended visibility of the rich in the way Carrie's increasing success as an actress is reported in the newspapers. What we begin to get a sense of here is the dynamics of fame, the way it can eddy its object into increasing prominence like a whirlpool in reverse. Carrie is promoted within the ranks of the chorus, gets a role in another show on the strength of that, and is able to reduce the audience to fits of laughter with just a look, which earns her a rave mention in reviews. On the basis of this success she becomes a star, whose life is a matter of interest for the newspapers, which in turn leads to a variety of economic opportunities, such as preferential accommodation arrangements in salubrious addresses and the

---

[117] C. Wright Mills, *White Collar*, p.253.

material offers of the mash notes, her likeness in lights on Broadway and an ever-increasing social status. In this way the seemingly self-perpetuating spiral of fame continues, as far as the span of the novel at least, for in Dreiser's schema, as is shown in the case of Hurstwood, and further foregrounded with authorial commentary, individual lives have their "natural" apexes somewhere in the middle.

The emergence of the American fascination with show business fame is something Dreiser locates specifically within the time of the Gilded Age. Commenting on the budding narcissism of the emergent actress, Dreiser states that:

> It was about this time that the newspapers and magazines were beginning to pay that illustrative attention to the beauties of the stage which has since become fervid.[118]

In the Gilded Age, Carrie's career is a new way to *distinction*, and one, by the time of Mills' writing in the 1950s, that has usurped other paths as a means to visible distinction, due in no small part to the emergence of new media such as radio, cinema, the gramophone, its descendants, and television. Indeed by the time of the 1980s, celebrity has become the primary mode of social distinction. This social fact is satirised, for example, in Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*, in the obsequious attitude of the extremely wealthy towards the "stars" they have to dinner. Concomitantly, the whole notion of reputation has by this time been infected by the kind of fame mechanics which belonged originally to the deification of the artistic performer. However this is not to suggest that the performer was the only person whose lifestyle newspapers in the Gilded Age were interested in. Howells' *The Rise of*

[118] *Sister Carrie*, p.442.

Silas Lapham opens with an interview of Lapham by the journalist, Bartley Hubbard. Similarly, Dreiser's Cowperwood trilogy, which was inspired by the author's reading of a newspaper article about the real-life tycoon, Charles Yerkes, is also filled with newspaper accounts of the grandeur of Cowperwood's later existence. In this sense, in the Gilded Age the businessman is already a celebrity, participating in the exemplary function of representing the possibility of the American dream to other Americans, in the sense that James Buchan has argued above. This status of the businessman as celebrity has remained strong in the American mythic network as is evidenced by the fame and cultural fascination with 20th century tycoons such as Henry Ford, Randolph Hearst, Howard Hughes, the Guggenheims, the Gettys, right up to Donald Trump and his charming wife, Ivana, in the 1980s.

That Carrie achieves distinction through being an actor is significant for a number of reasons. As Philip Fisher has commented, "Acting draws its moral meaning not from a world of true and false but from a dynamic society where all are rising or falling."[119] Here we get the importance of appearance in another sense: the ability to appear as other than what you are. Fisher argues that within *Sister Carrie* there is a hierarchy of work contingent upon a balance between the material and the personal in terms of the product being sold. In this way, argues Fisher, at the bottom of the ladder are those engaged in actual manufacture such as Hanson.[120] Above them is Drouet, who handles objects but uses his personality to sell them. Hurstwood is above Drouet because while still a salesman he has no object to sell. According to Fisher:

[119] Philip Fisher, *Hard Facts*, p.160.
[120] This schema omits, of course, the idle as opposed to the working poor. At the bottom of the heap are bums, etc. Yet it can be argued that they do not exist in the series as they are no longer subject to the desire economy of pecuniary emulation.

> As manager he, in effect, sells his tone, his presence and air to the nightclub. Standing around, the "dressy manager" rents out his personal approval. Objects have disappeared from the selling process, but the fictionality of social role is increasing.[121]

At the peak of Fisher's hierarchy is Carrie as actress. Fisher claims that with the actress the object has vanished entirely with only Carrie's "personality and vitality" remaining to be sold.[122] What Fisher suggests, therefore, is a hierarchy of occupation which is oriented towards the immaterial. From Hanson to Drouet to Hurstwood to Carrie in her final incarnation, the novel puts in place a series which corresponds to older social hierarchies which viewed work as an inferior activity. In this context, the hierarchy is based upon the extent to which your occupation produces and sells the immaterial. Yet Fisher's reading of a hierarchy of work into *Sister Carrie* is only a partial answer to the significance of the actress as a figure of social distinction. I have already discussed how Carrie's success is historically at the vanguard of stardom, because it constitutes a new mode of gaining and displaying a prestige that operates as a visible representative of the actualisation of material desires for the rest of the population. What is also important is the extent to which acting, or the skill of appearing as somebody else, is a skill which belongs very much to the newly urbanised industrial environment.

We have it from Veblen that to display the trappings of economic success was as important as the success itself. What then if you could adopt the display of success without actually possessing it first? In this new world where so many of the relations

[121] Fisher, *Hard Facts*, pp.162-3.
[122] Fisher, *Hard Facts*, p.163.

are imbued with the anonymous, the appearance of success or wealth was often as important as the attainment of it. Or to put it another way, the appearance of success often aided the event of success. An obvious example is the change of appearance of Ragged Dick, and the way he is differently perceived as a consequence. Perhaps just as obvious is the well-dressed swindler, Coleman, in *Struggling Upward*. This partly explains the extent the swindler, the quack, the conman, the hustler, the huckster, the grifter, the shyster, the scammer, the operator, the speculator and the wheeler-dealer have played in American society and its mythology. The sheer number of terms in the American vernacular for this kind of figure is evidence of the prominence of these attitudes in themselves. From the character of Colonel Beriah Sellers in Mark Twain's *The Gilded Age*, to the trickster God of Henry Gates' reading of African-American literature, to the elegant symmetries of *The Sting*, to the characters of the modern American television series, *Melrose Place*, to the Bakkers and Swaggerts of American TV evangelism, there is a fascination in nearly all American culture with people who are convincing while appearing to be other than they are. These personalities, whether they be rough diamonds in search of respectability like Ragged Dick, or two-faced bastards and bitches already high in the world of material success, as in Melrose Place, all deploy the ability to appear other than their nature to further their personal ambitions. In the case of Ragged Dick, it is set up as an anticipation of social mobility. However in many cases it is a faculty which is the source of pecuniary gain itself. As Fisher has argued this is precisely a consequence of a dynamic social system. Of course this ability to manufacture an identity is enhanced by the anonymous proximities of the city and the concentration of visibility which it takes to be widely or universally known. At a general level it is furthered also by the movement towards the mass production of consumables across national markets, which tended to extend the

legibility of status generating appearances. At the top of this hierarchy of people who have mastered the skill of appearing as other than themselves is the actor. It is no coincidence therefore that Dreiser foregrounds the acting career as a new way to social distinction in the Gilded Age.

In *Sister Carrie* the veracity of C. Wright Mills' observation concerning the visibility of the top echelons of society in the media is confirmed by the way that Hurstwood, on his way down, becomes more and more obsessed with reading the newspapers and less with organising the means for his own survival. After the failure of his saloon partnership and the beginnings of Carrie's career, Hurstwood stays in the apartment as much as possible. As Dreiser states with unusual lyricism, "He sat and rocked, and rocked and read."[123] It is implied that his reading matter is predominantly newspapers rather than books. It is as if Hurstwood is content to live vicariously on the representative success of those who are reported in these newspapers, including some of his prior Chicago acquaintances and eventually Carrie, even though this immersion in fantasy through the stories of other people's lives has an effect not unlike that on the protagonist at the end of Jack London's 1908 short story, "To Build a Fire" who falls asleep in the snow.[124] Nonetheless, it becomes increasingly apparent that to be someone, at least in the metropolis, it is important to have connections to the newspaper. Hurstwood is able through a Chicago contact to get a newspaper notice for Carrie's theatrical debut, yet in New York he remains a nobody. Also, he remains ostracised from his former associates because his crime has been reported in the

---

[123] *Sister Carrie*, p.407.

[124] Jack London, "To Build a Fire" [1908 version], in eds Earle Labor, et al., *Jack London Short Stories*, (Collier Books, New York: 1991) pp.282-295.

Chicago newspapers. Running into old associates in New York is a mutually embarrassing business. It seems that in these early days of media celebrity, the American axiom, held through much of the 20th century, that any publicity is good publicity is yet to come into play. Benedict Anderson has suggested that the newspaper was a crucial technology for enabling the imagined community of the nation.[125] What *Sister Carrie* suggests is a sort of representative community of the nation, a community of the rich and famous whose lives, and the reporting of them in the newspapers, come to represent to the imagination of the citizen and newspaper reader the possibility of actualising the material desires which are the source of yearning throughout modern American society.

Hurstwood's fantasy-like engagement with the newspapers, an act of disengagement which leads to stoic resignation towards his fate, is contrasted to Carrie's fantasies of desiring things she can't afford, the spiritual fuel which drives her eventual success. But they are two sides of the same coin, a thoroughly materialist perception of society, where individual psyches reference themselves through the capacity to acquire objects. This is one reason why it is so important to recognise the interpenetration of the mythic and the material in the structure of modern American society. With the exception of Minnie and Hanson, of whose internal subjectivities there is no real depiction (the novel, with even less regret than Carrie, is happy to dismiss them as boring) and Bob Ames, who is a somewhat enigmatic presence in the novel, there is little to contradict the novel's implicit message that success is ultimately the ability to remain faithful to the pursuit of your unfulfilled desires.

[125] Benedict Anderson, *The Imagined Community*, pp.25-6.

6

The Novel's Reflexive Operations in the Modern American Mythic Network

In the preceding sections I have looked at aspects of the change in the mythic network of America brought about by industrialisation. I have argued that one of the distinguishing features of this change is the fusion of the mythic and the material in the commodity driven world of modern social distinction. I have also shown how within the American novel there was a range of responses to these changes, which can be located in the way these changes are both constructed and discussed in texts. What I would like to discuss now is the way that the novel was a commodity and a technology which played a role in the kinds of processes of social distinction I have traced out above, and how this provides new ways of configuring its operations in the mythic network of modern America. At the same time I shall be arguing that these were processes of which the novel was intricately aware.

In section one of this chapter I have discussed how the American mythic network is centred on the middle class and more broadly on notions of how the middle is figured in terms of American society and its ideals. In this section I want to look at how the American novel in the Gilded Age functioned culturally as an assertion of this orientation. The nexus of the rise of the novel and industrialism is one well-established in the history of literature.[126] The familiar story is that the novel arose as a

---

[126] The classic text is Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* (Chatto and Windus, London: 1957). For links between the novel and the middle-class see particularly Chapter One. Other works important to the development of this connection include Georg Lukacs' Marxist theory of the novel in *Studies in European Realism* [1946], trans. Edith Bone (Hillway, London: 1956) and Eric Auerbach's classic *Mimesis* [1946], trans. Willard Trask (Princeton UP, Princeton: 1953). It is worth noting that in developing this theory all three point to "realism", or at least a movement towards realism, as the quality of the novel which links it to the middle-classes. Yet considering this is such a vexed term, it is

literary form in response to the emergence of the middle classes as a result of the Industrial Revolution. Whereas older forms of written literature pertained to the aristocracy and the tradition of literary patronage, the novel, as indeed the newspaper and the magazine, were the literary forms which pertained particularly to the middle-class, and to the growth of literature as a commercial activity. As Richard Lehan has commented:

> A new reading class came into being that was interested in the rituals of courtship, marriage, family, commerce and exchange, and the conflicts built into the new pursuits of money and success,

and it is to this class of reader that the novel from the outset made its appeal.[127] It is, furthermore, well established that nowhere was this type of reader more numerous than in America. Motivated by a belief that an informed citizenry was vital for an effective republic, and also by the residual literalism of the Puritan tradition, literacy in America during the 19th century exceeded that of its European counterparts. In explicating the difference in readership between Britain and America during the 19th century, Richard Altick has argued this as a function of America's political constitution claiming that in contrast to Britain, in America:

> the "right to read" had always been implicit in the premises of American society; no body of clergy, no aristocracy, no political faction had ever, in any important way ventured to deny it.[128]

---

useful perhaps to think these claims through Bakhtin's theory of the novel, its origins and uniqueness, as elucidated in the essays collected under the title of *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist (University of Texas Press, Austin: 1981). I am thinking particularly here about Bakhtin's arguments concerning proximity, heteroglossia, and the plasticity of the novel form, as the cultural and formal qualities which proved conducive to the modern novel.

[127] Richard Lehan, "The European Background" in *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism* (Cambridge UP, New York: 1995) pp.47-73, p.51.

[128] Richard Altick, *Writers, Readers, and Occasions: Selected Essays on Victorian Literature and Life* (Ohio State UP, Columbus: 1989) p.209.

America's 19th century cultural elites were still towards the end of the century struggling with a sense of cultural cringe and of the appropriateness of American life as a subject for literature, exemplified by Henry James' famous gripe in *Hawthorne*:

> One might enumerate the items of high civilization, as it exists in other countries, which are absent from the texture of American life, until it should become a wonder to know what was left. No State, in the European sense of the word, and indeed barely a specific national name. No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country-houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great Universities nor public schools – no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class – no Epsom nor Ascot! Some such list as that might be drawn up of the absent things in American life – especially in the American life of forty years ago.[129]

The paradox inherent in this cultural cringe was that 19th century Americans as a whole were better educated and bigger readers than their English counterparts, and in a curious inversion of the cultural cringe American literature in particular felt towards England, this was recognised even by leading highly anglocentric English cultural luminaries, such as Matthew Arnold. With the advent of industrialisation, the readership in America continued to increase, despite the immigration of large numbers of non-English speaking citizens. The expansion of education throughout the latter half of the 19th century, the emergence of a mass book and magazine market, the growth in public libraries, the creation of more leisure time and growth in disposable income for the middle classes all contributed to the expansion of the

[129] Henry James, *Hawthorne* (Macmillan, London, New York: 1887) pp.43-4. Of interest is Howells' response to James' contention. In answer to the question what was left once these absences had been considered, Howells responded "we have the whole of human life remaining, and a social structure presenting the only fresh and novel opportunities left to fiction, opportunities manifold and inexhaustible." W.D. Howells, "James's *Hawthorne*" [1880] in ed. Edwin Cady, *W.D. Howells as Critic* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London and Boston: 1973) pp.50-5, p.54.

American readership.[130]

Daniel Borus has reminded us that "people tend to use their reading abilities when it becomes important both vocationally and socially for them to do so."[131] As America became industrialised the utility of reading increased for the individual. As corporations formed and industrial activity became concentrated, the white collar classes grew in order to manage the paperchains which accompanied the new, complex and abstracted lines of productive process. The distinct economic advantages of reading ability, levels of reading and by extension writing ability (the gradation between the ability to obey a written instruction, to write a written instruction, or to write and analyse complex written information such as a report) became more exaggerated the more refined and abstracted these processes became.[132] Concomitantly reading tastes also became important in the struggle for social position, as books and the reading of them were deployed as subtle markers of social distinction in the supposedly classless society.

The social and professional importance of reading is something that the novels of the era are acutely (self-interestedly?) aware of. Issues of literacy occupy a crucial

---

[130] See for instance Richard Altick, *Writers, Readers, and Occasions* (Ohio State UP, Columbus: 1989) pp.209-230 for a comparative analysis of the readerships of America and England in the late 19th century. See also Daniel Borus, *Writing Realism: Howells, James and Norris in the Mass Market* (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill: 1989), particularly pp.100-38 for a valuable account of the American readership during the Gilded Age.

[131] Borus, *Writing Realism*, p.106.

[132] See here C. Wright Mills, *White Collar* (Oxford University Press, London: 1956) and particularly comments concerning how the new middle classes established the importance of education over property. As he argued:

> For the new middle-class, education has replaced prosperity as the insurance of social position. The saving and sacrifice of the new middle class to insure a good education for the child replaces the saving and sacrifice of the old middle class to insure that the child may inherit the good property

position in the novel's interpretation of America's mythic network. The "progress" of Horatio Alger's Ragged Dick, for instance, is partly a literary representation of the importance of reading in the individual's realisation of their place in the American Dream. Dick's quest for knowledge is directly attributable to the quest arisen in him for membership of the white-collar middle classes. Status is attributed to learning, and learning valued above financial reward. It is better to be paid less to be an office boy than it is to work as a boot black, and while money can easily change appearances through purchases such as a new set of clothes, an education is a more time-consuming (though also often expensive) activity. Cultural capital is rated above purely financial capital. While clothes are highly mobile and thus capable of being deceiving, an education is a commodity that is far more difficult to affect. Yet in *Ragged Dick* there is little pretension that the two are not somehow related. New clothes must accompany the education in the "unragging" of Dick Hunter.

Literature is probably related to the processes of social distinction in more ways than it sometimes likes to think about itself. The political contents of texts are quite capable of being nullified by the way a novel functions as a marker of social distinction. This intersection of the novel's functions is a point that is inherently tensional. Further it is a tension novels themselves often engage with. In *Sister Carrie* the function of literature as a mode of social distinction enters the novel through the enigmatic figure of Bob Ames. Although Carrie has climbed the ladder of social distinction in the highly related senses of her capacity to consume and display the financial benefits of her occupation, in Bob Ames, the last in the series of men who catch her eye, she finds

---

with which to earn his livelihood. The inheritance of occupational ambition, and of the education that is its condition, replaces the inheritance of property. (p.245)

a character who is dismissive of these values. At a pre-theatre dinner with the Vances in the fashionable New York restaurant, Sherry's, Ames makes negative remarks to Carrie concerning the excess consumption which surrounds them. Paradoxically, this is viewed by Carrie as a superior stance in terms of social distinction, purely because it is a position that can't be realised through the conventional mechanisms of satisfying desire, consumption and display. Of course it helps that Ames' comments are made from the position of being at the height of social distinction. The ability to be sufficiently comfortable with wealth to be able to deride its ostentatiousness in its presence is clearly a mark of familiarity (most probably in a literal sense) with it. It is highly unlikely, for instance, that Carrie would have listened with the same admiration if these opinions were being expressed by a character such as Lindau in Howells' *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. Instead Ames' pre-existing social position as the son of a western industrialist, and his vocation as a scientist, enables him to inhabit the prosperous realms of social distinction with sufficient confidence to be comfortable in his criticisms.

Part of the way Bob Ames presents his mode of social distinction to Carrie is as an arbiter of literary taste. He pans popular novels, particularly *The Opening of a Chestnut Burr* by E.P. Roe, which the Vances had been discussing. Mrs Vance had read it and claimed it was a "pretty good book," while Mr Vance interestingly had not actually read it, but read about it in the newspapers, and comments in relation to the fame potential of authorship, saying "a man can make quite a strike writing a book. . . I notice this fellow Roe is very much talked about."[133] Carrie, on the other hand, has

[133] *Sister Carrie*, pp.334-5.

never heard of Roe, but is somewhat alarmed when Ames comments that the book is almost as bad as another novel, *Dora Thorne*, which she had. Carrie's response is worth remarking on:

> Carrie felt this as a personal reproof. She had read "Dora Thorne" in the past. It seemed only fair to her, but she thought that people thought it was very fine. Now this clear-eyed, fine headed youth, who looked something like a student to her, made fun of it. It was poor to him - not worth reading. She looked down and for the first time felt the pain of not understanding.[134]

There are several things to notice about this description of Carrie's reaction. First, is the sense of a discrepancy between her personal taste and social taste. Whereas Carrie thinks the novel was only fair, she is aware of its popularity and good esteem in a more general sense. Yet even though she personally thought it only fair, she takes Ames' slating of the novel not as a vindication of her dissenting opinion as to its fairness, but as a "personal reproof." It could be argued that this sense of personal reproof derives from Carrie's sense of not having articulated her opinion of the novel's mediocrity, a sense of shame from her failure to critically resist the popular tide of opinion with the conviction of her own intuitive good judgement. A more likely reading, however, is one where Carrie views this as a personal reproof because what people say about a book is actually more important to her than what the book says itself. In other words for Carrie a book's status as a marker of social distinction is more important than the quality of the book as she experiences it, although in real terms these two aspects of the literary experience cannot so easily be separated. The sense of personal reproof which coincides with her first experience of the "pain of not understanding," can be correlated with her sense of inferiority throughout the novel

[134] *Sister Carrie*, p.335.

whenever she is confronted with the evidence of a superior mode of social distinction. In this case she begins to realise the distinction between high culture and popular culture, which has conventionally been read until recent times as the difference between literature as entertainment and literature as knowledge. It is the pain of not understanding, the pain of not possessing this knowledge, by which Ames has grabbed her attention.

In such scenes we are essentially dealing with a politics of unofficial canon formation. These scenes provide an inkling of how the critical process of canon formation is an institutionalised version of the use of literature as a means to the establishing of social distinction.[135] Carrie's pain of not understanding is more an effect of her running into a "glass ceiling" type of social distinction different to those of fashion and display, which she understands intuitively, immediately and in all their subtleties, rather than an effect of angst for knowledge itself. Yet as Dreiser has it, her intuitive judgement of *Dora Thorne* as only fair presupposes an instinctive capacity for improving at this game as well, which with the help of Ames she does. The difference, though, between this capacity and her previous capacity is that whereas her fashion sense is full and immediate, her literary judgement is in need of being refined. As Hurstwood begins his slide, Carrie's desire is characterised in terms of Ames as well as against the threat of poverty:

> The ideal brought into her life by Ames remained. He had gone, but here was his word that riches were not everything, that there was a great deal more in the world than she knew, that the stage was good and the literature she read poor.[136]

---

[135] For an excellent exploration of the relationship between institutional canon formation and social distinction see John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1993).
[136] *Sister Carrie*, p.346.

In this way Social Darwinism and Dreiser's infusion of the imperative of knowledge into it is vindicated. Ames, as a scientist who is knowledgeable about literature and the theater, is a paragon of the educated Victorian gentleman. When Carrie meets Ames again towards the end of the novel, she has read the novels he had recommended to her, Balzac's *The Great Man From the Provinces*, F. Marion Crawford's *Saracinesca* and Hardy's, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Carrie appears to be beginning to develop a knowledge of high culture, which in the work of the sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, has been largely thought out in terms of the individual's possession of cultural capital through exposure to educational institutions.[137] In this case, however, her education in high cultural matters arises from the far looser and sexually charged institution of her relationship with Ames, who appears nevertheless to have had the benefit of a college education. It can be said that Carrie receives instruction in the art of acquiring cultural capital at the dinner table rather than the academy. This mode of instruction and conveying canons was probably not unusual. While women were the predominant readers of novels at the time, it was rare that they had access to the institutions which were beginning to teach vernacular literature as a serious academic discipline.

Carrie's instruction at the hand of Ames suggests the extent to which literature as a commodity capable of conveying cultural capital was implicated in patriarchal patterns of gender relations, and in particularly where gender relations intersect with other patterns of social distinction. In terms of the novel this has occurred most

---

[137] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* [1979], trans. R. Nice (Harvard UP, Cambridge Mass.: 1984). For an instructive critique of Bourdieu and a more than useful overview of alternative theoretical approaches, see Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, especially pp.131-157.

obviously in the representation of courtship. A major reason for this has been that the rituals of courtship are where issues concerning cross-generational social distinction are often foregrounded. Yet as the plots of novels have shown, courtship is also where social distinction is frequently at risk, partly because the discourses of western romantic love have encouraged a certain blindness towards it. In an environment which stresses the individual, the idea of romantic love has tended to dissipate the power of social position to determine the end results of sexual attraction. Of course, this has been a theme in western literature at least since Shakespeare. In American literature, however, the power of the parents as an authority with the right of veto over their offspring's sexual partners is interestingly limited. In itself this can be brought down to the peculiarities of the American mythic network. At one level, of course, there is the American emphasis on the individual. More deeply embedded perhaps is a shift in the way intergenerational relations are configured. The rights of the parents to determine their children's lives are circumscribed by the belief that each generation symbolically represents a new beginning and that on this basis it is improper for parents to intervene in the decisions of their children. This is ultimately an aspect of the inscription in the American mythic network of the intent of building a new society. Each generation is effectively a new society and the time of youth, where courtships are carried out and career decisions made, is often the time when the assertion of this newness against the old is at its tensional apex. Other than the irony eventually imposed upon this situation by the individual life cycle, the paradox of course is that this insistence on newness itself has become a firm pattern in the conduct of American life.

Arguments have also been made with considerable validity as to the way courtship patterns were affected by urbanisation. The city's population meant a greater number and variety of possible lovers. The sheer anonymity of the city with the concomitant potential for invisibility created new freedoms to indulge some of these possibilities. The emerging consumerism contributed to an increased generational perspective towards the structure of society. Fashions, the knowledge of new products and technologies and the desire to master or possess them were frequently demarcated along generational lines. The city's effect on Carrie, for instance, shows how all these facets impinge upon the vectors of sexual desire. Indeed this is so strong a presence in the novel that critics like Philip Fisher have been led to argue that the city is actually metonymic for the individual's desire.[138] Furthermore, in 18th and 19th century European society, courtship and marriage was a means by which the conflicting interests of the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie - which can be crudely organised around the dichotomy of political and economic power - were often resolved. In a not dissimilar fashion, the American novel also observed the 19th century commingling of its "aristocracy" with the emergent bourgeoisie, depicted for instance in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, and the graduation of enterprising members of the working class into white collar middle-class respectability, a practice hinted at by the instinctive fancy Ida Greyson takes to Dick Hunter in *Ragged Dick*. In America, however, the social classes were not as established as in Europe.[139] As a consequence in American novels greater attention is paid to the possession of cultural capital in the form of manners,

[138] Philip Fisher, *Hard Facts*, p.129. See my discussion above.
[139] However there was a tendency for the children of wealthy American industrialists to go to Europe and marry the children of impoverished nobility.

education and literature out of the relative lack of dynastic pedigrees to hang the tensions of the courtship plot upon.

In W.D. Howells' *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, social standing is clearly indicated through the subject matter and sources of reading. Mrs Corey of the established Boston elite talks disparagingly about the literary practices of the Laphams, saying to her son:

> I dare say they never buy a new book. I've met some of these moneyed people lately, and they lavish on every conceivable luxury, and then borrow books, and get them in the cheap paper editions.[140]

This is an example of the difference between status and class in American society, and the importance of education in this distinction. Even as the book increased its readership through the advancing technologies of mass production, the same process introduced discriminations as to which edition of a book was more "respectable." The book conferred status not just through the cultural capital made available by the consumption of its contents, but by its status as a material object conspicuously displaying the patterns of their owners' consumption. Clearly for Mrs Corey a book is a privileged item of consumption in the social distinction it can confer upon its owner. Certainly it is more respectable to buy a book than to borrow it. It is as much a matter of ownership as readership, though there is not necessarily an accurate intersection between the two. Lapham's Back Bay library, for instance, is bought as a social prerequisite for an effective house, not to be read. Mrs Corey's snobbery places the

---

[140] William Dean Howells, *The Rise Of Silas Lapham* [1885], intro. Kermit Vanderbilt (Penguin:1983).

book in opposition to "every conceivable luxury" that the nouveau riche are more likely to spend their money on. Mrs Corey is clearly making a class distinction based upon the book's appeal as a measure of cultural capital. In foregrounding her snobbery, Howells is partly ironising it for satirical purposes as Penelope Lapham is the reader privileged by the author in the novel (humorous reproof, perhaps, towards the Coreys' unamerican elitism) but in a way he is also providing a form of etiquette manual for the social climbing readers of his books. In this sense novels themselves function as advice concerning the social benefits of broader literary practice.

The consideration of the physical properties of owning a book and the types of books that can be owned are of course not the only way that literature functions as a field through which social distinctions can be made. The discussion in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* between Tom and Irene about *Middlemarch* reveals the different dates of availability for books bought and those borrowed from libraries as distinctions of fashion. To be reading the wrong book belongs to a similar order of social mistake as the wearing of last year's fashions.[141] Irene is invested "with a little sense of injury in her tone" when Tom reveals that *Middlemarch*, which has just arrived in the Seaside Library, is a book Tom had read several years ago.[142] From this point her attempted flirtation proceeds at a disadvantage. The wryly snobbish following scene, where Tom advises Irene on the contents of the library for the up and coming Lapham family's Back Bay mansion, is further evidence of the role books play as a marker of one's

---

[141] Howells shows an acute awareness of the significance of fashion in the unstable meritocracy of consumer capitalist society as does Dreiser. Women's apparel and architectural fashion pervade the discussions in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. Irene's attire and Silas' negotiations with the architect for the Back Bay house are two such examples.

[142] *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, p.111. Compare this to Carrie's "pain of not understanding" in her exposure to the literary prowess of Ames.

arrival into a cultivated status. In fact, Tom probably loses any possible romantic interest in Irene, not only from her ignorance of what he discusses, but from her obvious lack of interest in the texts as anything other than a tool of flirtation and a strategy of interior decoration that confers social distinction.[143] Philip Fisher has argued that the extra social distinction conferred by the immaterial aspects of the book bears some resemblance to the hierarchy of employment, which is organised around an ascending order from the material to the immaterial. Yet in industrialised American society this hierarchy remains contingent for its recognition on patterns of material consumption: books are discussed in fashionable restaurants, the physical form of the book maintains its complicated allure and the domestic library an important way of materialising the distinguished activities you would like people to think are going on inside your head.

The ability to engage in literary conversation is privileged in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* as a marker of romantic aptitude. Parallelling this there is literature as a mark of social distinction, an activity, or mode of consumption which operates as cultural capital. Yet the two, especially where courtship is concerned, are closely intermeshed. The 19th century European novel's use of courtship as a trope for analysing the tensions between the aspiring industrial elites and the aristocracy is refigured in the way education and literature are used in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. What marks Tom as different from Irene in terms of class is an invisible marker: his embodiment by having read them of the texts he advises Irene to buy. In this sense there are two ideas

[143] A famous literary example of this is in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* [1925] where Nick and Jordan Baker discover Gatsby's library, to be told by an astonished drunk that the books are actually real, although the pages have not been cut.

of possession at work in the novel's thinking about books, the idea of material possession and the less tangible (the things you can't touch are often the most desirable) possession of literary experience. In this schema, a college education clearly serves as a delineation of class distinction, an important operation of cultural capital, in a novel modelled on the English template of the daughter of a wealthy industrialist being married into the house of an impoverished nobleman. Indeed it is precisely because of the lack of a fixed class system in America and the contrary celebration by American culture of concepts such as social mobility, or an aristocracy of talent within the symbolic network of the national community, that education becomes such a crucial marker of status. However, the important fact remains that education, or the sort of cultural capital that reading represents, is something that both Alger and Howells are convinced can be acquired, even if some natures are more suited to its acquisition than others. The "plain" sister, Penelope's possession of intuitive acumen and a droll conversational demeanour are connected with her creditation as a serious reader, and it is these abilities that attract the attention of the upper-crust Tom Corey, who is also practically inclined, business minded and thus qualified for the status of all-American hero. Furthermore, Penelope's eventually sensible decision to accept Tom's proposal is implicitly framed in terms of her ability to abandon the heroic conventions of the inferior plots of sentimental fiction and "get real" or practical about life.[144] This is evidence of the way the novel is reflexively trying to fashion its readership. There is a sense here, too, of an emerging hierarchy of the novel, of the realist novel over the sentimental novel, a hierarchy whose values, to a certain extent, will remain in place for the next one hundred years.

---

[144] For an interesting discussion of this in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* see the conversation between Tom and his father, pp.62-71.

In the case of both Ragged Dick in the Alger story and in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, it is the middle class that is finally privileged. Clearly, the rise of Ragged Dick from rags to respectability (as opposed to riches), literally from the ranks of the great unwashed to that of the white collar classes, is a valorisation of the middle-class, and an example of how the novel tends to treat its audience with respect. After all there is an intentional identificatory transfer between the reader and the literate character contained within the didactic strategies of Alger's novel. The extreme ends of society are something that Alger explicitly distrusts. The lower class lifestyle is full of the character harming effects of possible penury, suggesting the view that environment can be a hazard to character. Although Dick and Fosdick manage to rise above their lowly status, street life in New York (the subtitle of the tale) is permeated with the potential for criminal deeds or simply starvation as characters such as Micky Maguire, Jim Travis and Johnny Nolan serve to remind us. This is confirmed at the high end by the warnings about the unscrupulousness of some American businessmen which are scattered throughout the text, and a consciously antipathetic position taken towards the English aristocracy. The comparison of the Fifth Avenue Hotel and St James Palace, for instance, shows an obvious preference for the American way, and Alger's concerns about the activities of the Robber Barons is clearly evidence that the moral imaginary the text is attempting to inculcate in its readers is a model of Republican virtue which valorises the ethical endeavours and constraints of the middle way.[145] In this sense, as Carol Nackenoff has conclusively shown, Alger is trying to articulate the continuation of the Jeffersonian ethical world in a rapidly industrialising America.[146]

---

[145] *Ragged Dick*, p.32.
[146] Carol Nackenoff, *The Fictional Republic*. See pp.53-180 and pp.261-71 particularly.

This attitude is also conspicuous in Howells. In *The Rise of Silas Lapham* he spends a considerable time pillorying the aristocratic perspective of Tom's father, Bromfield, who in his unpuritanical rejection of utility, self-deprecatingly represents the leisure class values which would attract the particular ire of Thorstein Veblen. Although Tom is possessed with the qualifications of the Boston Brahmin, his earthy practicality, desire and aptitude for the business world, and respect for Silas Lapham, means that he also qualifies as an honorary member of the emerging middle class ideal of entrepreneurial America. In this way Tom is clearly demarcated in the novel from the values of his father, although this is mitigated by the clearly mutual affection shown in their relationship. Of course, to be educated demands sufficient leisure from the pressing need to establish the means of survival, and there is consequently a tension in Howells' attitude towards Bromfield Corey which is marked by the latter's given ability to ironise himself. This tension is also related to the act of reading novels: an ambiguity concerning what can properly be described as leisure and what as work. Silas Lapham, for instance, is not sufficiently literate, too busy or not interested in reading novels, as are businessmen in *Sister Carrie* such as Mr Vance. In *Sister Carrie,* it is only the educated and the idle man who reads: Hurstwood, who takes to reading as he literally retires from life, and Ames are the novel's male readers. As *The Rise of Silas Lapham* shows, and research by critics such as Daniel Borus, Cathy Davidson and Carol Nackenoff have confirmed, it is the female reader who is predominantly driving the novel economy, a situation that was parallelled across a wide spectrum of the emerging consumer capitalist economic system.

Most explicitly in terms of an agreement in attitude between Alger and Howells, the "rise" of Silas Lapham refers to his adherence to moral principles, even at the cost of

failing to avoid impending financial ruin. The novel is unambiguous in its championing of the position that economic activity should be ethically linked in the individual psyche to other social concerns, making it an interesting comparison to the Darwinistic business ethics of Frank Cowperwood, that are captured memorably by Dreiser's image of the lobster and the squid, the zoologically inaccurate but nonetheless resonant symbol which convinces young Frank of the accuracy of the survival of the fittest and imaginatively fuels his subsequent Nietzschean quest of the business tycoon.[147] Like Alger, Howells argued that business should be constrained by a moral code. Yet in Howells there is an extent of self-reflectiveness concerning the mythicity of this position. Silas Lapham's moral position is figured by the plot as a return to Jeffersonian nature. This argument is revisited in his later novel *A Hazard of New Fortunes* through the character of old Dreyfus. In the latter case, however, the story is resolved not at the cost of a fortune, but of a son.

A curious similarity between Howells' business magnates is the lack of intention involved in the discovery of their fortunes. Lapham's fortune is derived from the chance discovery of mineral paint on the family farm, while Dreyfus is derived similarly from the accidental discovery of natural gas on his. This suggests a continued role for Providence in the schema of Howells' novels, even if the efficacy of this providence in relationship to the Puritan-capitalist ethic is ironised to an extent, by the randomness of its landing. For both Lapham and Dreyfus their wealth is somewhat imbued with the status of the poisoned chalice. In other words, the idea of riches is divorced from the older resonances of the Puritan elect, where wealth is the

[147] Dreiser's image has the lobster eating the squid, whereas in real life lobsters are bottom feeders, whose exoskeleton and claws have a purely defensive function.

manifestation of God's grace and explicitly the reward for hard work. The same thematics can be observed in Alger, who was aware of the extent to which his plots depended upon chance and luck for the realisation of their heroes' upward social movements. By contrast Dreiser's construction of Frank Cowperwood's career trajectory emphasises the competitive exercise of intellect and will as the reason for his success. In the moral logic of the world Dreiser creates, Lapham's refusal to save himself financially would simply not occur, or if it did, would be considered universally as an act of folly.

The difference in the level of literary complexity between Howells and Alger is parallelled by the observation that in Howells' novels there is little sense of life outside the middle classes. This suggests that there is a relationship between the subject matter and style of these novels and the readerships they were respectively aimed at. Although there is similarity in the philosophical positions taken by the novels of both authors, there is a world of difference in the structure, style and tone. Of course, this can be partly explained through the distinction between Howells writing for adults and Alger primarily for boys. However there is also a class factor involved which hinges upon the literateness of the novels' respective readers. Whereas Alger provides intimate portraits of characters who come from the wrong side of the tracks, in Howells the working class are most commonly ciphers helping to define middle class characters or mass instruments of the plot. In *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, the stubborn integrity of Lindau's socialism is presented as being perverse. Even if his ideas are given some credence, his way of life is not, and as with Conrad Dreyfus it is the idealistic who are sacrificed for the sake of the plot. Genuine "working men" do not pervade the milieu of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* either. Indeed, it is remarkable for

the closed domain of its Boston gentility, with the possible exception of Lapham's charity towards the family of a fallen comrade in the Civil War. In *A Hazard of New Fortunes* the shift from Boston to New York does introduce the spectre of the working classes: the geographical facts of the city with its jumble of streets and their rapidly altering status make this inevitable. However, they do not appear as agents in their own right. Rather they appear primarily as the object of the middle class gaze as the Marches exercise their middle class capacity as flaneurs. Much is made of Margaret Vance's and Conrad Dreyfus' work with the poor, although for the reader this remains hearsay - a caricature answer to the very middle-class question: What do they do? The novel measures the effect of their philanthropy on themselves, not the complex interrelationships across a broad social spectrum. The only time the working class is granted agency in the novel is in the form of the masses or the crowd in the depiction of the streetcar strike. In this sense the novel privileges the middle classes as individuals, whereas the working classes are configured in terms of the crowd. This is particularly significant because of the emphasis placed in the mythic network of America upon the individual. As Dreiser so clearly shows in his depiction of Hurstwood, to be relegated to the crowd is to become *nothing*.

The relationship between realist writing and the working class is a vexing one that continues to resonate today. Daniel Borus, for instance, has shown how both realist and naturalist writers, and particularly Howells, fantasised a linkage between their work and the masses. But to read Howells is to read about the masses from a bourgeois perspective. Borus claims:

> The realist conception of the writer as the voice of the plebeians developed in small and halting steps. Given the personal backgrounds and temperaments of the major realists and the lack of familiarity with literature and, in some cases at least, the English language on the part of large segments of industrial working class. . . the prospects for such an alliance were far from brilliant.[148]

In explicitly political novels such as Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* the identification of the novel with the working class is just as problematic. Its patterns of pathos and catharsis which are reminiscent of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are convincing to the extent that they evoke pity for the protagonist and his trodden upon milieu. The novel's ending, for instance, is phenomenally patronising as Schliemann, the renaissance intellect or alternatively the middle-class speaker, sounds his socialist epiphany while any remaining agency is slowly leached from Jurgis. It is as if Jurgis, whose tragic life forms the plot of the novel, has been exposed to a new God and struck dumb as a consequence. While it might be argued that the merging of Jurgis into the masses is presented, contra Dreiser, as a process of becoming something, this transformation is figured in terms of Jurgis falling under the positive spell of Schliemann's charismatic dialectic which grows by the accumulation of energy from its converts. There is an aura surrounding the end of the novel which suggests much of the ambivalent operations of the ambitious left, where saving the world is sometimes as much a framework for the pursuit of personal glory. It would be churlish to suggest that this is the sum total of such activity, and not always wrong to take a pragmatic approach to the inevitability of this tension. Nonetheless this ambivalence is crucial and too often overlooked. Furthermore, it is when this tension is looked at from the range of options available to the middle or educated classes that the positions taken by

---

[148] Borus, *Writing Realism,* p.158.

middle-class rebels appear more defensible. In this way, it is possible to argue in favour of Howells' depiction of the charitable work of Conrad Dreyfus and Margaret Vance, which shows Conrad's decision, for instance, as a conscious abrogation of the right to a business empire, or Margaret Vance's in the historical context as the abrogation of marriage and children. It is difficult not to suspect that Howells is somewhat ambivalent about the extremism of their behaviour, but this is an ambivalence which applies to all the characters in the novel and the motivations behind the decisions they make.

Borus locates the realists' reaching towards the American worker in the popular, post-Civil War sentiment that America had lost its commonality. The resistance of writers such as Howells to this perceived loss of unity, can fairly be characterised as based on mythic as opposed to ideological grounds. Indeed in some ways Howells' thinking about the novel can be conceived as explicitly anti-ideological, deliberately railing against the articulation of difference in favour of the mythic ideal of commonality or unity. Howells, for instance, viewed with alarm the emerging view of American society in terms of class struggle, criticising both the plutocrat and the radical working class activist. Furthermore, the political purpose of the novel in Howells' view was conceived explicitly as a tool for creating and promoting social unity. In a critical piece, the "New York Low Life in Fiction," Howells commended Stephen Crane and Abraham Cahn:

> who have done their duty as artists and for a moment have drawn aside the thick veil of ignorance which parts the comfortable few from the uncomfortable many in this city.[149]

From this perspective his novels appear in retrospect as an attempt to impose consideration on the unchecked dynamics of Gilded Age capitalism. Howells pictures the novel as building a middle ground between the haves and the have-nots in its unifying function of imagining community. What is perhaps curious is that this middle ground in his novels is saturated with his attention to the members of the middle-class. There is a difference between his critical position and the subject matter of most of his novels. In one way it is possible to argue that this involves a slippage between the novel's task of establishing a middle-ground, and the idea that the middle class constitutes that middle-ground. From this we can see how the broader processes of imagining the national community are centred, as I have argued in Section One, on the identification of America as a middle-class society. Moreover Howells' arguments seem to be aimed, in their appeal to a readership, at the type of people likely to be in a position of some authority to make decisions. It is a realism whose focus is on the lives of the middle classes and aims at a readership of the elites, or people who would like to consider themselves in terms of the cultural elites. Within this there is considerable attention paid to the way middle-class modes of ordering social distinction are negotiated, and also of the way the novel and more broadly the literary cultural complex function in terms of social distinction in the rapidly industrialising and urbanising Gilded Age American society. There is also, however, a gracious

[149] W.D. Howells, "New York Low Life in Fiction" [1891], in ed. Edwin Cady, *Criticism and Fiction*, (Routledge, Keegan and Paul, London and Boston: 1973) pp.256-62, p.262. See also Howells, "The Politics of American Authors" [1902], in *Literature and Life* (Harper and Bros, London and New York: 1902) and for further commentary Borus, p.172.

inclusivist position taken in his criticism, which complements his perceptive engagement with the middle-class milieu in his novels.

In this chapter I have traced a number of ways in which a mythic perspective remains valuable in the interpretation of American culture and the role literature has played within it. An analysis of the Gilded Age and its literature redresses the idea that the pertinence of myth criticism in American culture ceases at the time when America starts to become recognisably modern. I have showed how the mythic network is transformed in the process of modernisation, yet also how it persists. In this way the chapter serves as an advancement upon the myth criticism of the 1950s in that it argues a mythic perspective which moves beyond the pioneering work of Leo Marx and R.W.B. Lewis, which has concentrated its attention on the American literary renaissance. By looking at literature in the Gilded Age, I have shown how new mythic narratives such as Social Darwinism clashed with the older mythic values of republican virtue. Yet such shifts do not constitute a diminution in the mythic content of American culture. What they do confirm is the idea of the mythic network as both transformative and tensional as I have conceptualised them in Chapter One.

In my analysis of literature in this chapter I have looked at the variety of mythic functions literature has performed. The role of the imagining of community in terms of the nation and the city is crucial, as is the task of making connections between segments of the population in a world where change was frequently viewed as an agent of fragmentation and counter to the ideals of community which shaped the American foundation. The novel in this sense was a technology for imagining

community, particularly in large communities such as the city or the nation where empirical knowledge of the whole can be limited by either size or concentration.

I have also discussed how the American mythic network has been centred on the middle class and how the shifts in the mythic network during the Gilded Age were mirrored by transformations in the conception of the middle class and its role in American society. I have traced in this chapter some of the emergent patterns of social distinction as America moved towards becoming an industrialised primarily urban society. What is important is the way these patterns of social distinction are implicated in shifts in the distribution of the social space, which in itself is strongly related to ideas of the mythic foundation (see Chapter Two) and consequently the mythic network. Furthermore I have argued that it is impossible to clearly separate the realms of the mythic and the material in the analysis of such matters. Indeed the interpenetration of symbolic and material orders is a strong reason for preferring a mythic to an ideological perspective in the consideration of modern capitalist cultures.

Finally, I have argued how literature itself is a site where the mythic and the material are interpenetrated. While literature plays a role in the American mythic network through its capacity to imagine, represent and critique communal forms, it also belongs as a commodity in the system where the consumption of objects confers social distinction. I have explored some of the ramifications of this double-sided function of literature in my discussion of Gilded Age novels by Alger, Dreiser and Howells. In the following chapter I will be looking at how aspects of this discussion can be extended to a consideration of the American mythic network, its transformation and the role of

the literary cultural complex within in the postmodern context of New York in the 1980s.

Chapter Four

In the last chapter of this thesis I want to concentrate on how aspects of the American mythic network can be configured in terms of what has been labeled the condition of postmodernity. I will be moving from a broad theoretical consideration of concepts such as globalisation towards a consideration of the symbolic mechanics of America with an emphasis on New York in the 1980s. By doing so I hope to consolidate my arguments in previous chapters concerning the mutability of mythic networks and my preferred position for a reading of American culture from the perspective of the continuum framed by the American mythic network, which in turn embodies the symbolic and narratorial aspects of what Bruno Latour has termed the "anthropological matrix."[1] My argument will also benefit from the sense of mythic continuity I have tried to portray by tracing the American mythic network through distinct historical periods, from the foundational vision of the nation and republic as discussed in Chapter Two, through the changes brought about by the advent of industrialised society in Chapter Three, to the postmodern paradoxes of the global and the local and their relation to the American mythic network in a reading of New York culture in the 1980s. As such I am aiming towards a model of history which emphasises transitions and mutations, as opposed to the ruptures and revolutions that have been superimposed as narrative structures upon the past. As I have argued in

[1] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* [1991], trans. Catherine Porter (Harvard University Press: 1993).

Chapter One, the position I am taking can be seen partly as a corrective against the current overdeployment of ideology as an interpretative tool in both cultural and textual studies. Consequently, this final chapter pertains particularly to the theoretical considerations I have outlined in Chapter One concerning the relative status of the mythic and the ideological and the privileging of the latter in critical discourse, particularly within discussions of the historical contexts of modernity and postmodernity.

The mythic perspective clearly shows that discourses and networks persist through social transformations and historical periods in a manner more complicated than the dualistic tendencies of progression and reaction. However, this does not in any way diminish a recognition of the enormous changes in the material circumstances of American culture since the foundation of the republic. As I have argued, the extent and motivation of these changes is at the core of the way the United States came into being as a nation. They are a central feature of the American mythic network and consequently of the way American subjects are related and distributed within the social space. The crucial inquiry is, therefore, how can these enormous changes be better understood using the rubric of the mythic network, and how does the interpenetration of the mythic and material operate in the specific context of American cultural history. These are questions too large to be approached within the scope of a single work, but has been my intention here to provide a sketch of the broad possibilities which emanate from such an approach.

From a contemporary critical perspective, dialectical modes of analysing the social and cultural have come to seem too simple. While this may be particularly true for

postmodern culture with its transnational emphases, the expanding scale of its organisation and the proliferation of the interpenetration between aspects of social life, a dialectical or binary approach is also inadequate as an explanatory analytic for either modern or pre-modern cultures. Nonetheless, it is the conditions of contemporary life which makes such approaches even less adequate than before. The analytical clarity and power which has long been the advantage of dialectical thought has been overcome by the inability of dialectical schema to adequately represent the complex networks which constitute the contemporary habitus. To continue to privilege the dialectical is to indicate a preference for the theory over the object of its inquiry, at the risk of failing to come to terms with the rich irrationality of human existence.

The increasing inadequacy of dialectical analysis is partly due to the material changes which have occurred in society and partly due to the sheer scale upon which contemporary societies are based. To some extent it also results from the loss of faith in the Enlightenment project, either in its inability to translate rational theoretical programs into social reality at a macrocosmic level, or from a dislike for the individual restrictions such programs necessarily entail.[2] However, the post-structuralist realisation of the limits of theory in being able to comprehensively articulate the unstable mesh of relationships which constitute social conglomerates is also a factor. As Gianni Vattimo has argued:

---

[2] The most famous dispute over the merits of this loss of faith is of course that between Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jurgen Habermas. For Lyotard's exposition of this loss of faith, which I largely agree with, see *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-5* [1986], trans., ed. J. Pefanis (Power, Sydney: 1992), which is notable for its letter to Habermas, and *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis: 1984). I have also discussed this issue in Chapter Three above.

> The presence of myth is an effect of modernization qua secularization: having demythologized the idea of progress as dissolution of myth, we go back to myth, but after we have made the experience of its dissolution; a new polytheism arises, but this doesn't only involve a dissolution of the unitary strength of divinity in many gods, in a plurality of limited forces. It means, more generally, the weakening of the very essence of truth: which is actually the experience of the late-modern subject, which no longer believes in the ultimacy of its self-consciousness. This subject when it turns toward itself, toward the depth of its consciousness, is not confronted by the certainty of the Cartesian cogito, but the *intermittances de coeur* described by Proust, the narrations of the mass media, the mythologies rediscovered by psychoanalysis. It is this experience - modern, even postmodern - that the return of myth in our culture and in our language tries to capture; and certainly not a rebirth of any mythical primitive culture, not yet touched by modernization, rationalism etc. Only in this sense, myth seems to point toward an overcoming of the opposition between rationalism and irrationalism (through a weakening of the notion of truth) to open a new possibility for thought.[3]

Vattimo's return to myth is posited as a correlative to the experience of late modernity. This in turn points towards some of the advantages of the interpretation of complex 20th century western cultures on the basis of their mythic networks. I would argue also that this is especially true in the case of America. The United States does not have an ideological heritage to the extent of that constructed and experienced in the modern cultures of Europe. As Jean Baudrillard has commented, whereas Europe tends to transform the real into ideas or ideology, in America ideas have been transformed into the real. This in itself is a reason for preferring a mythical to an ideological approach, in that America is organised not so much according to ideology but in Baudrillard's words again, according to a "concrete mythology."[4] This generative capacity of ideas and myth can be directly contrasted with the Marxist limiting of ideology to a role of covering up the base material conditions of society, its organisation and distribution of

---

[3] Gianni Vattimo, "Myth and the Destiny of Secularization," *Social Research*, Vol.52, No.2, Summer, 1985, 347-362, 350.

[4] Jean Baudrillard, *America* [1986], trans. Chris Turner (Verso, London: 1989) p.23.

economic wealth. In contrast a mythic perspective is open to the way abstract values are constitutive of the material conditions of society and the distribution of the social space. In the last chapter I discussed how the mythic network is a valuable way of looking at the interrelationship in the United States between the nation, industrialisation and the emergence of consumer capitalism. In the second part of this chapter I will sketch how the mythic network enables an exploration of postmodern culture, through looking at aspects of New York literature from the 1980s. Vattimo's position represents an overcoming of the equation of the mythic with the primitive. In Vattimo's schema, mythicity does not involve the rebirth of primitive culture. Rather, it is a position which recognises the mythicity of rationalism and its truth claims within a modern context. In turn this brings our conception of contemporary western societies back into the fold of the anthropological matrix wherein all societies are situated. The idea of a necessary rupture between the pre-modern and the modern is in this sense obviated, while the enormous change in the material circumstances of modern societies can still be recognised.

Although I have pursued the epochal formula of the early modern, modern, late modern and postmodern in the chapter structure of this thesis, it is important to note that the processes contained within these historical carry-alls are qualified by the large degree of their temporal unevenness. Notions of clear-cut or universal historical succession are inadequate as a model for cultural change, even as the frameworks they offer are indispensable to the way we conceptualise the contemporary social world and its origins. In the United States, developmental differences between the north and south, between the farm and the city, the difference in the access to the benefits of industrialisation for black and white are obvious examples of the unevenness of the

processes of modernisation. Indeed this is another theoretical advantage of concepts such as anthropological matrices and mythic networks. Mythic networks are many-speeded entities where factors undergo shifts in prominence and are recontextualised within a permanently shifting matrix. Furthermore, it is doubtful whether any of the values ever truly become extinct. As much of the literature in American Studies shows, and this has surely been one of the strengths of American Studies as a discipline, the recrudescence of superseded mythic values is a frequent and intricate pattern in culture and has too often been underestimated by those whose progressive imperatives have produced a willful blindness to the prevalence and resilience of cultural repetitions across a variety of contexts. Richard Slotkin's epic exploration of the frontier myth in American cultural history has shown, for instance, the persistence of mythic tropes once established in a culture, and how mythic networks are actively engaged in the interpretation of new cultural phenomena, particularly when their narrative trajectory derives from an original confrontation with the new.[5] The great advantage of bringing the mythic perspective to cultural analysis is that it is more conducive to the complex patterns of circulation and pulsations in a culture than either dialectics or ideology (although Geertz's ambivalent notion of a general ideology recovers some of the advantage). The theoretical model of the mythic network is more capable of producing an approximate understanding of the holistic operation of cultural systems than the narrower perspectives issued from the vectors of ideological thought as I have outlined them in Chapter One. Nonetheless, I would not want to be seen as arguing against the relevance of ideological thinking altogether. In specific contexts, ideological analysis can be a politically useful tool. However it is important

[5] I have discussed this in Chapter Two regarding the continual deployment of the frontier motif in a variety of American contexts, both historical and contemporary.

that the activity of ideology-based critique should be contextualised within the broader scheme of the mythic in order to prevent the lapse of the humanities into endlessly nuanced squabblings and the paper empires of coteries and interests that are too often blind to the contradictions between their utterance and the bourgeois inevitability of the academic life.[6]

While there have been arguments that postmodernity constitutes a post-mythic age, there are a number of factors to suggest that this is not the case. Sheldon Wolin's "Postmodern Politics and the Absence of Myth," one of the more notable arguments for the postmythicity of postmodernity, is fundamentally an extension of Levi-Strauss' claim for the transcendence of myth by politics in modern societies.[7] The notion of politics transcending myth is spurious, as we can see in the mediation of politicians and their policies to the public. Under postmodern conditions, politics has become perhaps even more susceptible to mythic operations through the emergence of television as a major medium in the dissemination of the political process. The politics of the thirty second sound bite means that the substance of political rhetoric is relatively incomplete and therefore increasingly dependent upon pre-existing referential frameworks for its grounding.

Shifts in the representation of politics also construct shifts in the nature of political representation and subsequently the structuring of the imagined national community. As the politicisation of Sherman McCoy's case in *Bonfire of the Vanities* shows, the

---

[6] See my argument (and note) in the introduction to Chapter Three.
[7] See Sheldon Wolin, "Postmodern Politics and the Absence of Myth," *Social Research*, Vol.52, No.2, Summer, 1985, 217-239.

entire political process is not just saturated with mythic discourse, but this mythic discourse is the territory which political contestants utilise in jockeying for position in front of an increasingly cynical public.[8] The democratic polity depends upon the interest of the media, and is represented by the people who can be captured within the frames of a camera at a particular point in time. It is the role of public relations, the so-called "spin doctors" of politics, to manipulate these contexts in the interests of an apparent agenda, though this surface agenda may well be a feint for a separate undisclosed agenda, whose representative function may be elided in the pursuit of goals such as party or personal ambitions.

Political agendas naturally acquire their own mythologies: favourite sons, daughters, a list of martyrs to the cause, rhetorics of struggle. If these agendas are unable to naturalise themselves as part of the commonsense understanding of the present, then they attempt to do so in terms of the future. The allure of the mythical future is expressed in the dual meaning of utopia as both "no place" and "good place". In terms of the political vision, utopia frames social reality at a given point in time in a way that is not dissimilar to the mythic origin, with the exception that it promotes dynamism through the tangible promise of the future, whereas the desire for the conditions of the mythic origin (say Jefferson's agrarian republic, although there is a lineage back to the state of nature) tends to operate against change, as a constraint or rejection of change, in order to minimise the diversion of a society from the conditions of the originary paradise. In times of crisis, of course, political action is presented as a matter of preserving the present, of a nation for example, so that the future of that

[8] Tom Wolfe, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (Picador, London: 1988).

imagined community and its political institutions can take place. The pantheon of political heroes contains those who have rescued a country in crisis, or have attempted to bring utopia and failed, or those who have continued to promise the possibility of utopia while pursuing policies that guarantee a long and successful career. The latter are accorded legendary status particularly within institutions by virtue of their sheer survival of the cannibalistic nature of political life. It can be argued that there is a particular mythos of the political; but not that the political has transcended the mythic. Moreover, this particular mythos of the political is strongly implicated in broader units of the mythic network such as myths of origin or the mythic intentions of utopian thinking.

The complexities of origins and utopias however do need to be recognised. First of all it is important to realise that individual manifestations of these concepts are contestable as they are indispensable. The different versions of the state of nature as I have discussed them in Chapter Two reveal, for instance, crucial tensions in the way that modern western societies have formed their beliefs and institutions. The differences between the states of nature of Locke, Hobbes, Hume and Rousseau constitute a continuing debate in modern social and political life that repeats itself across a surprisingly wide variety of contexts, and remains a central component of our mythic framework. Furthermore, the opposing temporal situation of utopia and the origin does not mean that they are mutually exclusive positions in terms of cultural narratives.[9] To assume that they are locked in opposition would be to fall back into the trap of maintaining a reductive opposition between the reactionary and the

[9] Early utopian thought in English literature generally operated with a lateral positioning of utopia; Thomas More's *Utopia* or Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, for instance.

progressive. Narratives of broad social goals may well consist of a combination of the ideals of the utopia and the origin. In contemporary social thought an obvious example is the conservation movement with its valorization of the originary wilderness and the life within it. A specifically American case is the position currently being taken by communitarian writers such as Robert Bellah with their variety of appeals, both open and implicit, to the ethos of Jeffersonian democracy (itself an interesting case in point). In both places there is a vision of an ideal community, and because the nature of communities depends so much on how the nexus of their components is imagined, these ideals have a significant bearing on the composition of society in the "real." These examples also reveal the potential for the mutual interpenetration of the utopia with the origin.[10]

The emergence of identity politics has also increased the role of myth, albeit of sectional mythologies, in the pursuit of political practice, even as it has pluralised myth in the proliferation of lifestyle options. Because truth has been opened up to competing interest groups, myth, as Vattimo has argued, provides ways of thinking around the problematic nature of contemporary truth. Characters such as the Reverend Bacon in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* show how easy it is to manipulate the exigencies of political particularities with the broad appeal of myth: for the Reverend Bacon it is a matter of fitting events to a story line that will guarantee media coverage. Moreover, as research in media studies, particularly by critics such as Stuart Hall, has shown, the types of storyline covered in the media are locked into deep generic grooves, the human interest story, the streets of fear, social injustice, or the drama of political

[10] See Chapter One, n.20.

antagonism.[11] Indeed the role of cinema, more lately the television and even more recently, though as yet less influential, the role of computer games, the internet and virtual reality, attest to the increasing importance of myth in the binding of large scale imagined communities, where for a variety of reasons interpersonal communication across the gamut of social positions has become problematic.[12] Finally, Roland Barthes was certainly right in bringing to our attention the vast importance of advertising in this process, as it provides through the media the mythos of an imagined community brought together under the auspices of consumer capitalism, the structural importance of which I have discussed in the previous chapter.[13] These media are crucial because along with a commonality of material products, they define a community by offering references that people can have in common.

While it is important to understand American culture from the perspective of its mythic continuum, it is also important to consider that the media through which the mythic network is communicated have changed dramatically since the 19th century. I have argued the significance of print culture in my tracing of the foundations of the American mythic network in some detail in Chapter Two. Following this I have discussed in Chapter Three the role of the Novel in the emerging network of industrialised America, as both a commodity and a representative medium of the American mythic network, and aspects of the relation between these dual roles. Yet to

[11] Stuart Hall, "The Social Production of News," in *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (London, Macmillan: 1978) pp.53-77. I would still beg to differ with Hall's model of hegemonic power in the operation of the media, without wishing to suggest that it is not an issue.
[12] These problems include scale, the ghettoisation of social and racial classes whether it be the rich in the Upper Eastside or the poor in the projects which limits the understanding between social positions, the multiplicity of language use in multicultural society and the proliferation of individuality itself and its role in breaking down intermediate social structures such as the family. Of course, there are many others in more specific contexts too.
[13] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* [1957], trans. Annette Lavers (Jonathan Cape, London: 1972).

discuss the Novel in the late 20th century, particularly in the context of the American mythic network, demands a recognition of the fact that the printed word has lost some of its authority and significance as a transmitter of cultural value. It would be foolish and unnecessary to try and rescue the significance of print from the proliferation of the electronic media, even if there are distinct reasons to prefer it.[14] Clearly radio, the cinema, and television are currently the predominant mythic vehicles in American culture. Nonetheless in this thesis I will be persisting with the book as my primary site of cultural analysis. Partly this is because academic discourse is by its very nature biased in favour of the book. It is more difficult to imagine, for instance, a half hour academic television treatment of a book, than it is to imagine an academic book about that half hour of television, although with innovations such as the Open University and video lecturing this is changing. While there has been a proliferation of books about the electronic media, and there is no reason to be against such cross-media generations, the academy largely remains the child of the printed media. Another reason for my continuing to stick with the book is that it provides a sense of continuity with the previous eras under discussion in this thesis. Only the print medium has existed through all three historical eras being dealt with in this thesis. In my discussion of *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, I am also interested in the way that the Novel has attained in some cases a mythic function at the level of its form. An aspect of this is the idea of the Novel as a conscious anachronism - here I am thinking of the 19th century realist novel especially, and the formal mythic effects this might produce. What is of particular interest here is the way a quintessentially modern form might be used to create an attitude towards a postmodern society. This is a position with which

---

[14] See for instance Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies* (Faber and Faber, Boston: 1994).

Tom Wolfe has conspicuously engaged. There remains in American culture too, particularly in New York, the undisputed publishing capital of the nation, a mystique about the activity of literature, an ironic novelistic exploration of which can be found in Jay McInerney's *Brightness Falls* through its novelist characters of Jeff and Vladimir Propp.[15] Scholars such as Michael Lind have also remarked on a "text-obsessedness" in the foundations of American culture. While the written word may be outgunned by the cinematic and televisual media, elements of this text-obsessedness undoubtedly still remain encrusted in the functioning of American society.[16]

The idea of a continuing mythic network brings into question Richard Slotkin's theory of America's mythic network being currently caught in a liminal moment.[17] What has to be understood is that mythic networks are always in a liminal moment, and that the present, at least conceptually, is always a difficult liminal premise. Part of the role of the mythic network is to make sense of the confusing intricacies of the present by organising through the familiar grooves of pre-existent narrative frameworks. An example of this is the way Tom Wolfe uses the narrative mode of 19th century realism in order to provide a coherent perspective of life in New York in the 1980s. Genre fiction is another prevalent instance of this in the way it can be deployed to bring the new into the familiar, as are comparative histories which continually mediate the past and present. While politics itself may be oriented towards the naturalisation of its discourse in the future through the materialisation of its visions (in addition to the pragmatic imperatives of nuts and bolts administration and ensuring re-election), the

[15] Jay McInerney, *Brightness Falls* (Random House, New York: 1993).
[16] See my discussion of this in Chapter Two, section two, n.94.
[17] See my discussion of Slotkin's contention concerning liminal cultural moments in Chapter One.

everyday or commonsense identity of the present is largely contingent upon the interaction of the physical environment with narrative frameworks that have been inherited or adapted from the past. New combinations of myth and modes of organising society are always emerging. Concomitantly old myths are broken up or relegated in importance. Liminality may mean merely that the context for a mythic paradigm has been exhausted. However, the exhaustion of a mythic paradigm is a far more provisional matter than the extinction of a mythic paradigm, which perhaps only occurs with the extinction of a culture, and not necessarily even then. It is not unheard of for cultures to incorporate into their own mythic networks aspects of the mythic networks of the cultures they have conquered. Moreover, the exhaustion of a mythic paradigm within a culture does not prevent elements of myths appearing in new forms, contexts and combinations to help legitimate and explain the sorts of relationships demanded by a new organisation of culture.

Myths and their symbols are constantly being recontextualised. This occurs across existent contexts and into new contexts as the social environment changes. An obvious example out of *The Bonfire of the Vanities* is the way the phrase "masters of the universe" is transferred from its originary superhero context through the commodified form of Sherman's daughter's "unusually vulgar. . .plastic toys" into Sherman's conception of the bond salesmen at Pierce and Pierce.[18] More pervasive, however, is Richard Slotkin's excellent genealogy of the frontier myth which still does not reach the limits of that myth's ability to proliferate across and into contexts as far removed from each other as the space race, Lower Eastside tenement housing or

---

[18] *Bonfire*, p.19.

Vietnam.[19] The frontier, for instance, permeates *Bonfire of the Vanities*, where it is deployed in the sense shared by Sherman and Maria of the Bronx as the jungle (a version of the Puritan wilderness), which again shows the strength of the link between social Darwinism and the frontier myth in the American mythic network.

It might also be argued that in modern societies the liminality of the present is amplified through the perpetual sense of crisis which attends the dynamics of capitalism as perpetual revolution. Marshall Berman's gloss on the writings of Marx, mentioned in the previous chapter, gives a good account of how the modern capitalist system is dependent upon crisis, either extant or impending, as an aspect of its ethos of perpetual change. However, the systematised greed that is the consequence of capitalism's need for continual economic growth is not the only reason why crisis remains such an important locus in the rhetoric of the present. Equally the contemporary environment movement has resorted to the mythic potency of crisis and the apocalypse in order to change patterns of social practice in the present. As Frank Kermode in his exploration of the modern apocalypse has argued:

> Crisis is inescapably a central element in our endeavours towards making sense of our world. . .It seems to be a condition attaching to the exercise of thinking about the future that one should assume one's own time to stand in extraordinary relationship to it. The time is not free, it is the slave of a mythical end.[20]

Crisis then functions to heighten the importance of actions being taken in the present by exaggerating their perceived effect upon the future. Of course this is an anticipatory

[19] See my discussion of this argument in Chapter Two, section three.
[20] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1967) p.94.

gambit whose predictive capacity and efficacy of action can be judged only retrospectively, if that. For as modern theories of causation such as chaos theory have argued, causal networks are complex and the relationship between action and effect unstable. The recognition of these difficulties may be presented as a crisis in itself; a crisis in confidence as to how to orientate the present towards the future, a crisis of unpredictability with the potential to descend into a crisis of randomness. If the intentions of actions do not adequately tally with their effects, then why act at all? Questions of faith or belief, as opposed to rationality, are ultimately involved, again showing the importance of the mythic network in the underpinning of these attitudes. Alternatively, if the sanctions of the anticipated future are insufficiently strong to shape decisions in the urgency of the present, it is difficult to find arguments against the gratification of pleasure in the present. In this way crisis has an ambivalent or paradoxical function. As Kermode argues crisis heightens the perceived importance of the present in terms of the future. Yet crisis can also function to disrupt the presence of the future in the apprehension of the liminal present.

This ambivalence in the nature of crisis and the way it mediates the present in relation to the future is obviously a factor at work in contemporary American culture. On the one hand there is the perpetual crisis, or revolutionary change, brought about by commodity capitalism, in its need for new markets, products and fashions. This has tended to shrink the future in relation to the present. The shortening of the future has been a hallmark of modernity and has accelerated as a characteristic of the postmodern condition across a large variety of contexts. A classic example is the frequent squeezing of the political horizon into the frames of three and four year elections, when the time-frames for achieving effective solutions to politically soluble problems

are necessarily far greater. A similar case is the propensity of contemporary business to seek profit through the short term mechanisms of the financial markets instead of the long term investment in expensive material and social infrastructure. The effect of these sorts of behaviour is a lack of faith in the future, with the side-effect that the future is becoming the present sooner than it ever has before.

The acceleration of change is what theorists such as Baudrillard have termed "hyperlety": a state where things change too quickly for any sense of reality to be attached to them. While there may be reality in the material sense, because of the rate of change in this material reality, reality is lacking in the phenomenological sense. It is crucial to remember that our ability to perceive the present as "real" is contingent upon our capacity to put in play narrative structures which constantly mediate the present to the future and the past. The situation of the future in the short term rather than the long term, and concomitantly the rapid erasure of the material conditions of the past heightens a sense of the present as precarious. This may well heighten the liminality of the present and the liminality of mythic discourse within that present, as Slotkin has argued. However, these claims must be checked by Kermode's scepticism concerning the present as perpetual crisis. Yet Kermode's scepticism is in turn checked by the nature of the modern capitalist system as one in perpetual revolution. As has been shown in the previous chapter, the American mythic network incorporates this dynamic, and together with the ability of mythic networks to recontextualise and adapt themselves in the face of rapidly changing environments, this suggests that the American mythic network is unlikely to collapse under the sort of crises or liminal pressures it currently faces. It is important not to slip back into the assumption that mythicity is necessarily a counterforce to change.

This is not to say, however, that American culture in the 1980s was not invested with a sense of precariousness. A central aspect of this precariousness was the way the reorganisation of the financial system effectively led to the reorganisation of society. The removal of restrictions on financial institutions inevitably led to a heady, dynamic, but more unstable economic world with the effects of practices such as corporate raiding, mergers and downsizing permeating deeply into the organisation of American society. The literature I discuss in the second part of this chapter evidences the often prosperous precariousness of this position in New York in the 1980s.

The emergent mythic recipe for these changes in the pattern of social organisation has been the rubric of economic rationalism, a curious and flawed amalgam of older modern mythemes, including Social Darwinism, a misinterpretation of the classical economics of Adam Smith and the narrowing of the Enlightenment vision of social improvement into the consideration of how best to keep the expansionary requirements of a consumer capitalist system satiated.[21] In itself economic rationalism is a symptom of the broader malaise into which the idealism of the modern project has fallen. From the loss of faith in grand narratives, society has devolved into an unusual dependence on the soothsaying of economists, the knee-jerk reactions of financial traders and the representation of financial markets as a natural force approximating the weather.[22] It is a limited attempt to salvage pragmatic sense out of the failure of

[21] These discourses, however, are not known as economic rationalism in America. Rather it is a resurgence of the belief in the sanctity of markets which has long been an aspect of American social organisation as the discussion of the Gilded Age in the previous chapter shows. The fact that it does not have to be called economic rationalism is evidence of the extent to which market forces have been naturalised in the American mythic network.

[22] Perhaps the most notable case is the way that financial information has permeated the evening news bulletin. With deregulation, and the flotation of currencies, financial news has been accorded a regular segment on the evening news which to a large extent has followed the form of the weather. A rise in the dollar, whether economically beneficial or not, becomes the same sort of upbeat news as a sunny day. In regular segments experts are called upon to interpret and predict movements in the economic sphere

the modern world to achieve its Enlightenment dreams. The assumption is that an efficient worldwide economic system would allow markets to create the best possible world. Of course, even here the complexity of the mechanisms in play has proved too much for rationality. Again and again economic experts are confronted with the sorts of difficulties that chaos theory has recognised as endemic to the measuring and prediction of the behaviour of complex dynamic systems. Economic rationalism is an ethos that nonetheless continues to organise and influence every aspect of contemporary American society, and an Americanism which has drastically altered the constitution of the social globe.[23] Yet, while the term is new and the circumstances in some part new, it is important to remember that economic rationalism is largely a composite of already extant aspects of America's mythic network translated into the uniqueness of a specific historical context.

The sheer prowess of economic rationalism as a mythic discourse, despite its inadequate logic, is one reason why the exchange of politics for myth does not work. It also shows how ideological readings of the contemporary world and its artifacts are also inadequate if the goal is the fullest possible understanding of such matters. Despite all the implications of Gramscian hegemony that can be applied to the dispersal of economic rationalism, its seeming coherence lies more in its agreement

---

with the same accuracy that has traditionally and cynically been accorded to the weatherman. This however is just the tip of the iceberg in the enormous change in the role of finance news as a narrative and organisational pattern in everyday culture over the last twenty years.

[23] An example of the ludicrous pervasiveness of economic rationalist doctrine is the fact that this thesis, which has little if any economic value, will be quantified in terms of research points so that its author might be ranked in a suitably economically rationalist fashion for his suitability for patently economically unrational positions in a university department whose economic - as opposed to intellectual - benefit to society is tangential to say the least.

with the sphere of possibilities emanating from the mythic foundation of America, and the mediations between the material and mythic as I have explored them in the previous chapter.

In this chapter I will be looking at the distinction between the mythological and ideological in specific relation to New York novels of the 1980s. Primarily I will be concentrating on Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, but I will also be discussing aspects of texts such as *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis and Jay McInerney's *Brightness Falls.* In tracing aspects of what became known as "yuppie" culture I am interested in exploring the mythic complex which came into being in the form of economic rationalism, and how this can be figured in relationship to other aspects of the American mythic network. Subsequently I hope to have provided at least a functioning sketch of how the American mythic network has been transformed in its history as a model for understanding the nature of modern mythic networks in general. The other reason for looking at these texts is on grounds of cultural criticism itself. I hope to show how the mythic perspective is not only a better mode for exploring American culture than the ideological, but that it also has practical consequences for discursive fields such as literary criticism.

Since I am talking about the 1980s as a reference point for the social conditions of postmodernity, the fact of globalisation must also be considered. To a certain extent, the history of the late 20th century has seen a tendency towards a decline in the political authority and symbolic significance of membership of the nation state. While 19th century capitalism seemed to be organised on national grounds, late 20th century capitalism is increasingly removed from the interests of specific national

communities. This has much to do with the growth of transnational capitalism and the rise of the multinational corporation: people the world over consume the same or similar products and the political agendas of the powerful multinational corporations have placed constraints on the ability of governments to determine social policy. The economic obligations of productive relations are increasingly oriented away from the citizen (i.e. doing the national good) and towards the shareholder (maximising return on investment), who need not have any direct affiliation with the national community. Indeed the rise of private corporations (with their fictive but legal status as an individual) to the position where they can transcend the state is probably one of the crucial shifts between modernity and postmodernity. Practices that emerged during the Gilded Age in America concerning the nature and activities of the corporation occupy a central position in this lineage.

There is the tendency in contemporary thought to present the emergence of global culture as something entirely new, rather than as the culmination of a tendency. This is a consequence of forming historical narratives from the relative perspective of the short-term rather than the long term.[24] With the exception perhaps of a few small and geographically cut-off tribal societies (and the discovery of these remains an unlikely Holy Grail of some anthropology) cultures have never been pure. Rather they have always consisted of a complex series of interactions between habitats, historical predecessors, and the values and habits acquired from contact with other

---

[24] For some examples of long term historical perspectives see for instance Michel Foucault's work, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol.1 [1976], trans. Robert Hurley (Allen Lane, London: 1979) or in terms of methodology, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* [1969], trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (Pantheon, New York: 1972). See also Norbert Elias' sociology, particularly *The Society of Individuals* [1987], trans. Edmund Jephcott (Basil Blackwell, Oxford: 1991), which I have discussed in Chapter One.

contemporary cultures. As I have suggested in the preceding chapters the mythic network of America was significantly constituted by the translation of a variety of European practices and ideas into the unique spatio-temporal context of the American nation. The development of the culture into a recognisably and uniquely American culture has, furthermore, involved the continuing translation of the attributes of other cultures, people, language, food, ideas, techniques and goods, into this American context. In this sense cultures and their mythic networks are always in a process of becoming, and there is no point where their identity becomes static. The measure of change in a society is therefore a matter of relative speeds, and as I have argued above the internal operations of culture are intrinsically multi-speeded and simultaneously multi-directional in terms of the proliferation of a culture's networks. But while cultures may be impure and the product of translations, they are still recognisably, if unquantifiably, distinct.

What is also a matter of relative speed is the ability of cultures to translate the attributes of other cultures into their own. Globalisation is important particularly to the American mythic network, because in many ways the current globalisation has proved tantamount to Americanisation. The current experience of globalisation has consisted of the world's becoming more American through the extension of largely American networks into foreign cultures. Perhaps the strongest example of this extension of networks is the case of the computer revolution where information is disseminated through the networks constructed by American companies such as

Microsoft, Apple and IBM.[25] Of course this process has been happening for some time, instanced in the Americanisation of Western Europe during and after World War Two, or that of Japan after the war, and the dissemination of American cultural values and products throughout the Third World. American cultural exports such as music, cinema and television have been at the vanguard of this endeavour. When someone says "Homer," the world says "Simpson." The current state of world affairs suggests that an abatement of this process is unlikely, even though there is continuing resistance to Americanisation at a variety of local levels, which shows that globalisation itself is a contested phenomenon.[26]

While the current processes of globalisation have an American emphasis, partial globalisation has been around for millennia. The spread of humanity from its unknown origins (depending on which theory you believe) through to all the continents of the world, the Sanskrit origin of European languages, the migration of the Celts from Persia, trading routes such as the Silk Route, or the pre-European trade between Africa and South America, or that between the Australian aborigines and Asia, the multitude of ancient empires, the Jewish Diaspora or the spread of religions are some of the many examples of the way the world has been partially globalised

---

[25] Networks such as the Internet, it should be noted, have an ambivalent potential with regard to the spread of American cultural power, as it also provides a forum for anti-American sentiments. Indeed the current uncontrollability of the Internet, where communication between friends and families, and commercial information can be found together with child pornography and the *Anarchist's Cookbook* makes it a turbulent presence in the modern world, although one sometimes overrated in terms of its importance compared to say satellite television. Nonetheless, Microsoft has recently been taken to court under American anti-trust legislation in order to stop it from making computer manufacturers install its particular Net software as the default option on all PCs.

[26] A particularly interesting case is India where the manufacture of Coca-Cola for instance has been banned, and where deliberately protectionist trade policies have led to the development of largely autonomous high-tech industries manufacturing everything from computers to the bomb. Another example is the fight between America and France concerning the rights of nations to protect their cultural heritage by placing restrictions on the import of cultural products such as films.

since before the beginning of recorded time. This background dismisses the temptation to think that globalisation is purely the product of modernity. The idea of a modern trajectory emerging from hermetically pre-modern cultures, with all the implications of static development this entails, to the current global economy with its unevenly distributed benefits and pitfalls is a furphy of a similar order to the delineation of the mythic and political around the pre-modern/modern divide.

There are, however, circumstances and modalities which make the nature of modern globalisation unique. To start with, as a result of the post war space race we are the first people with an empirical sense of the world as a globe. This has been the culmination of a series of developments in technologies of navigation which rendered the world both conceivable and negotiable as a totality. The fixing of the latitude/longitude grid, for instance, has meant that specific locations have been incorporated into the network of their relative positions. Our empirical knowledge of the world from an external perspective has inexorably confirmed our theory of the world's total surface, even if grids such as latitude and longitude are like all semiotic systems ultimately arbitrary. The world has become finite to us as a geographical totality in a way that it was not for our forebears, even if we have been slow in recognising some of the environmental responsibilities of this realisation. For the moment it has stopped being discovered, although there is no absolute guarantee that the store of our current knowledge is permanent.[27]

[27] For an interesting literary imagining of the dystopian possibilities for cultural forgetting see Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things* (Faber, London: 1989).

Most significant, however, in terms of the effects of this current globalisation, is the speed with which interactions between cultures now take place. The current form of globalisation is the effect of technological innovation, specifically in communications and transportation. In temporal terms the world has become much smaller, more quickly and easily accessible. Many of the innovations that have produced this scenario were American in either their scientific origin or industrial development. They have emerged from the need to imagine the community of a nation over an unprecedented geographic space.[28] The last two centuries have seen a panoply of technological developments such as the radio, telegraph, television, telephone, computer, aeroplane, internal combustion engine, railway and steamship. All these inventions have contributed to a shrinking of the world in terms of the time it takes for both information and goods to travel from one place to another. They have also provided the technology that has made the modern nation possible. This in turn has led to a far faster rate of translation between the mythic networks of cultures. Furthermore this has occurred largely under the auspices of commodity capitalism and the extension of its networks in the quest for new markets. From this perspective the symbolisation of the global community as much through the universal availability of iconic American products such as Coca-Cola and tobacco as through institutions such as the United Nations makes sense because these goods have benefited from the commercially oriented speeding up of global relations.

[28] Nations with their commonality of identity are different in this respect to geographical empires, although these have their complexities of identity too, as for instance the curious pervasiveness (well into the 20th century) of Australian-born subjects describing Britain as home.

Because it is clear that the distribution of the economic benefits of this current globalisation has retained many of the biases established under the imperialisms of western mercantilism, its treatment in critical theory has sometimes tended to be negative, framed as a defence of the local versus the global. Yet, it would be a mistake to characterise this process as completely deleterious, as is the tendency of the cultural imperialism school of critics, just as it is folly to imagine that globalisation will realise a new range of utopian possibilities. To assume that people in the "developing" world automatically resent the presence of the West, or at least should, is to only provide half the story, as the current economic imperialism has also brought benefits such as new medicines, agricultural techniques and other technologies. Nor is the extension of American networks a one-way transaction of unimpeded benefit to America. The spread of the AIDS virus from Africa to America is a potent example of how globalisation in its essence is ambivalent. However the economical, political and cultural negative effects of the exploitation of the underdeveloped world by the developed nations have been well chronicled, even if this chronicling has sometimes been motivated by western critics airing their nostalgia for the "pristine" living of the premodern, and is thus an inverted form of the chauvinism practiced by the many kinds of missionaries of the western life.

The exploitative potential of the imperial logic which lies behind the structures of the deregulated world financial system and the idea of global markets is perhaps about to be more fully realised with the current crises in the developed world. It has suddenly become significantly cheaper for American (and Western European) capital to purchase the rest of the world. Nonetheless the globalised world remains dependent on American networks and technology and lusts after the status of American products

and the American way of life. The intricate cross flows between the underdeveloped world's subsidisation of the American way of life as well as its subsidisation by America, and the symbolic networks which facilitate these transactions, remain a serious rationale for the continued exploration of the American mythic network as it proliferates throughout the world. Although the importance of the nation-state may be diminishing, in the rise of the multinational corporation and the globalisation of markets, the influence worldwide of "the American way" has undoubtedly thickened and spread.

1

New York and the Modern American Mythic Network

It has often been claimed that New York is atypical of America, and therefore inappropriate as the focus of an exemplary study of something as broad as the American mythic network. To be sure, America is inherently a place of multiplicities, an aggregation of cultures predicated upon factors such as ethnicity and geography with an immeasurable number of interactive skeins across significantly variegated localities. Nevertheless, from an external perspective America has a commonality from which New York cannot be excluded. It is also perhaps in New York, as much as anywhere else in America, that this inherent multiplicity is most strongly concentrated. From this perspective New York constitutes the global society in an extraordinarily compact microcosm to an extent that nowhere anywhere else in the world is able to do. It is also an unparalleled centre of power in terms of the global economy.

In many of the networks which draw localities into the scale of the nation and construct the imagined community of America, New York is the epicentre, even if one of the reasons for this was the initial trading advantage accorded by its peripheral geographical position on the North American landmass.[29] In this sense the concentrated power of New York is geographically derived for precisely the opposite reason to a city like Chicago, whose power largely derived from its actual geographical position as the hub of America's rail network.[30] Furthermore this centrality is enhanced by New York's status as a world city, in the way that Sydney following New York has been marked (or likes to represent itself) as a world city, while Melbourne has not.

The centrality of New York to American networks pertains most obviously to markets, and to those markets particularly which have organised the distribution and flow of finance and capital since America became industrialised. This is a further justification for arguing the centrality of New York in the American nation. Decisions made in New York can affect the whole running of American society, from the ranch

[29] From this perspective New York's power has rested on its capacity to recontextualise: immigrants into Americans, European ideas into American ideas, foreign capital into American economic growth.
[30] There is a school of thought emanating from the work of the great American communication scholar, Harold Innis, that early America was composed of competing city-states. New York's emergence was, therefore, a victory against cities with competing claims for pre-eminence, most notably Philadelphia. For a discussion of this position see James Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Culture* (Unwin Hyman, Boston: 1989), particularly pp.152-56. Another of the reasons for Chicago's emergence as a major centre was its dual position in the centre of America and on the Great Lakes, and thus accessible via the Erie Canal to New York. This served to further the power of New York as well. As Carey argues,

> New York's hegemony was secured by the Hudson River, the Erie Canal, and the resultant access to Chicago via the Great Lakes allowing New York to service and drain the Mississippi Valley. (p.153)

in Wyoming to the suburb in Boise, Idaho to the factory in Illinois.[31] It is precisely this ability of New York to penetrate the specificities of local situations that makes it both the mythical and economic centre of America. Nonetheless there are counter-myths which do compete with New York, such as the myths of small town America, which can be invoked in open hostility against the influence of New York. This is why mythic networks are composed of tensional discourse. Considering that the imagined community of America came into being partly through the extension of trading networks, it is unsurprising that the economic is implicated in the mythic and vice versa. Indeed it is difficult to genuinely imagine how this might not be the case, although the penchant for specialisation in the human sciences has meant that the intersection of these fundamental social aspects remains relatively little understood. The twin significance of New York as the apex of the economic and mythic America is something that has been and continues to be both celebrated and loathed about New York. Under these terms New York falls into the series of imperial cities, such as ancient Rome or 19th century Paris or London, an aura which has been preserved in appellations such as the Empire State.[32]

In terms of these markets the strongest symbol of New York's authority is enshrined in the mythos of Wall Street, a virtual alleyway which nonetheless has assumed the status of being at the centre of the capitalist world.[33] This centrality of New York can

---

[31] A useful example of this is the discussion of the Savings and Loans fiasco in Michael Lewis' insider account of the New York based merchant bank, Salomon Brothers, in the heady/headless days of the 80s, *Liar's Poker* (Penguin, 1990). See particularly pp. 79-133.
[32] As John Lennon said, "New York is the Rome of the 20th Century."
[33] For a specific exploration of Wall Street in fiction see Wayne W. Westbrook, *Wall Street in the American Novel* (New York University Press, New York: 1980). Of course since 1980 there have been a number of novels, biographies and memoirs based on the stockmarket boom of the 1980s which add to those considered by Westbrook. Westbrook also provides an account of the configuration of Wall Street practices in terms of the American mythic network, particularly the way it deploys images of the frontier. See particularly Chapter Six.

also be argued for other spheres of American life. Bodies of American cultural practice such as publishing, broadcasting, theatre, fashion, music and art are most highly concentrated around New York, the most obvious exception being film in Hollywood, and the relatively decentralised realms of popular music.[34] Furthermore, with the emergence of information technologies having supposedly reduced the importance of physical contact and networks, it can be argued that New York remains central to the networks of America partly out of tradition. W.D. Howells' *A Hazard of New Fortunes* shows that by the late 19th century New York had become the indubitable hub of American literary culture. Similarly Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* accords New York a similar status within the dramatic arts. Whereas newer media such as cinema have tended not to be centred in New York, in these older media New York remains the industry hub, and has consolidated its cultural gravitas as a consequence. Nonetheless centres such as Hollywood had their origins in the reach of New York capital. The big studios were owned by New York money, which hired and fired the movie moguls. While the film industry is physically centred in southern California, New York nonetheless continues to exert a strong mythic influence in its construction of America, more so than Los Angeles itself.[35] New York is the setting of many of America's most famous films (*Taxi Driver*, the opus of Woody Allen, *The Seven Year Itch*), whereas Hollywood has mostly covered subjects other than itself. In this sense

[34] When popular music was more closely tied to the musical theatre, New York was probably more central as the existence of institutions such as Tin Pan Alley show. Nevertheless due to the plurality of popular musics in America, this prominence has never been as marked as in other art forms. When you think of country music, you think of Nashville, Blues, Chicago, Memphis or the Mississippi Delta, Motown, Detroit, Jazz, Chicago, New York or New Orleans. Popular music has also been marked in a performance sense by mobility. In no other art form is the idea of going on tour quite so pronounced. Furthermore this does not take into account the extent of cross-pollination between musical genres. Nor does it account for the interaction of art forms such as cinema and music, which saw a concentration of the music industry again in California.

[35] There is the curious situation where films are shot in Hollywood using New York as a setting through the use of props such as a model of the New York skyline. Indeed the physical layout of New York, with its narrow canyons of curtailed light makes cinematography often difficult.

New York's mythic status as the imperial embodiment of American values and of the power of America, both cultural and financial, is mutually constitutive and supportive of the continued real existence of these factors. Again this is indicative of the strong interpenetration between the mythic and the material in American culture. Furthermore, New York has a unique pattern of social organisation because of its central position in American business and culture. The phrase goes, "If you can make it in New York, you can make it anywhere." What this means is that New York represents the pinnacle of the competitive struggle that has mythically justified the social and economic order, and provided the enduring vision of the individualistic rags to riches component of the American Dream. In this way the competitive system replicates itself at the level of the city. America's cities compete to be the biggest, the best value, the most exciting, the safest, even perversely the most dangerous. In this series New York is at the summit, not necessarily because it is the best on all counts, but because of its capacity to be the "mostest", to represent the extremes of American life. The symbolic work of New York in the American mythic network can be seen in novels such as Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, or in Hubert Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn* or in any number of movies, such as 1980s tales of the financial world, such as *Wall Street* or *Working Girl*, or even in novels depicting the economy of crack in the projects such as Richard Price's *Clockers*. Whether it be a shame-inducing expose of life in the slums as in the pioneering journalism of Jacob Riis, or chronicles of the wealthy such as *The Great Gatsby* and *Bonfire of the Vanities*, or Bret Easton Ellis writing about rich white trash in *American Psycho*, the symbolic work of New York is to affirm ultimately the extremes of possibility which represent the somewhat perverse American idea of freedom: freedom to be hungry, freedom to be homeless, freedom to

be rich and indifferent, or stricken by conscience into acts of philanthropy unparalleled anywhere in the world.

In the remainder of this thesis I want to concentrate on contemporary aspects and approaches to the American mythos, with a particular focus on New York. New York has carried with it a mythic aura which both emanates from and builds upon its status as the primary nodal point of many of the networks which construct America. This mythical aura has manifested itself throughout the 20th century in a variety of media from popular songs to postmodern theory. The dazzling mythicity which infects those who go to New York is evidenced, for instance, in Jean Baudrillard's metaphysical travelogue, *America*. Baudrillard argues intoxicatingly that:

> The resounding truths, the realities of genuinely great moment today are to be found along the Pacific seaboard or in Manhattan. It has to be said that New York and Los Angeles are at the centre of the world, even if we find the idea somehow both exciting and disenchanting. We are a desperately long way behind the stupidity and the mutational character, the naive extravagance and the social, racial, moral, morphological, and architectural excentricity of their society. No one is capable of analysing it, least of all the American intellectuals shut away on their campuses, dramatically cut off from the fabulous concrete mythology surrounding them.[36]

This smacks of Baudrillard's predilection for the provocative overstatement. Nevertheless it opens up lines of inquiry, particularly to the way the contemporary can be configured in terms of the mythic. Most obviously there is the sense of America as an imperial power and New York (with Los Angeles) as the centre of the networks which produce this power. In terms of the historical demarcations I have been arguing through this thesis, New York, with its baroque verticality, tends to be associated with

---

[36] Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. Chris Turner (Verso, London: 1989) p.23.

the modern, whereas Los Angeles with its horizontality tends to be configured in terms of the postmodern. In turn this can be mapped onto the temporal schema whereby the vertical is associated with the teleological movement of modern progress and the horizontal with the dissipation which is assumed to occur at the end of this trajectory, whether it be catastrophic in a manner analogous to the plight of the Challenger space shuttle or not. Yet the conjunction of modern New York and postmodern Los Angeles as the dual apex of the American empire suggests that the relationship between the modern and the postmodern as it can be applied to America is more complex than a narrative of clear temporal succession. Rather, they are planes of organising and perceiving social existence which simultaneously exist and have for some time.[37] This is something that a mythological vision of society as opposed to an ideological vision tends to confirm.

Another aspect of this demarcation is the notion that Europe is staidly associated with the Enlightenment and the modes of rationality attached to it, while America is placed in opposition to this. In this way Baudrillard presents another locus for the distinction between the modern and the postmodern: Europe and America. This distinction is actually a more general distinction which depicts Europe as either the past or present in relation to America as either the present or the future. The difficulty in this conception is the way it makes these distinctions geographical and continuous. There are further complications in the sense, particularly frequent before the Second World War, of the old world as more advanced in terms of civilised values than the new.

---

[37] See McKenzie Wark, "Third Nature," *Cultural Studies*, Vol.8, No.1, Jan. 1994, 115-132.

As I have indicated in the preceding chapters the foundation of America involved the recontextualisation of European ideas in the formation of a deliberately new society. Yet this eventuation has been conceptualised frequently (for reasons I have discussed in Chapter Two) as the birth of the first modern state. Baudrillard argues that "America is the original version of modernity."[38] In the Jeffersonian sense it was an experiment in the application of Enlightenment ideals to the formation of a society, which partially explains the pragmatic idealism that has been a hallmark of much American thought. Yet as I have argued this project became overwhelmed by issues not so much of human nature or actual corruption, but scale, the sheer material success of America's industrialisation and the patterns of representation it brought with it to the organisation of society. Furthermore it is the globalisation of "America", particularly in Europe since World War Two, that has marked America (though Japan now also vies for the status) as the quintessential postmodern site. After all if the Europeans - so thoroughly exposed to the might of America through the second world war, and subsequently the Marshall Plan and organisations such as NATO (with the cultural fertilisation produced by the long term presence of American troops) - were already the height of the modern, how would they be able to label the effects of the experience of their partial Americanisation from the middle of the century on?

Baudrillard's exploration of the distinction between Europe and America is interesting:

> We should not judge their crisis as we should judge our own, the crisis of the old European countries. Ours is a crisis of historical ideals facing up to the

---

[38] Baudrillard, *America*, p.76.

> impossibility of their realisation. Theirs is the crisis of an achieved utopia, confronted with the problem of its duration and permanence. The Americans are not wrong in their idyllic conviction that they are at the centre of the world, the supreme power, the absolute model for everyone. And this conviction is not so much founded on natural resources, technologies, and arms, as on the miraculous premise of a utopia made reality, of a society which, with a directness we might judge unbearable, is built on the idea that it is the realization of everything the others have dreamt of - justice, plenty, rule of law, wealth, freedom: it knows this, it believes in it, and in the end, the others have come to believe in it too.
>
> In the present crisis of values, everyone ends up turning towards the culture which dared to forge right ahead and, by a theatrical masterstroke, turn those values into reality, towards that society which, thanks to the geographical and mental break effected by emigration, allowed itself to imagine it could create an ideal world from nothing. We should also not forget the fantasy consecration of this process by the cinema. Whatever happens, and whatever one thinks of the arrogance of the dollar or the multinationals, it is this culture which, the world over, fascinates those very people who suffer most at its hands, and it does so through the deep, insane conviction that it has made all their dreams come true.[39]

Baudrillard's argument comes very close to an understanding of the mythic potency of the American Dream and the compensatory fascination its promise has upon the people it exploits, American and non-American alike. What this also suggests is the crucial interplay between the economic and the mythic. Yet at the same time it is the way the mythic can carry with it a material potentiality that makes it such an essential counterpart to the more clear cut forces of American imperialism. After all, the consumer capitalism which is the strength of America's economic imperialism is contingent on the ability of America to make its products desirable. This is why, for example, America insists on an equivalency in free trade between agricultural or industrial commodities and cultural commodities such as the cinema: in order to sell the products, there needs to be a desire for the lifestyle.

---

[39] ibid. p.77.

According to Baudrillard, what finally distinguishes American society from its European counterparts is that the American Dream:

> is not about conceptualising reality, but realizing concepts and materializing ideas . . .They build the real out of ideas. We transform the real into ideas, or into ideology. Here in America only what is produced or manifested has meaning; for us in Europe only what can be thought or concealed has meaning. Even materialism is only an idea in Europe. It is in America that it becomes concretely realized in the technical operation of things, in the transformation of a way of thinking into a way of life.[40]

While it is pertinent to observe that Baudrillard's rhetorical strategy has the tendency of turning matters of relativity and degrees of extent into binary postulates, there is nonetheless a genuine sense of America's separation from the conventions of ideology-centred discourse. To revert to a Marxist interpretation of America is to misunderstand the extent to which the boundaries between base and superstructure have been elided. What emerges instead from a mythic perspective is a sense of the way the mythic structures of the American Dream have been conjoined with a material immanence. In the sense of America as the Promised Land, the myth of America at a basic level has always been material. Baudrillard's construction of a distinction between Europe and America in the structuring and causal relationship of ideas to reality refers back to the notion of America as a place beyond history, which I have discussed in Chapter Two, a site which is clear (or will be cleared) for the experiment of a new society to proceed in. The movement from ideas to a constructed reality is a reversal of modern Europe's derivation of theory out of the assumptions of its history and the certitude of its pre-existing reality. This American movement

---

[40] ibid. p.84.

resonates with the empiricist bent of Jeffersonian scientism, American industrialism, and the willingness of America to construct a nature-culture complex which is invested with its foundational values; the promise of a new land to make into a perfect world. This experiment, however, has been largely uncontrollable. While the foundational values of the Republic continue to shape America, there has been considerable dissonance between their intent and their effect. Furthermore, the discourses and structures which frame these values have been altered by the type of society America became as it expanded its population and industrialised. These foundational values also contain sufficient contradiction, paradox and tensional energy that there is perpetual tension, dissonance and ambiguity in the relations between idea and idea (within the mythic network) and idea and reality (in the metamorphosis of the mythic network into material forms.) The unpredictable dynamics of the culture and its continual novelty tend also to override the theoretical form of the goal or ending. In other words, in the translation of the idea into the material, which Baudrillard identifies as the special trajectory of the American impulse, there is the sense that the idea gets swallowed by the material consequences of its implementation. The accidents of the experiment can be just as significant as the intentions.

As I have noted, some aspects of what might be termed the postmodern condition, in particular processes of globalisation, both culturally and economically (although the two terms are by no means fully distinct), have a peculiarly American tinge to them. Yet, this tinge cannot be neatly periodised within an epochal version of American development. It is a mistake to assume that America is necessarily representative of the postmodern, even if it is, as Baudrillard argues, at the centre of the world in its

postmodern condition. Many of the American peculiarities which have increasingly come to dominate the commonalities implied by the notion of a global culture - say the multinational system of management with its Taylorist heritage, or the Fordist production line - have their origins not in postmodernity in its epochal sense, but the Gilded Age, that is at the summit of epochal modernity. This larger span tends to favour historical narratives of continuity rather than rupture. Yet as I have argued following Marx and Berman, this continuity has paradoxically been dedicated to the pursuit of change. The developmental links between Taylor and Henry Ford is clear, as is the link between Fordism and that icon of global culture, McDonalds. On the other hand, there are large differences in the modes of living of these periods and it would be a mistake to imply that continuity implies staticism. Rather, as Levi-Strauss has argued, specifically in relation to myth, the networks which govern these phenomena are in a constant state of becoming.[41]

As Baudrillard's notion of a concrete mythology implies, the materiality of the American mythic network is crucial. The importance of this, particularly in the context of modernity with its dynamics of industrialisation, mass production and mass consumption, is something I have argued from a theoretical perspective in Chapter One and explored in my discussion of the Gilded Age in the preceding chapter. When Baudrillard's contention of a concrete mythology is combined with Berman's and Marx's reading of modernity as perpetual revolution and Levi-Strauss' figuration of mythic systems in a state of perpetual transformation, the extent of the

[41] Claude Levi-Strauss, *From Honey to Ashes* [1966], trans. John and Doreen Weightman (Harper and Row, New York: 1973)

interpenetration of the material and the mythic in modern American culture begins to become apparent. Much of the symbolic network of modern American culture is embedded in its material fabric, its built environments, its objects, products and commodities, and most importantly the way these mediate the sort of subjects a society produces. This is a result of America's coming into being as a national entity through technology and industrialisation, which in turn has its connections with the Jeffersonian scientism of the ante-bellum era. It is important to realise that American society cannot be imagined, in Benedict Anderson's sense, as a community without the technological innovation and material development that accompanied the consolidation of its nationhood. The importance of this cannot be underestimated as it provides a perspective - particularly in terms of the way the modern and postmodern are demarcated - of extricating oneself from the impotent sense of having arrived at the disappointing endpoint of narratives of modernity which apparently had once promised so much. Even if the imagined community of America as a nation appears, from an external perspective, to have been consolidated over the 20th century, there is nonetheless a continuing sense of transformation in its material and mythic underpinnings. This can be seen, for instance, in my reading of *The Bonfire of the Vanities* below.

Finally, Baudrillard's idea of the American crisis (and it is questionable whether "crisis" fits the context) as the struggle to maintain an achieved utopia is ultimately glib, a kind of drive-by assertion, unless one allows for a concept of (s)election which extends beyond its familiar American frameworks of representative democracy and Calvinism. There is a strong argument to be made that in large societies the achievement of utopia remains a possibility open only to a representative slice of that

society. The idea of an achieved utopia which Baudrillard postulates as the condition of contemporary America has credibility only if utopia is taken as a representative notion, a condition inhabited by a certain proportion of the population. From this perspective, broad questions and struggles arise as to what proportion and what kind of people occupy the utopian strand, how fluid is the possibility of admission, and on what basis. These questions are partly addressed in the American context by the doctrines of competitive individualism and equality of opportunity, even if other factors such as class inheritance, gender and race are also crucial and sometimes contradictory determinants.[42] Yet it is also unlikely that people fully occupy utopia, rather that utopia is a state in which people participate to varying degrees, from the trust-fund child playing at art in a swank Manhattan apartment to the working man having a Saturday game of golf. As the tragic and very popular tales of the rich and famous, movie stars with drug addictions, business tycoons with suicidal children and so on remind us, material wealth, however useful, is no guarantee of happiness. Like the corporation, the achieved utopia is a limited construct. This is of course the moral fable concerning wealth that is often encountered in the work of W.D. Howells. The role of the myth of the simple homestead away from the unnecessary complications of the city (a myth that can be used against the mythic force of New York) continues as a contrasting utopian stream to the unchecked pursuit of material gain, known to the 1980s in the form of the catchphrase, "Greed is Good." Of course, this is easier if you

[42] There is a heritage of persistent cultural speculation on the exclusivity of utopian wealth in American society. F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz," Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* or the comic *Richie Rich* are examples of this. This is matched with a general fascination with the wealthy in America and their lifestyles, which is often simultaneously celebratory, envious, fascinated and destructive.

are sufficiently wealthy to be able to afford a city and a country residence as is the case with the McCoys in *The Bonfire of the Vanities,* with their Manhattan apartment and Long Island beach house.

Distinctions can be made as to the extent of the individual subject's access to and engagement with utopia. Movements such as self-help, religious cults, or the psychology of get-rich-quick schemes such as Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, which are familiar aspects of the American social landscape, promise methodologies which will grant access to a utopia that is immanent. Such movements also frame the utopian impulse in terms of competitive striving, but in a way which begins with the very Protestant (and according to Max Weber, capitalist) impulse of striving against yourself. The championing of this perspective conveniently belies the real extent to which access to the material aspects of the American utopian vision are contingent also upon other patterns of social distribution.[43]

Baudrillard's idea of America as an achieved utopia is ultimately a relative concept and a matter of belief. From the individual perspective it is doubtful whether life can ever be truly utopian. Furthermore, the belief system of American society with its emphasis upon the rights of the individual would prevent the degree of social organisation demanded by the goal of universalising utopia. However, the idea of America as achieved utopia is no more absurd as a partial reality than the idea of democracy. Representation pervades the organisation of society as an operational

[43] The difference with contemporary capitalism is that the nexus between making money and risking personal capital has continued to be eroded. For explanations of this shift see the distinction between the entrepreneurial and the new managerial classes in C. Wright Mills, *White Collar Worker: The American Middle Classes* (Oxford University Press, London: 1956) or John Ralston Saul, *Voltaire's Bastards* (Penguin: 1993) pp.358-93.

principle, particularly in the complex series of relays that administer the relationship between the symbolic and what might be described as the material or, with some trepidation yet with a fuller if intangible meaning, the "real". Representation is a way of organising large scale societies through the construction of networks, and of coping with the inevitability of social imperfection. It is a concept that can be applied beyond the context of the political system into other areas where ideals are realised but in an impure form. Baudrillard's idea of America as an achieved utopia can be saved from absurdity through the extension of representation (in its political sense) into the realm of the mythic network. However it is important again to foreground the large extent of transference between the mythic and the material in this process.

The importance of representation in all its aspects applies to the symbolic functioning of images of America as achieved utopia, most notably through what Baudrillard poetically describes as the "fantasy consecration" of the cinema (and television). Anyone who has sat under the thatched roof of a café in a village in a developing nation and watched *Dynasty* with its inhabitants has confronted the extent to which America transmits itself as a material utopia. Of course, the cinema and television are merely the latest tools of seduction in a mode of American expression which has been purveying the promise of American life for some centuries. What has changed is that no longer is this discourse attempting to seduce prospective immigrants, as for instance in the pamphlets and agents who sold (often unscrupulously) an arcadian vision of American life to European villagers on behalf of American industrialists.[44]

---

[44] See for instance the story of how the family of Jurgis Rudkis came to America in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (George Robertson, Melbourne: 1906). Nor was this practice necessarily confined to industrialists. Jonathon Raban's *Bad Land: An American Romance* (Pantheon, New York: 1996) provides a fascinating account of the equally unscrupulous turn of the century marketing of the Dakota Badlands to unsuspecting intending immigrants and American citizens alike.

That mission has long been accomplished. Now it has the benefit of offering aspects of the American life - generally in commodity form - and the symbolic status of the exchange value of an American product, Marlboro cigarettes as opposed to local cigarettes, Levi jeans, and so on. This vision naturally has an internal operation too, providing both a carrot and a yardstick in the American Dream through fostering the individual drive to succeed. Of course the individual's measure of material success, as has been discussed in Chapter Three, is totally contingent on a series which establishes their relative social position in relation to other individuals. Yet, this operation again is representative. Just as there is not enough wealth in the world for everyone to be American, there is not even enough wealth in America for every American to live comfortable bourgeois lives, let alone become the embodiment of the achieved utopia of the American Dream. In order for the series to function properly there needs to be the rich and poor, and because America's mythic network is interested in the full spectrum of possibility, then this demands the existence of extremes of rich and poor. Perhaps more than anything else this is the crisis which faces Baudrillard's sense of the achieved American utopia.

What finally has to be remembered before one embarks on the tempting course of criticism of American cultural imperialism is the far greater extent to which this imperialism works on Americans. In the body of the American individual there is a coagulation of the mythic network (which in the Foucauldian sense, produces subjects) with the experience of the material conditions of America (which force the adaptation of the individual to the environment). This complex of forces is complicated by the interpenetration of the material and the mythic. The theory this thesis has developed requires contexts before it can make sense. This is a de facto

acceptance of the limits of theory in regard to the truth, but simultaneously a declaration of support for the sort of theory that is prepared to recognise its speculative contingency. It is also an approach to theory which is apposite to the pragmatic idealism that has been a hallmark of American philosophical thought. As a gesture of allegiance to this position I intend to give this theory a final context by exploring aspects of the preceding discussion in relation to some of the fictions about New York in the 1980s.

2

Tom Wolfe, Contemporary New York Literature and the Modern American Mythic Network

Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, which first appeared in serial form over 27 installments in *Rolling Stone* magazine and was then released with significant changes as a novel in 1987, is one of the best known New York novels of the 1980s.[45] In its hardback and paperback forms it was a bestseller and it has subsequently been made into a successful film. Renowned for his adeptness at self-promotion, the publication of *The Bonfire of the Vanities* was surrounded by controversy as Wolfe - the author of and proselytiser for the New Journalism, which he argued was usurping the fictional novel - had actually turned his hand to the novel. If this was not enough to incite interest in America's reading public, then the inflammatory essay, "The Billion Footed Beast" (published in *Harper's Magazine* in 1989 and installed as the introduction to subsequent editions of the novel), which argued a return to the social realist 19th

[45] The most crucial change between the serial and hardback form was the changing of the protagonist from a writer to Sherman McCoy, Wall Street bond salesman.

century novel writing tradition, kicked up a stir in the American literary community, provoking the full spectrum of positive and negative responses.[46] In order to situate the realist novel in relation to contemporary American culture and the role literature has within it, it is worth looking at why Wolfe's arguments provoked such controversy.

Wolfe's literary politics have always been provocative and the argument in "Stalking the Billion Footed Beast" is as deliberately inflammatory as the simultaneously self-aggrandising and ground-breaking polemic of the "New Journalism." In short it is a shunning of the anti-realist, reflexive endeavours of some of the postmodern schools of fiction which became prevalent in America from the late 1950s on. Wolfe's position is ultimately a defence of the capacity of the realist novel to imagine large-scale modern communities and in particular the city, which of course is precisely the kind of novel in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* he is attempting to write. It is a defence of the 19th century big-picture realist novel and an argument for the continuing validity of it as an authorial challenge and mode of both imagining and interpreting society. Wolfe's conception of the realist novel is particularly linked to its capacity to imagine the modern western metropolis. In "The Billion Footed Beast," he cites Balzac (Paris), Dostoevsky (St Petersburg) and Dickens (London) as the literary precursors behind *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, and it is curious to note here his seemingly eurocentric, relative lack of regard for the significant American realist and naturalist tradition which precedes him. It is tempting to think that in this respect Wolfe's argument is energised by the sorts of literary repressions popularised in Harold Bloom's theory of

[46] The "Billion Footed Beast" was published in *Harpers* magazine, November, 1989, pp.45-56. References in this work refer to its replication as the introduction to *Bonfire of the Vanities*. For a representative slice of the reactions to this essay see the issue devoted to Wolfe in *Journal of American Culture*, 14(3), 1991, Fall (Bowling Green, Ohio).

the strong poet, at the cost of a degree of critical acumen in his polemic, particularly considering it is the contemporary American literary scene which is the focus of his discussion.[47]

Wolfe's argument sets itself against the reasonably familiar narrative in American literary history which sees the realist novel as having been overcome by the circumstances of postmodern American life. Wolfe locates a statement by Phillip Roth as a marker of this transition. In 1961, Roth had claimed that:

> We now live in an age in which the imagination of the novelist lies helpless before what he knows he will read in tomorrow's newspaper. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures daily that are the envy of every novelist.[48]

According to Wolfe such a lament meant that in the literary community:

> By the mid-1960s the conviction was not merely that the realistic novel was no longer possible but that American life itself no longer deserved the term real. American life was chaotic, fragmented, random, discontinuous; in a word, *absurd.*[49]

This dichotomy between the real and the absurd is of course a false one. There is nothing to suggest that the real cannot be absurd or vice versa. In terms of the realist novel, one only has to think of Dickens to realise the falsity of this division. Again, in

---

[47] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (Oxford University Press, New York: 1997).
[48] "Billion Footed Beast" p.xiii. The full text of the essay from which Wolfe quotes is Roth's "Writing American Fiction" [1961], in ed. Malcolm Bradbury, *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction* (Fontana, London: 1977) pp.32-47. This selection also contains an essay on this topic by one of the giants of the postmodern American novel see John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion" [1967], which offers an analogous position to Roth but from the perspective of literary form. See pp.70-83.
[49] "Billion Footed Beast" p.xiii.

The Bonfire of the Vanities there is much - the dinner party sequences, for instance - which is simultaneously accurate social observation and absurd. Nonetheless, there was a sense at the time when Roth wrote this comment that the world had changed and literature had to find a way to effectively change with it. Or alternatively that literature had to find a way of transcending or ignoring the absurdities and banalities of the world it was constrained in time to interact with. Wolfe's essay refers to a number of movements primarily in the American postmodern novel (albeit with significant borrowing from continental European and Latin American literary movements) that arose from the conviction that realism was neither desirable nor possible in terms of dealing with contemporary American experience.[50] He talks about Radical Disjunction, the Puppet-Masters, Neo-Fabulists and K-Mart realists, movements which can broadly be grouped into the category of metafiction.[51] Of course, it also pays to remember that at the time these movements were in their heyday, Wolfe was simultaneously arguing in *The New Journalism* for the ultra-real, the transcendence of the fictional novel by the non-fiction novel.[52] The history of literary fashion is more complicated, and Wolfe more implicated, than the timeline argument in "The Billion Footed Beast" suggests. Nonetheless Wolfe's argument is not without its partial truth. There were definitely shifts in the American novel toward the exploration of a series of highly reflexive metafictional modes of writing. Writers such as Walter Abish, John Barth, Ronald Sukenick and Donald Barthelme were particularly interested in the interrogation of the writing process itself, and an

---

[50] Obvious influences include Jorge Luis Borges, the Magic Realists, Italo Calvino and Alain Robbe-Grillet as well as the emerging poststructuralist critical theory.
[51] See Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (Methuen, London: 1984) for a useful introduction - if sometimes critically flawed by enthusiasm for its subject - to metafiction and the controversy which surrounded it.
[52] Tom Wolfe, ed., *The New Journalism* (Harper and Row, New York: 1973).

awareness of the disjunctions between language and reality and language and truth, rather than the utility of language in the depiction and interpretation of social realities. For many novelists and critics from the 1960s through to the 1980s these investigations of the novel form itself became their chief concern and playground.

However, these developments were not occurring in isolation. There were other changes in American culture which were shifting the position literature occupied within it. One factor was the increasing academicisation of literature in America. This could be seen, for example, in the culture which emerged with the growth of university creative writing schools and the employment of writers within them as teachers and writers in residence. Furthermore many metafictionalist writers were actual academics, such as John Barth, who was famously slandered by Gore Vidal as an artist to be taught rather than read.[53] This was a relatively new phenomenon in American literature, which traditionally had stronger links with journalism, but also a wide variety of non-literary professions. What this meant is that to a certain extent writers could survive by writing novels which the general public had a limited interest in, because the market they were writing for was effectively the people who decided such jobs, in other words an intellectual milieu that remained concerned with its potential to be avant-garde. While some of the metafictionalist writers did actually enjoy significant popular followings (John Barth and Frederick Barthelme being two), on the other hand a specific reading culture was created which fostered often indulgent and even solipsistic experimentation.

---

[53] Cited in Don Anderson, ed., *Enchanted Apartments, Sad Motels: Thirty Years of American Fiction* (McPhee Gribble, Melbourne: 1989) p.26.

These processes were reinforced by the gradual insinuation of poststructuralist theory as the dominant strain of "progressive" thinking in the humanities departments of American universities by the 1980s. This movement in critical theory eventually overtook in cultural significance those in experimental fiction. As part of the process of the academicisation of literature, literary theory increasingly came to be at the cutting edge of literary trends as opposed to the literature itself. This tended also to valorise the literary critic/theorist in a cabalistic manner that disenfranchised the curious layman from a participation in arguments concerning literature. Names of fashionable theorists were like intellectual totems, bandied about as badges of learning: they became status effects. Critical strategies such as deconstruction, and the opaque language their arguments were often couched in, operated to further disassociate the "literary" community from the reading public.[54] It was mostly not so much a problem of concepts - although the conceptual axioms of poststructuralism have caused huge, valid, and often crucial debates about the nature and meaning of the social world - but the inaccessibility of the language which rendered these works so difficult. Part of the blame for this language has to be attributed to the (usually) American academics who were involved in the industry of translating the predominantly French post-structuralist texts into English. In many cases there was clear evidence of a fashion for obfuscation. In both the case of metafiction and poststructuralism there is an arguable case of the ivory tower putting up barriers to entry; of trading the democratic appeal of eloquent but plainspeaking acuity for the elitist appeal of initiation into the rites of postmodern intellectual mysticism, a pattern

---

[54] I would argue, however that in the humanities now there is increasingly a recognition that this sort of behaviour was ultimately counter-productive. Recently academic luminaries such as Elaine Showalter, President of the MLA, have argued for the necessity of language accessible to the layman if the humanities is to continue to vindicate its existence in terms of the general public.

which is currently undergoing somewhat of a reversal, which can only be to the long term benefit of the humanities and literature.

The converse of this position was that literature continued to be overtaken in everyday cultural significance by the explosion of popular culture in music, television and the spread and intensification of fashion in its broadest sense. Accompanying the progressive social movements of the 60s was the extension of the commodification of the social world and the subject. These processes of commodification are considered to be a defining aspect of the postmodern or late capitalist era.[55] Culture increasingly was moving from the cerebral to the material and becoming embedded in consumable items. It was an extension of processes whose origins lie in the industrialisation of American culture in the Gilded Age, although this transition from cerebral to the material, marked particularly by the condition described by Walter Benjamin's famous phrase, "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", is one of emphases rather than absolutes. In the case of the book, the gap between the ethereal aspects of "culture" and its material manifestations was becoming increasingly blurred. The meaning of culture had lost the Arnoldian resonances of "sweetness and light." The amount of text being generated has grown astronomically. It has been argued that print culture itself is under threat from the growth in methods of electronic representation and the intensified speed and modalities of information circulation.[56] These processes have tended also to attenuate the possibility of maintaining a distinction between high and low or popular culture that retains a functional relevance to the understanding of

---

[55] See for instance David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins Of Social Change* (Blackwell, Cambridge MA.: 1989)

[56] See for instance Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies* (Faber and Faber, Boston: 1994) for a pessimistic take on the electronic age from a lover of the printed word.

cultural processes. The concepts of literature and of the institutions which consider it have been forced to adapt to this rather momentous change in circumstances.

Of course, one of the roles the novel has played in modern western culture has been to account for these sorts of changes and the tensions they produce. In the Gilded Age the emergence of the realist and naturalist novels were fuelled by the tensions created by industrialisation and the reorientation of the American mythic network this demanded. In *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, Wolfe shows an awareness of technologies of communication which have succeeded the novel's function in the imagining of contemporary communities. The heightened role of the media in society, its importance in constructing a representative reality from the mass of current events, and the way this can be manipulated (by the Reverend Bacon, for instance) are things the novel is keenly aware of. Indeed one of the striking things about the novel is its understanding of how our polity functions in terms of the media and of television in particular. While Wolfe frequently satirises this, there is no doubt of its significance. The televising of the Mayor's fracas in Harlem is shown early in the novel as common to the experience of Sherman and Kramer even before they are brought together by the accident in the Bronx. Like the novel and the newspaper, the television has become an integral technology by which the community of New York is imagined. There is not the time here to contrast the kinds of imagining these technologies facilitate, but it is crucial to recognise that we are not dealing with the replacement of the newspaper or the novel by television. The correspondence between media forms, like Wolfe's representation of the role of television in the creation of public consciousness, or alternatively translations between forms such as adaptations of novels into films or television series means that linear ideas of succession are inadequate explanations of

the complex role these media play in the imagining of community. Further, the novel's heritage - given the facility in mythic networks for the recrudescence of superseded values - means that the greater historical continuities of the American novel continue to exert influence on the patterns of American culture. Finally, the critical advantage of the juxtaposition of cultural forms also has to be considered in terms of the novel's relationship with more modern narrative media such as film and television.

There is a definite paradox in this pathology of the literary and academic scene that demands attention. At the same time as literature was getting self-reflexive and the criticism of it increasingly impenetrable, the academic bases of literature were trying to open themselves up to popular culture. The emergence of cultural studies, for instance, was a genuine attempt to accommodate popular culture within the academy. In Britain, the Cultural Studies pioneered in the 1950s and 1960s by Raymond Williams, E.P. Thompson and Dick Hebdige among others, attempted to rescue everyday working class culture from the elitism of the Arnoldian and Leavisite versions of culture. However, these critics maintained that the emerging mass consumerist culture was a threat to the organic and localised integrity of working class culture and for that reason were highly suspicious of if not openly hostile towards it. In America, on the other hand, the emergence of Cultural Studies had been preceded by American Studies, which had always been somewhat multidisciplinary, although with a leaning towards the literary. Because popular culture in America tended towards being mass culture anyway, because the American mythic network placed such a high value on the identification of the American with the modern, and because American Cultural Studies postdated the emergence of British Cultural Studies, there was never quite the same concern in the American academy with a dichotomy

between old and new modes of popular culture, as there has been in the British (and more thoroughly Marxist) tradition of cultural studies. The Cultural Studies that emerged in America was very much interested in the nature of postmodern culture, in the mass consumerism, television, film and popular music made in America that the rest of the world has come to consider the embodiment of American culture. While British Cultural Studies was predominantly Marxist in its origins, its romanticisation of extant proletarian culture (of coal mining villages for instance) and its antipathy towards mass consumer culture and the broadly progressive, bourgeois domains of fashion, American Cultural Studies was more influenced by the new left progressive movements of the 1960s, and tended to underpin itself intellectually with the adoption of structuralist and poststructuralist theory.[57]

As can be seen in his other writings, Wolfe has always been more interested in the connections between ideas and popular culture, in Cultural Studies so to speak, than in the rarefied marginalia of the literary avant-garde. Nonetheless, Wolfe's argument in "Stalking the Billion Footed Beast" is rather guilty of attempting to impose a logic of linear development onto the American novel so that he can set himself up as a reactionary subversive. Even if we are to accept his plotting of American literary history in "The Billion-footed Beast", it appears, as Jerry Varsava has argued, that

[57] My direct experience is with English Departments in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Here there were revolutions going on between people who wanted to preserve the conservative canons and critical approaches and those who were arguing for alternative canons, poststructuralism and the transformation of English Departments into Cultural Studies Departments. One of the paradoxes of this is that those who were trying to renovate and popularise the function of criticism were the ones most often using impenetrable language while those preserving the stuffy elitism often expressed themselves most clearly. This is yet another indication of how cultural phenomena are more complex than a simple dialectic and a reason for proposing models of culture which extend beyond the adversarial surfaces of ideological arguments.

making these claims in 1989 is somewhat out of step with the times.[58] Clearly the idea of the New Journalism fits neatly as an oppositional category to metafiction. But more importantly, what Wolfe's essay lacks is the recognition of the fact that during the supposed heyday of metafiction, the realist novel, however unfashionable, managed to survive, and even on occasion to prosper.[59] The sort of historical narrative Wolfe attempts to establish demands considerable selection and editing before it acquires coherence. It is a classic example of the intrinsic partiality of histories. The so-called Dirty Realism of writers such as Raymond Carver, the career of Norman Mailer, whose books have often straddled the boundary between New Journalism and the novel, the renowned works of writers such as Hubert Selby, or the emergence by the 1980s of new schools of social realism such as the Downtown writers in Manhattan, attest to the survival power of realist fiction even at its supposedly unfashionable nadir. While the grand overview of society might have been lacking to a certain extent in the American novel, realism had by no means been in the sorry state into which Wolfe puts it, in order to rescue it.

Furthermore the techniques of realism have always had a privileged relationship in the realms of popular fiction. While metafictional literature made play with the juxtaposition and jumbling of popular genres, popular fiction remained largely uninfluenced by the operations of metafiction. Even genres such as science fiction and fantasy have generally deployed the narrative strategies of realism in order to draw the

---

[58] Jerry Varsava, "Tom Wolfe's Defense of the New (Old) Social Novel; Or, The Perils of the Great White-Suited Hunter" in *Journal of American Culture*, 14(3), 1991, Fall (Bowling Green, Ohio) 35-41.
[59] Wolfe is somewhat quiet on the long-term relationship between journalism and social realism, which has been in play since Stephen Crane, Jack London and Jacob Riis. As Jonathan Raban has argued, "the longest lasting and most incestuous of the novel's many marriages and affairs has been with journalism." See "Criction", *London Magazine*, 10, 2, May 1971, p.71. I would add that this is especially the case with reference to the modern American novel.

reader into the alternative reality of their constructed fictional worlds. More obvious is the strong and continuing influence of social realism on the American crime novel. The descriptions of the mean streets of American metropolises, or the explorations of the corrupt machinery of power which frequent these novels owe much to the tradition of the social realist novel. Finally, it must also be recognised that many of the techniques and narrative strategies of realism had been recontextualised into the visual mediums of film and television. The police show, the domestic drama of the soap opera, and more recently the confection of real life T.V. all have a significant aesthetic and structural debt to the social realist novel.

In other words when Wolfe talks about the demise of realism, it is for reasons rhetorical rather than true. In itself realism has been and continues to be a crucial form in the American mythic network. Most broadly it is associated with aspects of that network such as the valorisation of plain speaking, naturalness, democratic accessibility and the idea of honest toil. Conversely it has been responsible, more than any other cultural form, for the admission of the slums and ghettos, the poor and the disenfranchised into the general understanding of America as a national community, even as it retains the middle-class as its natural milieu. When used as a mode of social critique, it is most often concerned with the nature of material inequality and questions of social justice. Although the realist canon has been criticised for the predominance of its dead middle class white male authors, it has sought (however successfully) in its quest for the real to encounter other elements of the cultures it aims to represent. It has been far more catholic in its authorship and - equally importantly - readership than many other forms of literature. Realist novels such as *The Bonfire of the Vanities* still have the ability to be bestsellers, which partly reflects their ability to

entertain with narrative, but partly also their ability to strike chords with a wide variety of readers' understandings of their or other peoples' culture. In short, social realism has proven a resoundingly effective method for making modern culture legible.

There is no clear ideological position that can be specifically imputed to social realism as an artistic form. Its adherents have been radicals such as Upton Sinclair and conservatives such as Henry James or Tom Wolfe, but most commonly people in between such as John Dos Passos or John Steinbeck, people whose political positions are frequently nearly as full of tension, oscillation and contradiction as America itself. As I have argued in the previous chapter American social realism, which includes both realism and naturalism, arose largely as a response to the conditions of industrialisation and the tensions this posed for American society and its symbolic network. Whereas some realists attempted to straddle the discrepancies between pre-industrial ethical networks and the excesses of the Gilded Age, others tried to rewrite the American mythic network by shifting the meaning of "nature" (in many ways the original term of the American mythic network) to fit it with Social Darwinism which came to philosophically underpin many aspects of modern America. Since then the realist form has proliferated to include interrogations of the institutionalised discrimination against African-Americans such as Richard Wright's pioneering *Native Son*, and chronicles of the immigrant life and of society from the perspectives of American women (the primary reading constituency of the novel), of which the oeuvre of Edith Wharton is an early example. It has not just explored the relation of the big people to the little people in American society, but built narrative connections between them, within the framework of the tensional and transformative network of

the values bequeathed by the nation's founding fathers. Yet it must also be remembered that realism began to do this as the conditions of possibility for the visions of the Founding Fathers were being erased by the scale of society which industrialisation made possible. Subsequently there is a permanent tension in realism between its affiliation with the founding myths of America, and the new representative orders and social space industrialisation created. An example of this is the almost unconscious valorisations *The Bonfire of the Vanities* places on its middle class public servants, an argument I will develop below.

While the realist novel has covered much of the terrain of America's vastly varied lives, it is important to recognise the extent to which the concerns of the social realist novel are centred in the middle classes. I have argued this extensively in the previous chapter, but it is a crucial point to keep in mind in discussions of the American social realist novel particularly. Whether it be the titillation of excess combined with a disapproving prurience in the lives of the rich and famous, or the colour and struggles of life in the ghettos and mean streets as they are safely acquired from the couch, it seems accurate to say that the "literary" novel generally has the middle-class as its anticipated readership. Even the literary negotiation of class in Marxist inspired western literature and criticism has had the middle-classes - albeit often aggressively or masochistically - as the focal point of its orientation. Yet this is not the limiting situation which the critical deployment of the term "bourgeois" often connotes. It is important to recognise that the middle-class is not an automatically homogeneous entity. Within its ranks there are broad divisions of gender, race, nationality, political persuasion and religion. Along with that set of cross-hatching complexities, there is the infinity of individual quirks and preferences which collectively constitute the

readers' taste and the multitude of ways in which the individual and collective bring themselves symbiotically into being. The middle classes are just as complex in their composition as any other stratum in society, and one furthermore which in some of its aspects has self-consciously valorised this tendency towards complication and sophistication. In other words to argue that the novel is essentially, not exclusively, but nonetheless inescapably a bourgeois form, still leaves it with an enormous wealth of possibilities. Within this sphere of possibility, the American realist novel has remained consistently fertile, as much as anything because the idea of America has also been a middle-class vision.[60]

The Bonfire of the Vanities does not constitute the salvation of realism its author would perhaps like it to be. Yet it is a fine example why social realist novels remain a valid form of cultural expression in contemporary American culture. One of Wolfe's concerns in the essay, "The Billion Footed Beast" - in addition to the plight of the realist novel per se - is the plight of the big picture realist novel. As he argues:

> The economy with which realistic fiction can bring the many currents of the city together in a single, fairly simple story was something that I eventually found exhilarating. It is a facility that is not available to the journalist, and it seems more useful with each passing month. Despite all the current talk of 'coming together.' I see the fast-multiplying factions of the modern cities trying to insulate themselves more diligently than ever before. . .So the doors close and the walls go up! It is merely another open invitation to literature, especially in the form of the novel.[61]

Basically what Wolfe is talking about here is the capacity of the novel to perform the function of imagining the community. As I have argued in Chapter Three, the novel -

---

[60] See Chapter Three, n.19.
[61] "Billion Footed Beast," pp.xxix-xxx.

and in particularly the realist novel - has been a crucial technology for the way phenomena of modernity such as the nation and the metropolis have been imagined. Most importantly, the novel has been a key technology in our facility to approximate a holistic notion of the cities and countries we inhabit. Other important contributions obviously include the refinement of cartography and the aerial overview gained over spacewith the invention of skyscrapers, balloons, aeroplanes and satellites - most crucially in tandem operation with the camera. As Hana Wirth-Nesher has argued quite rightly, neither the city nor nation can make sense until it is narrativised.[62] In the case of the city, the novel's capacity to build an approximate holistic imaginary is matched only by the city movie and the television series.[63]

This ability of the realist novel is in itself a vindication of Wolfe's antipathy towards metafictional literary fashions. In "The Billion Footed Beast" Wolfe cites the author John Hawkes, as saying "I began to write fiction on the assumption that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting, theme."[64] The contrary is true. It is precisely the novel's facility with these factors that has made it such an important part of modern western cultures. As I have argued throughout this thesis, the novel is a crucial part of the possibility of the cultures we inhabit. While its popularity may have waned due to the advent of other technologies such as film and television, it does not follow that this was due to any inadequacy of the novel form to represent culture.

---

[62] Hana Wirth-Nesher, *City Codes: Reading the Modern Urban Novel* (Cambridge UP: 1996) p.9. For further adumbration of this argument see Chapter Three.

[63] One of the wonders of modern life is the feeling you get looking out an aeroplane window as you are flying into a big city. This effect has a corollary in movies, in the aerial pan shot which city movies often open with. Two examples of many are the Steve McQueen cop film *Bullitt* set in San Francisco, or the relatively appalling film *Gridlock* which uses the plot device of the police helicopter for its aerial panoramas of New York City. In terms of the television series, obvious examples are police shows such as *NYPD Blue* or, in a more comic vein, *Seinfeld*. In both cases the peculiar ethics and modes of interaction make the city of New York a central feature in the show.

[64] "Billion Footed Beast," p.xv.

Furthermore, the novel has not simply been a technology for representing modern life, but a technology which creates community, because the communities we inhabit - due to the empirical restrictions of the individual (we can't be in more than one place at the same time for instance) - are to a great extent the products of human imagination. It is for these reasons that the novel will always be about more than mere ideology, even if it often deals with ideology. It partly explains also why the novel occupies the American mythic network in so many places.

It can be argued that the primary function of satirical novels such as *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, is (in the broad sense) to deconstruct community, to question the certainties of its construction as an imaginary, to invest the plot with inversions of the conventions of the social structure. The question then is whether the imagining of community and the satirical deconstruction of community are complicit operations. I would argue that in a number of ways they are. One of the central ambivalences of satirical modes is that they are complicit in the subjects of their ridicule. In a satirical novel, for instance, a world has to be imagined and represented even while satire is being used to deconstruct that world. From this perspective a community has to be imagined before its follies can be represented. This is evident in the case of *The Bonfire of the Vanities* which constructs a series of connections between aspects of New York society even as it pillories them. Satire as a mode is essentially grey, a tensional oscillation between putting things together and pulling them apart, and this type of operation generally demands an investment in the subject matter from the author for it to be convincing. Furthermore, it depends a great deal upon slippages or ambiguities between positive and negative representations for its maintenance of reader intrigue. At a more strictly phenomenological level, the imagining of

community is inherently unstable, being comprised of a series of shifting perspectives which commonly do not mesh together neatly. As a mode satire is energised by the dissonance generated by this clash of perspectives when they are brought together. Satire's formal investment in figures such as caricature and stereotype means that even while these characters are being deconstructed, they are nonetheless reinforced as the representative icons of communities. In *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, characters such as Detective Martin or Judge Myron Kovitsky simultaneously deconstruct and reinforce stereotypes of the American Irish and Jewish hard man respectively. They are characters represented with affection and this is partly because their phlegmatic moral complexity is most in tune with the tensional movements of the satirical mode itself. These arguments also suggest that deconstruction is a prelude to processes of reconstruction, and in critically undermining established formulations it creates space for new stories and combinations. In this way, through the refiguring of cultural connections, deconstruction is implicated in the transformative nature of the mythic network and its task of imagining community.

While I think Wolfe's effort at the broadsweeping realist novel is laudable, I do not wish to suggest that this approach to the novel is superior to, or replaces the necessity for more finely tuned, restricted and nuanced novelistic explorations of society, or even of the novel form. An important point to remember here is that ultimately the literary store of the individual reader is likely to be more complex than any individual novel. The reader is finally the most crucial part of the way novels create community. The intersections, connections, comparisons between novels; their themes, their settings, their characters and plots which exist in the minds of individual readers are the true storehouse of the novel's capacity to imagine and create community. And in

such storehouses this connects to other artistic mediums, teachings and most importantly real experience for the complex configuration of community in the individual. What Wolfe does with the broadsweep social realist novel of New York, the reader is able to do through the range of different characters, plots and settings attained by the agglomerative processes of reading. This intertextual matrix connects as well with the readers' store of characters, narratives and settings in life. In this relay between the literary and the real, the novel's particular advantages are its ability to transcend social milieu and provide fictive access to the internal states of characters with whom the reader is not intimately acquainted. In other words the novel facilitates readers' explorations of people who, in any number of ways, are different to themselves.

Interestingly enough there has been a fashion, in some contemporary New York novels, for authors to play with the fact that the fictional imaginary is ultimately in the reader's mind. The sharing of fictional entities between texts and authors hints at an imaginary which is bigger than any one book. Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, for instance, refers to *The Bonfire of the Vanities* through the use of the fictional entity, Pierce and Pierce. This occurs quite frequently among the Downtown writers. Easton Ellis novels refer not just to the characters of his other novels, but also to characters and places in novels by Jay McInerney and Tama Janowitz as well as Wolfe. It is a compliment that is returned. In this sense the idea of a parallel fictional New York extends beyond one writer, becoming an imaginary which plays with the mythic potency of New York, tending to dissolve fixed differentiations between the mythic and the material or real.

In some critical circles during the 1980s there was the idea, strongly connected to post-representational theory, that people could only write about what they had directly experienced. Mostly this theory expressed itself as a function of the critical mechanisms put in place to support what is known in America particularly as "minority literatures." You could only write as a women if you were one, as an African-American if you were one, and so on. This exclusivity - which is also a form of defensive theoretical insulation - is fundamentally problematic. While it is often the case that authors write best about what is close to their experience, there is nothing to suggest that novelists should avoid exploring what is unknown to them. It is partly the attempt to imagine the other, of building connections through fictive empathy, which allows communities and in particular multicultural communities to function reasonably harmoniously. Again this exploration of the unknown is a major reason for the popularity of reading novels. As Hana Wirth-Nesher has argued the experience of modern life is inevitably composed of a series of partial exclusions, and the mind of the urbanite is constantly inventing stories to complete the partiality of their experience. The understanding of life is in this sense a speculative, constantly shifting and contingent exercise. While it may sometimes be tempting to read this fact of exclusion from an ideological perspective, as many kinds of exclusions do have a class, gender, race or status basis, it is nonetheless inaccurate to suggest that these exclusions add up to the totality of the complicated series of arrangements which constitute a community or society.[65]

---

[65] Nor is it always the case that these sorts of exclusions can be necessarily interpreted in an ideological fashion. The division of public toilets, for instance, into male and female is one such case.

The types of narratives people listen to, read and tell about the parts of life from which they are excluded or simply don't belong are many. Some of these narratives provoke fear and hostility, others empathy, pity, envy, pride or shame. They have complex emotional resonances. To deny the opportunities broadsweep novels such as *The Bonfire of the Vanities* provide is to deny one of the ways in which the partiality of real urban life can be momentarily transcended, even if an enriched partial awareness is the outcome of the reading. While the various elements of New York society are brought together essentially through the random plot contrivance of Sherman's automobile accident in the Bronx, the sort of overview of the interaction of these social elements is important as it does satisfy the reader's curiosity and the need to imagine their connection to the broader entity of the metropolis.

I have been arguing throughout the thesis the importance of imagining community and the role of mythic networks in performing this essential task. I have outlined how the novel and in particular the American social realist novel has been an important technology in the imagining of the community of modern America. Finally, I have argued that despite the changes which have occurred in American culture, the realist novel remains an effective technology for imagining this community even if it no longer occupies the central position it once did. In the last pages of this thesis I want to consider how *The Bonfire of the Vanities* imagines the community of New York, why it considers this might still be important, but also how it replicates the predilections of the realist novel as a narrative form in the American mythic network. It should be emphasised, however, that I am not engaging here in a full critical reading of the novel. Rather I am interested in providing a partial reading which concentrates on the way *The Bonfire of the Vanities* illustrates and interacts with the idea of the

American mythic network I have constructed in this thesis, and in particular the narrative organisation of the New York community the novel imagines. Finally, I am interested in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* as a contemporary example of the American realist novel in order to make some preliminary observations, particularly in relation to Chapter Three, concerning the function of realist novels in a transformative mythic network. Broadly speaking, my approach is one oriented towards issues of the relation between cultural continuity and change in an American context. In this sense I have posited the realist form as a mode of continuity (but not a static one), through which aspects of this relationship in the American mythic network can be identified and explored.

The need for the broadsweep novel with its building of connections between disparate elements of large-scale communities can be contrasted against the policy of the privileged in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* to insulate themselves against the conditions under which the rest of the city exists.

> Insulation! That was the ticket. That was the term Rawlie Thorpe used. 'If you want to live in New York,' he once told Sherman, 'you've got to insulate, insulate, insulate,' meaning insulate yourself from those people. The cynicism and smugness of the idea struck Sherman as very au courant If you could go breezing down the FDR drive in a taxi, then why file into the trenches of the urban wars?[66]

The notion of insulation is one which tends to produce exclusion zones in the urban environment. There is a hierarchy: for instance transportation combines the notion of insulation with the powerful force of status and status operates along the trajectory

[66] *Bonfire*, pp.65-6.

determined by the degree of insulation - from the greater insulation of the car in comparison to the subway, and the greater insulation of a hire car as opposed to a taxi and finally of a limousine as opposed to a hire car (see p.369 for the politics of this.) Wolfe contrasts Sherman's generation's attitude with that of his father, the Lion of Dunning Sponget and Leach, who finds it almost a civic duty to take the subway no matter how dangerous it seems to get. The practice of insulation minimises the sense of the individual's belonging to society, and is an aspect of what various commentators have observed as a diminution in the sense of civic responsibility in postmodern American elites.[67] This change of attitude has been explored by writers such as Louis Auchinloss, whose *Diary of a Yuppie* compares and contrast the mores of two lawyers divided by a generation.[68] Indeed Sherman is aware of how his father is unimpressed by his decision to be a bondsalesman as opposed to the traditionally more respectable calling of the law. The effect of insulation on the young elites of America is perhaps most tellingly revealed in the oeuvre of Bret Easton Ellis, which is populated by materially spoilt and emotionally retarded young characters such as *American Psycho*'s Patrick Bateman. Generally the combined products of broken marriages and trust funds, these "smug and cynical" characters move through the motions of their desires with a pathological amorality that lacks any indication of a capacity for empathy (unless as a tactic), or ultimately any capacity to understand themselves. The effect of insulation is that these people are oblivious to the existence of others' lives except as props and scenery in their highly localised and minutely stratified competitive struggles for status. Contact with anyone outside of their direct

---

[67] An early observation of this can be found, for instance, in Digby Baltzell's *The Protestant Establishment* (Secker and Warburg, London: 1965). Of course, the situation has changed much since then.

[68] Louis Auchinloss, *Diary of a Yuppie* (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London: 1987).

milieu is mediated either through physical or psychological insulation, although the consequence of this is a mostly unrecognised but nonetheless pervasive anxiety at the numbness and meaninglessness of their existences. Without any emotional anchorings their personalities are totally subsumed by their quests for status through the making of the right consumption choices and, as I have argued in the discussion of *Sister Carrie* above, this is a series which, although central in the functioning of the American mythic network and the distribution of subjects in the social space, can never deliver final satisfaction with the self.[69]

It is however possible to read the plot of *The Bonfire of the Vanities* perversely as a testament to the good sense of remaining insulated. If Sherman had never gone into the Bronx, none of his problems would have happened; the Master of the Universe would never have been brought to his knees. Indeed the argument can be taken further. If Sherman had remained comfortably ensconced in monogamous Waspishness and not taken Maria Ruskin, made-good southern white trash whose "game. . .is men," as his mistress, then his life may well have continued to be highly profitable and relatively banal.[70] Yet while the plot can be interpreted in this light it remains quite clear that the novel holds the idea of insulation with little regard. It is comfortable, but not what the stuff of character is all about.

It is when the idea of insulation is brought up against other elements of New York's mythic network, that the reader gets a clearer idea of how the novel distributes its preferences. While Sherman McCoy functions as the novel's obvious protagonist, and

---

[69] See Chapter Three, section five.
[70] *Bonfire of the Vanities*, p.657.

while there is an ill-fitting, almost tragic sense of fatal flaw or overreaching in the relationship between his character and his fate, the true heroes in the novel are those who know how to negotiate the grim realities of the New York streets. Interestingly, these streetwise characters are predominantly Irish, or if they are not, they want to be. In the Bronx District Attorney's office, both Andriutti and Kramer, Italian and Jewish respectively, want to emulate the peculiar stubborn Irish machismo emanating from characters such as Jimmy Caughey and Detective Martin. It is the hard-nosed, no-backward stepping no-nonsense, but basically fair-minded Detective Martin (along with Judge Myron Kovitsky) whom the novel presents in the best light. In a novel whose characters are dominated by their quests for money, sex, publicity and status, these characters perform their underpaid public service positions with a pragmatic doggedness and tough pride. Although Wolfe has claimed in interviews to like New York, because it is "the city of ambition," in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* it is the characters who lack this surfeit of personal ambition who are tinged with the heroic.[71] What this suggests is the strength of the American mythic network's and the realist novel's affiliation with the middle-class. Without necessarily realising it Wolfe has posited a measure of ethical and pragmatic heroism, which would not be out of place in the realist novels of W.D. Howells. This evidences the strength with which the American realist novel is embedded in aspects of the American mythic network.

Another perspective that emerges in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* is the sense of New York as a conglomerate of tribes. There are the Irish, the Wasps, the Jews, the Italians, the Hispanics and African-Americans. This is not surprising in itself; but there are

---

[71] Bonnie Angelo and Tom Wolfe (interview), "Master of His Universe," *Time*, February 13, 1989, p.34.

several interesting theories which surround Wolfe's notion of the tribal metropolis. The first is encountered at the beginning of the novel where the Mayor is under siege from the Reverend Bacon's people at a civic meeting in Harlem. The novel provides us with the Mayor's internal dialogue as the meeting is gradually degenerating into the semblance of a riot.

> It'll be on TV. The whole city will see it. They'll love it. Harlem rises up! What a show! Not the hustlers and the operators and the players rise up - but Harlem rises up! All of black New York rises up! He's only Mayor for some of the people! He's the Mayor of White New York! Set fire to the mutt! The Italians will watch this on TV, and they'll love it. And the Irish. Even the Wasps. They won't know what they're looking at. They'll sit in their co-ops on Park and Fifth and East Seventy-second Street and Sutton Place, and shiver with the violence of it and enjoy the show. Cattle! Birdbrains! Rosebuds! Goyim! You don't even know, do you? Do you really think this is your city any longer? Open your eyes! The greatest city of the twentieth century! Do you think money will keep it yours?[72]

The Mayor's purported inner voice blurs curiously in this passage with the narrator's, mainly in the Mayor's frequent consideration of himself in the third person.[73] This tirade is later qualified by the Mayor with the admission: "Completely crazy, these things roaring through his head! Absolutely paranoid!"[74] However, because of the transition from the Mayor to the narrator as the holder of these opinions, this qualification tends to lack resonance and the idea remains in play. What underlies the Mayor's argument is the contrast between sheer demographics and those in control of financial power. In a sense this contrast is somewhat like the Gramscian idea of hegemony, but again the approximations of ideological analysis do not go far enough

---

[72] *Bonfire of the Vanities*, p.13.
[73] One of the weaknesses of Wolfe's writing is his lack of touch with the internal monologues of his characters. This tends to produce a cartoonish or two-dimensional effect.
[74] *Bonfire of the Vanities*, p.14.

towards fully realising the grey and paradoxical complexities of the situation. It is a democratic anomaly that the Mayor continue to be in power, much as it is also an anomaly that the Wasps still wield so much power in New York. The Mayor's paranoia is a democratically elected official's paranoia of democracy. What is also interesting is the way the Mayor's argument suggests the extent to which contemporary consciousness is relayed through television. According to the Mayor those whose social power is under threat will watch it on TV at home and enjoy the spectacle. The irony of his exclamation, "Open your eyes!" is that their eyes are open, albeit in front of the television. This suggests the importance of the television in the way subjects imagine their community: televisual coverage of events comes to represent the real, particularly because it is a medium of imagining the community which co-exists comfortably with urban practices of insulation.[75] Yet as Wolfe's glib satirical construction of the media beat-up at the core of the Henry Lamb protests in the projects displays, there is considerable slippage between the fabrication of televisual reality and the realities of the situations themselves. What is also clear, however, is that a functional demarcation between the two is incapable of being sustained. The fabricated realities of television have a real impact in the community the novel represents. In other words the simulacra and the actual, the sensationalised and the factual, the staged and the real are mutually constitutive of each other. In this way, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* seems to suggest that the imagining of community is a tensional process in terms of both its contents and its forms.

---

[75] This mode of armchair imagining also has relevance to the practice of reading books, although the imaginative effort of reading a book as opposed to watching television may mitigate this effect to an extent.

An interesting corollary to the Mayor's paranoiac logic is the argument the Reverend Bacon utilises in the notion of "steam control" as an explanation to Edward Fiske for his murky use of Episcopal childcare funds.[76] Bacon suggests to Fiske that the capital he has misappropriated is performing useful work in helping to prevent the undercapitalised masses from embarking on a trajectory of violent overthrow. If you allow enough people to become stakeholders in the status quo, argues Bacon, then society is less likely to explode. Of course Bacon's argument is depicted by Wolfe as a rhetoric which shields Bacon's feathering of his own nest, as is evidenced by his familiarity in dealing with Pierce and Pierce.[77] Yet the framework which both Bacon and the Mayor use also has - once the political imperative of instigating a sense of crisis is removed - a potential for gradual succession, based upon the weight of sheer demographics and the sense of New York as a continually evolving arena. The geographical and ethnic affiliations of New York are constantly shifting at unpredictable speeds. The Bronx, for instance, once "the summit of the Jewish [American] dream" is now an urban wilderness which Kramer experiences from the relative safety of the Bronx County Building. Here, insulation is apparently a necessity for those who work for the state. The Reverend Bacon's argument is that once you lose control of an area you lose control of the capital invested in its development. The opposite of this is, of course, gentrification, the return of the well-to-do to the inner-

[76] *Bonfire of the Vanities*, pp.159-79.

[77] This reflects a contemporary dilemma in the left, especially in communities with wide income disparities and high costs of living such as New York, as to what balances can be struck between private gain and public service. While it is consistent to expect someone like Sherman McCoy to be rich, Wolfe suggests it is hypocritical for someone like Bacon to become rich. On the other hand there is the figure of Larry Kramer, whose job as an Assistant District Attorney barely enables him to support a wife and child. In an overarching status system demarcated by the ability to consume, there is a serious practical problem at the level of the individual with the virtues of ideological consistency. This problem evidences the continued resonance of the mythic tension between republican virtue and Social Darwinist logic which I have discussed in Chapter Two. While Wolfe's deployment of the realist form reconstitutes this tension, the satirical dialectic of his representation of leftist characters in *Bonfire* fails to adequately deal with this, even if he is formally aware of the issue.

cities of America, which is also a feature of the shifting geographies of American life in the 1980s, and of parts of Manhattan in particular. The conditions of the Bronx and Harlem as they are somewhat apocalyptically presented in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* can be contrasted with contemporaneous New York novels depicting the tensions of urban renewal in places such as the Lower Eastside which is captured for instance in Joel Rose's *Kill the Poor*.[78] The question of who owns New York in terms of geographical possession is overlapping but different to that of who owns the capital radiating from New York. Both are different again but related to the way the symbolic and mythic networks of New York and America continue to intricately mutate.

The idea of demographic succession which the novel implies without actually showing - the long term picture is lost in the short time frame of the action - is complicated by the cross-hatching of cultural boundaries, something which increases the inadequacy of the strictly ideological as an explanatory rubric for American society. An example of this is how Detective Goldberg, whose name connotes the essence of Jewishness, has probably become Irish by osmosis because of the Irish heritage of the homicide squads and specifically his proximity to Detective Martin.[79] Meanwhile in the upper echelons of society, Sherman is insulted by the sort of people who constitute contemporary "society" and the lack of attention they pay to his merchant banking Wasp pedigree. At the Bavardage's, Sherman resents his apparent lack of standing in what passes in the novel for internal monologue:

> The idiots! Human specks! What is this business of groveling before dancers, novelists and gigantic fairy opera singers? They're nothing but court jesters,

[78] Joel Rose, *Kill the Poor* (Atlantic Monthly Press, New York: 1988).
[79] *Bonfire of the Vanities*, p.212.

> nothing but light entertainment for. . .The Masters of the Universe, those who push the levers that move the world . . .and yet these idiots worship them as if they were pipelines to the godhead. . .They didn't even want to know who he was. . .and wouldn't even be capable of understanding, even if they had. . .[80]

Sherman is shocked, for instance, that a newspaper gossip columnist and a real estate broker would be joining him at the dinner table, to which his mistress, Maria (herself an archetypal parvenu) replies, "You're behind the times, Sherman."[81] Concomitantly Sherman's father is unimpressed about Sherman having chosen the bond market rather than law as a profession. It is difficult furthermore to ascertain from an external perspective why the selling of real estate should carry less kudos than the carrying of bonds. Nonetheless there is evidence of a change in values at the upper end of the social strata and a reconfiguration of the mythic network and distribution of people to reflect this. The responsibility enshrined in the mythos of the Protestant ethic has lost weight against the imperatives of making money and displaying it. In the novel this shift in emphasis manifests itself in a number of ways. At the tables of "high society" it can be seen most obviously in the cult of celebrity which Sherman despises so heartily. Again as I have argued in previous chapters, it must be remembered that the late 20th century American cult of the celebrity is a culmination of a process whose origins lie in the Gilded Age, which again shows continuity of aspects of the modern American mythic network. The strangely fawning attitude of Gene Lopwitz towards the hillbilly tenor, Bobby Shaflett, including the loan of his private jet and the interruption of a crucial business meeting to point Bobby towards the best bottle in its aerial cellar, is a memorable example of this.

---

[80] *Bonfire of the Vanities*, p.380.
[81] *Bonfire of the Vanities*, p.391.

The Bonfire of the Vanities is acutely attuned to the reverberations of status within the varieties of New York society. Responding in an interview to the observation that Americans seem obsessed by status, and that *The Bonfire of the Vanities* and its author are status obsessed, Wolfe argued that:

> Status is an influence at every level. We resist the notion that it matters, but it's true. You can't escape it. You see it in restaurants - not just in New York. People seem willing to pay any amount to be seen at this week's restaurant of the century. It's all part of what I call plutography: depicting the acts of the rich. . .But status isn't only to do with the rich. Status is fundamental, an inescapable part of human life.[82]

Wolfe of course is not the only person to notice the status wars going on in New York City in the 1980s. Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* is an almost encyclopaedic anatomy of the status politics of yuppie consumption. Wolfe has called plutography what Thorstein Veblen called conspicuous consumption some ninety years before. The other members of the social elite (in addition to the celebrities) are the immensely rich, such as Arthur Ruskin, the Jew who made his fortune flying Muslims to Mecca and Gene Lopwitz, who uses Pierce and Pierce's financial weight as an extension of his personal social status. The conspicuous displays at socialite dinner parties such as the Bavardages and in the design of Sherman's flat are obvious examples of this conspicuous consumption. According to Wolfe, in the 1960s and 1970s there was a reluctance of people to display their material wealth. However the 1980s saw a return to what Wolfe saw as a more "normal" open attitude towards affluence. As in the Gilded Age, to be extremely wealthy was to be a celebrity, a representative of the

[82] Bonnie Angelo and Tom Wolfe (interview), "Master of His Universe," *Time*, February 13, 1989, p.34.

freedom to consume in the industrialised world. The public fascination which accompanied the lives of the robber barons, of which Dreiser's Cowperwood trilogy is perhaps the most comprehensive literary exploration, was a kind of plutography matched by Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* and the extensive coverage of the lives of people like the Trumps throughout the course of the 1980s.[83]

But Wolfe is not only interested in status as it pertains to the rich. As James Smith has noted in his valuable comparison between Wolfe and Dreiser:

> Whether status is defined by Drouet's flashy jewelry, Roland Auburn's snow white Reeboks, or Hurstwood's and McCoy's respective social positions, the quest for higher status is critical in both *Sister Carrie* and *Bonfire*. In each novel, we see examples of unfulfilled characters longing for something better, and in each case, the longings take on definite material dimensions.[84]

As I have argued in previous chapters, the realm of status constitutes the material manifestation of the mythic network - with its function of legitimising the distribution of the social space - through the conspicuous consumption of objects made available by the demand generating, growth imperatives of capitalist production. Status is precisely a mode of imagining community in the way individuals organise themselves into a relational series based upon their capacity to consume, and the choices they make in exercising this capacity. *Bonfire* is particularly strong in the way it describes the quest for status and the way this organises the social structure of New York. However, it is important to note that status is by no means a linear operation, whereby

[83] This was evident in Australia too, with the newsworthiness of the lives of Alan Bond, Kerry Packer Christopher Skase, Robert Holmes a Court etc., and with TV shows such as *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, as well as the fascination worldwide with lists such as the Forbes 100.
[84] James F.Smith, "Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*: A Dreiser Novel for the 1980s," *Journal Of American Culture*, Vol.2, Fall, 1991, 43-51, 45.

goods are organised in a strict hierarchy of which every person from the top to bottom of society is aware. The gradations of status in one group of people might be invisible to those on the outside, whether it be the intricacies of sneakers for gang members or being able the recognise a designer's work in a Park Avenue apartment. Nonetheless, there remains a degree of vertical recognition, as is evidenced by the reaction of Detectives Martin and Grossberg when they visit chez McCoy. The visit is interesting in the way the Detectives' awareness of McCoy's superior status is composed of a combination of deference, disdain and envy, which is subsequently manifested in the way Martin sits on McCoy's desk and exacerbates Sherman's discomfort with the legal authority of his position, his Irish machismo and the cheeky insubordination of someone aware of his status as a social inferior.

The Bonfire of the Vanities shows, contrary to Smith's argument, that status is not always material. As much as anything else status can be attitude. Martin's Irish machismo is clearly a marker of a certain moral status. Attitude is also why all the young black men are so reluctant to abandon the swagger of the "pimp roll," even at the risk of alienating the juries who are deliberating on their verdicts. In another instance Kramer and his wife are relieved to establish a feeling of superiority over their expensive English nanny, when she reveals herself as a bigot:

> These days the thing about bigotry was, it was undignified. It was a sign of Low Rent origins, of inferior social status, of poor taste. So they were the superiors of their English baby nurse after all. What a fucking relief.[85]

[85] *Bonfire*, p.42.

This little episode reveals how complex and contradictory patterns of status can be. While, the employer/employee relationship should be clear in terms of status, the Kramers are concerned because they are not directly employing the baby nurse (Kramer's mother-in-law is), because she is obviously used to operating in far more salubrious surroundings, and also because she is English. There is residual status in being English throughout the novel. Edward Fiske admires the British art of conversation at Leicester's, when all the Brits are doing is charming Americans, so they can fleece them. Similarly Gene Lopwitz displays a love for the English, from the design of his office to watching a cricket match. In terms of the American mythic network this can be characterised as a yearning after the origin and the status that is conferred by the idea of Englishness as the origin of American culture. It is also perhaps representative of a desire to escape the inherent insecurity of the mobile American status system and move into the nuanced permanency of the British system of class.

The Kramers discover that their child's nurse is a bigot and they are relieved. An interesting counterpoint to this scene is where the Kramers are having lunch with Larry's former college classmates in a restaurant in SoHo. At this lunch Wolfe introduces the reader to the status system of the trendy left-wing cultural elites. Greg Rosenwald has the job of a writer for the *Village Voice* and as a consequence, "anytime the others had a comment to make, they looked at Greg when they made it."[86] Greg, of course, is playing the role of the inner-city sophisticate with his Pus Casserole T-shirt and sneering disdain for the people who come to SoHo from Jersey

---

[86] *Bonfire of the Vanities*, p.262.

every Saturday for lunch. Of course Greg is as big a snob in his own world as Pollard Browning is in his. Greg's status as a writer for *The Voice* has landed him a beautiful young WASP girlfriend called Mary-Ann, which makes Kramer even more envious of his former classmate. In trying to regain some conversational territory Kramer reverts to his "one strong suit, Macho Insider from the Bronx."[87] However while competing with Greg he goes too far and finds the table giving him the look reserved for "someone who turns out to be a covert reactionary."[88] The contrast to this is Kramer's determination not to appear too much like a liberal in the company of Detectives Martin and Goldberg. In Kramer, Wolfe has created a character who is liminally situated between different realms and their conflicting codes of status. He wants to be tough like Detective Martin or Judge Myron Kovitsky, yet trendy and popular like Greg Rosenwald, yet he cannot even face a law school buddy of his, Andy Heller, who he once felt superior to, because as a civil servant he earns only $36 000 a year while his friend is being picked up in an Audi. This shows that the status network is tensional and multifarious rather than a linear sequence which applies across the gamut of New York society. If it were not like this and everyone continued for their lives to want the same thing as everyone else then it would be unlikely that society would survive. Instead status is a complex multivalent arena comprised of differing values, material and immaterial aspirations and ways of being which is crucial to the way society is imagined into a set of interacting communities.

The Bonfire of the Vanities' exploration of status in contemporary New York life is proof of the continuing validity of the realist novel as a form of social understanding.

---

[87] *Bonfire of the Vanities,* p.266.
[88] *Bonfire of the Vanities,* p.267.

Furthermore, the continuation of the form enables the reader to gain an understanding of the changes and continuity in the American mythic network. Realist novels are also effective at creating community. In their construction and critique of the representative orders which administer the idea of community in mass society, they are a valuable cultural technology. Like the realist novels of the Gilded Age, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* creates an imaginary of aspects of American society that is a vindication of the broadsweep realist novel as a form with an important heritage and future in the American mythic network and consequently in the imagining and interpreting of American society.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have looked at how mythic perspectives on modern American culture generate interpretative possibilities which ideological perspectives on culture often preclude. While there may be some overlap between the possibilities these perspectives generate, the mythological perspective - in its willingness to consider modern western society as just one of the possible forms societies take - allows an openness towards the idiosyncratic, non-rational connections at work in forming the distinctness of modern American society. This is something that ideology - with its binary inclinations, teleological implications and territorial ambitions - fails to adequately provide. The conceptual tool of a tensional mythic network is better equipped towards an understanding of the relays between cultural discourses and practices, which are just as important to the investigation of issues of national identity as the consideration of these phenomena in isolation.

My initial problem with ideology derives from my training in literary criticism. While it is not necessarily always the case, ideological readings of literary texts have shown themselves far too often to be reductive in their pursuit of solipsistic political truths. Literary texts are ultimately depleted when they are critically hijacked as evidentiary mechanisms in the vindication of a priori ideological positions. One of the attractions of the mythic perspective I have constructed is that it restores the rich complexity of the literary form to the analysis of texts, without obviating the capacity to critically engage with the world. This benefit is compounded in turn by a recognition of how

literature and the criticism of it have a multivalent relationship to the broader domain of culture itself, which I have tried to demonstrate in my analyses of texts here. I have tried to trace aspects of this complexity by my analysis of how literature relates to the American mythic network and the distribution of social space, by its ability to imagine and critique community, and its status as a commodity and a mode of delineating social distinction. While the operation of the literary cultural complex in American culture tends to be predominantly centred in middle-class values, a mythic perspective obviates the need to figure this in negative terms, instead permitting the exploration of why this might be the case, and how it can be related to the centrality of ideas of the middle in the American mythic network. In turn an awareness of the bourgeois conditions of production in the academic practice of the humanities and the paradoxes and ambivalences this entails, is also crucial to the reflexive articulation of the value of the humanities and their "untimeliness" in the increasingly hostile environment of the short term focus, market driven thinking of the contemporary social world.[1] Here again, the deployment of the mythic perspective, with its affinity for broad historical vistas and its recognition of the complex relationship between continuity, recrudescence, change and the naturalisation of change is a useful corrective and strategy of resistance against myopic emphases upon the significance of ruptures and revolutions.

Finally, if the mythic perspective tends to restore literary texts to their rightful complexity, it can also be argued that it does this also for culture in general. The

[1] The term is Friedrich Nietzsche's but my use of it is aimed at Simon During's rather glib acceptance of market reform in his article, "Teaching Culture" in the *Australian Humanities Review* (August 1997) at www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/Issue-August-1997.

mythic perspective offers the potential for a positive appropriation of what Gianni Vattimo has described as "the weakened condition of truth in contemporary thought" and the recognition of relativity in the organisation of social worlds.[2] As such it is more capable of appreciating the rich irrationality of human existence, the stubbornness of the implausible and the role of accidents and coincidences in the formation of the structures which govern our social lives. While I have concentrated on a mythic approach to America in this work with an emphasis upon its literary practices it is my hope and my belief that aspects of my investigation will be translatable across contexts into the exploration of other cultures and other cultural forms.

It is worth remarking, however, that while the work conducted in this thesis does not constitute a series of exhaustive analyses of literary texts, it is work that has its beginnings in literature and that has great faith in the value of literature as an enriching technology for comprehending the world. As such my intention is also to expand upon the ways literature and literary criticism can be situated within the broader cultural complexes of American culture and interdisciplinary practice in the humanities.

---

[2] Gianni Vattimo, "Myth and the Destiny of Secularization," in *Social Research*, Vol.52, No.2 (Summer 1985) 347-362, 350.

Bibliography

Notes – Unless otherwise indicated all editions used are original publications. In the case of translated works or use of editions other than a first edition, the original date of the work's publication appears in brackets after the title. Absent place of publication refers to simultaneous publication of the same edition in multiple places, for instance (Penguin: xxxx).

Alger, Horatio jr, *Ragged Dick and Struggling Upward* [1867 in serial, 1868 in book], intro. Carl Bode (Penguin: 1985).

Altick, Richard, *Writers, Readers, and Occasions: Selected Essays on Victorian Literature and Life* (Ohio State UP, Columbus: 1989).

Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, London and New York: 1993).

Anderson, Don, ed., *Enchanted Apartments, Sad Motels: Thirty Years of American Fiction* (McPhee Gribble, Melbourne: 1989).

Arieli, Yehoshua, "Individualism and National Identity" in eds R. Curry and L. Goodheart, *American Chameleon: Individualism in Trans-national Context* (Kent State University Press, Ohio: 1991).

Auchinloss, Louis, *Diary of a Yuppie* (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London: 1987).

Auerbach, Eric, *Mimesis* [1946], trans. Willard Trask (Princeton UP, Princeton: 1953).

Auster, Paul, *In the Country of Last Things* (Faber, London: 1989).

Bailyn, Bernard, *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass: 1967).

Bakthin, Mikhail, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* [1975], trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. Michael Holquist (University of Texas Press, Austin and London: 1981).

Ball, Terence, *Reappraising Political Theory: Revisionist Studies in the History of Political Thought* (Clarendon Press, Oxford: 1995).

Ball, Terence, James Farr and Russell Hanson, eds, *Political Innovation and Social Change* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York: 1989).

Baltzell, Digby, *The Protestant Establishment* (Secker and Warburg, London: 1965).

Bannister, Robert, *Social Darwinism: Science and Myth in Anglo-American Social Thought* (Temple University Press, Philadelphia: 1979).

Barth, John, "The Literature of Exhaustion" [1967], in ed. Malcolm Bradbury, *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction* (Fontana, London: 1977)

Barthes, Roland, "Change the Object Itself" in *Image Music Text*, essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath (Flamingo, London: 1977).

, "Myth Today" in *Mythologies* [1957], trans. Annette Lavers (Jonathan Cape, London: 1972).

Bataille, George, *The Accursed Share*, Vol.1 [1949], trans. Robert Hurley (Zone Books, New York: 1988).

Baudrillard, Jean, *Fatal Strategies* [1983], trans. P. Beitchman and W.G.J. Niesluchowski, ed. J. Fleming (Semiotext(e), New York: 1990).

, *In The Shadow of the Silent Majorities* [1982], trans. Paul Foss, John Johnston and Paul Patton (Semiotext(e), New York: 1983).

, *A Critique Of the Political Economy of the Sign* [1972], trans. Charles Levin (Telos Press, St Louis Mo.: 1981).

, *America* [1986], trans. Chris Turner (Verso, London: 1989).

, "The Anorexic Ruins" in eds D. Kamper and C. Wulf, *Looking Back at the End of the World* (Semiotext(e)), New York: 1989).

Becker, Carl, *The Declaration of Independence* [1922] (Vintage, New York: 1942).

Bell, Daniel, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Free Press, New York: 1962).

, "Technology, Nature and Society: The Vicissitudes of Three World Views and the Confusion of Realms" in Bell, Daniel, *Sociological Journeys: Essays 1960-80*, (Heinemann, London: 1980).

Bell, Michael, *Literature, Modernism and Myth* (Cambridge University Press: 1997).

Bellah, Robert, *The Good Society* (New York: 1991).

Bentham, Jeremy, "A Fragment on Government" [1776], in *A Fragment on Government and Principles of Morals and Legislations*, ed. W. Harrison (Basil Blackwell, Oxford: 1948).
Bercovitch, S., and M. Jehlen, *Ideology and Classic American Literature* (Cambridge University Press, New York: 1986).

Berman, Marshall, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (Simon and Schuster, New York: 1982).

Berube, Michael, *Public Access: Literary Theory and American Cultural Politics* (Verso, London: 1994).

Birkerts, Sven, *The Gutenberg Elegies* (Faber and Faber, Boston: 1994).

Bledstein, Burton J., *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (W.W. Norton, New York: 1976).

Bloom, Allan, *The Closing of the American Mind* (Simon and Schuster, New York: 1987).

Bloom, Harold, *The Anxiety of Influence* [1973], 2nd edition (Oxford University Press, New York: 1997).

Bobbitt, Philip, *Constitutional Interpretation* (Blackwell, Oxford: 1991).

Borus, Daniel, *Writing Realism: Howells, James and Norris in the Mass Market* (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill: 1989).

Boudon, Raymond, *The Analysis of Ideology* [1986], trans. Malcolm Slater (Polity Press, Cambridge: 1989).

Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* [1979], trans. R. Nice (Harvard UP, Cambridge Mass.: 1984).

Bowlby, Rachel, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola* (Methuen, New York: 1985).

Bowman, Scott, *The Modern Corporation and American Political Thought: Law, Power and Ideology* (Penn State Press, University Park PA: 1996).

Boyle, T. Coraghessan, *The Tortilla Curtain* (Viking, New York: 1995).

Bradbury, Malcolm, *The Modern American Novel* (Oxford University Press: 1992).

———, ed., *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction* (Fontana, London: 1977).

Brooker, Peter, *New York Fictions: Modernity, Postmodernism, the New Modern* (Longman, New York and London: 1996).

Bruchey, Stuart, "The Historical Development of the Corporation in the United States" in eds A. Chandler, et al., *The Changing Economic Order: Readings in American Business and Economic History* (Harcourt, Brace and World, New York: 1968).

Buchan, James, *Frozen Desire* (Picador, London: 1997).

Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1957* (Bureau of the Census, Washington: 1957).

Cahn, Steven M., *Classics of Modern Political Theory* (Oxford University Press: 1997).

Campbell, Joseph, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* [1949], 2nd edition (Princeton University Press: 1968).

Carafiol, Peter, *The American Idea: Literary History* (Oxford University Press: 1991).

Carnegie, Andrew, "The Advantages of Poverty" in *The Gospel of Wealth and Other Timely Essays* [1891] (Doubleday, Doran and Co., New York: 1933).

Carey, James, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Culture* (Unwin Hyman, Boston: 1989).

Carter, Paul, *Revolt Against Destiny: An Intellectual History of The United States* (Columbia University Press, New York: 1989).

Cashman, Sean, *America in the Gilded Age* (New York University Press: 1984).

Cawelti, John, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man: Changing Concepts of Success on America* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1965).

Ceaser, James, *Reconstructing America* (Yale University Press, New Haven: 1997).

Chandler, A., ed., *The Changing Economic Order: Readings in American Business and Economic History* (Harcourt, Brace and World, New York: 1968).

Clark, Robert, *History, Myth and Ideology in American Fiction, 1823-52* (Macmillan, London: 1984).

Cohen, Michael Lee, *The Twenty-Something American Dream: A Cross-Country Quest for a Generation* (Plume, New York: 1993).

Commager, Henry Steele, *The Search for a Usable Past* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York: 1967).

, *The American Mind* (Bantam Books, New York: 1970).

Cords, N. and P. Gerster, eds, *Myth and the American Experience*, Vol.1 (Glencoe Publishing, Encino CA: 1978).

Corse, Sarah, *Nationalism and Literature: The Politics of Culture in Canada and the United States* (Cambridge University Press: 1997).

Curti, Merle, *American Paradox: The Conflict of Thought and Action* (Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick NJ.: 1956).

, *The Growth of American Thought*, (Harper and Row, New York: 1964).

Davidson, Cathy, *Revolution and the Word: the Rise of the Novel in America* (Oxford University Press, New York: 1986).

Doueff, Michele le, *The Philosophical Imaginary* [1980], trans. Colin Gordon (Athlone Press, London: 1989).

Doty, William G., *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals* (University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa: 1986).

Dreiser, Theodore, *Sister Carrie* [1900] (Penguin: 1981).

, *The Financier* [1912] (Constable, London: 1927).

, *The Titan* [1914] (Constable, London: 1928).

, *The Stoic* [1947] (Signet, New York, 1981).

D'Souza, Dinesh, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (The Free Press, New York: 1991).

During, Simon, "Teaching Culture" in the *Australian Humanities Review* (August 1997) at www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/Issue-August-1997.

Elias, Norbert, *The Society of Individuals* [1987], trans. Edmund Jephcott (Basil Blackwell, Oxford: 1991).

Etzioni, Amitai, *The Spirit of Community: Rights, Responsibilities, and the Communitarian Agenda* (Crown Publishers, New York: 1993).

Farr, James, "Conceptual Change and Constitutional Innovation," in eds J.G.A. Pocock and Terence Ball, *Conceptual Change and the Constitution* (University Press of Kansas, Lawrence: 1998).

Fiedler, Leslie, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (Criterion Books, New York: 1960).

Fisher, Philip, *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (Oxford University Press: 1985).

Fitzgerald, F. Scott, *The Great Gatsby* [1925] (Penguin, Harmondsworth: 1950).

, *The Diamond as Big as the Ritz and Other Stories* [1922] (Penguin, Harmondsworth: 1962).

Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol.1 [1976], trans. Robert Hurley (Allen Lane, London: 1979).

, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* [1969], trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (Pantheon, New York: 1972).

Frank, Tibor, ed., *The Origins and Originality of American Culture: Papers Presented at the International Conference in American Studies, Budapest, 9-11 April, 1980* (Akademiai Kiado, Budapest: 1984).

Fromm, Harold, *Academic Capitalism and Literary Value* (University of Georgia Press, Athens: 1991).

Gane, Mike, *Baudrillard: Critical and Fatal Theory* (Routledge, London: 1991).

Geertz, Clifford, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books, New York: 1973).

Gould, Eric, *Mythical Intentions in Modern Literature* (Princeton UP: 1981).

Graff, Gerald, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1987).

Guillory, John, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1993).

Hall, Stuart, "The Social Production of News," in *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (Macmillan, London: 1978).

Harvey, David, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Blackwell, Oxford: 1990).

Hawkins, Mike, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860-1945: Nature as Model and Nature as Threat* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 1997).

Hiaasen, Carl, *Skintight* (Pan, London: 1991).

Hobbes, Thomas, *The Leviathan* [1651] (Scolar Press, Menston: 1969).

Hofstadter, Richard, *The Progressive Historians* (Knopf, New York: 1969).

, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Beacon Press, Boston: 1955).

Howells, William Dean, *The Rise Of Silas Lapham* [1885], intro. Kermit Vanderbilt (Penguin:1983) .

, *The Hazard of New Fortunes* [1890] (Signet, New York: 1965).

, "James's *Hawthorne*" [1880], in ed. Edwin Cady, *W.D. Howells as Critic* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London and Boston: 1973).

, "New York Low Life in Fiction" [1891], in ed. Edwin Cady, *Criticism and Fiction* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London and Boston: 1973).

, "The Politics of American Authors" [1902], in *Literature and Life* (Harper and Bros, London and New York: 1902).

Hume, David, *Of The Original Contract* [1748], in ed. Steven M. Cahn, *Classics of Modern Political Theory* (Oxford University Press: 1997).

Jaffa, Harry V., *Original Intent and the Framers of the Constitution* (Regnery Gateway, Washington DC, Lanham MD: 1994).

James, Henry, *Hawthorne* (Macmillan, London: New York: 1887).

Jameson, Fredric, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Verso, London: 1991).

Jefferson, Thomas, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson,* 10 Vols, ed. Paul Ford (Putnam, London and New York: 1904-5).

Jehlen, Myra, *American Incarnation* (Harvard University Press: 1986).

, "The Novel and the American Middle Class" in eds S. Bercovitch and M. Jehlen, *Ideology and Classic American Literature* (Cambridge University Press, New York: 1986).

Jewett, Robert, and John S. Lawrence, *The American Monomyth* (Anchor Press/Doubleday, New York: 1977).

Kammen, Michael, *Spheres of Liberty: Changing Perceptions of Liberty in American Culture* (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison: 1986).

, *A Machine that Would Go of Itself: The Constitution in American Culture* (Knopf, New York: 1986).

, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York: 1991).

, *Changing Spheres of Liberty* (University of Wisconsin Press: 1986).

, *People of Paradox: An Inquiry in to the Origins of American Civilization* (Vintage, New York: 1972).

Kamper, D. and C. Wulf, eds, *Looking Back at the End of the World* (Semiotext(e)), New York: 1989).

Kasson, John F., *Civilizing the Machine: Technology and Republican Values in America 1776-1900* (Grossman, New York: 1976).

Kermode, Frank, *The Sense of an Ending* (Oxford University Press, New York: 1967).

Keynes, J.M., *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (Macmillan, London: 1936).

Kimball, Roger, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted our Higher Education* (Harper and Row, New York: 1990).

Klein, Marcus, *Eastern, Westerns and Private Eyes: American Matters, 1870-1900* (University of Wisconsin Press: 1994).

Lasch, Christopher, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (W.W. Norton, New York: 1995).

Latour, Bruno, *We Have Never Been Modern* [1991], trans. Catherine Porter (Harvard University Press: 1993).

Lehan, Richard, "The European Background" in *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism* (Cambridge UP, New York: 1995).

Levine, Lawrence, *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture and History* (Beacon Press, Boston: 1996).

Levi-Strauss, Claude, *From Honey to Ashes* [1966], trans. John and Doreen Weightman (Harper and Row, New York: 1973).

, *The Savage Mind* [1962], trans. not acknowledged (George Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London: 1974).

, "The Structural Study of Myth," in *Journal of American Folklore,* Vol.LXXVIII, No.270, 1955, 428-444.

Lewis, R.W.B., *The American Adam* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1955).

Lind, Michael, *The Next American Nation: The New Nationalism and the Fourth American Revolution* (Free Press, New York: 1997).

Locke, John, *Second Treatise of Government* [1690], in ed. Steven M. Cahn, *Classics of Modern Political Theory* (Oxford University Press: 1997).

London: Jack, "To Build a Fire" [1908 version], in eds Earle Labor, et al., *Jack London Short Stories* (Collier Books, New York: 1991).

Lukacs, Georg, *Studies in European Realism* [1946], trans. Edith Bone (Hillway, London: 1956).

Lyotard, Jean-Francois, *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-5* [1986], ed. J. Pefanis (Power, Sydney: 1992).

, *The Postmodern Condition* [1979], trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis: 1984).

Lewis, Michael, *Liar's Poker* (Penguin: 1990).

Marx, Leo, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* [1964] (Oxford University Press, New York: 1967).

Mauss, Marcel, *The Gift: the Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* [1925], trans. W.D. Halls (Routledge, London and New York: 1990).

McInerney, Jay, *Brightness Falls* (Random House, New York: 1993).

McNeil, William, *Mythistory and Other Essays* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1986).

Miller, Daniel, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford: 1987).

Mills, C. Wright, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* [1951] (Oxford University Press, London: 1956).

Monkkonen, E., *America Becomes Urban: The Development of U.S. Cities and Towns 1780-1980* (University of California Press, Berkeley: 1988).

Nackenoff, Carol, *The Fictional Republic: Horatio Alger and American Political Discourse* (Oxford University Press, New York: 1994).

Nancy, Jean-Luc, "Myth Interrupted" in *The Inoperable Community* [1986], trans. Peter Connor (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and Oxford: 1991).

Norris, Frank, *The Octopus: A Story of California* (Doubleday and Page, New York: 1901).

Paine, Thomas, *The Rights of Man* [1791] (Dent, London: 1915).

, *The Age of Reason: Being an Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology* [1794] (Putnam, New York: 1896).

Parrington, Vernon Louis, *Main Current in American Thought: an Interpretation of American Literature Frim the Beginnings to 1920* [1927] (Harcourt, Brace, New York: 1930).

Plato, *The Republic,* trans. Desmond Lee (Penguin Classics: 1977).

Pocock, J.G.A., and Terence Ball, eds, *Conceptual Change and the Constitution* (University Press of Kansas, Lawrence: 1998).

Pocock, J.G.A., "States, Republics, and Empires: The American Founding in Early Modern Perspective" in eds J.G.A. Pocock and Terence Ball, *Conceptual Change and the Constitution* (University Press of Kansas, Lawrence: 1998).

Potter, David, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1954).

Pred, Allan, *Urban Growth and the Circulation of Information: The United States System of Cities 1790-1840* (Harvard UP, Cambridge Mass.: 1973).

Raban, Jonathon, *Bad Land: An American Romance* (Picador: 1996).

, "Criction", *London Magazine*, 10, 2, May 1971.

Robertson, James O., *American Myth, American Reality* (Hill and Wang, New York: 1980).

Rose, Dan, *Patterns of American Culture* (University of Pennsylvania Press: 1989).

Rose, Joel, *Kill the Poor* (Atlantic Monthly Press, New York: 1988).

Roth, Philip, "Writing American Fiction" [1961], in ed. Malcolm Bradbury, *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction* (Fontana, London: 1977).

Rousseau, Jean Jacques, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondemens de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* [1755], trans. D. Cress (Hackett, Indianapolis: 1992).

Russnitz, Horst, "Dreams in Austerica: A Preliminary Comparison of the Australian and the American Dream" in *Anglie: -Zeitschrift fur Englische Philologie*, Tubingen, 113:1, 1995, 41-70.

Sagan, Eli, *The Honey and the Hemlock: Democracy and Paranoia in Ancient Athens and Modern America* (Princeton University Press, Princeton N.J.: 1991).

Sahlins, Marshall, *Stone Age Economics* (Aldnic and Atherton, Chicago: 1972).

Said, Edward, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (John Hopkins UP, Baltimore: 1978).

Saul, John Ralston, *Voltaire's Bastards* (Penguin: 1993).

Scharnhorst, Gary, *Horatio Alger Jr* (Twayne Publishers, Boston: 1980).

Seltzer, Mark, *Bodies and Machines* (Routledge, New York: 1992).

Shestakov, Vyacheslav, "American Dream and American Culture", in ed. Tibor Frank, *The Origins and Originality of American Culture: Papers Presented at the International Conference in American Studies, Budapest, 9-11 April, 1980* (Akademiai Kiado, Budapest: 1984).

Simmel, Georg, "The Metropolis and Mental Life" [1903], in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Kurt Wolff (Free Press, Glencoe, Illinois: 1950).

Sinclair, Upton, *The Jungle* (George Robertson, Melbourne: 1906).

Slotkin, Richard, *Regeneration Through Violence: the Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Wesleyan University Press, Middletown Conn.: 1973).

, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (Atheneum, New York: 1985).

, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Harper Perennial, New York: 1993).

Smelser, Marshall, "The Glorious Fourth - or Glorious Second, or Eighth," in eds N. Cords and P. Gerster, *Myth and the American Experience*, Vol.1 (Glencoe Publishing, Encino CA: 1978).

Smith, Henry Nash, *Virgin Land* (Vintage Books, New York: 1950).

Smith, James F., "Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*: A Dreiser Novel for the 1980s," *Journal Of American Culture*, Vol.2, Fall, 1991, 43-51.

Smith, Neil, "New City, New Frontier: The Lower East Side as Wild, Wild West" in ed. Michael Sorkin, *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space* (Noonday Press, New York: 1992) pp.61-93.

Sorkin, Michael, ed., *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space* (Noonday Press, New York: 1992).

Steinbeck, John, *Grapes of Wrath* (Heinemann, London: 1939).

Stourz, Gerald, "Constitution: Changing Meanings of the Term from the Early Seventeenth to the Late Eighteenth Century," in eds J.G.A. Pocock and Terence Ball, *Conceptual Change and the Constitution* (University Press of Kansas, Lawrence: 1998).

Trachtenberg, Alan, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (Hill and Wang, New York: 1982).

Turner, Frederick Jackson, *The Frontier in American History* [1920] (Henry Holt, New York: 1940).

Twain, Mark, and Charles Warner, *The Gilded Age* [1873], 2 Vols, (Harper and Brothers, New York: 1901).

Varsava, Jerry, "Tom Wolfe's Defense of the New (Old) Social Novel; Or, The Perils of the Great White-Suited Hunter" in *Journal of American Culture*, 14(3), 1991, Fall (Bowling Green, Ohio).

Vattimo, Gianni, "Myth and the Destiny of Secularization" in *Social Research*, Vol. 52, No. 2, Summer, 1985, 347-62.

Veblen, Thorstein, *Theory of the Leisure Class* [1899] (Houghton Mifflin, Boston: 1973).

Wark, McKenzie, "Third Nature" in *Cultural Studies*, Vol.8, No.1, Jan., 1994, 115-132.

Watts, Ian, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Chatto & Windus, London: 1957).

Waugh, Patricia, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (Methuen, London: 1984).

Westbrook, Wayne W., *Wall Street in the American Novel* (New York University Press, New York: 1980).

White, Hayden, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (John Hopkins UP, Baltimore: 1973).

Williams, Raymond, *Keywords* (Fontana, London: 1976).

Wills, Garry, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (Athlone Press, London: 1978).

Wirth-Nesher, Hana, *City Codes: Reading the Modern Urban Novel* (Cambridge UP: 1996).

Wolfe, Alan, *Whose Keeper?: Social Science and Moral Obligation* (UCP, Berkeley: 1989).

Wolin, Sheldon, "Postmodern Politics and the Absence of Myth" in *Social Research*, Vol.52, No.2, Summer, 1985, 217-239.

Wolfe, Tom, ed., *The New Journalism* (Harper and Row, New York: 1973).

Wolfe, Tom, *Bonfire of the Vanities* (Picador, London: 1988).

Zanine, Louis, *Mechanism and Mysticism: The Influence of Science on the Thought and Work of Theodore Dreiser* (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia: 1993).

Ziff, Larzer, *Literary Democracy: The Declaration of Cultural Independence in America* (Viking Press, New York: 1981).