

“The American Monomyth in a New Century” and “The Birth of a National Monomyth”

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“The American Monomyth in a New Century”

As the United States approached the year 2000, waves of anxiety and hope crested. The technologically informed had worries that decades of shortsighted computer programming would allow the Y2K bug to deliver lethal bites, inflicting random damage on our economy and essential services. Citizens had few hopes that government would provide wise policies, suspecting instead that its own aged, behemoth systems would themselves collapse. Believers who viewed the calendar through a millennial lens thought that the Rapture might finally be at hand. Titles such as *Revelations 2000: Your Guide to Biblical Prophecy for the New Millennium* and *Spiritual Survival During the Y2K Crisis* appeared in bookstores alongside Pat Robertson's *End of the Age* and Paul Meyer's *The Third Millennium*. The popular Rapture-based fantasies, launched in 1995 by Tim LaHaye's and Jerry Jenkins' *Left Behind: a Novel of the Earth's Last Days*, dominated the religious best-seller lists and brought forth a series of successors, such as *Tribulation Force: The Continuing Drama of those Left Behind*. By mid 2001, the number of end-time products sold—including millennial materials for children—reached 39 million. There seemed to be widespread solace in the idea that we were not—could not—write the script of our national destiny and that a divine hand would wipe clean the social slate, saving a righteous few who would no longer bear historical responsibility.

At this moment of despair came a stylish film that combined the themes of computer dystopia and messianic deliverance—in effect, a Rapture away from America's computer-designed hell. *The Matrix*, released in mid-1999 gives us a vision of our planet as redesigned to serve the tyranny of machines directed by malevolent artificial intelligences. Humans think they can disable these solar-powered dictators by blasting the atmosphere into a sooty darkness. But the "Agents," as they are called, respond by tightening their control. Humans are imprisoned in power plants that extract their heat; the bodies of the dead are recycled to feed the barely living. Yet there is hope in this situation. A person named Thomas Anderson works at the Metacortex Corporation as a lowly programmer in a Dilbert-style cubicle. Because of the clever virtual reality created by "the Matrix," Thomas has been unaware of his subjugation and its resulting illusions. But he has shown a resisting spirit of freedom by computer hacking and selling secrets. And this leads to the call from an otherworldly figure named Morpheus, who believes that Thomas is "the One" who can liberate humanity.

After a period of testing and a rebirth with powers that permit him to fight the Agents, the newly christened "Neo" (no longer the doubting Thomas) is joined by a beautiful, previously rebirthed young woman named Trinity, who becomes his partner in world redemption. In a final battle, where these two haul an arsenal of weapons into the Matrix headquarters, Neo and Trinity float, fly, fire their weapons, and deliver bonesmashing kicks. In one moment, Thomas-Neo dies, is resurrected by Trinity's virtuous kiss, and then fights with magical fury. He catches flying bullets and enters the body of one of the Agents, exploding him. Then, once he has defeated the last Agent, Neo ascends into the heavens.

The Matrix quickly became a cult film. It ran for months in theaters after reports of earning \$50 million in its first weekend, then quickly migrated to VCR and DVD formats for private screenings. A *Matrix*-themed video game and film sequels were on the drawing boards within a few months of its initial triumph. The story became the locus for numerous fan commentaries and discussions that enthusiastically worked out parallels between the Bible's language and events and those of the film. Other fans developed online versions of *Matrix* stories that project its heroism into new situations.

Less surprising than the outsized success of this tale of apocalyptic redemption is its conformity to an American formula of the standard superheroic character. Like the violent film roles developed by Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Chuck Norris, Clint Eastwood, and Steven Seagal, among others, Keanu Reeves's Neo and Carrie Moss's Trinity are lonely, selfless, sexless beings who rescue an impotent and terrorized community. Early in Neo's training for world liberation, he is required to ignore a pretty woman in a red dress. And in their gun-toting relationship, Trinity and Neo behave as chaste as do the terminal loners Dana Scully and Fox Mulder of *The X-Files*. Neo's passion, perhaps the first of his life, becomes his zeal for the mission of world rescue.

These motifs of superheroic redemptive violence become significant points of departure in tracking American mythology because their predictability opens the doors to our sensibilities. As John Cawelti, persuasively suggests, "Strongly conventionalized narrative types ... are so widely appealing because they enable people to re-enact and temporarily resolve widely shared psychic conflicts." Invention in the dramatic realm strives after a statement of unique personal vision, while conventions "assert an ongoing continuity of values...." Our concern lies with these ritualized mythic plots because they suggest important clues about the tensions, hopes, and despair concerning democracy within the current American consciousness.

The Classical Monomyth

But, the reader may wonder, are these stories of heroic violence unique to America? Why do we suggest that American culture has generated a novel

pattern of narrative? Not initially convinced ourselves, we tested our intuition about the American patterns by turning to one of the major studies of world mythology, Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. There we find a provocative description of the archetypal plot for heroic action in traditional mythologies. The *classical monomyth*, as Campbell called it, offers this story pattern:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.

One can find examples of this plot in the stories of Prometheus stealing fire from the gods to benefit mankind, of Ulysses undergoing his adventurous journey, of Aeneas visiting the underworld to discover the destiny of the nation he would found, of St. George and the dragon, and of Hansel and Gretel. Campbell incorporates myths, legends, and the fairy tales of many cultures into this framework, suggesting that the archetype is molded according to rites of initiation, in which persons depart from their community, undergo trials, and later return to be integrated as mature adults who can serve in new ways. We see this training for permanent social responsibility as an important benchmark in assessing the American pattern in heroic mythmaking. Since this aspect of the classical plot is not typically present in the popular materials of contemporary America, many analysts of myth have concluded simply that we have become a postmythical culture. The psychoanalyst Rollo May even argued that some of our cultural distresses can be traced to the absence of any mythic system whatsoever.

We disagree. The widespread current enthusiasm for materials such as *The Matrix*, *Rambo*, *Touched by an Angel*, and the *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, and *Left Behind* franchises indicates that Americans have not moved beyond mythical consciousness. Moreover the form of the classical monomyth, with its symbolic call for lifetime service to a community's institutions, allows us to highlight its absence in the distinctive pattern of what we call here the *American monomyth*. Although there are significant variations, the following archetypal plot formula may be seen in thousands of popular-culture artifacts:

A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat: a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task: aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition: the superhero then recedes into obscurity.

Whereas the classical monomyth seemed to reflect rites of initiation, the American monomyth derives from tales of redemption. It secularizes the Judaeo-

Christian dramas of community redemption that have arisen on American soil, combining elements of the selfless servant who impassively gives his life for others and the zealous crusader who destroys evil. The supersaviors in pop culture function as replacements for the Christ figure, whose credibility was eroded by scientific rationalism. But their superhuman abilities reflect a hope for divine, redemptive powers that science has never eradicated from the popular mind. Figures such as Neo in *The Matrix* seem explicitly designed to offer contemporary moviegoers this new Christ—one who has dropped the ineffectual baggage of the Sermon on the Mount. Instead, he and his shooting partner Trinity carry a duffel bag full of pistols, guns, and explosives needed to destroy the command center of political evil.

Such stories and their power to evoke admiration from large audiences have led us to explore some paradoxes associated with these American superheroic fantasies. Why, for example, in an era of sexual liberation, do we still have heroes marked by sexual renunciation? And why, amid so many signs of secularization, do large audiences entertain so many fantasies of redemption by supernatural powers? And why, in a country trumpeting itself as the world's supreme democratic model, do we so often relish depictions of impotent democratic institutions that can only be rescued by extralegal superheroes? Are these stories safety valves for the stresses of democracy, or do they represent a yearning for something other than democracy? And why do women and people of color, who have made significant strides in civil rights, continue to remain almost wholly subordinate in a mythscape where communities must almost always be rescued by physically powerful white men?

Whether one recognizes these as paradoxes or not, and whatever the intent of their creators, the emotional power of the monomythic narratives for a substantial part of the populace is undeniable. The premise of our book is that the vitality of democracy and a full understanding of contemporary religious consciousness depend on an intensive examination of these heroic-redemptive images in popular culture.

To understand our current situation, it is essential to take account of voluntary behavior changes that derive from complex webs of motivation and fashion so common in pop culture. The religious quality of such actions has seldom been taken seriously, in part because the artifacts of popular culture that inspire them are not explicitly religious. Cultural interpreters such as Herbert Gans have argued that popular culture merely provides "a temporary respite from everyday life," passing "in one eye and out the other." He also contends that people "use the media for diversion and would not think of applying its content to their lives." In contrast, we believe, with William G. Doty, that "rituals, symbols, and myths establish conservative benchmarks, but at the same time, they anticipate *forms of the future* as they determine and shape ideals and goals for both individual

and society." Among those "forms of the future" are the developing styles of religious confession in pop culture's spiritual marketplace. Narratives of superheroic redemption have become occasions for confessional statements of personal transformation and new trajectories of life meaning.

The Werther Effect

In searching out relevant historical precedents and categories to explain fans' imitative behavior, we were struck by an important moment in eighteenth century Europe. In 1774, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe published a novel that became an important landmark of popular culture in the era of mass-produced literature. Entitled *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, it is the story of a sensitive young man who, thwarted in his passion for a young woman, commits suicide. Within a decade of this novel's publication it had become an international sensation: it was published in many versions and translations, and it evoked hundreds of imitations. S. P Atkins explains:

Novelists, playwrights, poets, composers, choreographers, and iconographers ranging from reputable painters and illustrators to anonymous wax workers, all unrestrained by laws of copyright and inspired by their own or others' interest in Goethe's popular novel, quickly appropriated its themes to their peculiar talents. In addition, the cult of Werther was exploited by the trade: *eau de Werther* was sold, and Charlotte and Werther figures...as familiar and ubiquitous as Mickey Mouse or Donald Duck today, appeared on fans and gloves, on bread boxes and jewelry, on delicate Meissen porcelain....

The imitation of the Werther character also led to more alarming results in that romantic era. Walter Kaufmann points out that "all over Europe large numbers of young people committed suicide with a copy of the book clutched in their hands or buried in a pocket." Suicide notes referred explicitly to Goethe's novel. In one particularly dramatic case, the young Fanni van Ickstatt leaped to her death from the tower of the Munich Frauenkirche. The unfortunate Goethe was accused of being responsible for this death by a host of preachers and lecturers. One lecturer, Johann Georg Prandl, wrote verses bemoaning her death and condemning Goethe. Goethe was alarmed at the incredible uproar over his novel and its unforeseen impact. Indeed, during his first trip to Italy, where he was both feted and condemned as the author of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, he expressed the wish that he could destroy his creation." It had apparently taken on a life of its own. Two centuries later, William Shatner and Leonard Nimoy as Kirk and Spock of *Star Trek* would experience similar moments of estrangement from their admirers.

When an artifact enters the arena of popular culture and assumes its own existence in the imagination of fans, a powerful though elusive process begins.

We can hardly sort out the causal and motivational influences in the Werther-related suicides. However they illustrate an interesting interplay between fantasy and reality that begins to obliterate any clear distinction between mere entertainment and seriously contemplated life purposes. Goethe's novel was inspired by an actual suicide, that of K. W. Jerusalem, and also by Goethe's own frustrated passion for Charlotte Buff. The novel, in turn, inspired public interest in the life of K. W. Jerusalem, leading to a published biography of him by another author. But once Goethe's novel captured the popular imagination, a fantasy process had begun that resulted in a wide variety of imitations and personal identifications with the heroes. This process of behavior alteration has its closest analogues in religious ethics, but the particular artifact inspiring it is not itself religious.

We propose to call this paradoxical and elusive result a *Werther effect*. In the Werther effect an audience member (a) experiences a work of fantasy within a secular context that (b) helps to shape the reader/viewer's sense of what is real and desirable, in such a way that, (c) the reader/viewer takes actions consistent with the vision inspired by the interaction between his own fantasy and that popular entertainment. A Werther effect appears to be a form of voluntary behavioral change produced by interaction with a powerful artifact of popular culture. It can be a religiously tinged ethical impulse, within a nonreligious context, that occurs regardless of the intent of the artifact's creators. A Werther effect characteristically embodies a redefinition of the boundary between fact and fantasy.

Throughout this book we will identify *Werther*-like imitative behaviors inspired by materials such as the *Star Trek* television series, Buffalo Bill's Wild West, the *Death Wish* and *Rambo* films, some recent videogames, and *The Turner Diaries*. However, we do not intend to take the censorious line of Goethe's critics: one cannot eliminate fantasy processes by banning works that may have inspired them. The complex interaction between individual imaginations and popular artifacts should instead be brought to consciousness and subjected to balanced criticism.

In the past, puritanical types with keen noses for idolatry have sniffed the religious aura of pop culture. Savonarola ranted against popular entertainments with the same arguments as did Puritan divines in revolutionary New England. They fervently hoped to ban the festivals and theatrical troupes that they felt popularized subversive forms of behavior - polluting the imagination of the faithful. "Christian" in *Pilgrim's Progress* received his most severe testing at "Vanity Fair," where worldly diversions and illicit relations were hawked. Religious zealots throughout American history have promoted bans against the insidious influences of popular culture. From the prohibitions against theaters and pictorial art in colonial days to the recent campaigns against X-rated films, the ire of the faithful

has burned against what was perceived as a corrupt, competitive religion. The raging reformers correctly perceived the presence of youth-formative influences under the innocent guise of mere entertainment. But their repressive strategy simply rendered them powerless to deal with the fantasies that appealed to the popular mind. The censorious approach eliminated the possibility of public discussion about fantasy and behavior essential to the health of both the individual and society.

As we write late in 2002, there are increasing signs that in international affairs the nation is tempted to move with mythic footsteps toward "cowboy" stances. Before the attacks of September 11, the U.S. government took steps to paralyze multilateral efforts to face several issues of international concern: on the environmental front, it renounced the nation's earlier commitment to the Kyoto Protocol on Global Warming; it stalled on the Biological Weapons Convention designed to restrain chemical and biological warfare; the U.S. Senate curtly rejected any attempt at moving forward with the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty; the Bush administration threatens to abandon the AntiBallistic Missile Treaty of 1972, with its allied arms control regimes of the Outer Space Treaty, and the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Instead of these diplomatic agreements, the U.S. government proposes a National Missile Defense, which it proposes to "share" with other countries by offering to shield them. A sentimental thread running through these unilateral thrusts is the expectation that others can see our dominating military power as motivated by purely defensive objectives that will protect the innocent. While critics in other countries view such sentiments as self-deluding, they are perfectly consistent with the image of the selfless superhero encouraged by our most popular entertainments.

Some of our mythic certainties about the special and favored place of America in the world came to expression with the surprise attacks of September 11 at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and the anthrax terrorism that followed. The official interpretation of these tragic losses has carried an American mythic stamp from the very first moments. Divorcing the events from any connection with U.S. policies, President George W. Bush stated that "America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world." Taunting the adversary Osama Bin Laden, the President embraced a stark, dualistic and triumphal world view in promising that "this will be a monumental struggle of good versus evil. But good will prevail." Senator John McCain, impatient with the slowly developing military response in the weeks after September 11, echoed the jihadic perspective in calling for a relentless war. With a grim eloquence, he exhorted the nation's leaders to "shed a tear, and then get on with the business of killing our enemies as quickly as we can, and as ruthlessly as we must." While the simplicity of myth and the prospect of vengeance offer special comforts in a time of mass murder, the notion of destroying evil on a world-wide basis may draw us toward spiraling conflicts that

we can never hope to control.

Counterbalancing elements of democratic hope in this situation have emerged in a new recognition that America's safety requires it to cooperate with a community of nations. Moreover President George W. Bush has been courageous in his stances warning against ethnic and religious stereotyping of Arabs and Muslims as a betrayal of democratic respect for minorities.

In our current situation, we believe that examining the American monomyth—the endlessly repeated story of innocent communities besieged by evil outsiders—can help us gain a better perspective on the dangers we face. We invite readers to join in our venture of studying the national mythos. It was never more timely to project our fantasies onto a mirror that renders them with less distortion.

“The Birth of a National Monomyth”

"It is hard for us, bred on science and rationalism, to grasp how fearsome, how magical, the universe appeared to earlier societies, how full of wonders and portents it was. It could only be controlled by men and women larger than life. Heroes were necessary both as gods and as a part of the ritual that kept the external world secure and tolerable.... But epic heroes such as these essentially belong to rural worlds, to societies living near the wilderness. And no wonder then that they are dying, particularly in the Western world, where nature has become benign."

J. H. Plumb, "Disappearing Heroes"

Reputable scholars such as J. H. Plumb have repeatedly announced the death of mythic heroes with magical powers to redeem the world. This reveals a peculiar analytic lag, because it was written in the heyday of superheroic dramas in popular culture. Thousands of images of heroes and heroines larger than life, with powers every bit as magical as those exercised in classical mythology, were floating about in the American entertainment system, yet they appear to have been unrecognizable to sophisticated minds. Since the traditional, classical mythology was no longer popular, its replacement by a new story form could not be grasped. Perhaps the visual appearance of the modern superheroes and heroines made them so familiar in everyday life that they simply became invisible. More likely the seedy products of pop culture, produced for profit and entertainment, lacked the sheen that had been gained by traditional myths, hallowed by centuries of serious scholarship. One thing is certain, in our view: mythology's death notices were greatly exaggerated, to use the phrase of Mark Twain. We therefore provide some of the details that an obituary concerning the allegedly deceased should include.

The Myth of Eden in American Imagination

Tales of the American monomyth typically begin and end in Eden-like settings. We see small communities of diligent agrarians, townspeople, or members of a work group together in harmony. Then a disruption occurs, one that calls into question the effectiveness of the institutions designed to cope with such challenges. Because those institutions and their leaders conspicuously fail, the mythic vision dictates with clarity that a superhero must act before any likeness of Eden can be restored. Although a few women have taken on heroic stature in the nonviolent stories, the hero is typically a male. *Star Wars* begins in a small farming community on Tatooine, where Luke Skywalker dutifully helps his aunt and uncle on their subsistence farm. Disney's *Lion King* presents us with the newborn cub prince Simba, who lives in a violence-free interspecies paradise until a wicked uncle contrives the death of his father. Simba must endure exile before returning for a miraculous restoration of his own kingship. And the *Star Trek* television series and films have now given us decades of opening scenes with cheerfully bantering crew members on the antiseptic bridge of the peaceful *Enterprise* or the *Voyager*. Suddenly an evil face appears on the screen or a mysterious force seizes their ship, shattering this technological idyll. After the crisis is resolved, the starship is shown back on course, the computer-assisted Eden temporarily restored.

In all these artifacts the state of harmony is the source from which the drama springs, as well as the goal of its resolution. The *monomythic Eden* has distinctive features: it is neither the pure state of nature—the rustic world of small farms and plantations—nor the urban metropolis. It is a small, well-organized community whose distinguishing trait is the absence of lethal internal conflict arising from its members; the surrounding pastoral realm echoes its inner harmony. The citizens are law-abiding and cooperative, without those extremes of economic, political, or sexual desires that might provoke confrontations. A cheerful atmosphere pervades the homogeneous populace, and there is no hint of a tendency on the part of the majority toward evil. If there are evil individuals in the community, they are clearly differentiated by behavior, dress, and physical appearance. The majority's only failing is its impotence in the face of the evil of others.

The obvious model for this monomythic Eden is the Midwestern small town as seen through the lens of pastoralism. Yet, if we examine it more closely, small-town life in the American heartland has hardly been Edenic. Frequent crop failures, depressions, fluctuations in population, and conflicts over school, church, and civic administration have been endemic to Main Street, U.S.A. Farmers commit suicide, murder, adultery, and incest—unpleasant realities set forth with grim realism in Jane Smiley's novel *A Thousand Acres* (later made into a movie). One need only read the novels of Sinclair Lewis to get a sense of the

undercurrents of small-town life in early twentieth-century America. Pressures for social and moral conformity cause considerable unhappiness. It is thus unlikely that the monomythic image of a small-town paradise could have arisen from practical experience. This raises the question: how did this myth arise?

Charles L. Sanford's study *The Quest for Paradise* suggests that "the Edenic myth ... has been the most powerful and comprehensive organizing force in American culture." The myth arose with the discovery of the New World, long before the actual settlement of the continent. Sanford traces this quest for paradise in early tales of exploration and cites Christopher Columbus's conviction that "there is the terrestrial paradise" newly discovered in America. He thus attributed the "innocent qualities of Adam and Eve" to the American Indians (pp. 39-40). Shortly before his last voyage, Columbus claimed the discovery of the new heaven and new earth mentioned in the Bible, placing the discovery of America as a decisive step toward the second coming of Christ and the establishment of the millennial kingdom.

This speculation fed the quest for El Dorado and stimulated Renaissance ideas about Arcadia and the recovery of the Golden Age. Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly* and More's *Utopia* take up these paradisiacal themes. The Reformation linked the quest for paradise even more explicitly with millennial hopes. Luther's *Second Commentary on the Book of Revelation* placed contemporaneous struggles with Catholicism in the penultimate phase of apocalyptic history, which would be followed shortly by a climactic battle and then the dawn of the millennial paradise. These expectations were widely shared by American Puritans. Sanford concludes:

The most popular doctrine in the colonies was that America had been singled out, from all the nations of the earth, as the site of the Second Coming; and that the millennium of the saints, while essentially spiritual in nature, would be accompanied by a paradisaic transformation of the earth as the outward symbol of their inward state. As Mather put it, "When this Kingdom of Christ has filled all the Earth, *this Earth will be restored to its Paradise state.*"

Studies of the American Puritans have shown that the expectation of paradise remained in the rather distant future. The wilderness symbolized temptation, threat, and adversity to early settlers. By 1693, Mather was suggesting that "Wilderness" was the stage "thro' which we are passing to the Promised Land." The Puritans' pessimism about their own evil, as well as that long journey through the wilderness, tempered any tendency toward utopianism.

The Edenic myth came to play a more powerful role in the next century among Enlightenment figures who abandoned the sense of omnipresent evil. Franklin

and Jefferson, Sanford observes, combined the Puritan legacy of moral perfectionism with a remarkable confidence in America's Edenic potential. "The image of Paradise in the American myth of Eden has had its greatest development in the moral sphere. The superiority of the United States in quantitative achievements and political skills has consistently been blazoned forth in moral terms." Franklin seems to have been serious when he called his proposed colony in Ohio the future "paradise on earth." (p.125) In 1836, Thomas Cole proclaimed that "we are still in Eden; the wall that shuts us out of the garden is our own ignorance and folly." Such minor impediments could be dealt with by education, social reforms, and moral endeavors, to which Americans in the first half of the nineteenth century turned with enormous optimism.

The belief in America's millennial destiny, optimism about human progress, and an increasing hope in the perfectibility of man contributed to the idea of America as "The Garden of the World." As Henry Nash Smith defines this image of the American West, "The master symbol of the garden embraced a cluster of metaphors expressing fecundity, growth, increase, and blissful labor in the earth, all centering about the heroic figure of the idealized frontier farmer...." Smith cites an 1827 statement by Timothy Flint that describes happy farmers raising their families "in peace, plenty and privacy, under the guardian genius of our laws....Farmers and their children are strong, and innocent and moral almost of necessity." (p.140) This mythic image of an agrarian Eden is constantly contrasted with cities, which "are the sores of the political body," as James B. Lanman put it in 1841 (p. 142). This image of the Edenic western garden became embodied in the Homestead Act of 1862, whose strongest appeal, according to Smith, "lay in the belief that it would enact by statute ... the agrarian utopia of hardy and virtuous yeomen which had haunted the imaginations of writers about the West since the time of Crèvecoeur." (p. 170)

The power of this mythic image of the West to disguise empirical reality is illustrated by the reinterpretation of the "Great American Desert" image of the high western plains during their settlement. The treeless region from Kansas to the Dakotas, whose sparse rainfall had seemed forever to defy cultivation, was advertised as arable after the Civil War by the Department of the Interior with the motto "Rain Follows the Plough:." Farm vegetation and newly planted trees would increase rainfall sufficiently to produce the promised Eden, according to the ad. David M. Emmons' study *Garden in the Grasslands* cites promotional literature that beckoned millions of immigrants to the anticipated paradise. Union Pacific Railroad ads compared settlers to Abraham, Columbus, and the Pilgrims, calling them "the advance column of civilization ... a peaceable, even tempered race, who hate war, love peace ... honor their wives, raise honest children, live within their income, and grow rich out of Kansas soil." A Rock Island promotion explained: "It is the garden spot of the world ... because it will grow anything that any other country will grow and with less work. Because it rains here more than

in any other place, and just at the right time," it is the ideal region to settle.

It is scarcely credible today that claims about a rich and trouble-free western paradise lived on even after most original homesteaders lost their claims through adverse conditions. The myth was preserved in Western novels and films depicting small communities of peaceful and industrious citizens saved from thieves and blackguards by courageous cowboys. In fact, at the very moment the Edenic myth was undergoing its most traumatic shock, during the dust bowl days of the Great Depression, Walt Disney was fashioning animated visions of paradise whose power is still apparent. In his classic 1937 cartoon *The Old Mill*, a fierce storm buffets the idyllic windmill and its innocent animals just as the economic storms and dust bowl winds had been striking the midwestern Eden. A loyal pair of birds had laid their eggs in a gear hole of the unused mill, and the unusual winds drove the creaky wheel with its great gears over and over—seemingly through the innocent nest. But the magic of animation preserved the myth as the baby birds magically reappear in the imperiled nest when quiet descends at the end. The same vision has remained popular at Disneyland in Anaheim, which offers "eternal fun, infinite holiday and deathlessness—in short, an urbanized Eden," to use John Seelye's words.

The popular entertainments overlooked by Plumb and an entire generation of classical scholars attest to the virtual omnipresence of the Eden theme. The decisive correlate to this nostalgic syndrome is a sense of loss, a conviction that the Eden Americans deserve to inhabit is now besieged by insoluble problems. This theme of a threat to paradise is embodied in the second phase of monomythic drama.

The Intruding, Evil Other

The action of the American monomyth always begins with a threat arising against Eden's calm. In the popular *Death Wish* films that originated in the 1970s, petty criminals threaten the voyagers from Eden. In *Star Trek's* original series, challenges arise from interplanetary baddies such as Romulans, Klingons, or aggressive gods. In *Star Trek's Next Generation* and *Voyager* series, the disturbances of harmony originate with forces such as the Borg or Q. In the blockbuster success *Jaws*, Amity Island's tranquility is shattered by the marauding supershark. Spiderman and Superman contend against criminals and spies just as the Lone Ranger puts down threats by greedy frontier gangs. Thus paradise is depicted as repeatedly under siege, its citizens pressed down by alien forces too powerful for democratic institutions to quell. When evil is ascendant, Eden becomes a wilderness in which only a superhero can redeem the captives.

The theme of a chosen people under attack emerged in one of the earliest forms of American literature, the Indian captivity narratives. Mary Rowlandson's *The*

Sovereignty & Goodness of God...a Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration, first printed in 1682, remained popular for a century and a half, along with several similar stories that were bestsellers in colonial America. Rowlandson was living "in prosperity, having the comforts of the world," oblivious of her shortcomings, when the Indian attack destroyed her family and carried her away into the night. Having resisted the temptations of Indian life, she was finally rescued and thus allowed to tell the story of "Israel in Babylon," to use Richard Slotkin's expression. The sense of the chosen people in an alien realm, under attack by the oppressive forces of a demonic Babylon, thus became a central theme in popular literature. "The great and continuing popularity of these narratives, the uses to which they were put, and the nature of the symbolism employed in them are evidence that the captivity narratives constitute the first coherent myth-literature developed in America for American audiences."

The siege of paradise, expressed in the secular terminology of Thomas Jefferson, became central to the Declaration of Independence and America's perpetual pose of innocence: "But when a long Train of Abuses and Usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object, evinces a Design to reduce them under absolute Despotism," it is the duty of a people to revolt. The Declaration enumerates the phases of this perfidious attack by an unjust King on the innocent colonists: "He has plundered our Seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the Lives of our People ... with circumstances of Cruelty and Perfidy, scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous Ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized Nation." Jefferson portrays these attacks as totally unprovoked, evoking the mildest protestations suitable for a peaceful and law-abiding people: "In every stage of these Oppressions we have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble Terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated Injury."

The paradise and wilderness themes also play decisive roles in the Leatherstocking tales, where maidens are captured by aggressive Indians and peaceful frontier settlements are threatened by raiders. The Wild West shows dramatized these themes, showing log cabins and stagecoaches attacked by wild Indians. The dime novels of 1860-1893, which Henry Nash Smith analyzes, concentrated on "rescuing beautiful heroines from the Indians. When the Indians began to yield place in the dime novel to road agents or counterfeiters as the standard enemy, the hunters of the Leatherstocking type lend a hand in fighting the newer foes.

At the root of this shift in the locus of evil was the inability of the western Eden to provide immunity from economic and natural disasters toward the end of the nineteenth century. Smith notes that

the myths of the garden and of the empire had both affirmed a doctrine of progress.... Neither American man nor the American continent

contained, under this interpretation, any radical defect or principle of evil. But other men and other continents ... were by implication unfortunate or wicked. This suggestion was strengthened by the tendency to account for any evil which threatened the garden empire by ascribing it to alien intrusion. Since evil could not conceivably originate within the walls of the garden, it must by logical necessity come from without....(p. 187)

A conspiracy theory thus emerged, projecting all evil outward upon others (or, in today's literary and theological terminology, "the Other"). Whereas Mary Rowlandson had believed her suffering to be a just punishment for her own sins and those of fellow colonists, the myth of an innocent public afflicted by evil foes from outside now began to crystallize. And heroic violence was required to confront these foes. A classic statement of this myth appeared in an early film by D. W. Griffith, appropriately entitled *The Birth of a Nation*.

The opening scene of Griffith's 1915 classic is thoroughly Edenic, depicting plantation owner Ben Cameron gently stroking a pair of puppies. As Gerald Mast observes, "Significantly one of the puppies is black and the other white; also significant is the fact that a kitten soon begins to play with the pups. The animals become visual metaphors for the prewar South's happy mixture of different races and different social classes." The film depicts the Civil War, having been fomented by evil abolitionists who favored miscegenation, as breaking this innocent idyll. As Mast says, "All the evil in the film is instigated by three people"—the abolitionist Austin Stoneman, the mulatto demagogue Silas Lynch, and the "renegade Negro" Gus, whose rape of a young white girl is pivotal. These three seduced others into the evil of the war. (p. 86)

The siege of innocent citizens is portrayed through a brilliant series of innovative film techniques that mark *The Birth of a Nation* as a milestone in film history. Film theorists Kinder and Houston note that *The Birth of a Nation* "developed innovations specifically suited to express a dualistic conception of the world. Griffith skillfully blended close-ups, crosscutting, iris shots, split-screen juxtapositions, and unusual camera positions to produce both realism and suspense in the conflict between stereotypical forces of good and evil. One might say that he invented mythic cueing, or at least employed its devices with unprecedented impact. He and his associates discovered "the value of a detail not only as a narrative, attention-getting device, but also as a means of suggesting poetic significance." Despite *Birth of a Nation*'s inflammatory social content, the American Film Institute in 1998 gave it a rank of 44th in its list of "the greatest 100 American movies.

Thus the plight of the innocent South at the hands of carpetbaggers and depraved blacks is conveyed by riotous street scenes, close-ups of lecherous looks at white women, and scenes of war devastation. The mulatto Gus chases

Flora Cameron to her death while the camera shifts back and forth from her desperate face to his leering eyes and pursuing body. Griffith used remarkable film-cutting techniques to build the suspense of a concluding scene in which Elsie Stoneman is being forced into marriage with the repulsive mulatto Lynch in the carpetbagger's office. Tension between absolute good and absolute evil is built by short scenes that flash between their two faces and then outside to the gathering Klansmen.

The redemptive resolution provided by these galloping Klansmen derives from a tradition extending back to the Indian captivity tales. When the siege brings the innocent unbearably close to capitulation, Ben and his Klansmen arrive to kill the black militia and free all the captives. Thus the vigilantes bring justice to a threatened nation. The influence of the redemptive scheme popularized by William Cody's Wild West shows (examined in the next chapter) is obvious. The novelty lies in the technical sophistication with which Griffith communicated the mythic paradigm: he made film into a technomythic medium immeasurably superior to the storytelling of the previous era. As Arthur Knight observes, the audience "found Griffith's pictures more realistic, more convincing, more human than anything shown upon the screen at that time...."

The closing scene of *The Birth of a Nation* depicts Elsie Stoneman and Ben Cameron in wedding garments, symbolic of the reconciled North and South, gazing at a cloudlike image of the City of God replacing the city of man. A Christ figure replaces the warrior king, who has cut the Gordian knot, confirming the resolution of Eden's siege. Mast observes: "There are several remarkable things about this closing vision—its audacity, its irrelevance, and the passionateness and sincerity of Griffith's commitment to it....Exactly how is this City of God to become a reality? Certainly not by the efforts of the Ku Klux Klan alone" When one takes the emerging monomyth into account, the scene is neither irrelevant nor lacking in efficacy. As Charles Sanford reminds us, the connection between paradise and marriage has long been close in Christian symbolism: "Throughout the New Testament and in the many theological commentaries thereupon the union of the faithful with Christ in the heavenly paradise is depicted by the imagery of marriage." It is also consistent with the tradition of zealous nationalism to believe, as Griffith did, that righteous violence could usher in the millennial age.

Although *The Birth of a Nation* did not contain the isolated, sexually passionless superhero, the monomythic scheme of a restoration of paradise by selfless violence had fully crystallized by 1915. The film was an implicit invitation to emulate the KKK in crusades to make the world safe for democracy. No wonder President Woodrow Wilson, a Southerner who believed in segregation, was enthusiastic about the film's "writing history in lightning." But, as Knight records, "race riots and mob action followed in the wake of its presentation in many cities." A different judgment about this film came from the pen of Ralph Ellison: "The

propagation of subhuman images of Negroes became financially and dramatically profitable. The Negro as a scapegoat could be sold as entertainment, could even be exported. If the film became the main manipulator of the American dream, for Negroes that dream contained a strong dose of such stuff as nightmares are made of." The redemption of paradise by lone crusaders would have been unnecessary in American mythology if actual experience with democracy had matched the Edenic expectation. Most of the materials we describe in this book share *The Birth of a Nation's* pessimistic premise that democratic institutions cannot lift the siege. Citizens are merely members of a *spectator democracy* in which they passively witness their redemption by a superhero. This presumption is dramatized on a world scale in the recent blockbuster film *Independence Day* (1996). In its plot, the United States, even the whole world, is under siege by aliens who want to kill us and suck away our resources for their own use. They succeed in paralyzing the world's military forces. In this situation the President of the United States, abandons his constitutional role as Commander in Chief, assuming the role of a superheroic pilot who personally flies sorties against the alien mothership. In response to a super threat against Eden, the normal agencies of a democratic government become invisible.

Like so many other features of the monomyth, this theme of the defenseless "city set upon a hill" seems to have been decisively shaped by cowboy Westerns in the last third of the nineteenth century. At that time the expected western Eden was suffering repeated setbacks. The economic disorders of 1873, 1883-84, and 1893-95 were psychic shocks of formidable dimensions to those expecting snug little nests somewhere out in the West. Henry Nash Smith describes the resulting sense of helplessness:

Since the myth affirmed the impossibility of disaster or suffering within the garden, it was unable to deal with any of the dark or tragic outcomes of human experience. Given a break in the upward curve of economic progress for the Western farmer, the myth could become a mockery, offering no consolation and serving only to intensify the sense of outrage on the part of men and women who discovered that labor in the fields did not bring the cheerful comfort promised them by so many prophets of the future of the West. The shattering of the myth by economic distress marked, for the history of ideas in America, the real end of the frontier period.

Other factors, such as the corruption of the political system and the disillusionment of reformers, contributed to the psychic dilemma as well. But Smith seems to overlook the fact that the Westerns offered an immediate mythic solution. Posed against the failures of democratic institutions, the dime novels and Wild West shows offered unofficial redeemer figures on powerful horses,

impartial outsiders whose zeal for the right and sympathy for the underdog would triumph over evil.

The frontier vigilante as protector of a defenseless civilization was given substance by actual conditions in the West. Rapidly expanding exploitation of western resources and the lack of an effective national police system provided an ideal seedbed for vigilante justice. The invention of the six-gun and its successful use against the Indians of the western plains combined with the Civil War experience to produce a heavily armed citizenry. A desperado such as Wild Bill Hickock, who killed dozens of men in frontier duels and ambushes, became a redeemer figure. His repeated service as a U.S. marshal and frontier sheriff blurred the distinctions between vigilantes and public officials. Daniel Boorstin points out:

There were few if any notorious "bad men" who had not at some time or other worn the badge of the law, and risked their lives for what some men in their neighborhood called law and order. Beneath the widespread admiration for the "manhood" of the quick-on-the-trigger desperado was a gnawing suspicion that the desperado himself was often...on the side of the right. "The 'bad men,' or professional fighters and man-killers," wrote Theodore Roosevelt in 1888 after one of his trips out West, "are of a different stamp (from the common criminal, horse thief or highway robber), quite a number of them being, according to their light, perfectly honest. These are the men who do most of the killing in frontier communities; yet it is a noteworthy fact that the men who are killed generally deserve their fate."

In Owen Wister's Western novel *The Virginian*, which he dedicated to Theodore Roosevelt in 1902, this theme achieved its archetypal formulation. Its original preface introduces the romantic horseman who "rides in his historic yesterday," possessing virtues not found in the "shapeless state" of current democratic morals. "Such transition was inevitable," writes Wister. But he adds: "Let us give thanks that it is but a transition, and not a finality." In the "Rededication and Preface" of 1911, Wister relates his novel to the "half-a-century of shirking and evasion" of political responsibilities. And he insists: "Our Democracy has many enemies, both in Wall Street and in the Labor Unions; but as those in Wall Street have by their excesses created those in the Unions, they are the worst; if the pillars of our house fall, it is they who will have been the cause thereof." (p. vii) In this context of a democracy besieged by mortal enemies, the unknown cowboy from Virginia and those who follow the implied invitation to imitate him provide the only viable defense.

The story of *The Virginian* begins as the narrator encounters the hero from Virginia at the Wyoming train station. "Lounging there at ease against the wall

was a slim young giant, more beautiful than pictures. His broad, soft hat was pushed back; a loose-knotted, dull-scarlet handkerchief sagged from his throat; and one casual thumb was hooked in the cartridge-belt that slanted across his hips." (p. 4) His redemptive competence is registered when he saves the narrator from a runaway horse and later shoots a rattlesnake that might have killed him. Similarly, in the cowboy's first encounter with Molly Wood, the Yankee schoolteacher he is to court, he gallantly sweeps her out of a stagecoach sinking into a river. There is prefiguration in these incidents that prepares the way for his ultimate triumph over evil, personified by Trampas, who leads a gang of rustlers threatening to ruin honest ranchers such as Judge Henry. After the Virginian is made foreman of the Sunk Creek Ranch, he undertakes the responsibility of tracking down the rustling gang, capturing two of its members, one of them formerly his best friend. But the frontier code demands that he renounce friendship and hang the thieves. Trampas escapes with a guileless sidekick. When the trackers approach, Trampas shoots his companion in the back so that he can escape on the only horse they have between the two of them.

After an account of the lynching reaches the horrified Molly, Judge Henry visits her to explain its morality. This is a difficult task because "he had been a staunch servant of the law" while serving as a federal judge. "I am partly responsible for the lynching," he admits, but he insists that there is a moral difference between "burning Southern negroes in public ... [and] hanging Wyoming cattle-thieves in private...." (pp. 432-37) Compared with the "semi-barbarous" practice in the South, the recent events are "a proof that Wyoming is determined to become civilized." He contends that, in lynching, citizens are only taking back the inherent powers of government that they have given to the courts:

But in Wyoming the law has been letting our cattle thieves go for two years. We are in a very bad way, and we are trying to make that way a little better until civilization can reach us. At present we lie beyond its pale. The courts, or rather the juries, into whose hands we have put the law, are not dealing the law. They are withered hands....And so when your ordinary citizen sees this, and sees that he has placed justice in a dead hand, he must take justice back into his own hands where it was once at the beginning of all things. Call this primitive, if you will. But so far from being a defiance of the law, it is an assertion of it—the fundamental assertion of self-governing men, upon whom our whole social fabric is based. (pp. 438-39)

In an earlier scene, Molly had been horrified to find her school children playing the lynch game, re-enacting the hanging of Trampas's accomplices. But the judge's words now persuade her to accept the monomythic ethic of circumventing the institutions of law for the sake of saving civilization. Later she even suggests the appropriateness of vigilante violence to the Virginian as they ride past the

wordless Trampas into Medicine Bow for their wedding. She remarks that it seems "wicked that this murderer" goes free when others were hanged just for stealing horses. "He was never even arrested!" she says. "No, he helped elect the sheriff in that county," replies the Virginian (p. 450).

Wister's presentation of benign Western violence reflects the range war between a cattlemen's association and homesteaders in Johnson County, Wyoming. As Daniel Boorstin points out, the cattlemen's "associations were of course intended to protect the cattle which bore their brands. But they were also protecting the large cattlemen's control over pieces of the open range—the public domain—which, without any legal title, they called their own." W. Eugene Hollon's analysis in *Frontier Violence* describes how the cattlemen came into conflict with small ranchers and farmers, with state and federal officials favoring the ranchers, and the local courts and juries controlled by the homesteaders. When the ranchers' lynch campaigns proved unsuccessful, they arbitrarily seized the small operators' livestock. The homesteaders retaliated with systematic thievery. Harry Sinclair Drago concludes: "It was more than range thievery undertaken for gain: it was rebellion, the oppressed striking back at its oppressors." When the ranchers imported a trainload of Texas gunmen equipped with dynamite to put down this resistance in 1892, the showdown occurred near Buffalo, Wyoming, where federal troops finally intervened. *The New York Times* covered the story in detail, glorifying the big cattlemen's side of the struggle and praising Frank Wolcott, a wealthy cattleman born in Kentucky, whose ranch Wister visited during his first trip to the West. Wister inadvertently reveals the historical content of the novel by allowing the heroic cowboy to explain that his lynched friend "knew well enough the only thing that would have let him off would have been a regular jury. For the thieves have got hold of the juries in Johnson County."

Wister's distortion of the historical reality of western lynching becomes credible in the powerful mythic framework he provides, in which the besieged community is finally redeemed by a duel between Trampas and the Virginian. At the dramatic climax of the novel, the rustler issues a formal challenge to a duel on Main Street. The Virginian seeks the counsel of the bishop, the man who is to preside over his marriage to Molly. The bishop shares the narrator's conviction "that Trampas was an evil in the country, and that the Virginian was a good. He knew that the cattle thieves—the rustlers—were gaining in numbers and audacity...that they elected their men to office, and controlled juries; that they were a staring menace to Wyoming. His heart was with the Virginian. But there was his Gospel that he preached, and believed, and tried to live." He reminds the Virginian of the plain command not to kill, and the latter responds: "Mighty plain to me, seh. Make it plain to Trampas, and there'll be no killin'." As they parry about the contradictory demands of religion and communal redemption, the Virginian poses the monomythic question: "How about instruments of Providence, seh?" When the Virginian refuses to give up his honor even for his future wife, the bishop says as

the cowboy departs to the battle, "God bless him! God bless him!" (pp. 471-74)

The Virginian then confronts Molly with his painful obligation. She is appalled that he will not simply leave town when he has a chance. He explains that he gave Trampas two chances to get out of the duel:

"I kept thinking hard of you - with all my might, or I reckon I'd have killed him right there.... I spoke as quiet as I am speaking to you now. But he stood to it.... He will have to go on to the finish now."

"The finish?" she echoed, almost voiceless. "Yes," he answered very gently. . . .

"If you do this, there can be no tomorrow for you and me." At these words he also turned white.

"Do you mean-" he asked and could go no farther. This would be the end?" he asked.

Her head faintly moved to signify yes.... "Good-by, then," he said. (pp. 476-79)

With this last in a series of renunciations in the novel, the hero goes out to his fateful duel—the first "walkdown" in American literature. In this archetypal duel the bad guy draws and shoots first, but he is killed by the Virginian's bullets. The hero's friends marvel, "You were that cool! That quick!" The hero returns regretfully to pack his belongings and return to a bachelor's life. But Molly's "New England conscience" relents, and she capitulates to love.

The bridal pair sets off on their honeymoon, camping the first night on a peaceful mountain island, straddled by a lovely stream. "It belonged to no man; for it was deep in the unsurveyed and virgin wilderness...." Their isolation is celebrated by the Virginian: "The whole world is far from here." After their first blissful night, "she stretched her hands out to the island and the stream exclaiming, 'Nothing can surpass this: He took her in his arms....'" (pp. 476-79) In this garden encircled by the stream, symbolic of the biblical Eden surrounded by its rivers, the Virginian confesses his ancient longing: "What I did not know at all," he said, "was the way a man can be pining for—for this—and never guess what is the matter with him." (p. 506) Just as in *The Birth of a Nation*, the resolution of marriage and the entrance into paradise only become possible after evil has been destroyed. Once the vigilante task is completed, whether in the South or the West, the Gordian knot is cut, and the blissful marriage can ensue. The novel ends with the hero and his family ensconced in prosperity and long life. The Virginian becomes a wealthy rancher and mine owner, escaping the "cattle war" of 1892, and passing the redemptive task on to the next generation.

As one of the most influential novels of its time, *The Virginian* became required reading in high schools for decades. More than two million copies were sold, and

the novel became the pattern for hundreds of imitations." The success of the paradigm was due in part to the moralizing of vigilante violence by dramatic juxtaposition, impassioned arguments, and the selfless restraint of the hero. For five years the Virginian withstood the villain's provocations, reluctantly killing him at the price of renouncing sexual fulfillment. Gary Cooper played this role perfectly when *The Virginian* was made into an archetypal Western movie in 1929. Robert V Hine has commented on the "namelessness" of the Virginian, an essential feature in the paradigm: "The vagueness of his past requires the reader to judge the man solely in the present." But more than that, one suspects, it enhances the archetypal power of the story to cast an Everyman in the role of community savior. Facing the siege of paradise, against which mere human force seems unable to prevail, only "the transcendent figure, originating beyond the town," to use Peter Homan's words, is able to redeem.

The Axial Decade of Monomythic Development

With 1929 we enter what we choose to call the axial decade for the formation of the American monomyth. Here the unknown redeemer on a horse becomes the "Masked Rider of the Plains"; his sexual renunciation is complete; he assumes the uniform and the powers of angelic avengers; and thus he grows from mere heroism to superheroism.

The development of the sexually renunciatory superhero, the most distinctive feature of the monomyth, accelerates to its climax soon after the 1929 release of the sound-film version of Gary Cooper's *The Virginian*. With the technomythic advance of sound film, the embodiment of the monomythic heroism became even more compelling. The shock of the Depression and the rise of unprecedented foreign threats to democratic societies provided the background for the creative advance. In this same year the comic-book version of *Tarzan* appeared. Burne Hogarth, who collaborated with Hal Foster in making Tarzan a household word in the 1930s, sets the scene: "The success of 'Tarzan' owed much to the time when it was first drawn. This was a little after the start of the great depression: big corporations were crashing and misery was widespread....Tarzan finds himself again—like the American people—without weapons to fight off all the perils." But Tarzan, like the many heroes who were to follow him, was more than merely human. The first of the major pulp-novel crime fighters, The Shadow, also appeared in 1929. With the alter ego of Kent Allard the aviator, this mysterious figure performed super feats against the enemies of civilization in some 325 complete novels written over the next two decades. Buck Rogers was also created in 1929, and the ascetic supercop Dick Tracy appeared in 1931. The widely popular pulp imitators of The Shadow, such as Doc Savage, The Phantom, and The Spider, appeared in 1933. Probably the most systematic presentation of a superman appeared in Philip Wylie's novel *Gladiator*, written in 1930, which depicts the prodigy son of scientist parents who proves invulnerable to machine-gun bullets. It was this figure who provided the model for Siegel and Shuster's

Superman. The two teenagers developed their comic superhero as a way to counter "the hopelessness and fear in the country" in 1933, but they did not market Superman successfully until 1938.

A decisive factor in the axial decade was the emergence of serialization in the new and more powerful technomythic media. Comic books and radio programs required a heroic format with traditional appeals of adventure and redemption but without marital resolution at the end. Sexual renunciation had to become permanent because, if the hero rode off with his bride into the golden sunset as did *The Virginian*, it would entail creating a new redeemer figure for the next episode. Once involved in family and business complexities, a hero would have to pass the redemptive torch to the next candidate. The new media offset this problem by allowing a presentation of heroic action more spectacular than any made credible before. Heroes could fly across the frames of comic strips with impunity, or thunder on their mounts at incredible speeds across the sound-effects stages of radio programs. The augmented capabilities ensured the resolution of otherwise insoluble crises. Miraculous redemption thus came to replace the blissful union of married partners as a fitting expression of Eden's restoration.

In *The Lone Ranger* the new, permanently isolated superhero sprang to life in serial form. The program was developed by a Detroit radio station in 1933 to meet the requirements of a regular time slot on a new network. The station owner, George Trendle, wanted a cowboy who would play the role of a "guardian angel," a hero who would be the "embodiment of a granted prayer." The radio version of *The Lone Ranger* ran to 2,956 episodes, ending only in 1954. It has since been replayed in reruns many times, as well as appearing in comic books, a television series running from 1949-1961, and films. The genesis episode reveals both the continuity and the development beyond the *Virginian* archetype. A voice announces: "This is the legend of a man who buried his identity to dedicate his life to the service of humanity and country....Early settlers in the West had to be brave men and women....There was danger on every side, wild beasts, savage Indians, and the Cavendish gang." Having established the theme of a hero with secret identity who defends humanity from danger, the narrator turns to Butch Cavendish, who orders his gang to open fire on a helpless wagon train: "Wipe them out to the last man! Later a group of Texas Rangers follows the Cavendish gang into a desolate canyon, where the Rangers are betrayed by their own guide. Just before the ambush begins, the birds are heard twittering in the trees as Captain Daniel Reid asks his younger brother to care of his family if tragedy overtakes them. The Edenic scene is broken by the outlaws' gunfire, which falls upon the trapped Rangers until night. Young Reid wakes up four mornings later in a cave, where he had been carried by an Indian, who introduces himself.

"Me ... Tonto."

Reid asks, "What of the other Rangers? They were all my friends. One was my brother."

Tonto replies, "Other Texas Rangers—all dead. You only Ranger left. *You lone Ranger now.*" The two men discover that they had been boyhood friends. The youthful Reid had saved Tonto's life, thus providing a prefiguration of his redemptive capabilities, in the style of *The Virginian*. Reid and Tonto resolve to track down the Cavendish gang and bring them to justice. Jim Harmon describes the scene: "Marked for death by a huge outlaw organization, he decided to disguise himself with a mask, a mask made from the black cloth of a vest in his brother's saddlebags - cloth that has borne the silver star of justice." The narrator intones the litany: "In the Ranger's eye there was a light that must have burned in the eyes of knights in armor, a light that through the ages must have lifted the souls of strong men who fought for justice, for God!" The young man gives voice to his zealous decision:

"I'll be ... the Lone Ranger!"

As in Owen Wister's story, it is a Southerner who comes west to play the role of national redeemer. In this instance the unification of the symbol system is portrayed by the deep midwestern voice of the Lone Ranger rather than by a marriage to a Vermont schoolteacher. The requisite selflessness in his campaign is portrayed by the dedication of the proceeds from his secret silver mine to pay the expenses for his crusade. The Lone Ranger renounces both wealth and heterosexual love. In his friendship with Tonto there is a remarkable degree of racial reconciliation, in drastic contrast to the reality of an implacable hatred between Indians and the Texas Rangers. Tonto not only becomes the constant companion and follower of the Lone Ranger; he also takes up the crusading ideology, which had played such havoc with the American Indians. A more striking symbol of co-optation could scarcely be imagined, but it provides a powerful confirmation of the white man's vigilante code.

Of equal importance symbolically is the Lone Ranger's taming of the great white stallion Silver after he had saved Silver from death in a battle with a "giant buffalo." The powerful horse responds instinctively to the sound of his name and accepts the gentle mastery of his savior. The narrator describes the wondrous scene:

"As the halter touched Silver, he trembled as if from a chill. Every instinct told him that he must flee at once to preserve his freedom. Yet he stood his ground. It wasn't gratitude that kept him there. It was something stronger. Some mysterious bond of friendship and understanding. He heard the man's voice and he liked it."

"Silver, Silver, we're going to be partners!" says the Lone Ranger. Tonto

is amazed: "Him let you use halter!"

"Give me the saddle."

Tonto replies, "Oh, no horse like that take saddle."

The Lone Ranger then states the mythic point as he places the saddle on the magnificent horse: "There never was a horse like this. Now Silver, we're going to work together."

The narrator reiterates the theme: "No hooves had ever beat the plains like the thundering hooves of that great horse Silver!" The opening lines of the radio program henceforth feature Silver as a full member of the redemptive team. He not only responds to his master's voice without being trained, but seems to "understand" the vigilante work in which he is engaged. The peculiar capabilities of radio sound effects make it possible to render Silver virtually human, whinnying his assent to utterances of Ranger truth. He is the first in a remarkable line of redeemer animals in American popular culture.

The speed of the incomparable horse provides the Lone Ranger with his crucial element of the superhuman: rapid mobility, the most characteristic and coveted form of freedom in America, the ability to transcend space and time. In an early episode the need for such speed was displayed in the Lone Ranger's inability to overtake Butch Cavendish with his former steed. "My next horse must be faster," he says, in order to take the culprit alive and bring him to justice. This theme is touched on, but not fully exploited, in Owen Wister's references to Monte, the Virginian's horse. But in the Lone Ranger series, Silver develops into a symbol of tireless endurance and strength, allowing the vigilante to accomplish miraculous feats that raise him above the merely heroic level of the Virginian.

Extralegal violence and personal vengeance are essential to the vigilante ideology, but in the Lone Ranger's instance there is an elaborate effort to downplay objectionable features of lynch justice. The masked rider is not acting as a law-enforcement officer, despite the black mask of cloth that had borne the star of justice. But he invariably turns his captured crooks over to the authorities for punishment. The program always begins with loud pistol shots interspersed with the *William Tell Overture*, yet the Lone Ranger never kills anyone. With superhuman accuracy his silver bullets strike the hands of threatening bad guys - evoking a mere "yowl" or "my hand!" Yet their evil powers are neutralized. In an elaborate extension of the ideology of cool zeal, which relieves the vigilante of guilt in the exercise of what appears to be "hot" vengeance," the Lone Ranger's powers ensure that he inflicts minimal injury. This is similar to the later theory of nuclear deterrence, where unlimited power is celebrated as the ultimate defense because it presumably will never have to be used destructively. Magical silver missiles will keep the foe from aggression, thus bringing no blame on selfless redeemers. All one needs in order to escape the ambiguity of violent power is

more power. Thus *The Lone Ranger* program answers the objections posed by Molly and the bishop in *The Virginian*. The vigilante has become the saint, not merely through superior virtue but also because of superhuman power.

The invitation to imitate that is implicit in the program was articulated when the Lone Ranger found his brother's long-lost son and explained the "great heritage" he was to carry forward:

[Your forefathers] have handed down to you the right to worship as you choose, and the right to work and profit from your enterprise. They have given you a land where there is true freedom, true equality of opportunity, a nation that is governed by the people, by laws that are best for the greatest number. Your duty, Dan, is to preserve that heritage and strengthen it. [Strains of "America the Beautiful" grow louder.] That is the heritage and duty of every American.

In a program broadcast in 1950, that invitation is even more sharply formulated, as a dying government agent tells the Lone Ranger: "Listen to me—carry on. And train someone to carry on in the twentieth century when—when you join your Ranger pals—and me...." The Lone Ranger replies: "Dan Reid is going to meet the twentieth century as a man." The appeal to the audience is to take up the vigilante task with similar manliness.

The final extension of powers into the superheroic scale occurred toward the end of the axial decade. *Superman* began to appear as a feature in the June 1938 *Action Comics*. By the fourth issue, the sales curve indicated that something significant had occurred, and within a few years millions of copies were selling each month, revolutionizing the comic-book industry and making a permanent alteration in the American hero pattern. It was, as Les Daniels puts it, "an instant triumph, a concept so intense and so instantly identifiable that he became perhaps the most widely known figure ever created in American fiction:" Ted White refers to the "magnificent sense of wonder" with which these pages were received by readers. Episodes that climaxed with "Look! The bullets bounce right offa him!" virtually replaced ordinary plot developments. The August 1939 issue of *Action Comics* emphasizes this theme:

Leaping over skyscrapers, running faster than an express train, springing great distances and heights, lifting and smashing tremendous weights, possessing an impenetrable skin - these are the amazing attributes which Superman, savior of the helpless and oppressed, avails himself of as he battles the forces of evil and injustice.

As with the Lone Ranger, these extraordinary powers made it possible to carry out vigilante violence without incurring blame. Speeding getaway cars could be

stopped dead by Superman's arms—without splattering anyone on the windshield. Superman never kills anyone, thus denying the actual effects of boundless power. If crooks are hurt or killed, it is their own fault. The steel-sinewed fists of Superman can be as gentle as Walt Disney's mill wheel, knocking bad guys unconscious without raising welts on their jaws. Siegel and Shuster's fantasy was even better than silver bullets because their superhero never even had to fire at the enemy. His bulletproof body could grapple with adversaries and bring them to a flawless form of vigilante justice.

In the first years of its comic-book life, Superman's power of flight was limited to prodigious leaps. When the first motion-picture cartoons appeared, however, "he gained the power of pure flight," which was subsequently incorporated in the comics. As we have noted before, the mythic advance goes hand in hand with real-world technomythic breakthroughs, in this instance related to animation techniques. The transcending of human capabilities had reached its apex. When combined with the appealing structure of Superman's plebeian alter ego, Clark Kent, a beguiling fantasy world took form. The redemptive god with superhuman strength was disguised as Everyman, thus breaking out of the bounds of democratic ordinariness. For the first time in modern, secularized America, superhuman powers became widely distributed in fantasy.

In contrast to *The Birth of a Nation* and *The Virginian*, the Superman paradigm exhibits two remarkable features: in addition to vastly exceeding human muscular powers there emerges a full development of what we would like to call "sexual segmentation." Following the pattern of his serialized counterpart, the Lone Ranger, Superman is permanently blocked in his relations to the opposite sex. But the transformation of the redeemer paradigm that surfaces in *The Birth of a Nation* and *The Virginian* exhibits two remarkable features: a transcending of human muscular powers and a completion of the sexual segmentation pattern. Like that of his serialized counterpart, the Lone Ranger, Superman's sexual segmentation is permanent. Although as Clark Kent he is attracted to Lois Lane, he knows that as long as he is Superman, she must always be denied to him. This point becomes emphatic in the *Superman II* movie (1981), in which Superman abandons his celibate vow and takes Lois to the Castle of Solitude for sex. When he returns, he discovers that a loutish truck driver can inflict pain because he now has a vulnerable, soft body. Lesson learned!

The other superheroes of the period were presented with similar strategies of segmenting the element of sexual need out of their personalities. The classic Batman has a permanent relationship with his male counterpart, Robin, but he never forms an abiding relationship with a woman. Billy Batson is called to be Captain Marvel with the injunction, "You are pure in heart. You have been chosen." This purity prevents anything beyond a boyish crush on the well-endowed Beautia Sivana, who has betrayed her own evil father for Captain

Marvel. Her feelings for the superhero and his coolness toward her are similar to the perpetually frustrating Clark- Lois-Superman triangle. Torch, Sub-Mariner, Green Lantern, and Spiderman rescue girls but never marry them. The list of single saviors goes on at length: Wonder Woman, Lady Blackhawk, Mary Worth, Rex Morgan, and Marcus Welby. And judging from the fatalities that befall the fiancées of Ben, Joe, and Hoss Cartwright in TV's popular *Bonanza* series, merely planning to marry a fictional redeemer may be the riskiest job in America.

Crowds of Superheroes

Following the phenomenal success of Superman comics in 1938, the axial decade closed with a proliferation of superheroes. The masks, uniforms, miraculous powers, and secret alter egos combine with sexual renunciation and segmentation to complete the formation of the monomythic hero. Batman, Sandman, Hawkman, and The Spirit all sprang to life in 1939; Flash, The Green Lantern, The Shield, Captain Marvel, and White Streak followed in 1940; and Sub-Mariner, Wonder Woman, Plastic Man, and Captain America were born the following year. The opening captions of these comic superhero tales reveal the degree to which the monomythic definition of mission, character, and powers was permanently crystallized by the axial decade. The first episode of *Batman* in May 1939 introduces the disguised isolate as "a mysterious and adventurous figure fighting for righteousness and apprehending the wrongdoers, in his lone battle against the evil forces of society...his identity remains unknown." The initial issue of *Captain Marvel* comics announces itself in these monomythic terms: "Whiz Comics proudly presents THE WORLD'S MIGHTIEST MAN—POWERFUL CHAMPION OF JUSTICE—RELENTLESS ENEMY OF EVIL." In the story, Billy Batson is confronted by a divine personage looking suspiciously like the "Ancient of Days" in old Sunday school material. "All my life," the figure says, "I have fought injustice and cruelty. But I am old now - my time is almost up. You shall be my successor merely by speaking my name. You can become the mightiest man in the world—Captain Marvel. Shazam! Blam! Captain Marvel, I salute you. Henceforth it shall be your sacred duty to defend the poor and helpless. Right wrongs and crush evil everywhere." Thus a new superhero takes up the redemptive task from a senile religious symbol, offering for the fantasy life of every schoolboy an opportunity to be transformed by a magic word into the all-powerful redeemer.

The connection of these superhero materials with the American religious heritage illustrates the displacement of the story of redemption. Only in a culture preoccupied for centuries with the question of salvation is the appearance of redemption through superheroes comprehensible. The secularization process in this instance did not eliminate the need for redemption, as the Enlightenment had attempted to do, but rather displaces it with a superhuman agencies. Powers that the culture had earlier reserved for God and his angelic beings are transferred to an Everyman, conveniently shielded by an alter ego. Even the most explicit

references to the mythology of the ancient world are conditioned by this new superhero paradigm. This can be documented in materials created long after the axial decade. The television version of the goddess Isis began in 1975 with these mysterious-sounding lines:

"O mighty queen," said the royal sorceress, "with this amulet you and your descendants are endowed by the goddess Isis with the powers of the animals and the elements. You will soar as the falcon soars, run with the speed of gazelles, and command the elements of sky and earth."

But as the narrator extends the context, it is clearly the familiar redemption scheme with a segmented superheroine in disguise.

Three thousand years later a young science teacher dug up this lost treasure and found she was heir to the secrets of Isis. And so, unknown to even her closest friends ... became a dual person—Andrea Thomas—teacher—and Isis—dedicated foe of evil, defender of the weak, champion of truth and justice."

The references to ancient gods and amulets may sound archaic to some, but the format was shaped during the axial decade of the twentieth century.

As the superhero genre was elaborated in the years following the axial decade, the displacement of traditional religious symbols was frequently articulated. A *Flash* episode of August 1971 seems archetypal: a gang of urban thugs has taken over a church to store and divide their loot; when the faithful nuns pray for relief, one of their oppressors pours scorn on the thought of divine intervention.

Haw! Whatcha doin'? Askin' your own top man to help you? No Way!
Nothin's gonna stop us from keepin' this loot!

The gang then accuses the nun's brother of being an informer. Flash arrives just in time to save him from death as they throw him off the roof of a tall building. The boy decides to go straight, but the chief has hidden the loot. The boy confides his problem to Sister Anne, who says that she will pray for help. Flash overhears the conversation and comments: "There's only one way of quickly finding that hidden loot ... and that's *scientifically*!" The superhero becomes a rapidly moving radar unit, systematically projecting grids over the city and searching until he finds the cave where the loot is hidden. He saves the young informer and his girlfriend from retaliation by secretly warding off hostile bullets and making clubs disintegrate while increasing the strength of the good guy's fists. After triumphing over the crooks, the young man tells his girlfriend, "Might makes right!" The nuns get control of their church again, the juvenile delinquents

are reformed, and, as Vic recounts the events, "It all seems like a miracle!" Barry Allen, alias Flash, mutters to himself, "Made possible by the miracle of superspeed!"

In the final scene, Sister Anne expresses her thanks to God for deliverance. As Barry acknowledges that it has been "a kind of miracle," the caption reads: "Perhaps, Barry—but to those who believe, `the moment of a miracle is like unending lightning.'" The miraculous intervention of the modern superhero has confirmed the faith of the naive sister. She thinks God still works in mysterious ways, and if this story is right, he does—through the jet-age counterpart of the Lone Ranger's speedy horse.

The superheroes thus provide a secular fulfillment of the religious promise articulated in the endings of *The Birth of a Nation* and *The Virginian*. They cut Gordian knots, lift the siege of evil, and restore the Edenic state of perfect faith and perfect peace. It is a millennial, religious expectation—at least in origin—yet it is fulfilled by secular agents. The premise of democratic equality is visible in that superhuman powers have to be projected onto ordinary citizens, yet their transformation into superheroes renders them incapable of democratic citizenship. Moreover, total power must be pictured as totally benign, transmuting lawless vigilantism into a perfect embodiment of law enforcement. That such fantasies suddenly became credible in the popular culture is the abiding legacy of the axial decade. Although they had not yet appeared in the minds of their creators, the parameters for Kirk and Spock, Dirty Harry, Rambo, and the Steven Seagal characters were already defined. They were ready to play out their roles of redeeming the American Dream, along with their nonviolent cohorts from Heidi and Mary Poppins to Lassie and Flipper. All that remained was for the subplots to vary and the scenes to change. Henceforth, materials for mass audiences would have to undergo a kind of mythic alchemy to fit the new monomythic consciousness. A story paradigm as potent as Hercules or Odysseus had been born, spawning its offspring in a popular culture that would soon encircle the world. It would not be long before the American monomyth became a subculture of Planet Earth, massaging especially the consciousness of youth and adults, evoking a wide array imitative behaviors.

By the end of the axial decade, a new mystical consciousness shaped by the American Monomyth was already emerging. E. E. Smith's vivid description of the mindset at the end of the axial decade is equally applicable today. Asked to define the meaning of the First International Science Fiction Convention to its participants in 1940, he did so in terms that are disarmingly religious:

What brings us together and underlies this convention is a fundamental unity of mind. We are imaginative, with a tempered, analytical imagination which fairy tales will not satisfy....Science fiction fans form a

group unparalleled in history, in our close-knit...organization, in our strong likes and dislikes, in our partisanship and loyalties...there is a depth of satisfaction, a height of fellowship which no one who has never experienced it can even partially understand.

Although Smith felt that that science fiction fans would never comprise more than a fraction of the population, and that outsiders would have trouble grasping the basis of their fervor, the attitude of credulity and the yearning for fantasy redemption was already visible within the widespread audience for monomythic entertainments. A revolution in spiritual consciousness was underway, allowing for the emergence of formal and informal pop religions in which the various superheroc rites could be conducted. Fandom began to emerge as a new form of religious community, and in the alter ego feature of the superhero fantasies every worshiper could become a god.

The Shape of the New Heroic Paradigm

The monomythic superhero is distinguished by disguised origins, pure motivations, a redemptive task, and extraordinary powers. He originates outside the community he is called to save, and in those exceptional instances when he resides therein, the superhero plays the role of the idealistic loner. His identity is secret, either by virtue of his unknown origins or his alter ego; his motivation is a selfless zeal for justice. By elaborate conventions of restraint, his desire for revenge is purified. Patient in the face of provocations, he seeks nothing for himself and withstands all temptations. He renounces sexual fulfillment for the duration of the mission, and the purity of his motivations ensures his moral infallibility in judging persons and situations. When he is threatened by violent adversaries, he finds an answer in vigilantism, restoring justice and thus lifting the siege of paradise. In order to accomplish this mission without incurring blame or causing undue injury to others, he requires superhuman powers. The superhero's aim is unerring, his fists irresistible, and his body incapable of suffering fatal injury. In the most dangerous trials he remains utterly cool and thus divinely competent. When confronted by insoluble personality conflicts within the community, he—or more often she—uses nonviolent manipulation. With wisdom and coolness equal to the vigilante counterpart, the female "Heidi-redeemers" (which we describe in later chapters) bring happiness to a desperate Eden.

In these conventions the monomyth betrays an aim to deny the tragic complexities of human life. It forgets that every gain entails a loss, that extraordinary benefits exact requisite costs, and that injury is usually proportionate to the amount of violence employed. The bold figures of Superman and Flash and the dramatic hoofbeats of the great horse Silver may seem to lack ambiguity; but the paradoxes of the monomyth abound. The American monomyth offers vigilantism without lawlessness, sexual repression without resultant perversion, and moral infallibility without the use of intellect. It features a

restoration of Eden for others, but refuses to allow the dutiful hero to participate in its pleasures. The Lone Ranger's laughter was one sound effect never heard after the first program.

The monomythic hero claims surpassing concern for the health of the community, but he never practices citizenship. He unites a consuming love of impartial justice with a mission of personal vengeance that eliminates due process of law. He offers a form of leadership without paying the price of political relationships or responding to the preferences of the majority. In denying the ambivalence and complexity of real life, where the moral landscape offers choices in various shades of gray rather than in black and white, where ordinary people muddle through life and learn to live with the many poor choices they have made, and where the heroes that do exist have feet of clay, the monomyth pictures a world in which no humans really live. It gives Americans a fantasy land without ambiguities to cloud the moral vision, where the evil empire of enemies is readily discernible, and where they can vicariously (through identification with the superhero) smite evil before it overtakes them.

The tapestry of the American monomyth is woven in bold and stirring colors. Its radiant, electronic aura dazzles the beholder's eye and conceals the discordant clash of its components. The intricately crafted message of paradise redeemed by heroes larger than life has appeals far deeper than reason, particularly to a culture believing itself besieged by ruthless foes. To borrow words from J. H. Plumb, the world of the American monomyth is truly "fearsome...magical...full of wonders and portents...." All things considered, scholarly obituaries for "disappearing heroes" were indeed premature. It seems likely that be that the portraits in radio, film, television, and the comics are so artful in their technomythic wizardry that even highly sophisticated minds fail to detect the new heroic presences. These dramas of redemption resonate so powerfully with so true to our most earnest hopes that they acquire the semblance of reality. In view of its growth from the Axial Decade to a position of present ascendancy in global entertainment, the American monomyth is truly alive and well, it reveals a side of modern, scientific man seldom imagined in the dreams of reason that stirred the century in which the American nation was founded. It is surely appropriate now, as we enter the twenty-first century, to investigate this pervasive mythic legacy. In the chapters that follow we will offer a guide to the mythic flora and fauna that have come to populate this increasingly dominant universe of American superheroes.