

**Geoff Ward**

the Writing of  
**America**

Literature and Cultural  
Identity from the Puritans  
to the Present





But there is no drag like the U.S. drag. You can't see it, you don't know where it comes from. Take one of those cocktail lounges at the end of a subdivision street – every block of houses has its own bar and drugstore and market and liquorstore. You walk in and it hits you. But where does it come from? Not the bartender, nor the customers, nor the cream-colored plastic rounding the bar stools, nor the dim neon. Not even the TV.<sup>3</sup>

This is America, *tout court*, the source of its sameness invisible as gas. To Philip Fisher there is no such thing as American culture, culture being an Old World 'set of practices and beliefs that are stable over time and passed on from generation to generation'.<sup>4</sup> A recurrence of creative self-destruction has replaced the vertical bequests of culture with the innovations of technologically inventive capitalism in a country where 20 per cent of the population move in any given year. What is made in America exists in order to be rendered obsolete. Yet in moving, the maker-consumer finds that uncanny, yet curiously comforting – indeed *heimlich* – replication of which Burroughs is such an acute observer. The bartender in Reno has a different accent from the one in New Jersey, but it is the same bar, and as he steps forward to ask what'll it be, he is the same bartender. Rod Serling's TV series *The Twilight Zone*, the photographs of O. Winston Link, the novels of Philip K. Dick and Stephen King discussed in chapter 4 – all give off this air of reality as replica. It is all uncannily like home, but not home; *heimlich* yet *unheimlich*, to revive Freud's term for the uncanny. The experience is of being, to use a Scots term, outwith America, even while travelling inside it. The literature lays claim to what it can never fully inhabit, and the indeterminacy of settled meaning in Hawthorne's novels or Gilman's tale metaphorizes at a profound level American national identity.

One of the most engaging novels of recent years, *Accordion Crimes* (1996) by E. Annie Proulx, offers a fictionalized history of immigrant America held in sequence by an accordion passed from hand to hand among its characters. Like a damaged accordion, a person can find parts of their past history 'dissolved by the acid of circumstance and accident', and yet be patched up in order to play an American tune.<sup>5</sup> A more genial writer than Burroughs, Proulx reaches an entirely compatible form of literary irony from a different set of starting-points, as in this account of a Polish immigrant trying to make a home in the un-homely United States:

Hieronim had heard the story again and again from his mother of how his father had landed at Castle Garden and a month later was in

Chicago working in the Armour meat-packing plant, living as a boarder with a Polish family in Armour's Patch, this trained pharmacist, but he could neither read English nor speak American and the immigration inspectors marked him down as illiterate. In this way Hieronim learned that to be foreign, to be Polish, not to be American, was a terrible thing and all that could be done about it was to change one's name and talk about baseball. (364)

Proulx's nice distinction between the reading of English and the speaking of American not only gets to the heart of certain immigrant experiences, but has resonance for some of the diverse materials discussed in this book, particularly in chapter 5, where Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music* (1952, 1997) is treated as historical literature. I am in no doubt whatever that Smith's *Anthology* is a crucial work of twentieth-century America, and my failed attempt to find a more specific and apt term than 'work' cuts straight to the reasons why. The *Anthology* is, among other things, a collection of musics, a book, a diachronic history of the culture of the South, a testament to the persistence of British in American literature, an exercise in hermetic epistemology evoking the English Renaissance but composed by a follower of Aleister Crowley, a postmodern moment in which the artist and critic merge in the figure of the fan, and a box. Ignorant of the box, which was about to make its first appearance, Louise Bogan wrote wistfully in a survey of American poetry:

I have thought that 'popular art' – so-called – should be brought into some relation with the more formal arts. An anthology of poetry which included 'popular songs', ballads etc., along with 'serious' and formal poetry (the two kinds of expression being printed without any lines of demarcation between) would, it seems to me, be extremely interesting and valuable.<sup>6</sup>

Repeating this quotation during the course of his study *The American Poetry Wax Museum* (1996), Jed Rasula adds that '[n]early half a century later, this remains a project in limbo' (65). Harry Smith's *Anthology* was reissued in the year following publication of Rasula's book. While my conscious decision to place Harry Smith at the centre of this book does not go all the way to filling the gap pointed out by Bogan and Rasula, I hope to have questioned those 'lines of demarcation' between 'popular' and 'formal' literature, and between the literatures of poetry and of popular music, and in ways that seek to define cultural value, rather than simply celebrating a range of



demotic material in an anti-canonical spirit. The *Anthology* is not as hybrid as it may at first appear, in the sense that American literature is precisely the expression of hybridity, seeking new forms and serving diverse purposes, at one in that respect with the Declaration of Independence and other texts examined in this book.

Lines of demarcation have also been breached by the serious attention paid to Stephen King. He is the most popular novelist in the world, a fact that would invite comment and analysis even if his novels were dross, which they are not. King is a lightning-conductor for American disquiet, an essentially Republican and sentimental Cassandra who horrifies before he reassures, testing small-town values and backwoods resilience to the limits of destruction before reaffirming their enduring superiority over the unsentimental metropolis, the foreign, the alien. His work also reaffirms the American Gothic tradition of Lippard and Poe, while openly recycling plots and images from popular films and comics. This has of course been read as a weakness in his work, but, without special pleading, it can be said to be a *modus operandi* characteristic of writing of the United States that sets it at a remove from European models. The same stories, figures and tropes cross the decades. To take an example, avant-garde poetry and the novels of Stephen King would seem at first to inhabit different universes, but each shares an amiable relationship with its literary forebears, in distinctively American ways. Allen Ginsberg, nothing if not the standard-bearer for a new poetry, at least at the time of *Howl* (1956), constantly invoked, wrote like and even looked like a fifties poet from the previous century, Walt Whitman. Every American poet via Pound down to Ginsberg and the so-called Language poets is compelled to reaffirm a link on the page with the revolutionary grandfather. In Europe, by contrast, the avant-garde formations of Dada, Futurism and Surrealism were not on speaking terms with each other, never mind the past. The principle of supersedence that Philip Fisher diagnoses in American society at large is actually *opposed* in its literature by a move towards ahistorical and sentimental embrace.

The canon is disrupted in order to be reaffirmed with extended boundaries by such groupings as the Language poets, with whom this history closes. Readers who object to this choice will no doubt also bridle at the assertion that the work of Ashbery, O'Hara, Creeley, Wieners and the other writers sampled in Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry 1945-60* comprise a second American Renaissance. Let them bridle. The importance of this grouping was evident to me from the time I read their work in the 1960s and 1970s, and the passage of time has only served to bring Ashbery and now O'Hara to a canonical status, where some of the other Allen-generation writers

will follow. Compendious as it was, Allen's anthology paid scant attention to African-American writers, and I hope that the attention paid in this book to Stephen Jonas in particular will help redress the balance, not merely in the cause of balance, but by virtue of the strengths of his sadly neglected writing.

I decided at an early stage to ignore the American theatre. It would have been easy to include it, if only because the interesting American playwrights could be counted on the fingers following an accident with a bacon-slicer. No matter that one of my most memorable nights at the theatre was at an off-Broadway performance of Sam Shepard's *The Curse of the Starving Class* in 1989, or that I could have written with pleasure about Tennessee Williams or David Mamet. The same is even true of Israel Zangwill, whose play *The Melting-Pot* (1909), which famously deals with immigration and assimilation, also contains my all-time favourite stage direction: '*He plants his feet voluptuously upon the floor*'.<sup>7</sup> But the more vibrant and long-standing connection lies between the literature of America and its popular music, and it is in this emergent area of study that my account has a contribution to make. It may also be the case that the relative weakness of the American theatre tradition (the multi-art, hybrid cinema being a different matter entirely) is in some subtle way bound to the diffusion of a culture of performance in American life. The performative aspects of politics, group and individual identities, and the inculcation of behavioural norms are a recurrent feature in what follows. America *equals* theatre.

This, at last, is because America was invented rather than discovered, its identity subjected to ceaseless redefinition by its new arrivals. Its essence is no essence, but a movement along the spectrum of contradiction sketched in this introduction. American literature is massively inclusive, but dissident and adversarial; obsessive, full of violence, yet pearled with nostalgia and sentiment; addicted to the new, but condemned to repetition; a mirror for its own culture of self-replication, but hybrid by nature; Paradise, but Paradise<sup>TM</sup>. Famously, at the close of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1926), Nick wanders down to the beach alone at night, and watches the moving glow of a ferry-boat across the Sound:

And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes – a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in



The essay three-quarters written, Melville did a strange thing. In what his biographer Hershel Parker (who sees deflected sexuality everywhere) regards as 'an extraordinary display of deflected sexuality', Melville abducted another man's bride.<sup>8</sup> He stole Mary Russell Butler (née Marshall) from her wedding car and set her in his buggy, which the groom (whom Melville had met once) and Evert Duyckinck duly pursued. The escapade was terminated when Melville and Duyckinck demanded the bride and groom's attendance at a friend's masquerade party that night as their terms of release. Unamused, they declined. Keeping up infidel and predatory appearances, Melville appeared at the party dressed as a Turk, turbanned, kitted out with a scimitar, and serving cherry cobbles.<sup>9</sup>

While Parker may or may not be right in assuming that sexual tensions generated by writing the manifesto for an American literature caused Melville to behave badly, there is no doubting that an anxious groom feared for his wife and she for herself in the company of the author of *Typee*, who, in contrast to his later phases of reclusiveness, was a young and aggressively romantic figure, a writer associated with the theme of sexual conquest. It might be suggested without irony, exaggeration or any certainty at all that Melville was intent on re-enacting the abduction of Helen that began the Trojan War and would become a founding moment in the myth-making and symbolic repertoire of Western literature. His action was symbolic, vacuous, misogynistic, impenetrable, childlike, unguessable finally in the depths or shallows of its irony and/or its clumsiness – in short, its performative nature. In a final and definitively American twist to this history of strange performances, the writer's great-great-grandson and the most currently esteemed rock performer, the appropriately named Moby, has become the first recording artist to have every track of his latest compact disc (*Play*, 1999) used as background music for a television commercial. Who now buys a CD by an Englishman that is a modern?

## 4

## 'Eden is burning'

*Literature of the Popular Imagination*

## Nineteenth- and twentieth-century affinities

A distinction between high and low forms of art lives on, both in the top-down hierarchies of the Western canon promoted by Ivy League critics such as Harold Bloom and from the bottom-up tradition of cultural criticism intent on situating literature, song and other practices as indices of social deprivation. In the next two chapters it will be argued that either form of division misrepresents the nature and achievements of American popular culture in its liveliest manifestations, from the protest novel to horror and science fiction, cinema and popular song. I begin with George Lippard's novel *The Quaker City* (1845), the most popular novel by an American prior to the appearance of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), which book, Lincoln told its author only partly in jest, had caused the Civil War. The effects of war on literature are charted in this chapter. Chapter 5 deals with the literary aspects of the music that emerged from the racial group whose oppression was to continue after what Stowe termed 'our peculiar institution' of slavery had technically been abolished following the victory of the Union.

The commercialization by white musicians of black innovations was, and continues to be, an obvious feature of American tradition that itself constitutes a part of, rather than a liberation from, the oppression of African-Americans. However, an examination of the history of popular music uncovers a complex dialogue through music between various ethnic and regional groups, a reciprocal process of



dissemination, sharing and theft that runs from the nineteenth century, through the evolution of recording and the early rags and blues, through to the latter-day folk revival, figures such as Bob Dylan and the commercial ascendancy of rock.

A landmark source for study here is Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music* (1952, 1997), which throws into question both auteurist and collective models of cultural expression, upsetting thereby the modes of criticism that have battled for ownership of 'American literature'. The place of the *Anthology* at the mid-point of this study is no accident. What has been called Smith's 'memory theatre' is as essential to an understanding of the cultural history of American literature as the work of Melville or Dickinson.<sup>1</sup> The murder ballads, gospel epiphanies, medicine showmen and lyrical vortices to which the *Anthology* beckons the listener, form a dark carnival that exemplifies the central argument of this book. The nineteenth century cannot be read in separation from the twentieth, which its most vivid texts anticipate and on which their posthumous life is a gamble. Meanwhile, the twentieth century alludes to and mirrors a past history outside of whose major wounds and concepts it could not be understood.

The trans-historical persistence of Gothic horror as one of the pleasures of the popular is a case in point. The imagination of madness, of murder and haunting is arguably evoked more vividly in the *Anthology* than in the books and films of the books by Stephen King that have made him the world's most popular novelist. King's ultimately comforting stories, whose secret narrative drive is always toward the containment of horror, are indebted to nineteenth-century forebears whose power to shock is perhaps greater; but, before the spectre is raised of a Gothic Eden of True Horror from which contemporary literature is cast out into commercialism, it should be recognized that those texts themselves knowingly echoed Romantic tropes and images, Lippard's underrated novel being an obvious case. Once again, the centuries are an echo chamber; once again, the Edenic America is hoisted like a flag which turns out to have been woven of corrosive stuff. America was always Eden, but always, to echo Bob Dylan's 1975 song 'Changing of the Guard', Eden burning. Its utopias are dystopias, Brook Farm and Walden the dream that literature has to leave to become itself. This is the central chatter of the machine in the visionary satires of Philip K. Dick, where horror and the jeremiad enter the world of accelerating technological achievement to become science fiction. My chosen texts are in an obvious sense wildly various, and it is not my aim to set everything in the memory theatre whirling so giddily that it implodes to congeal in a new metanarrative

of superimposition, where Emerson and Stowe stare through Dylan's shades – though there would be a certain carnival truth in such an American imposition. There is more affinity and compatibility across the range of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literature than across any comparable banding. Nor would a ludic sense of American literature as a dangerous game mean that all grains of truth were forever lost among the shells beneath the bleachers of cultural studies. The performance of identity as intrinsic to American society is its carnival truth, source of both its hollow, showy politics and its greater (and lesser) books, songs and pictures.

### The Gothic inheritance: George Lippard and *The Quaker City*

There is no more appropriate place to begin than George Lippard's hollow, showy and horribly wonderful novel *Quaker City: Or, The Monks of Monk Hall. A Romance of Philadelphia Life, Mystery and Crime*. Lippard was a friend of Edgar Allan Poe, and dedicated his most famous novel to the memory of Charles Brockden Brown, whose 'Wieland' is as a sombre quartet for strings by comparison with Lippard's manic symphony. He was Byronic in appearance, in behaviour, in prolificity and in dying early (at thirty). A lover of cloaks and velvet, with shoulder-length hair, Lippard travelled armed in case of attack from those opposed to his proto-Marxian but essentially anarchistic politics, who dubbed him a 'pothouse brawler' and a 'redhot locofoco' (Reynolds, p. xvi). His transplantation of Byronic dandyism to Philadelphia signals the meeting of American authorship with exhibitionism: Lippard married by moonlight among the rocks, was prevented from throwing himself into Niagara Falls on his wife's death, and saw visions. He also founded a co-operative movement, the Brotherhood of the Union, aimed at bypassing exploitative capitalism and which, although it dwindled into an insurance group, ceased operations only in 1994. Lippard's multi-directional self-fashioning goes back to the ambiguities of Byron's own multiplicity of personae: acting the jaded Regency buck in the *beau monde* of Beau Brummell; playing the redhot locofoco while parodying the accents of his social inferiors, such as Keats; supplying arms to Greek insurrectionists; cultivating a reputation for satanism and incest, debunking, carousing, swimming, dieting, collapsing the distinctions between play and real life. Refracted in Byron's own personality, these ambiguities replay the tensions of Europe in the wake of the French



and a better standard of living would continue to draw waves of immigrants to Ellis Island. However, the kind of picaresque life narrative sketched in the cases given above was more common in the previous century, and the period preceding the Civil War in particular. Thereafter the pressures of industrialization and commercialization, more socially influential drivers of that conflict than emancipation of the slaves, would enforce kinds of conformity which the flux of pre-Civil War life agitated beyond the reach of control, notwithstanding the hardship of other kinds endured by many citizens.

### Violence, masculinity and popular culture: Dock Boggs

It is worth jumping to the twentieth century to clarify this issue, by looking at the contrasting styles and fortunes of the two musicians represented in the *Anthology of American Folk Music* on whom most critical attention would be lavished, in time: Bascom Lamar Lunsford (1882–1973), whose 'Mole in the Ground' is smoked out later, and Dock Boggs (1898–1971). These men had a Southern background in common – North Carolina and Virginia, respectively – and both sang ballads to a banjo accompaniment. Lunsford's career has something of the nineteenth century at work in its twists and turns: fruit-tree salesman, honey-bee promoter, teacher, practising lawyer, federal worker, reading clerk of the North Carolina House of Representatives. In 1928 he founded the Asheville Mountain Dance and Folk Festival, a version of which is still held, and his work gained increasing recognition. He played for the British king and queen at the White House in 1939, and ten years later laid down an archive of several hundred performances of folk-songs for the Library of Congress. Lunsford was an artist of major importance, range and subtlety; the archive, together with his other recordings, comprises one of the great artistic *oeuvres* of the American Century, albeit one that is insufficiently known. The contrast with Dock Boggs's life and fortunes could hardly be greater.

Boggs worked as a miner for forty-five years, from the time he was twelve. He escaped briefly from the scarred terrain of the Virginian coal camps in the late 1920s, when touring producers from the Brunswick label heard and brought him to New York to record eight blues and ballads, sampled decades later in the *Anthology*. The Depression sank his career just at its inception, and he pawned his banjo around 1930. Boggs was in any case under pressure from the parishioners of his wife's church, who disapproved of music, and who

would send him anonymous hate mail when he took up playing again in the 1960s to appreciative college audiences at Newport and other shrines of the Folk Revival. He had an Indian summer, recording for Folkways in his old age. At certain points even mine work was unavailable to him, and Boggs, like many, took to bootlegging, a symptom of strained social fabric in a mountain region so rapidly developed and just as rapidly subjected to market collapse. Boggs's life was profoundly violent. He carried a .38 calibre revolver most of the time, plotted seriously to kill his wife's entire family ('they had a tendency to be overbearing'<sup>4</sup>), and though he had the courage in the end never to kill, went half-way. One brother, two brothers-in-law, several cousins and his teacher died of gunshot wounds. This was life in Virginia in the early twentieth century:

It was dangerous to get on the highway. People a-shootin' in the road, shooting everyway, carrying guns, everybody carrying revolvers, and they'd shoot to hear 'em pop like you'd shoot firecrackers. I was standing in my own doorway, and a fella down the road, about a hundred and fifty yards, pulled out his pistol and shot, shot right inside of the door. A foot from where I was standing. I emptied my pistol right down where the shot came from. (13)

What caused, he was asked in interview, the temper of those times? 'People were afraid' (35).

That fear is in his voice, not expressed as such, but there in the recoil, the harsh tones of repressed emotion that lead Greil Marcus to describe Dock Boggs's voice as sounding 'as though his bones were coming through his skin every time he opened his mouth' (2). While such encomiums are unlikely to lead to queues at the Folk section of Tower Records, the intensity of the early recordings in particular is unforgettable, the very narrowness of range a telling representation of a society as well as a particular personality. The later recordings show the way that personality might have evolved had the life context been other than it was, and anyone disinclined to take the banjo seriously should listen to Boggs's instrumental 'Coal Creek March', where notes fall like pure spring water on hot skin, and the ethereal beauty of which would have preserved his name even if this otherwise somewhat Calvinist entertainer had never opened his mouth to let his bones through.<sup>5</sup>

As with all hard men, musicians included, there is always someone harder around the corner. For those who become injured to the Boggs rasp, there is always the 'high, lonesome sound' of Roscoe Holcomb, truly the Samuel Beckett of country-and-western music. No doubt



there lie in some outhouse the mouldering platters of an Appalachian songster whose skeletal austerity makes Roscoe Holcomb sound like Dolly Parton; the point is that, inseparable from the primitivist modernism of these rural musicians, is a deletion or extreme suppression of sung warmth, tenderness or sensual satisfaction. Masculinity was a question of work, drink, discharge in guilty sex or a .38, but otherwise reined in. This is a consequence of the kind of society produced by industrialization, for many a post-slavery enslavement, which is what the Civil War and the succeeding century were about. It is not an ante-bellum manner. Boggs's work – like that of Frank Hutchison, a 1920s player who sings the 'Worried Blues' as if he were outlining varieties of life insurance – or that of most of the white performers represented by the Folkways and Yazoo labels – has few remnants of ante-bellum style. (The *content* of course can be a different matter, drawing on the melancholy fatedness of ballad narratives originating in the Britain of the Napoleonic Wars or even centuries earlier.) These recordings can be contrasted with those of, say, Henry Thomas, the black singer, guitarist and pipe-player. Born in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, and recording in the 1920s songs he had played and heard in the 1890s, Thomas's music has gaiety, good humour and a certain melodic fluency, though it is built from the same standard chord changes and bending of 'blue' notes, the third, fifth and seventh in the scale, from which Holcomb or Boggs shout the triumph of death and Bascom Lamar Lunsford builds his troubled reflections. The picaresque life was taken by the Civil War, though its masks and motley survived in the side-shows to industrialization that the children of that process would celebrate, just as these things vanished over the horizon into American nostalgia and the eras of the suburbs and the mall.

### *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

Of course the performative nature of identity in ante-bellum America coexisted with identity erased, in the lives of African-Americans. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the novel that helped bring the bestialization of people of colour in America to public crisis in the prelude to the Civil War. The novel surpassed Lippard's *Quaker City* in popularity, exhausting the first edition of 5,000 within two days of publication on 20 March 1852, and selling 300,000 copies in America and 150,000 in Britain within a year. By the end of that year George Aiken's dramatization was being performed by as many as

four companies simultaneously in New York City, sometimes, so great was the public interest, in three shows a day. More than a book, this was, in the words of Frederick Douglass, an attempt to light a million camp-fires in front of the embattled hosts of slavery, a *roman à thèse* whose thesis was designed to leak, flow back into and so redirect the society whose inequalities had brought it into being. In this sense it is more the national epic than *Moby-Dick* or *The Scarlet Letter*, texts whose hypercanonicity (to adopt Jonathan Arac's phrase) rests in part on their permission to imagination as a tenet of American ipseity. Critically, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has been neglected or patronized until relatively recently, in the main through Fiedlerian doubts over its unabashed and repeated use of the sentimental climax, crude (not that Stowe cared) by contrast with the better European novels, and so a perilous cause to support in the years when the national literature was felt to lag behind the Europe that had generated *Madame Bovary*. However, two points might immediately be made in defence of the book, registering the use of sentiment by writer or reader for purposes that in the end are dialectical, and intrinsic to the success of the work.

The famous scene in which the slave Eliza escapes to freedom, pursued by bloodhounds across the cracking ice floes of the Ohio River, became a synecdochic image for the book, reproduced countless times on theatre posters. However, that portion of the tale is actually short in the telling, a page or so, and does not exhaust by any means its own sentimental potential. Moreover, it is echoed subtly at a later point in the novel, when the good-hearted but compromised Shelby, who has sold Uncle Tom and cannot raise the money for his 'redemption', muses on the ups and downs of market-driven capitalism, while smoking his postprandial cigar: 'Once get business running wrong, there does seem to be no end to it. It's like jumping from one bog to another, all through a swamp: borrow of one to pay another ... all scamper and hurry-scurry.'<sup>6</sup> The obvious dissimilarities between the 'scamper' of fleeing banknotes and a life-and-death rush across the ice from bondage to safety do not obscure the underlying parallel, one confirmed by the acidic but resigned assessment of labour relations under capitalism offered by St Clare in chapter 19. St Clare is in a dual sense the centre of the book; appearing only in its middle section, his jaundiced liberalism, acceding to a *status quo* which he is morally and intellectually equipped to destroy, but to which he sees no practicable alternative, incarnates precisely the attitudes Stowe saw as winnable to the abolitionist cause by argument and ethical appeal. 'Born a democrat', St Clare notes the consistency in his brother Alfred's defence of slavery:



## Going Fishing

### *Harry Smith, the Anthology of American Folk Music, and the Fan*

#### Culture and the fan

An analysis of American culture such as that urged by Philip Fisher and confirmed by the fiction of Philip K. Dick sets what is valuable and valueless, collectable and disposable, in ratios that are as questionable as they have been instrumental in the advance of America to its current position as world-leader. Perhaps the recycling of styles as fashionable, outmoded and acceptably retro within the space of a decade or two, or the proximity between such icons of the banal as Andy Warhol's tins of soup and Campbell's 'originals' indexes an acceleration of what was latent in American industrialism from its first consolidation as supplier of the latest car, phone or gadget. Within such an accelerated culture of disposability the product (about which there will hang an immediate aura of the phantom, presaging its supersedence) and the producer (detached by the priorities of investment and profit from an identification with the commodity as a real object) come to possess an increasingly virtual reality. In this situation the package, rather than the content, becomes the essence of transaction, most famously in the case of the 1916 Coca-Cola bottle. From this time also the consumer would move to centre-stage in the production process, and begin to multiply into types amongst which the fan – the consumer as completist and devotee – would become increasingly crucial to market success in the post-1945

years that saw a growth in teenagers with disposable income. A further hybrid of the fan, and one central to the current development of consumption focused on the Internet, is the buff, a figure combining in an unstable blend the qualities of Fisher's expert, inducting a mass audience into the latest technology, and the consumer, whose work and leisure operate in a constructively ambiguous blur. As DJs with computer skills replace musicians on-stage, and fashionable art becomes predominantly conceptual rather than expressive, these changes in consumption and production have had important cultural repercussions. This chapter is in part about Harry Smith, a fan who was able to become an artist through the coupling of old music and new technology.

Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*, released first in 1952, then in 1997, constitutes *inter alia* an archive of music and lyric from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; a diachronic slice of the rural culture of the South, 1927–32; and a template for a cultural form, rock, that came into being just after its appearance on vinyl and that arguably waned to exhaustion around the time of its re-release on compact disc.<sup>1</sup> At once a salvaging of cultural detritus, of lost names on crackling 78s, and a template for the artistry of sampling and collage in an electronic age, the *Anthology* is a pivotal American creation. Indeed, America can experience itself only through the creation of such a hybrid form. Harry Smith was at once the adversary and the paradigm of the culture in which he operated, scorning its materialism but, in turning aside, turning himself into an alembic of influence and energies that would eventually permeate that culture as it strove to evolve.

#### Harry Smith and the things he gathered

Harry Smith (1923–91) made films, painted pictures, collected music and objects. A recent book about Smith concludes with 'A Partial List of Things He Gathered', which over his lifetime included vast collections of Ukrainian painted eggs, dolls, string games and 20,000 gramophone records.<sup>2</sup> Smith also collected a reputation and wove stories about himself. Some of the most unlikely ones are true. His parents were Theosophists, and his mother taught on an Indian reservation, where, by the age of fifteen, Smith was making wire recordings of Lummi songs and rituals, gathering artefacts and compiling a dictionary of dialects. His father taught him to draw the symbols of the Kabbala, which led in time both to the intricate designs



in his paintings, most of which survive only in photographic reproduction after Smith lost or destroyed them, and to his lifelong involvement with magic and the Ordo Templi Orientis of which the English magus Aleister Crowley had been head. (Smith was eventually made a bishop of the Order.) He liked to say that on his twelfth birthday his father had presented him with a complete blacksmith's forge, and the injunction to turn lead into gold. While this does not carry the ring of truth, his background did spark an interest in the mechanical realization of metaphysics that would give his work a huge, albeit indirect, influence. The light shows that accompanied rock concerts from the mid-1960s onwards, together with certain aspects of contemporary dance culture, derived from his experiments with oil and water on projected slides, and from the films such as *Heaven and Earth Magic* that comprise Smith's main auteurist achievement. However, the most influential thing he gathered would turn out to be his assembly of an anthology of recordings that itself incorporates his visual and literary energies.

Harry Smith studied and intermittently practised alchemy. Alchemy is blind-alley science, the doomed attempt to master reality by the transformation of its base elements into something higher. A photograph taken in 1985 by Allen Ginsberg finds Smith in the inauspicious confines of New York's Breslin Hotel, following his temporary ejection from the Chelsea, the legendary tolerance of whose management was stretched as much by the alchemist's self-transformations through drugs and drink as by his chronic lack of funds. Prematurely ancient, dwarfed by enormous horn-rimmed spectacles, he is shown in the lens of his poet benefactor reduced by dyspepsia to 'transforming milk into milk' (106). The photo of the young hipster reprinted on the back of the third volume of the *Anthology of American Folk Music* could not be more different: enigmatic shades, beard, the epitome of Fifties cool, except that the hand pointing at the camera seems to warn as it beckons, identifying the chosen ones but signalling that they will not leave the same persons they were on entering. In the world of the *Anthology*, as opposed to the Breslin, alchemy worked.

### The *Anthology*: memory and Modernism

The *Anthology* comes in a box decorated with an imposing design, a drawing attributed correctly by Smith to Theodore DeBry and taken from Robert Fludd's four-volume *History of the Macrocosm and the Microcosm*, published in Germany between 1617 and 1619. In the

drawing we see the hand of God tuning, on what appears to be a single-string dulcimer, the Celestial Monochord: that is, drawing up into celestial harmony the four base elements of earth, water, fire and air, a symbolism perpetuated by the colours chosen for the sleeves of the albums inside the box. (Earth/brown is missing, as Smith was never satisfied with the notes he had written for this quarter of the music. He had, however, selected the tracks, and a careful reconstruction has been issued recently, happily completing the project.<sup>3</sup>) On opening the box, the listener finds a variety of materials, some added for the reissue. These include an essay by Greil Marcus on Smith and 'the old, weird America', which also forms a chapter of the latter's landmark study of Smith and his influence on Bob Dylan and the 1960s, *Invisible Republic* (1997).<sup>4</sup> More arrestingly, the listener who is at this stage, as throughout, a reader will find Harry Smith's original handbook to the eighty-four recordings in the *Anthology*. This is a scholarly document that lists dates of recording, alternative versions, origins where known, catalogue numbers and so on. The anthology is an iceberg-tip selection from Smith's personal collection, chunks of which broke away and drifted into the New York Public Library. What strikes the eye, however, is an anti-scholarly, presentational Surrealism that informs only to cast a spell of doubt over the outlines of fact. A kappellmeister taps his score, while a hand points to the legend 'All Please Sound' beneath the American eagle; he will reappear on the back cover with a giant trumpet balanced on his finger leading skywards in a blast of notes to an Apollonian lutanist in a circle of majors and minors. Pictures of musical instruments jostle reprints of the sleeves of 'race' records, as music aimed at an African-American audience was labelled, as well as quotations from Fludd and Aleister Crowley. The lyric of each track is summarized by the anthologist, sometimes helpfully, given the moschiferous condition of 1920s recordings and the twists of regional enunciation, but more often idiosyncratically.

Smith's retrieval of the lost was to be read as news, and his summaries eschew the daily for banner headlines that cross history: 'MEDIEVAL WOMAN DEFEATS DEVIL DESPITE HUSBAND'S PRAYERS' is his summary of Bill and Belle Reed's 'Old Lady and the Devil', which, like many tracks, is a Child ballad transmuted by Appalachian and blues traditions. Elsewhere a lazy farmer's boy is in deep trouble ('YOUNG AGRICULTURIST NEGLECTS SEED - LOSES BOTH CROP AND FIANCÉE'), though times are equally hard in town ('TECHNOLOGICAL UNEMPLOYMENT HITS SHOE INDUSTRY'); the bandit Cole Younger goes down ('BANK ROBBER VOICES REGRET FOR ASSOCIATION WITH JAMES



BOYS IN NORTHFIELD FIASCO'), but so does the Titanic; President Garfield's assassin speaks from the scaffold, but four songs later it is someone else's turn to suffer the 'White House Blues' ('MCKINLEY SWEARS, MOURNS, DIES. ROOSEVELT GETS WHITE HOUSE AND SILVER CUP'). Echoes of Joyce's methods in *Ulysses* are intentional. The sublime insinuations of Mississippi John Hurt's 'Frankie' (played at such a lick that Segovia, an early listener, refused to believe that only one guitar was used) are paraphrased obliquely by Smith as 'ALBERT DIES PREFERRING ALICE FRY, BUT JUDGE FINDS FRANKIE CHARMING AT LATTER'S TRIAL', while altogether elsewhere a parrot sings his refusal to alight on a murderer's knee, a boll-weevil avoids destruction by answering questions correctly like Oedipus in reverse, and froggie goes a-courting ('ZOOLOGIC MISCEGENY ACHIEVED IN MOUSE FROG NUPTUALS [sic], RELATIVES APPROVE'). Each track is connected by one link to the next. Sometimes the relationship is obvious, as the stabbing of 'Henry Lee' that opens the collection is succeeded by ritual child murder in 'Fatal Flower Garden', originally a Somerset folk-song and now sung to the melismatic keening of Hawaiian guitars. Sometimes, however, the links are conjectural or occult, as Smith attempted to organize rural music of the Southern States in the later 1920s along Fluddian and magical lines.

Memory is the key. The anthology is, like *Ulysses* and *The Cantos*, an epic of memory. As an ethnomusicologist, Smith had some affinities with Béla Bartók, whose forays into the indigenous rural music of Hungary and Romania would also result in a new fusion, equally primitivist-modernist. Fittingly, it was the composer's son Peter who transferred Smith's discs to tape for the *Anthology*. Like that of the Modernists, Smith's work questions the relationship between established history, buried histories and the creative role of consciousness. Where is America? Is it located in the minutiae of rural life or the accidentals of music, combined in the rise and fall of Casey Jones's fateful whistle? Or is the old, real America a matter of *region*, the last bastion against the loose, democratic Union hymned by Whitman that would impose its grid of highways, malls and Taco Bell from coast to coast? The *Anthology* presents a multi-faceted picture of the South, and is willing to try, but reluctant to settle for, any single explanation of the relationship between economics, oppression and artistic work. Smith chose tracks 'because they were odd' (Iglieri, 126), 'exotic' in relation to both the music of high culture and the received idea of the 1920s as summed up by the Charleston and the Black Bottom. That elusive oddity questions the neatness of both an analysis that would root art exclusively in ethnic identity and subjugation and one that

would airily dismiss history as mere material for the individual talent.

Discrepancy between voicing and presupposition recurs as an issue throughout: the Reverend Sister Mary Nelson sounds, frankly, like a man; the wonderful 'Spanish Merchant's Daughter' is credited to Hattie and Ernest Stoneman, but the mounting cry of 'No sir! No sir! No sir!' sounds to many like a male falsetto. Early listeners could not believe that Mississippi John Hurt was black. The choice of performers such as Hurt, Richard 'Rabbit' Brown, Henry Thomas and Prince Albert Hunt was strategic. The first three were 'songsters' moving easily from rags to ballads or blues. Brown was one of the first exponents of the twelve-bar blues, and he and Thomas (born at the end of the Civil War) go back to the time before the blues had established its hegemony in African-American music. Meanwhile Prince Albert Hunt, whose intriguing career was terminated at gunpoint by a jealous husband, gives evidence that a diversification of cultures in Texas and Louisiana could certainly entail the ready absorption of Magyar accent variations by fiddle-and-banjo dance music. Just as the narratives and styles of juxtaposed recordings shoulder each other out of the way, so models of influence based on monolithic lines of ethnicity or region become audibly and legibly simplistic.

The temptation for the scholar, particularly one of Harry Smith's eclectic and compendious tendencies, would be to say that America is all of this, in sum – all the recordings, all the sources, all that the archaeologist-collector can find and piece together so as to give a sense of how the past felt to those for whom it was the present. Here again memory is the key, and the anthology is, to use the title of an important essay by Robert Cantwell which has done much to shape my own understanding of the project, 'Smith's Memory Theater':

Smith seems to have called upon the hermetic epistemology that fascinated the learned minds of Elizabethan England in the decades before Bacon and Descartes refined it into the scientific method. Robert Fludd had developed out of the old art of memory pertinent to the study of eloquence a so-called memory theater . . . whose aim was to present the entire cosmos of knowledge in the form of alchemical, astrological and cabalistic symbols arranged in particular sequences on the terraces of a small circular amphitheater; a scholar could enter the theater to study, discovering in drawers or cabinets beneath each emblem those manuscripts summarizing the information represented by the emblem. (Cantwell, 204–5)

This description of Fludd's mnemonic library recalls the desktop of a personal computer, and Smith in interview used the phrase (as



Cantwell notes, esoteric in 1968) 'program the mind' (205). By studying and using the emblems of the memory theatre or the PC, the adept can access by systematic recall information larger than what can be retained by the single consciousness. Writ large, such a practice points ambiguously to a final and universal comprehension that would spell the end of history, and an Edenic and unmediated apprehension of, well, everything.

This is quite a lot to expect from six compact discs and two leaflets in a box. That the *Anthology* does not disappoint expectation but rather encourages deeper questioning, just as its own contesting models of understanding are allowed to shatter in sequence, is a testament to Smith's abilities as a dialectician of materials housed in the cause of suggestion. To put it another way, the *Anthology* is a Modernist collage – perhaps the last such, as the decade of the 1920s that produced the great and varied collages by Pound, Joyce and the Surrealists is the decade not of Smith's activity but of the artists' whose work he reconfigures. Of course the music he chooses is (generally) terrific, but in purely musical terms there are alternative collections deriving from the *Anthology* that do the job as well. The four-volume *Times Ain't Like They Used to Be* on the Yazoo label has an arguably better track by Blind Willie Johnson, Skip James's suicidally depressive 'I'm So Glad', Rabbit Brown's 'Sinking of the Titanic' with its unforgettable gargling of 'Nearer My God to Thee', a blues by Henry Thomas out of the 1890s that would draw tears from a stone.<sup>5</sup> One of the functions of the *Anthology* is precisely to send the listener out armed with the knowledge and the appetite that will open other doors. At the very least, Smith's work demonstrates that the second half of the 1920s discharged in a tremendous outburst of artistic energy the accretions of centuries of words and music as they had been shared in a thriving oral culture just before careers were ruined by the Depression, followed by the loss of precious shellac to recycling for wartime purposes. The discs that Smith collected by placing advertisements and cruising thrift shops were vanishing just at the moment of his approach.

Necessarily, there is also something of the vanishing trick about Smith's collage, something inherently fey and of the circus tent. The ludicrous paraphrases, the giant black numbers for the tracks, the cartoons and quotations from Aleister Crowley (whose genius was for publicity, whatever his darker talents) are intended to recall not only the memory theatre of Robert Fludd but also the medicine show and museum of oddities. One contributor to *American Magus*: Harry Smith calls him the 'Barnum and Bailey' of magic (Iglieri, 37). The emblems, drawers and cabinets of the memory show ought to recall

the 'escritoire' of Melville's *The Confidence-Man*, with its sign of 'NO TRUST' and its black songster who must swallow irony to keep hold of the coin between his teeth. The model of the Elizabethan memory theatre is an important one, but its ultimate rejection in Smith's dialectics is what gives the *Anthology* its uniqueness and its critical edge.

There is something of the *Verfremdungseffekt* even in Smith's enthusiastic annotation. Smith elevated the role of critic to that of artist in his anthology, but was prescient in taking two further steps. First, this is the critic-artist, the creator, as *fan*, rather than as conservative curator in the Eliotic tradition enjoying its ascendancy at the time. The discs are the first historical example of something that would become popular as a gift and provide solace on long journeys at a later date: the personal compilation tape. Secondly, the process of listening to and reading the project opens up questions which, crucially, it is left to the reader/listener to arbitrate. The work does not seek to control its materials, but to collage them in the most provocative and questioning ways for the audience to turn over, and so half-create, and so take out into a world that can never now be quite the same again. The work fits an economy where the consumer has moved to centre-stage, but restores an element of creativity to consumption by handing over such complex historical materials. Smith was quite clear that his work was a counter-cultural and political statement: 'I felt social changes would result from it' (134).

### Radicalism and regional identities

At mid-century in the age just preceding the triumph of the credit card, Smith's pact with the listener marries elements of the bootleg economy and the radical left. Peter Bartók worked from Smith's own records rather than master tapes which would clearly have had to be paid for, had they been available; the first release perched on the border of legality and piracy. In another sense the reverse is true, in that anthologization was made possible by the new microgroove technology that released the music from its captivity in 78 rpm format, elevating it to the status of classical music and the community of hi-fidelity buffs. 'Hence the Folkways Anthology in effect legitimized its material, investing it with the cultural authority both of its advanced technology and its rarefied sociopolitical connections. What had been, to the people who originally recorded it, essentially the music of the poor, the isolated, and the uneducated, the Anthology



reframed as a kind of avant-garde art' (Cantwell, 190). Robert Cantwell's implication of innocence exploited is open to question, at least in the case of certain artists. His 1996 study of the Folk Revival and its association with the Civil Rights movement is entitled *When We Were Good*, and, for all its usefulness, reminds us that when we were good, we could be awfully prissy. The discs were issued on the Folkways label, now controlled by the Smithsonian, but then run by Moses Asch, whom Cantwell presents persuasively as a Fludd for 1950s America and 'a kind of ethnographer ... proposing a complete acoustic record of the human lifeworld' (190). Alongside mountain ballads, Woody Guthrie, cowboy songs, the speaking voices of Sigmund Freud and Martin Luther King, Asch recorded 'infant cries, technological sounds from office equipment and locomotives, bird calls, and the sound of the rain forest' (191). This sounds very like Smith's unfinished project *Materials for the Study of the Religion and Culture of the Lower East Side*, which included bird-song, talk and children's skipping rhymes. And so Asch too was a fan turned artist, hooked on echo, innovation, correspondence, the local becoming the universal.

As already noted, the *Anthology* activates various models by which its materials can be interpreted, only to subject them to unceasing dialectical pressure. These include the understanding of music in its minutiae, as the expression of region, and as part of a totalization whose ancestry lies in an Edenic and pre-scientific holism. A further route to constructing a sense for the whole is that of literary allegory. The pieces are sequenced in generic groups, with the first two albums labelled by Smith 'Ballads', the second set 'Social Music', subdivided into dance and church music, followed by the final Volume of 'Songs'. The two albums of 'Songs' are the climax of the project; they are where the going gets weird (Didier Hébert, Dock Boggs, Clarence Ashley), where bravura performances jostle for attention (Lemon Jefferson, Hurt, Lunsford), and where the ordering of materials produces an allegorical narrative. The narrative moves from the isolated experience of danger and desire, on to prison, work songs, death and finally to competing and contradictory versions of Paradise. It is in this area that the *Anthology* outperforms other collections of music in the complexity of what it can offer, and it is noticeable that in this extra dimension music becomes the means to the construction of a work that is essentially literary. A new national epic, dealing with models of enslavement and freedom, the *Anthology* is also one man's performance, using his own record collection as material. The final tracks are alternative exits from the memory theatre, any one of which may turn out to be an egress, in Barnum's sense. They have

to be read actively and critically as versions of America, and not simply appreciated by passive listening.

### Allegory, prison and Paradise: work songs, dissidence and the minstrel tradition

Tracks 71–84 begin with five prison songs, succeeded in a straightforwardly allegorical gesture by Lemon Jefferson's plaintive 'See That My Grave is Kept Clean', a version of which would appear several years later on Bob Dylan's first album, together with two other songs from Smith's box. The next cut, 'C'est si triste sans lui', mourns someone's passing in the almost atonal surges of Cajun music from so obscure a source that Smith has no annotation to offer, a historical lacuna that turns the patois of the lyric in a self-referential direction. There follow two songs by Uncle Dave Macon, one of the oldest performers represented. Many of his songs contain vignettes of social and political life in the South. The first, 'Way Down the Old Plank Road', is about working on a Georgia chain-gang, though the signals sent out by the words and music are intriguingly at variance, as Uncle Dave's ecstatic playing, singing ('KILL YOURSELF!') and dancing (unless it's someone whacking the floor with a chain) make forced labour sound like a Dionysiac rave. By contrast, track 79, 'Buddy Won't You Roll Down the Line', a superb recording for 1928, offers a clear-eyed account of the Coal Creek Rebellion which took place in East Tennessee in the 1890s, when mining companies hired convict labour as an instrument to break the miners' union. This plan backfired when, in an armed rebellion, the miners freed the convicts, though their leaders went to gaol. We are back in a zone like Dock Boggs's Virginia, where guns go off like firecrackers and 'people were afraid'. Such rebellions were still common at the time of Macon's and Boggs's recordings, and have been played down in modern accounts. For example, in 1920, West Virginia's Logan County was effectively a state within a state, with striking miners, company assassins and detectives shooting each other (and the mayor) in the streets. By August of the following year, between ten and twenty thousand men were firing at each other in a civil war around Blair Mountain, which, as Greil Marcus notes laconically, exceeded the number mobilized by George Washington in the battle that changed the course of the American Revolution (Marcus, 57).

The theme of political dissidence is picked up by Mississippi John Hurt in 'Spike Driver Blues'. This is a 'John Henry' song, one of many



in a genre centred on the steel-driving prowess of a mythical black man. Cantwell builds on the work of Alan Lomax, whose early field recordings were instrumental in the retrieval of the lost musics, to argue that 'John Henry' songs are the primal scene of folk-song, one where 'sexual potency, physical beauty, strength, endurance, and grace, the search for authenticity, the recovery of democracy, and the industrial age itself make clandestine meeting in an actual and symbolic underworld where America's images of itself are forged' (Cantwell, 76–7). Cantwell's and Lomax's reverence for the 'orgasmic' thunderbolt of the driver with his hammer sounds like a guilty inferiority complex, vulnerable to ridicule as many white posturings on the left-folk axis were. More persuasive is Cantwell's spotting of the 'secretion of power' in the image of John Henry. The hammer that rivets the industrial machine is also the 'kingpin' of the folk-song that sets a man against it, but the power is buried, a man in a mine, an image related by Cantwell not only to 'the social unconscious' but to black minstrel, and indeed black-face, traditions.

It appears that the ruling elite of seventeenth-century Virginia, mindful of their own place in the English hierarchy, were prompted by cultural nostalgia and the exigencies of social control to compel their African slaves to play the role of English serfs – in David Fischer's words, 'to dress like English farm workers, to play English folk games, to speak an English country dialect, and to observe the ordinary rituals of English life in a charade that Virginia planters organized with great care' (23). The minstrel-serf would mutate over time into the black-face minstrels who were ousted from the television screen of my childhood less by outraged sensibility than by the arrival of pop singers who were, ironically, their latest mutation. For an English youth like Mick Jagger to sing black rhythm and blues from the stage of the London Palladium with his trademark loucheness and ragamuffin shuffle was to continue the fey artifice of a minstrel tradition that runs from the Virginia plantations to videos of rappers or Michael Jackson. The implications of this for the transmission of folk-song from Scottish or Somerset origins to Texas or the Appalachians undo any po-faced account of folk tradition as rooted in authenticity and its synonyms. Cantwell remains in thrall to such sentimentality even as his own best insights blow its cover.

Harry Smith's choice and arrangement of tracks evidence a historical imagination that, in attending to the nuances and secreted powers of the past, could predict with accuracy. Significantly, he concentrates on voice and guitar, so the keyboard is barely represented in his *Anthology*, despite its centrality to both church music and the bar-room. In returning to the 1920s, he conjures by these means the image

of the singer of 'Mystery Train' and 'Hound Dog' a little (1952) before the coming of Elvis. A price is paid, for Smith's focus on the recordings of the pre-war tradition is as male-dominated as the rock and roll tradition would be. Anyone wanting to hear Big Mama Thornton's original 'Hound Dog' or the lesbian blues of Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith ('I went out last night with a crowd of my friends. / They must have been women 'cause I don't like no men'), the octave range of Ethel Waters, or the work of white blues singers such as Mildred Bailey will unfortunately have to look elsewhere.<sup>6</sup>

In other respects, and to return to Mississippi John Hurt, historical resonance and range are exactly what the *Anthology* stands for. 'Spike Driver Blues' is a document rich in suggestion, as when Hurt's inimitable, caressing whisper carries to the inner ear the line 'This is the hammer that killed John Henry, but it won't kill me'. The repetition intrinsic to the blues form and which signifies despair in more clichéd efforts becomes in this case an explosive political promise: 'no, it won't kill me.' On that note, history shoots from the anthology through the two-dimensional cut-out Presley to become the conflagration of the Watts riots. This music anticipates the era of Civil Rights and assassinations, the speeches given and the bullet taken by Martin Luther King. Decades not yet lived seem implicit in the next track also, as the Memphis Jug Band's 'KC Moan' subdues their usual jollity to the atmosphere of a funeral parlour. Three alternative egresses follow.

J. P. Nestor recorded four songs in Tennessee in late middle age, of which track 82, 'Train on the Island' (with Norman Edmonds on fiddle), is one. That excursion appears to have been enough, for, despite invitations to record, Nestor never left Virginia again. 'Train on the Island' is the kind of discovery which Bartók understood fully. The level of skill in play is so high that any notion of folk-music, let alone *Volk* music, as beguiling by its untutored innocence is knocked out of court. Yet the texture of the music moves to such a level of complex implication – for example, in its subdivision of the semitone – that the folk-musics of other lands and times, including most definitely Asia and North Africa, are evoked. Notes tumble over each other in a bravura display of telepathic fingering, an early and unsurpassed example of the kind of approach that would be brought to popularity in later years by Flatt and Scruggs, and which remains the template for bluegrass. In a deeper sense the heart of the music beats in infinitesimal silences generated by a slight lag between Edmonds's soaring cadences and Nestor's frailing. It is as if things could move so fast that, as in certain technological contexts, a paradoxical stillness ensued in which clock time stops and things float. This is reinforced



by the train theme, to which various sorts of animate and inanimate coupling are clearly germane, as the hortatory intimacies of the ballad tradition – ‘go tell my true love’ – are wedded to ambiguity – ‘I can’t roll the wheel’. Cantwell’s musicological explanation of ambiguities in the lyric stems from his identification of the melody as a descendant of an Irish reel, ‘Lady on the Island’, traditionally coupled with a work song, ‘Callahan’s Reel’, the ensuing lyrical ambiguity a function of mingling elements from two different pieces. Whatever set it in motion, ‘Train on the Island’ is a musical Paradise of speed and unfettered agility, its overlapping ecstasies of sound, sex and flight into the hyperborean Galax of a Virginia aptly named, and nevermore to leave.

The penultimate way out of the anthology is Ken Maynard’s ‘The Lone Star Trail’. Maynard was the first singing cowboy in the movies and starred in more than 300. He worked as a real cowboy, a rodeo and circus performer, and a stunts man touring with the Kit Carson show. ‘The Lone Star Trail’ came from the film *The Wagon Master* of 1929, but the song itself dates back to the old days of cattle drives. ‘Oh, I love the rolling prairie that’s far from trail and strife. / Find a bunch of longhorns, I’ll journey all my life.’ To Cantwell the song is simply awful, ersatz, and Maynard’s stumbling into the exalted company of the *Anthology* shows him up as ‘the classic bumpkin, utterly out of place’ (230). No bumpkins on Folkways then. By these lights, Smith’s decision to include the track must therefore be an egregious error of taste or, more likely, given its crucial position in the set, a deliberate impertinence that reminds us of white America’s willingness to airbrush out exactly the kind of pain and unabridged oppression that the preceding songs document. While this is at least plausible (and Smith’s box wants to be open to exactly these sorts of questions), it overstates the case, exposing the fault lines in the authenticity cult of the Folk Revival. Maynard’s vocalizations are hardly more restricted, more ‘white’, than those of Frank Hutchison singing the impeccably canonical ‘Stackalee’.

Most likely the interest to Smith of a figure such as the singing cowboy was not that he drowned the authentic in the ersatz, but that he incarnated a period in which the one turned rapidly into the other, willy-nilly. The cattle drives began in the aftermath of the Civil War, and were gone in a generation. As Philip Fisher writes, in America’s modern economy ‘the forms of life move and the claims of regional or stable identity weaken in the face of the obvious survival value of change and mobility’ (172). One American version of Paradise is the recycling for cultural nostalgia of what was in active use a moment ago; the authentic and the inauthentic are joined at the hip, and often

cover for each other when the going gets rough out on the trail. The results can be intentionally or unintentionally camp, which in Susan Sontag’s famous definition entails the setting of inverted commas around what was previously simply there. Ken Maynard is more camp than camp-fire, and sounds as if he’s singing in inverted commas: ‘But I can “twist a lasso” with the greatest, “killin’” ease / Or rope and ride “a bronco” most anywhere I please.’ But camp, in certain other contexts the signature of sexual orientation, can also spell something utterly different, as here: the unmeant, hapless broaching of a critical perspective by the acceleration and whim of ideology. By 1914, Kit Carson was ‘Kit Carson’.

Greil Marcus is more taken than Robert Cantwell with ‘The Lone Star Trail’, reading between the lines of its blues-rinsed yodel and affable commercialism a figure of freedom. ‘The shape of the land, its vast expanse, its indifference to who you are or what you want, looms up as this solitary figure says his piece: I am the first cowboy and the last. Here no one sees me, myself least of all, I am happy, I am free’ (Marcus, 111). Marcus is a seductive interpreter of America, and perhaps the most important these days. An enlivening historian of popular culture, he convinces through the kind of close reading for which Literature departments no longer have much time. What appeals in his picturing of Maynard is its capture not only of a sentimental and an anti-sentimental image of the cowboy – gone from working man to movie and myth in the space of Maynard’s lifetime (‘I am the first cowboy and the last’) – but also of the bleak freedom of existentialism and its lonely choices that were cooling the air at the time of espresso and black polo-necks, while Smith fashioned his contesting narratives of America.

But these are time-bound questions, whereas the final track, Henry Thomas’s ‘Fishing Blues’, conjures Paradise from timeless sound. I hope I am using the word ‘timeless’ in a precise and not simply a clichéd sense, just as I believe that when Greil Marcus describes this performance as ‘the freest song imaginable’, his words are loaded and carefully chosen (111). It is a simple thing, more of a rag than a blues. The lyric is about going down to the river, hooking a catfish and frying it in a skillet. However, the reader/listener is led to open doors that lead in widely different directions, both by Thomas’s artless art and by Smith’s positioning of it. ‘Here’s a little something I would like to relate / Any fish bite if you got good bait.’ Fishing images in the blues tradition are often sexual, and the performance is highly effective in retaining those possibilities, lightly, alongside its simple idyll of escape. Innocence and experience are not antithetical here, in a primal American text. Huck Finn comes to mind.



Thomas was a songster, virtually contemporary with the shipboard minstrel of *The Confidence-Man*. He learned some of his material in the 1890s. And just as Thomas's musical memory reaches so far into the past, so some songs have an untroubled prescience, for example, 'Bull Doze Blues', which one of the best rhythm-and-blues bands of the 1960s, Canned Heat, would rework only slightly as 'Goin' Up the Country'. It is telling that they rewrote the lyrics to incorporate references to the turbulence and riots of America in 1968, but were able to retain Thomas's melody without seeming to offer a piece of nostalgia. They also duplicated note for note, on a flute, the solo Thomas plays on his quill – pan-pipes he cut himself from canebreak.

It is above all the pipes that give 'Fishing Blues' its distinctive charm. Of course, a busking itinerant African-American singing about catching his own food and playing the quills is manna for the folk cult, and the sound of those pipes sends Cantwell's prose into outer space: 'It is the sound of something breaking free, something above the world, Andean, forged in that limbic region where natural forms, animated by human forces, return to throng a human consciousness evacuated by its own projections' (Cantwell, 235). Indeed, the quills sound ethereal yet real, as fresh and yet as old as going fishing. You could hear some arrangement of that handful of notes played tomorrow in Cuzco or Washington DC. Equally, one might have stood idly practising those pipes while another scratched the earliest surviving instance of writing, on the wall of a sapphire mine in what is now Iran. All of Thomas's playing has that timeless charm. All of Smith's assemblages have an anthropological perspective. The two in tandem, in the *perpetuum mobile* of the *Anthology*, create a collaborative form proposing journeys whose limits are, even now, not in sight.

### American space

In his study *The Anxious Object*, Harold Rosenberg observes in passing that modern artists have been driven to choose between an art of deep or of layered space.<sup>7</sup> To an art of deep space belong all questions and certainties of metaphysics, religion and the extremes of consciousness. Any hierarchical ordering of perceptual data has the potential to lead to an art of deep space, in whatever medium. The tradition of Northern European landscape painting that depicts the inner by recourse to representations of the outer world, epitomized

by Friedrich or Turner, is clearly a move into deep space that has repercussions for the history of painting up to the present day. For example, the work in the 1940s and beyond by the Abstract Expressionists centred in New York – Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko *inter alia* – absorbs the bequest of the landscape tradition, and pushes it to new extremes of inwardness. That body of work can be viewed as both the assertion of subjective, inner space over the Cold War demands of the social centre and an ironic confirmation of a new-found world-dominance happy to fund culture while investing in the more literal explorations of deep space pioneered by its technocracy. Being abstract, this expressionism could depict nothing so controversial as an issue. So it was that the art of Jackson Pollock could be seen, without contradiction, as both the psychodrama of an outlaw Romanticism and the latest adornment of bourgeois culture (used, as it was and with the artist's consent, by County Homes Inc. of Tarrytown, New York, to help sell their executive villas). The artists painted, the galleries sold, the museums housed, and the State Department funded the triumph of the avant-garde. This is the house that Jackson Pollock built, and there are some very deep spaces here.

However, to return to Harold Rosenberg's key terms, the more crucial and pugilistic advances in painting, literature and music tended in the twentieth century to be made in the service of an art of layered, rather than deep, space. This is noticeable in the European art that influenced (and in certain ways prompted) American art in the wake of the Armory Show. A layered space art would be typified by the innovations of Mondrian, Léger and Picasso in his Cubist phase. Here paint is configured in shapes and flats which, be they referential, semi- or non-representational, are freed from metaphysical ambition and press their claims on our attention by virtue of their *intensity*, rather than their place in some order. Such an emphasis on instantaneous effect suggests the adaptation of the late Romantic cult of the moment to the tempo of a society for which change is becoming a *modus operandi*. Meanwhile, in poetry, the work of William Carlos Williams presents a layered-space manifesto as influential in its sphere as Picasso's and Braque's Cubism. Crucial early poems such as 'The Great Figure', which would in time help shape the practice of Frank O'Hara, Robert Creeley and other poets cited in chapter 7, press the case for a materialist poetic in which any metaphysical extension to the visible surface, or the experienced moment, is happily and polemically denied. So the line 'I saw the figure 5' is weighted equally at both ends, the first-person singular claiming no privileges over the numeral in Williams's layered-space world.<sup>8</sup>



lead to a difference in the likely ratios of deep to layered space within the self-understanding of the British and the American. Britain is characterized by irritable and contesting layered spaces – of nations within the nation, of class antagonism, of capitalist development – that collide and find compromise inside mythic images of deep space, emblemized by the Royal Family, that have proved surprisingly durable. They have lasted because, if Britain truly modernized and got rid of them, it would be small, naked, simplified: a more urbanized Norway. This is not thought desirable, for reasons that are as tenacious as they are perhaps irrational. America loves deep-space symbolism, from Cape Canaveral to the Washington Monument, canyons photographed by Ansel Adams, the American Dream – dreams are the deepest, most duplicitous spaces imaginable – above all the flag, and the mysticism of Union won from struggle. Secretly, America is about venerating the deep while allowing the layered to win every time. The dream breaks on waking. A region, pre-eminently the South, can image itself as a deep space, but such presumption merely draws attention to its failure as a pseudo-State. The States are layered spaces.

### 'Don't move! The eggs will explode!'

At no point in this sketch of concepts have Harry Smith and his *Anthology of American Folk Music* been left behind. Rather, the reverse: the occult secrets of Smith's box of tricks collapse into transience and improvisation, much as the unblown eggs he would paint, gaseous and fragile, soon reached their expiry. 'Don't move! The eggs will explode!' was a frequent warning to the innocent visitor (Iglori, 153). Smith observed more evenly in an interview, with the blend of Dada and anthropology that characterized his activities, that 'a rotten egg is about the most transient medium, it is about the most difficult thing to paint on' (140). A layered space, then; a shell, the decoration of a passing moment. The *Anthology* is a succession of such aural and literary moments, yet questions of deep space recur in its perpetual motion. As Greil Marcus notes, our first reaction is a question: Who are these people? Who is singing? The past that was lost offers itself to partial reconstruction, but, more importantly, the voices become a counter-cultural band, a prompt to Smith's 'social changes' and the understanding that if things could have been so different then as to sound so other now, then the future could be different again, and the present not what it seems.

### Fishing for hidden meanings: Rabbit Brown, Bascom Lamar Lunsford and the lyric

This Möbius strip runs through every track at the micro-level. 'Old times ain't now nothing like they used to be. / And I'm telling you all the truth, you can take it from me.' Beginning its song, Rabbit Brown's voice sounds ancient, the echo chamber of his guitar confirming the rounded and aphoristic quality of the lyric. This is 'James Alley Blues', in the real history of New Orleans Jane's Alley, also known as the Battleground, a place where the police did not venture. Brown sings from the depths, the deep well where the excluded are invited to drown themselves. Yet the guitar style is in no fixed sense regional, and its bass runs and flamenco strumming testify to a mix of ethnic and cultural influences, as does Brown's voice, its changes throughout the song a self-aware piece of acting. He's seen better days, but he's 'putting up with these', the roguish world-weariness a blatant put-on, influenced vocally by the stage, rich with artifice and nothing like the insistent negritude, the fierce adherence to gospel tones and prophecy to be heard in, say, Blind Willie Johnson. ('Scary! Lion!', was my two-year-old son's correct reaction on first hearing Johnson growl 'His Blood Will Make me Whole'.) The penultimate and final verses of Brown's 'James Alley Blues' canvass as wide and as nuanced a spectrum of tones as could be slipped into the available time. Brow-beaten aggression is succeeded by plaintive affection, protested fidelity, possessiveness, lust and a murderous disregard. The last verse follows a curve from love to misogyny, while never straying from dark humour and a certain psychological acuity regarding the confinement and abrasion to be negotiated in any relationship:

Sometime I think that you too sweet to die.  
Sometime I think that you too sweet to die.  
And another time I think, *you ought to be buried alive.*

The layerings of tone are in one sense swallowed in the deep space of the grave and that vicious last line, and yet in this shifting performance burial is just another noun-token in the give and take of the relationship, like the sugar and salt given and taken in an earlier verse. The flamenco strum of the opening chords would be reworked by the group Love in their classic 'Alone Again Or' (1967), while the salt and sugar would find their way into Bob Dylan's 'Down in the Flood', a track from the *Basement Tapes*, never released officially in their



entirety, but which are effectively Dylan's rewriting of the *Anthology*, songs from which have found their way into recordings by him covering a span of forty years. Smith's project is literally interminable, the music reworking material so old that it never had a starting-point.

Inasmuch as there was a point of origin, it was in the British ballad tradition of materials gathered earlier by Child. One of the paradoxes of Smith's achievement is that, in helping to trigger the American Beat movement and its diffusion into Civil Rights politics and hippie disaffection, he retrieved a body of work which more than any artefact since the seventeenth century reminds its audience of the umbilical ties between American and British literature. Tracing such lines of descent allows deep to become layered space in a Möbius strip, the hum of the circum-Atlantic, as news and myth interrupt each other's claims. Sometimes the most baffling texts, their literary bones eburnated and rearranged by the winds of time, are the most sharply effective.

What is Bascom Lamar Lunsford's 'I Wish I Was a Mole in the Ground' about? If it were knowable, it would not be so powerfully what it is, another aspect of primitivist-modernism: 'If I was a mole in the ground, I'd root that mountain down.' Mountain metaphors are undone by metonyms, deep spaces by layered, the whole – the whole what? the whole thing, is all one can say – brought to ruin by the burrowing vengeful mole. It is as if Paul de Man's diagnosis of allegory undoing symbolism in the rhetoric of Romanticism were retold as a farmyard ditty. Fragments of different songs and rhymes seem to have found themselves cohabiting over time, like skeletons separated by generations finally embracing in the same burial-ground. Some of the limbs are recognizably American, as bangs curl around and their owner asks sweetly for a nine-dollar shawl, but the 'o'er's and 'tis'es and the syntactical structure seem much older and from another place. In the strange middle reaches of the song, who can say what's at stake and in play, as the voice wishes he was 'a lizard' in the spring. Priapic, suavely serpentine, without meaning: the possibilities flatten, balloon, alternate without rest. Lunsford's voicing is at one with these mysteries. Generally given to the clearest enunciation, here he lets his vowels slide crazily, an element of weirdly unctuous laughter in the voice setting an umlaut on each vowel like a lizard on a stone. Where is 'the Bend'? – 'I've been in the Bend, with the rough and rowdy men, / 'Tis baby where you been so long' – this is particularly teasing, when 'been' and 'Bend' are given almost identical pronunciation. Rewritten slightly, the following lines would find their way into Bob Dylan's 'Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again', but whereas *Blonde on Blonde* epitomizes Sixties cool,

Lunsford is anything but: 'O, I don't like a railroad man. / If I was a railroad man, they'll kill you when he can [*sic*] / And drink up your blood like wine.' In what incident, myth or mishearing did this travesty of Communion have roots? Is time the only mole that can root these mountains down?

There is no end to these trails of enquiry. When the sign on the door reads 'Gone Fishing', that is the ultimate layered space, the flat card telling us that nothing is going to happen except an absence. Yet this is also a deep space, a withdrawal of the person to a private adventure, from which he may return like a child or an Ancient Mariner, with a tale to tell. Such duplicity begets a career for Bascom Lamar Lunsford, whose 'Memory Collection' of several hundred performances lies waiting in the Library of Congress, a canon in itself, yet one of the least-known *oeuvres* by an American great. His renditions are all, to put it mildly, double. I never heard a singing voice that could inhabit so deeply, while standing so far outside to watch, the developing outline of a song. Though his loping banjo playing is strategically effective, this is a reading of poetry raised to the power of music.

He lived many lives inside and outwith the many Americas: post-graduate student, teacher, lawyer, ballad collector, fruit-tree salesman, court solicitor, secretary of the Marion board of trade, founder of America's first folk festival, political campaign manager for Congressman Zeb Weaver, a federal agent in New York. A biography would cast light on Carolina and Kentucky life in those times. It would surely uncover the connections that took him to the White House, to play for the President and Mrs Roosevelt and King George VI, in 1939. Lunsford was obviously a great host, and was often called on to be so, a powerful man of obscure involvements as well as origins:

His cozy white home on South Turkey Creek has long been a gathering spot for musicians, singers, dancers and even State Department-squired guests to this country ... the latter many times stiffly-correct (at first) delegations from behind the Iron Curtain ... The Europeans may have come across an ocean, but folk dancing is folk dancing the world over. But one request, to add his name to a group of folksingers opposing US policies in Viet Nam, riled him good. Lunsford says folk music often has patriotic themes and he went on to criticize those who would use it for political motives, particularly in opposition to their country.<sup>9</sup>

We have only begun to uncover what lies beneath the scratched surfaces of Harry Smith's 78s.



## Ginsberg's lost America of love

It might be tempting to suggest that Allen Ginsberg strained for what Stephen Jonas was, though what Jonas was itself begs questions, splitting on examination into an insider/outsider status that dismisses any social belonging or natural language as fake, its being outwith America, at home if at all in the recurrent apparition of the crowd or ghosts of Freud, haunting the mind at its most musical and flighty. By contrast, Ginsberg's dissidence was one that played at every point on the American literary past, and on key images of prophecy and New World Paradise. Like Robert Duncan, an instinctive didact, a hip teacher, Ginsberg made it new by recalling the primary American tropes. His latest biographer, Graham Caveney, quotes an exchange from Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* to urge this point. As with many such exchanges in James, the dialogue sets at polite loggerheads a European and an American sense of self, leaving it to the reader, as well as the heroine, to decide whether that opposition is true, false, binary or only to be proved on the pulses of individual actions and affections:

'I don't care anything about his house,' said Isabel.

'That's very crude of you. When you've lived as long as I you'll see that every human being has his shell and that you must take the shell into account. By the shell I mean the whole envelope of circumstances. There's no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we're each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances. What shall we call our 'self'? Where does it begin? where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us – and then it flows back again. I know a large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear. I've a great respect for *things*! One's self – for other people – is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's furniture, one's garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps – these things are all expressive.'<sup>19</sup>

To the poet's biographer, Isabel's spirited reply is one that could have been inscribed on Ginsberg's tombstone. Her response is an open-hearted statement of her Americanness, a declaration of independence from tradition, from all custom and constraint:

'I don't agree with you. I think just the other way. I don't know whether I succeed in expressing myself, but I know that nothing else expresses me. Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me; everything's on the contrary a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one.

Certainly the clothes which, as you say, I choose to wear, don't express me; and heaven forbid they should!

'You dress very well,' Madame Merle lightly interposed.

'Possibly; but I don't care to be judged by that. My clothes may express the dressmaker, but they don't express me. To begin with it's not my own choice that I wear them; they're imposed upon me by society.'

'Should you prefer to go without them?' Madame Merle inquired in a tone which virtually terminated the discussion.

Just so, Ginsberg incarnated the dissident energies of his own time while chafing at restriction in ways that run deep in the American grain, back to Emerson's self-reliance and Whitman's open road; 'nothing else expresses me'. Unlike James's heroine, the poet did 'prefer to go without' the clothes imposed by a society that had put him in a strait-jacket, stripping to the buff on-stage in response to a heckler who asked if the real Allen Ginsberg would please stand up. 'Naked' is a favourite word in the poems, as it is in the whole Beat pantheon; *The Naked Lunch* was Kerouac's title for Burroughs's novel. Yet there was always a touch of Madame Merle in Burroughs's viperish cleverness, and a sentimental, sports-watching patriotism lay at the heart of Kerouac's boozy odyssey. Ginsberg was the one whose self-expression risked everything on candour: a search for the naked truth, political or personal, his most far-reaching bequest a habit of conflating the two. Thus a certain Puritan self-steeling enters into even his most Dionysiac experiments. He would write essays while smoking marijuana or experiencing the onset of LSD hallucinations, but neither these substances nor any other factors do anything to disturb the teacherly momentum of the prose. On the poetic side, 'Please Master' (1968), Ginsberg's homo-erotic hymn to the ecstasies of self-abasement, one of the last really arresting poems that he wrote, and perhaps the poem many of the others really wanted to be, is not an unfettered expression of pleasure.

All of this got him into trouble. *Howl* (1956), his first major and also his best book, landed the poet and his publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti in court on obscenity charges. Confident of winning, Ginsberg turned the court room into theatre. The book would in time become a staple of American Literature courses, its manuscript history and legal wrangles documented and solemnized in a scholarly edition modelled on the transcripts of *The Waste Land*. More courageously, and with far less certainty about the outcome, Ginsberg was prominent in the anti-war protests at the Democratic Convention in Chicago in 1968, and was duly tear-gassed for his pains. Called to



testify in the subsequent show trials, the poet was surprised to find himself cross-examined on the sexual content of three poems selected by a homophobic official of the Justice Department, rather than over his support for the accused, one of whom, Bobby Seale, sat bound and gagged before the court on the order of the judge. Such was the temper of the times. Rattled by assassinations, civil disorder and the disinclination of young men to fight an unjust war in South-East Asia, it is the military-industrial complex that appears mad in retrospect, living up to its prescient imaging as 'Moloch the incomprehensible prison' in *Howl*; meanwhile, the poet in his Old Testament beard and hippie regalia appears the epitome of mild benignity.<sup>20</sup> Extrapolations of saintliness are even harder to avoid when the tally of Ginsberg's lifelong care for relatives, unstable friends and various gifted or shiftless hangers-on is added to his unflagging support for good causes. (At one point he was paying the salaries of most of the faculty at Naropa, now a respectable college with alumni and fund-raising events, having changed its name from the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics.) Such selflessness was not made comfortable by deep pockets; Ginsberg enjoyed no sustained financial security until his sixties, when the sale of his papers and a Distinguished Professorship at Brooklyn College facilitated a move to a larger apartment on the Lower East Side.

The poet was also handy with a camera, and the two published books of photographs show him to have been a gifted portraitist, particularly of fellow-writers and artists, Burroughs and Harry Smith. Susan Sontag wrote on the democratic vistas available to the American lens: 'In the open fields of American experience, as cataloged with passion by Whitman and as sized up with a shrug by Warhol, everybody is a celebrity. No moment is more important than any other moment; no person is more interesting than any other person.'<sup>21</sup> Thus the aesthetic of the moment in the poet's snaps is related less to the metropolitan tradition of the *flâneur* than to the profound thrill of democratic uniformity articulated by Whitman and theorized by Philip Fisher as an American archetype. Differences in geography, climate, time zone, not to mention race, class and the social costs of private wealth are among the factors that at one level or another question the unity of the United States. American identity, built from the hopes and exploitation brought about by four waves of mass immigration, is hyphenated into Cuban-American, Jewish-American, Armenian-American, the root preceding the hyphen cherished all the more nostalgically for the fact that it is all but dissolved by the acid of induction, stripped within a generation of its attachment to another time and place. For the deep spaces of origin America

substitutes a sign system of minimal affiliation and immediate recognition; as perhaps it must, in such a huge space, dominated by marketing and technology, where a fifth of the population moves in any given year.

In his search for the naked truth, and his choice of poetry rather than the novel, Ginsberg could evade by lyrical rhetoric and an essentially religious sensibility the pressures of American sameness. The poet became a Buddhist, and his long poem of the mid-sixties, 'Wichita Vortex Sutra', frames in a devotional genre things thought and glimpsed along the road, on a long Kansas journey by car:

Now, speeding along the empty plain ...  
 I claim my birthright!  
     reborn forever as long as Man  
         in Kansas or other universe – Joy  
     reborn after the vast sadness of War Gods!  
 A lone man talking to myself, no house in the brown vastness to hear,  
     imaging the throng of Selves  
         that make this nation one body of Prophecy  
             languaged by Declaration as  
             Happiness!  
 I call all Powers of imagination  
     to my side in this auto to make Prophecy

(Ginsberg, 406)

The trouble is that there is more of P. B. Shelley than there is of Kansas in Ginsberg's Wichita. Even as early as 1966, Ginsberg was in a number of senses on 'auto', his grabbing of the mantle of spokesman for the counter-culture taking him at speed from microphone to microphone, rally to rally, the actual details of experience hardly sifted, but rushed by an aesthetic of improvisation into the kind of airy rhetorical conceptualizations that characterize Whitman's weaker stretches, and that Lawrence had parodied so archly four decades before. So little is *seen* by Ginsberg, at least after *Howl*. Rather, it is all boosted at once to the Emersonian infinite, on automatic, pigeon-holing wings.

From quite early in his career, Ginsberg was a literary figure first, and a poet second. He was as tireless a literary agent as Pound in his London years, but, unlike Pound's, his poetry suffered as a result of packing the diary. The problem, to return to the exchange from *Portrait of a Lady*, is that Ginsberg may not have been whole-heartedly on the Isabel Archer side after all. 'When you've lived as long as I you'll see that every human being has his shell and that you must take the shell into account. By the shell I mean the whole envelope of circumstances.... What shall we call our "self"?' Ginsberg had an