All this may sound intolerably abstract; it probably does. It is, however, a way for me to tease out, and to underscore, what I see as three fundamental points: points that are never really foregrounded or argued out in this history but are nevertheless there, feeding into and informing everything I try to say and provid- ing me with something like a structure, a narrative pattern. First, social stability is an illusion, the preserve of pastoral dream and utopian vision – and, for that matter, of that idea of the writing into life of a New Eden that has tended to monopolize readings of American literature. At some moments, the pace of change may accelerate but change is the one constant, guaranteeing the plural character of any culture. Second, American culture and writing are surely only properly under- stood in these terms, as multiple and layered, composed of many different groups all trying to make sense of their lives and changes – and, in the process, construct their own imaginative community. And third, if anyone at all is likely to help us understand the exact forms that change has taken in America, the plurality of its cultures and the conflicting forces at work there, it is writers precisely because of the chance their writing gives them to live both 'in' and 'out' of history. Writers can help more than most to disclose to us the continuing acts of imagination that constitute the making of a nation. There are other more personal debts, among them to the many students and colleagues who have helped me to what little I have learned about American literat- ure over the past thirty years. I would like to thank all those I have met and communicated with in the British Association for American Studies, particularly during my stints as Associate Editor and then Editor of the Journal of American Studies, and my fellow scholars in the European Association for American Studies and the Southern Studies Forum. Friends at the British Academy, particularly Andrew Hook, Jon Stallworthy and Wynn Thomas, are to be thanked, for the advice and support they have given. So are colleagues at other universities in the United Kingdom, notably Susan Castillo, Kate Fullbrook, Mick Gidley, Judie Newman and Helen Taylor, at other universities in other parts of Europe, espe- cially Jan Nordby Gretlund, Lothar Honnighausen and Waldemar Zacharasiewicz, in Asia, particularly Bob Lee, and in the United States, where I owe a special debt of gratitude to Saki Bercovitch, George Dekker and Marjorie Perloff. At the Uni- versity of Essex, I have especially to thank my friend and colleague of over thirty years Herbie Butterfield, John Gillies and Peter Hulme, and my doctoral students, with particular thanks to one former doctoral student, Owen Robinson, who has now become a colleague. I would like to thank Brigitte Lee, too, for being such a meticulous, thoughtful and creative copy-editor. Acknowledgements should also be made to the University of Essex, the British Academy, and the Arts and Humanities Research Board for making some limited support available, and to the several universities and conferences that enabled me to try out my ideas – often persuading me to change them. More personally, I want to thank Andrew McNeillie at Blackwell, the best, most supportive and inspiring of editors and a good friend. On a more personal note still, my greatest debt is, as always, to my family. My older daughter, Catharine, now herself an academic in the United States, I want to thank here for

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