

An Elegant Bewilderment

Martin Green

What Ann Douglas means by the feminization of American culture is suggested by the chapter titles in the first part of her book: "Clerical Disestablishment," "Feminine Disestablishment," and "Ministers and Mothers: Changing and Exchanging Roles." She describes what happened to women on the model of what happened to the Protestant clergy of New England and shows that the function, almost the identity, of the two classes had merged by the end of the nineteenth century, though they were perfectly distinct at its beginning. In the course of that hundred years the two groups established their right to be guardians of American "culture" (its serious popular literature), while at the same time losing their more solid social functions. The second part of the book has an excellent chapter, "The Loss of Theology," and another that could have been called "The Loss of History." The latter shows how history in America was taken over by a masculinist and militarist ideology, while women and ministers were confined to antiquarianism and sentimentalism.

Nineteenth-century Americans lived by capitalism but yearned for opposite values; "culture" enshrined those yearnings. "Sentimentalism provides a way to protest a power to which one has already, in part, capitulated. It is a form of dragging one's heels." The valuable alternative to this Ann Douglas calls Romanticism, and she offers in Part Three two case studies of romantics: one of Margaret Fuller's personality, the other of Herman Melville's work. These are the book's two heroes.

It is a long and learned book, with thirty pages of scholarly apparatus at the end, including a biographical chart of thirty women and thirty ministers. The footnotes average a hundred per chapter, while some individual notes cite a dozen authorities. It represents seven years' work, the author says, work done while teaching at Harvard, Princeton, and Columbia. Part of its character and interest for us must derive from that privileged training.

It is not an easy book to read, and one guesses that that is because the author is paying tribute to a number of powerful minds that speak for different interests and impose barely compatible criteria upon her. For instance, one of her concerns is for women in the

nineteenth century, to rediscover them for herself, reintroduce them to us, defend their ideas and their work from the ridicule often showered on them. But another concern is with the decay of theology and other traditional intellectual disciplines in nineteenth-century America; these chapters are written, as it were, for Perry Miller and T.S. Eliot to read—the very teachers who taught us to despise nineteenth-century sentimentalism.

Their criteria are quite different and implicitly hostile to the first concern. If you regard Jonathan Edwards's intellectual rigor as the exemplar of solid thinking, you are bound to find what women and clergymen wrote in nineteenth-century America appallingly feeble. It could probably be demonstrated that Eliot and Miller (the latter literally one of Douglas's teachers) had an antifeminine bias; it could certainly be shown that they were antisentimentalist, in revolt against this "culture," and so were very unsympathetic guides to it.

The Feminization of American Culture, by Ann Douglas. (Knopf: 383 pp.; \$15.00)

I think this accounts for certain gaps in the book's historical scheme. For instance, why is Jonathan Edwards everywhere in this book and Benjamin Franklin nowhere? Why measure nineteenth-century sentiment always against the model of the former and never against the latter? The reason is that Miller believed that America was all Puritan, and that Franklin was an Edwards manqué. To take another instance, why is there no mention of eighteenth-century sentimentalism? Douglas says that Stowe's Little Eva introduced us to the pleasures of consumerism and the comforts of mass culture; that Victorian sentiment and its heroines were the first in the line so familiar to us now. But what about Richardson's *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, which were very popular in America a good hundred years earlier? These two offered the pleasures of reader identification with passive feminine virtue, and long before 1800. Moreover, Richardson's novels were adapted for children and cited in sermons, forging the alliance of women and ministers as missionaries of culture, too.

MARTIN GREEN's latest book is *Transatlantic Patterns*, reviewed in this issue.

In natural correspondence to the book's historical omissions are its literary inflations. For instance, the overreading of *Billy Budd*: "In the austere literary form which Melville has evolved here, he has apparently discovered an analogue, perhaps a substitute, for the theological discourse which was the substance of America's primarily intellectual tradition." The provenance of this sort of thing is obvious as soon as one recalls the intellectual climate of Miller and Eliot. Nowadays fashions have changed—and Ann Douglas follows the new fashions enough for one to be quite puzzled for a while.

Stylistically the book betrays the bewilderment of too much tutelage. The first sentence of the first chapter reads: "Henry James, Sr., a religious maverick of no little waywardness and no less astuteness, judged that American Protestantism in the mid-19th century was in a sad state of decline." The point of that sentence is in the last phrase, but the stress is scattered everywhere but on that phrase, which is merely feebly ironic. Those showy appositions, with their misleading parallelism, have no function in the argument that follows. Why such ill-regulated vivacity? Ann Douglas is an elegant writer, familiar with the best models and the subtlest rules. Surely it's the graduate-seminar syndrome; she is too aware of too many teachers, and this is a literary equivalent of social vivacity—still, alas, a preferred option for women students.

Inevitably this vivacity undermines the segment's serious intentions. Douglas says someone's theology has "trenchant logic and superb rhetoric"; but then defines his doctrine of the Atonement thus: "Bellamy's God, ever histrionic, puts on a sort of spectacular temper tantrum, controlled only by his divine and innate didactic purpose." That's the sort of thing that—some time in her seven years' labor—a writer should cut. Why did so

much high-class training not teach that necessary asceticism? The higher the class, the more likely the training becomes its own reward, and the trainee—especially a woman—becomes a permanent trainee.

But what can the book tell us about women and nineteenth-century culture as distinct from telling us about its author and twentieth-century academia? What I found of most interest are the chapters on the decline of the ministers: it is striking how much more effective the author's sympathy is with them. Then I became very interested in the history of the Beecher family, Lyman, his wife, and their children, including Harriet Beecher Stowe and Henry Ward Beecher. Clearly the story of this phase of American history could be told most satisfactorily in the form of a biography of that family.

The book ends (it is very well shaped) with the chapters on its two heroes, Melville and Margaret Fuller. The chapter on Fuller makes some interesting points and is full of generous enthusiasm, but it doesn't give a very clear image of its subject. The chapter on Melville I thought quite bad because so out of touch with its author—so overly interpretive in that old American-literature style. It is really not true that the sea "was for Melville what the safari or the bullfight" was for Hemingway. Hemingway "discovered" those enterprises and their meanings. Melville inherited the romance of shipboard life and contributed to it—in hidden form—a sinister negation. Douglas makes him a heroic subversive of the feminized culture, but his subversion was far too self-negating to be exemplary, his connection with Douglas's theme too indirect to bear stressing. Douglas's making of the connection is ingenious, but, like other features of this book, it counts on an indulgent readiness to applaud precocity.

Our Hope by Dmitrii Dudko

(St. Vladimir's Press [Crestwood, N.Y.]; 292 pp; \$6.95 [paper])

Richard John Neuhaus

Orthodox theologian John Meyendorff in his foreword to this remarkable book claims: "More than any other document coming to us from Russia, Fr. Dudko's sermons represent the religious life of the rank and file of Russian believers." In truth they represent much more than the religious life. They invite reading by all who desire insight into the cultural and political malaise that exists in non-Marxian "contradiction" to official policy and ideology in Russia today.

In 1973 Dudko began a series of Saturday night "dialogues" that soon

filled St. Nicholas Church in Moscow and attracted the intense interest of Soviet dissidents and of the Western press. Unlike much *samizdat*, or clandestine literature, coming from the Soviet Union, this statement is not intended for Western ears. But through the very readable translation by Paul Garrett we outsiders are permitted to listen in, as it were, on a conversation between one courageous priest and a congregation composed of believers and unbelievers, troubled university students and ordinary workers, and not a

few atheist provocateurs. The power and authenticity of the document are enhanced by the format of immediacy and spontaneity in the exchanges recorded.

Although Dudko's dialogues were highly controversial and the government took measures to discourage him, one is struck by his conviction about the naturalness of what he was doing. After all, he says again and again, I am a priest, and it is a priest's job to proclaim and defend the faith. His questioners frequently ask if he isn't running great