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Author(s): David Read

Source: *Modern Philology*, Vol. 91, No. 4 (May, 1994), pp. 428-448

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/438136>

Accessed: 13/07/2010 16:48

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Colonialism and Coherence: The Case of Captain John Smith's *Generall Historie of Virginia*

DAVID READ

University of Missouri—Columbia

In the past few years we have seen a major revival of interest in Anglo-American colonial literature as a field for criticism—a revival that at times presents itself as a crisis. We are aware, in any case, that much is at stake in the debate over our early colonial texts, for they lead us towards some of the most serious questions concerning the social and cultural history of both England and America over the four centuries since the English built their first outpost on Roanoke Island. Given the peculiar resonance of these texts for contemporary criticism, they now serve as meeting points for activity across the disciplines and form the convenient literary ground on which ethnohistorians, new historicists, and cultural materialists all gather and trade with one another, on more or less friendly terms.¹

This interdisciplinary ferment is an aspect, and probably also a cause, of the immense change during the past two decades in our understanding of colonial literature, a change which will have been obvious to anyone who followed the stormy fortunes of Christopher Columbus during the quincentennial “celebration” of his first voyage. An inevitable consequence of such a massive shift of perspective is that important elements of the critical discussion become neglected or obscured, perhaps to surface again only long after the general interest has shifted to some other topic.

I would like to thank the Newberry Library and its Hermon Dunlap Smith Center for the History of Cartography for providing me with a Columbian Quincentennial Fellowship during the summer of 1989 that enabled me to begin work on this study.

1. For representative examples of these three approaches, see, respectively, James Axtell, *The European and the Indian: Essays in the Ethnohistory of North America* (Oxford, 1981); Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, 1980); and Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492–1797* (London, 1986).

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One of my objects in this article is to retrieve some elements of the discussion which may be in danger of falling from view but which strike me as deeply relevant to our understanding of English colonial literature in its historical context. I am concerned here with the unexamined assumptions that emerge in the efforts of recent literary criticism to reconstruct colonialist thought. More generally, I am interested in the question that informs the work of both Dominick LaCapra and Hayden White: What are the epistemological and rhetorical strategies that critics employ in “thinking the thought” of the cultural past, and where does the use of such strategies lead?² White speaks of the “tropes” that pervade historical interpretation; I want to concentrate here on what might be called the trope of coherence in the criticism of colonial texts and the ways in which this trope crucially influences—and limits—our current discussion of those texts.

I will take as my example that representative and difficult figure from the early history of Virginia, Captain John Smith. Despite his iconic status in American history and cultural mythology, Smith has received relatively little attention as an author, though Philip Barbour’s magnificent complete edition has made Smith’s work more accessible than ever before.³ The reasons for this neglect are not far to seek: Smith’s “masterwork,” the 1624 *Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles*, is one of the least coherent of major colonial texts; laboriously assembled by Smith from a haphazard collection of sources, and published long after his return to England from Virginia, the book is full of internal contradictions, second- and thirdhand information, jarring juxtapositions of tone, and passages of uncertain authorship. Moreover, it attempts to narrate the history of Jamestown, one of the most chaotic, not to say distressing, “settlements” in the history of colonization.⁴

Yet it is precisely this lack of coherence that makes the *Generall Historie of Virginia* worth our patient examination, for Smith’s writing resists our desire to understand the process of colonization as itself a coherent phenomenon. In this sense the *Generall Historie* gives us

2. See Dominick LaCapra, *History and Criticism* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985), and *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1983), esp. pp. 13–71; and Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, 1978), pp. 1–134. The notion of “thinking the thought” of the past comes from R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1946).

3. *The Complete Works of Captain John Smith (1580–1631) in Three Volumes*, ed. Philip L. Barbour (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1986); hereafter abbreviated as CW, with volume number indicated.

4. The definitive modern account of Jamestown’s decline and fall is Wesley Frank Craven, *Dissolution of the Virginia Company: The Failure of a Colonial Experiment* (New York, 1932).

pause; it is a profoundly unsettled work, and it in turn unsettles our interpretations, leading us towards less familiar characterizations of the activities in which Smith was so closely involved. As Wayne Franklin has acutely observed,

Captain Smith cannot tell the story he might like to, a tale of Virginian growth and promise, because too many other voices intrude on his. Those other voices not only have their own tales to tell, thus interrupting the flow of Smith's prose—they also undercut, with some subtlety, Smith's apparent assumption that the unity of English endeavor (should it ever be achieved) ought to be embodied in a unified account. If his book as he presents it seems to sprawl, that very quality of its shape is significant of its meaning.⁵

The knowledge of the colonial world that Smith presents to us in his text is shot through with radical uncertainties, and its unstable character forces us to reconsider our own efforts to interpret in a "coherent" way the earliest literary records of the English enterprise in Virginia. For out of the midst of the *Generall Historie's* confused and confusing welter of "too many other voices," certain voices emerge with startling and unexpected clarity—those of the original Virginians, the voices of Powhatan and Opechancanough.

To get a better sense of this quality of ambivalence in Smith's work, we need to move beyond the Pocahontas episode, which has become something of an overexploited hunting ground. I want to begin instead with a passage taken from Smith's expansion of his earlier tract

5. Wayne Franklin, *Discoverers, Explorers, Settlers: The Diligent Writers of Early America* (Chicago, 1979), p. 187. Franklin's book is one of the earliest attempts to analyze colonial texts from within a generally postmodernist critical vocabulary. His brief but forceful discussion of the *Generall Historie* (pp. 187–91) finds in Smith's work a vein of alienation that Franklin sees running through most of the colonial literature of North America, arising from each writer's inability either to locate or to create a genuine sense of community in the colonial environment. Franklin associates this quality of alienation, once again, with the writer's "voice," describing that voice in terms that anticipate the lexicon of the new historicism: "Each voice in these works is a center struggling for power, excluded in its own right but willing to exclude others, if need be, to fortify its own transcendent claims" (p. 191). I would agree with this up to a point but qualify it by saying that, in Smith's case at least, the primary voice never manages to exclude the other voices struggling to speak, nor does it ever fully control the "center"; see my discussion of the native map and the bag of gunpowder, below. Along similar lines, there is Myra Jehlen's recent essay, "History before the Fact; or, Captain John Smith's Unfinished Symphony," *Critical Inquiry* 19 (1993): 677–92, which I encountered as this article was going to press. Jehlen uses different material from the *Generall Historie*, makes Peter Hulme rather than Stephen Greenblatt the object of critical scrutiny, and works from a somewhat different theoretical orientation, but raises many of the same questions that I have tried to raise here and reaches conclusions that strikingly parallel my own. I hope that readers will examine my article alongside of—and in light of—Jehlen's, and consider them both as part of an emerging critique of current practices in the study of early modern colonial literature.

A Map of Virginia (1612) in books 2 and 3 of the *Generall Historie*; these are the two sections of the larger work that most consistently show Smith's own hand as an author rather than as an editor. At the end of book 2 we find an Algonkian word list—in fact a duplicate of the one in *A Map of Virginia*. Modeled after a similar glossary in Thomas Hariot's *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (London, 1588), Smith's list mainly consists of common objects grouped loosely by kind: household items, weapons (the largest group), tools and raw materials, and features of land and water; the second half includes the Algonkian number system as well as some chronological and theological terms.⁶ The list also contains two strange sequences of words and phrases, each contiguous, that suggest a hidden narrative underlying the otherwise colorless organization.

Weghshaughes, Flesh.

Sawwehone, Blood.

Netoppew, Friends.

Marrapough, Enemies.

Maskapow, the worst of enemies.

Mawchick chammay, The best of friends.

Casacunnanack, peya quagh acquintan uttasantasough, In how many daies will there come hither any more English Ships.⁷

.....
Tawnor nehiegh Powhatan, Where dwels Powhatan.

Mache, nehiegh yourough, Orapaks. Now he dwels a great way hence at Orapaks.

Uttapitchewayne anpechitchs nehawper Werowacomoco, You lie, he staid ever at Werowacomoco.

Kator nehiegh mattagh neer uttapitchewayne, Truly he is there I doe not lie.

Spawgtynere keragh werowance mawmarinough kekten waugh peyaquough.

Run you then to the King Mawmarynough and bid him come hither.

Utteke, e peya weyack wighwhip, Get you gone, and come again quickly.

Kekten Pokahontas patiaquagh niugh tanks manotyens neer mowchick rawrenock audough, Bid Pokahontas bring hither two little Baskets, and I will give her white Beads to make her a Chaine.⁸

6. The most incongruous feature of the list is the insertion of "*Wepenter*, a cookold" between "*Shacquohocan*, A stone" and "*Suckahanna*, Water." Jeffrey Knapp also notes this peculiarity (*An Empire Nowhere: England, America, and Literature from "Utopia" to "The Tempest"* [Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1992], p. 209) but treats it, curiously, as a joke on Smith's part. Knapp is hewing to his thesis that "trifling" is a central element of both colonial activity and that activity's literary representations, but the interpretation here seems unduly elaborate, since there are no obvious indications in the way Smith presents the list that he is being either frivolous or ironic—and subtle humor is not notably one of the arrows in Smith's rhetorical quiver.

7. CW 2:130.

8. *Ibid.*, 2:131–32. Knapp quotes this excerpt in his discussion of the word list from *A Map of Virginia* (p. 209); cf. n. 6 above.

“Flesh” and “Blood” in the first excerpt occupy no clear category—they are preceded by the words for “Water,” “Fish,” and “Sturgeon”—but they convey a notion of the human body, both in its capacity for intimacy (as in the familial “flesh and blood”) and as an object of violence (for here the two elements have been separated from the rest of the body). Immediately following these words are two nouns and two superlatives that would have been in common use among both colonists and natives and could be applied equally easily by either party to the other. We need to keep in mind, though, that Smith is translating native terms; the primary object of the epithets “the worst of enemies” and “The best of friends” would most likely be the colonists. The question that ends the sequence—asked in hope or in anxiety?—appears to support such a conclusion. Even as Smith attempts to demonstrate a certain mastery of the Algonkian language, he manages to suggest, perhaps unwittingly, that Powhatan’s people might actually have opinions about the interlopers in their territories and that those opinions might lead to significant decisions. The passage allows, in other words, for the existence of both consciousness and will among the natives.

This same point emerges more dramatically, as it were, in the second passage. Again Smith wants his readers to know that he can carry on a capable conversation in Algonkian, and perhaps he intends this example to show them the way an extended conversation would look and sound. Yet the utility of this passage for lay students of Algonkian is hard to detect, since it presents a singular exchange between Smith and the native speaker(s); as a fragment of a historical moment involving Smith himself, it is unlikely to be duplicated or even approximated by anyone else. The interest of the sequence lies in its very impression of historicity, in the way in which it appears to represent a distinct exchange between Smith and the natives. The nature of that exchange is extremely ambiguous: the informant is accused of lying, yet he may well be telling the truth; if he is lying, he may have a valid reason for doing so; the motives for the initial effort to locate Powhatan are never made clear. We are left with a sense of the caginess of both speakers—each deflecting the stratagems of the other. And we are left with what is, upon the word list’s initial appearance in *A Map of Virginia*, the first reference to Pocahontas in Smith’s writings; the passage alludes to a banal if rather courtly material exchange but also to an exchange that is commanded rather than invited: “*Bid* Pocahontas bring hither two little baskets.” This is where the word list ends; the request for Pocahontas’s presence receives no “answer.” The whole excerpt suggests—in a roundabout way, I confess—the difficulty we have in rendering judgment on Smith’s ideological posi-

tion in relation to the Algonkians. The “Smithian” voice, though it may be peremptory, speaks here with no more authority than the native voice; indeed, the voices seem to cancel each other out. Smith’s mastery of a language does not extend in this instance to mastery of another culture.

We confront this distinctive quality of Smith’s voice more directly in a number of his descriptions of personal encounters with the natives. In book 3, chapter 6, of the *Generall Historie*, Smith recounts an ambush by the Mannahoacks of one of his up-country expeditions, during which Smith’s party captures a warrior:

We demanded why they came in that manner to betray us, that came to them in peace, and to seeke their loves; he [the warrior] answered, they heard we were a people come from under the world, to take their world from them. We asked him how many worlds he did know, he replied, he knew no more but that which was under the skie that covered him, which were the Powhatans, with the Monacans, and the Massawomeks, that were higher up in the mountaines. Then we asked him what was beyond the mountaines, he answered the Sunne: but of any thing els he knew nothing; because the woods were not burnt.⁹

This remarkable display of comparative cosmography is probably intended to show the limitations of the Mannahoack worldview, yet Smith has neglected, for whatever reason, to suppress the irony at the heart of the exchange between native and interloper: the warrior understands rather too well who Smith’s “people” are, and the resonances of their origin “under the world” would be inescapable to many if not most of the *Generall Historie*’s readers. What is perhaps most striking about the passage is Smith’s willingness to “quote” the warrior, to allow him to speak in such an unvarnished way about the possible motives of the Europeans; this tolerance of an alternative point of view runs counter to our intuitions concerning the propaganda of colonization, in which we would be surprised to find a voice from either side of the question advancing a claim that the colonial party was seizing a “world” from its rightful owners. We are even more surprised to find that voice and that claim emerging from an allegedly “savage” source.

We might say that Smith is attempting to deflect the point of the Mannahoack warrior’s observation by querying him on the boundaries of the world he knows; yet elsewhere the narrative displays a concern with the relative character of “the world” and the tension between native and European notions of its contents and its edges.

9. *CW* 2:175–76.

Earlier in the *Generall Historie*, during the extended confrontation that leads up to Smith's rescue by Pocahontas (book 3, chap. 2), Smith tries to influence the chieftain Opechancanough through what could be characterized as the strategic deployment of European geographical lore:

He [Smith] demanding for their Captaine, they shewed him Opechancanough, King of Pamaunkee, to whom he gave a round Ivory double compass Dyall. Much they marvailed at the playing of the Fly and Needle, which they could see so plainely, and yet not touch it, because of the glass that covered them. But when he demonstrated by that Globe-like Jewell, the roundnesse of the earthe, and skies, the spheare of the Sunne, Moone, and Starres, and how the Sunne did chase the night round about the world continually; the greatnesse of the Land and Sea, the diversitie of Nations, varietie of complexions, and how we were to them Antipodes, and many other such like matters, they all stood amazed with admiration.¹⁰

Smith presents the compass to Opechancanough as a precious talisman, a "Globe-like Jewell," and indeed an ivory compass is considerably more valuable than the usual "trash" (to use Smith's own word for it) of glass beads, bells, and other trinkets which the Jamestown colonists used as barter in their traffic with the natives.¹¹ Most likely Smith recognizes the seriousness of his situation in making this gift, even as he acknowledges Opechancanough's high status within the Powhatan confederation. At the same time Smith uses the compass to lay his world against Opechancanough's, invoking that world in a kind of magical ritual that serves as both an assertion of Smith's own powers and a means of averting a possible catastrophe. Moreover, Smith—indeed the passage as a whole—seems to revel in the magic inherent in a knowledge of the "roundnesse of the earth" and its "greatnesse," "diversitie," and "varietie."¹² The compass functions not only as a talisman but as a sign of the mysterious distance between

10. *Ibid.*, 2:147. The shift from first person to third person occurs frequently in the *Generall Historie*; it may or may not imply the presence of an author, or authors, other than Smith. Given the (still) confused—and confusing—state of the text, perhaps the firmest ground we can stand on here is to regard Smith as an extremely "active" editor, always shaping the material at his disposal to suit his own ends, and imposing his own personality on the work of others. Richard Hakluyt the Younger's *Principall Navigations Voyages and Discoveries of the English Nation* (1st ed. 1589; 2d ed. 1598–1600) would have provided a powerful model for Smith's work in this respect.

11. For a particularly vivid example of this sort of barter, and its practical consequences, see *CW* 2:156.

12. Smith's knowledge seems to depend more on Ptolemy than on Copernicus, as is suggested by his reference to the "spheare of the Sunne, Moone, and Starres" and his claim that "the Sunne did chase the night round about the world continually."

Smith's world and Opechancanough's: the natives "could see . . . plainly" the inner apparatus of the compass, "and yet not touch it." As "amazed with admiration" as Opechancanough's followers are, they fail to be entirely persuaded by Smith's magical geography: "Notwithstanding, within an houre after they tyed him to a tree, and as many as could stand about him prepared to shoot him, but the King holding up the Compass in his hand they all laid downe their Bowes and Arrowes."¹³ Opechancanough finally relents, compass in hand, but the moment is mysterious; we are not certain whether Smith's geography has rescued him from execution or if Opechancanough is simply expressing his gratitude for the lovely gift.

There follows a lengthy progress towards the residence of Powhatan, and ultimately towards Pocahontas's famous intercession. On the way, Smith witnesses a ritual in which the priests arrange meal, corn kernels, and sticks for a specific purpose; here again the narrative reflects a concern with the relativity of different versions of "the world":

Three dayes they used this Ceremony; the meaning whereof they told him, was to know if he intended them well or no. The circle of meale signified their Country, the circles of corne the bounds of the Sea, and the stickes his Country. They imagined the world to be flat and round, like a trencher, and they in the midst. After this they brought him a bagge of gunpowder, which they carefully preserved till the next spring, to plant as they did their corne; because they would be acquainted with the nature of that seede.¹⁴

Smith seems mainly concerned with pointing out the naïveté with which the natives "imagine" their world; he reaches for the homely, familiar image of the "trencher" to depict a flat world with Powhatan's people at the center. Yet the simile cuts another way, so to speak: if the natives are in the middle of a serving plate, then they are there to be eaten. Smith's analogy suggests nearly as much about the colonist's model of the world as it does about the natives'. Even the "map" which the priests create, with its array of circles, bears comparison with Smith's account of "the spheare of the Sunne, Moone, and Starres" and its assumption of man existing "in the midst" of the universe. Like Smith's world, the world of Powhatan's priests contains an element of mystery: Smith must be "told" the "meaning" of

13. CW 2:147. As Karen Kupperman points out, the whole exchange would have been almost completely nonverbal, since neither party understood much of the language of the other. This may help to account for the transitory effect on the natives of Smith's description of the world. See Karen Ordahl Kupperman, ed., *Captain John Smith: A Select Edition of His Writings* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1988), p. 60, n. 12.

14. CW 2:150.

the ceremony he is witnessing—a ceremony which depends upon and aims for a privileged knowledge not unlike the knowledge that Smith invokes when presenting the compass to Opechancanough. The crucial difference between the two worlds of colonist and native comes down to the means with which men occupy the center. The priests display a keen knowledge of just where the difference lies, in their scheme to plant the gunpowder “seed” in order to reproduce it for their own uses.

While the ceremony continues, Smith remains an object of intense scrutiny among Powhatan’s warriors: “more than two hundred of those grim Courtiers stood wondering at him, as he had been a monster.”¹⁵ We are aware here of a reversal in the habitual order of things, for the courtiers of Elizabeth and James had enjoyed the spectacle of “monsters” from the New World on several occasions; English expeditions from Frobisher’s onwards had typically returned with one or more captured natives to be paraded before the noble sponsors of such expeditions. As in the previous encounter with Opechancanough, the natives treat Smith not as an omniscient magus but as an exotic if threatening curiosity worth the contemplation of a fairly large audience of the curious. The distinctions between English and native worldviews begin to dissolve into a *mélange* of strangely similar motives.

What we experience at several points in the *Generall Historie*—or, more precisely, what Smith enables us to experience in his text—is an uncanny competition between the worlds of the native and the colonist, a competition in which the victor is by no means obvious. One of the most striking examples of this occurs in book 3, chapter 10, in which Smith presents in elaborately rhetorical fashion his efforts to cajole additional food supplies from Powhatan. Though Powhatan seems to agree to provide the food to the colonists, he expresses considerable reluctance, telling Smith, “some doubt I have of your comming hither; that makes me not so kindly seek to relieve you as I would: for many doe informe me, your comming hither is not for trade, but to invade my people, and possesse my Country, who dare not come to bring you corne, seeing you thus armed with your men.”¹⁶ After more than a day of inconclusive negotiations with Smith’s party, Powhatan delivers a more specific assessment of his situation, which Smith characterizes as a “subtill discourse” but which may strike us as pungently and painfully objective:

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, 2:195.

What will it availe you to take that by force you may quickly have by love, or to destroy them that provide you food. What can you get by warre, when we can hide our provisions and fly to the woods? whereby you must famish by wronging us your friends. And why are you thus jealous of our loves seeing us unarmed, and both doe, and are willing still to feede you, with that you cannot get but by our labours? Thinke you I am so simple, not to know it is better to eate good meate, lye well, and sleepe quietly with my women and children, laugh and be merry with you, have copper, hatchets, or what I want being your friend: then be forced to flie from all, to lie cold in the woods, feede upon Acornes, rootes, and such trash, and be so hunted by you, that I can neither reste, eate, nor sleepe; but my tyred men must watch, and if a twig but breake, every one cryeth ther commeth Captaine Smith: then must I fly I know not whether: and thus with miserable feare, end my miserable life, leaving my pleasures to such youths as you, which through your rash unadvisednesse, may quickly as miserably ende, for want of that you never knowe how to find?¹⁷

It is remarkable enough that Smith portrays Powhatan in possession of such a clear-eyed perspective on the tensions that exist between his tribe and the Jamestown settlers; what is more remarkable still is that these speeches of Powhatan's are obviously literary constructions. Smith has chosen to include these speeches in his account—may in fact have created the speeches to fill out his narrative—with the simultaneous awareness that Powhatan's views are not strictly necessary to or supportive of the views that Smith is attempting to promulgate in the *Generall Historie*.

Smith is, of course, presenting Powhatan's words as part of a dialogue, and his own response within that dialogue is clearly intended as a refutation of everything that Powhatan has just said. His answer, however, is broadly rather than specifically dismissive and concludes with more bluster than substance: "As for the dangers of our enemies, in such warres consist our chieftest pleasure, for your riches we have no use: as for the hiding your provision, or by your flying to the woods, we shall not so unadvisedly starve as you conclude, your friendly care in that behalfe is needlesse; for we have a rule to finde beyond your knowledge."¹⁸ As in the episode of the compass, Smith asserts his superiority on the basis of a hidden "knowledge"; at the same time this knowledge and its consequences remain crucially ungrounded. We are aware that there is a practical reason for Smith's

17. *Ibid.*, 2:196. In bk. 3, chap. 10, the chieftain Okaning expresses similar sentiments to Smith rather more bluntly: "We perceive and well know you intend to destroy us" (*ibid.*, 2:208).

18. *Ibid.*, 2:196.

reticence: the “rule” is a pure fiction improvised to deflect Powhatan’s probing questions. Yet we have seen elsewhere that Smith’s knowledge is continually exposing its own limitations, that Smith is tied to the tree not only physically but epistemologically.

We find a poignant example of the boundaries of Smith’s understanding in book 4, in the account of Smith’s meeting in London with Uttamatomakkin, who had accompanied the newlyweds Pocahontas and John Rolfe on their visit to England in 1616; in effect Uttamatomakkin was a spy sent by Powhatan to determine the number and strength of the English nation, a task which quickly exhausted his patience. Here he turns to Smith to provide him with information that has so far eluded him:

hee told me Powhatan did bid him to finde me out, to shew him our God, the King, Queene, and Prince, I so much had told them of: Concerning God, I told him the best I could, the King I heard he had seene, and the rest hee should see when he would; he denied ever to have seene the King, till by circumstances he was satisfied he had: Then he replied very sadly, You gave Powhatan a white Dog, which Powhatan fed as himselfe, but your King gave me nothing, and I am better than your white Dog.¹⁹

Though in Virginia Smith was able to invoke “our God, the King, Queene, and Prince” as symbols of his power over the natives, here he finds himself at something of a loss, for Uttamatomakkin has managed to reveal Smith’s lack of access to the objects of his own higher “knowledge.” Not only is Smith’s God more distant than he seemed to be in Virginia but Smith’s vague answer to the rest of the query suggests all too clearly that he has had even less contact with the royal family than Uttamatomakkin has had. The remark that “I am better than your white Dog” shows Uttamatomakkin bringing his own kind of knowledge to bear in measuring the distance between the cultures of King James and Powhatan, and his measurement is not necessarily flattering to James—or to Smith. Smith must attach some significance to Uttamatomakkin’s words, for he has included them in his account; but he neglects to comment on them in any way, moving on instead to mention his many visits to Pocahontas with “divers Courtiers and others, my acquaintances,”²⁰ thus reminding his readers—probably not to their complete satisfaction—that he is still a man of affairs though no longer the hero of Virginia.

This account of certain aspects of the *Generall Historie* may seem both familiar and unfamiliar: familiar, in that we are already accus-

19. *Ibid.*, 2:261.

20. *Ibid.*

tomed to thinking of Smith's cultural and social milieu as one where radically different ideas and values not only collide with one another but somehow manage to survive the collision; unfamiliar, in that we usually do not expect to find the intellectual and ideological contrarities that we often associate with other areas of the English Renaissance making themselves felt in the promotional literature of colonial enterprise. (It may be that the *Generall Historie* fits less than comfortably within this genre, but the lineage from Hakluyt to Smith is clear enough.) As I have suggested already, we are more likely to see in this literature the signs of a coherent purpose, sometimes veiled, sometimes obvious, but always leading toward a particular conclusion. We generally have the sense that these colonial writers knew, at some level, what they were "about."

This dissonance between two very different sets of generic expectations concerning English writing in the late Renaissance is a major crux for much of the recent historically oriented criticism of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature. Such criticism tends to question assumptions about both the diversity and the harmony of cultural forms in the period; it then goes on, more often than not, to expose the evidence of a deeply authoritarian, highly determined system which masks itself in *discordia concors* but continues to move toward its unitary aim—the acquisition of greater power (or authority, or determination) for itself. Not surprisingly, much of the strongest evidence for this interpretation comes from colonial texts.

One of the more influential examples of this approach is Stephen Greenblatt's essay, "Invisible Bullets," which employs Hariot's *A Briefe and True Report* to portray a culture in the act of systematically repressing the alternatives that threaten it, even at the moment when it appears to tolerate those alternatives.²¹ In what is probably the most memorable part of this essay for most readers, Greenblatt comments on Hariot's willingness to record the Algonkians' ideas about the European contagions that circulated so destructively among them, and he presents several passages from *A Briefe and True Report* that bear comparison with those I have quoted above from the *Generall Historie*. The natives regard the colonists as the spirits of dead men in possession of living bodies; a number, "who seem in historical hindsight eerily prescient," as Greenblatt says, predict that more Englishmen will come to kill and displace them; to account specifically for

21. This essay has appeared in many versions in many places, most recently in Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1988), pp. 21–65. My quotations are from this source.

the devastating effects of introduced diseases, the natives conceive an airborne spirit-army of vengeful colonists, slaying them with the eponymous invisible bullets.²²

From this selection of passages Greenblatt raises the specter of a kind of radical relativism, an ideological chaos flowing beneath Harriot's attempts at objective description: "For a moment, as Harriot records these competing theories, it may seem to us as if there were no absolute assurance of God's national interest, as if the drive to displace and absorb the other had given way to conversation among equals, as if all meanings were provisional, as if the signification of events stood apart from power."²³ As quickly as Greenblatt invokes this apparition, he dissolves it, for it does not square with his severe conception of colonial history: the broaching of alternative viewpoints, Algonkian or otherwise, is actually a feature of what we might call "counterintelligence," an indication that the internal security arm of a hegemonic culture is doing its job: "Power thrives on vigilance, and human beings are vigilant if they sense a threat; in part that power defines itself in relation to such threats or simply to that which is not identical with it. . . . English power in the first Virginia colony *depends* upon the registering and even the production of potentially unsettling perspectives."²⁴ Thus both Harriot's quasi-anthropological curiosity and his apparent openness to letting the natives "speak" in his narrative are redefined as forms of hostility towards those things that power has not yet come to possess as its own: "The recording of alien voices, their preservation in Harriot's text, is part of the process whereby Indian culture is constituted as a culture and thus brought into the light for study, discipline, correction, transformation. The momentary sense of instability or plenitude—the existence of other voices—is produced by the monological power that ultimately denies the possibility of plenitude."²⁵

Greenblatt's account here depends crucially on the assumption of a generalized bad faith, as if Harriot's use of native voices must necessarily be disingenuous—whether or not Harriot, both the agent and the captive of the dominant culture, is conscious of that disingenuousness. This is certainly an easy enough conclusion to reach, given the subsequent history of English relations with Native Americans. And the same charge of disingenuousness could as easily be leveled at Smith when he records the "alien voices" of Powhatan's people at the

22. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

25. *Ibid.*

edges of Jamestown almost forty years later. The problem here, of course, is that the textual evidence for the attitudes of either Hariot or Smith is highly ambiguous. Would it not also be possible to claim, based on the same quotations, that Hariot and Smith really did respect the qualities of the native cultures they encountered? Yet such a claim seems more than a little naive, especially in Smith's case.

Our difficulty here returns us once again to the matter of coherence in the Jamestown colony. A colony is a project, and a project of any sort succeeds or fails based on the ability of its "projectors" to organize the materials, both concrete and conceptual, which they have gathered together in order to make whatever kind of thing it is they intend to make. A coherent project, in other words, emerges from the projectors' mastery of a body of data. Yet such a project would confront a paradox which also, quite obviously, affects every effort to think historically, and which involves the disjunction between what we might call comprehensive mastery and critical mastery. Do we master the data by knowing and using all of it (at least as much of it as we can possibly know and use), or by recognizing and selecting what is most important for the work at hand? We would probably say that our efforts to build coherent projects include aspirations toward both kinds of mastery; at the same time we would most likely come down on the side of critical mastery as the most crucial aspect of our project-building, if only because of its practical advantages.

With this distinction in mind, we may be able to unravel some of the cognitive tangle surrounding Smith's description of his own activities. The *Generall Historie* appears weighted heavily toward comprehensive mastery; it is not that the signs of critical mastery disappear altogether but that they are subsumed within Smith's effort to embrace the whole history of the Virginia enterprise in his writing. That history in turn suggests the desire of the Jamestown settlers to master the New World comprehensively—to acquire and allow for all the possible "versions" of the Virginia colony, from an earthly paradise to a vast tobacco farm, from a gentleman's parade ground to a paradigm of military empire. While the Massachusetts Bay Colony maintained a built-in selection principle based on the theocratic beliefs of its founders, the colonial society in Virginia found itself unwilling to choose between its many potential meanings, thus setting many of its members against Smith, who as an actor in the history (as opposed to a writer of the history) made much of his powers as a critical master of the situation at Jamestown.

The problem with comprehensive mastery, of course, is that it is fatally open-ended, offering as it does an infinitely receding horizon of data still to be acquired. When we witness this desire to master

everything being acted out on the historical field, we are not terribly surprised to find that it can degenerate rapidly into a near-total loss of control which causes the very notion of mastery to lose any significant meaning. This loss of control is reflected in Smith's history as well, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Smith constantly struggles with his control of the historical data in his efforts to comprehend the comprehensiveness of the collective experience at Jamestown. The effects of this struggle are more positive in the *Generall Historie*, however, than the effects of the struggle over control are at Jamestown itself.

If we view Smith the writer as working toward an ideal of comprehensiveness,²⁶ toward a truly "general" history, then we may come to find his account of his relations with the Powhatans less disorienting—if perhaps only somewhat less. It is not that Smith is constitutionally unable to make critical distinctions or to identify internal contradictions among the many voices in his work, but that, given the nature of his task, he does not view such activities as relevant. The *Generall Historie*, in other words, is a vivid example of what we might call "undialectical" writing and thinking, and its character in this respect has less to do with the technical deficiencies of its author than with the cultural conditions under which he operated, both in Virginia and in the world of words to which he returned in England after suffering the near-fatal injuries that ended his career as a colonist.²⁷ We cannot say that Smith's attitude toward the natives is sensitive and respectful or, on the other hand, that it is bigoted and intolerant; it seems, strangely enough, to be both. What is perhaps most unsettling about this—to return to the adjective that I used at the outset—is that Smith displays no obvious intellectual discomfort over appearing to occupy two contrary positions at the same time. Powhatan as friend and as enemy, as oppressor and oppressed, as wise man and as foolish savage, as subject and as object, as figure of likeness and of otherness—Smith makes room for all of these possibilities in his narrative and does not rely consistently on any one of them. In the *Generall His-*

26. Examples of the pursuit of this ideal are frequent in England during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries: Sidney's *Arcadia*, Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, Hooker's *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Drayton's *Polyolbion*, Prynne's *Histriomastix*, Raleigh's *History of the World*, and Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* are all notable instances, each in its own way.

27. Smith returned to England in 1609 after being seriously burned when a bag of gunpowder exploded as he slept in his pinnace on a downriver trip to Jamestown; at the time he was already under threat of removal from the presidency, a victim of the weak economic condition of the colony, of his own high-handed approach to governing Jamestown, and of a fair share of personal ill will toward him. See *CW* 1:268–75.

torie, we find equivocation transformed into a literary and historiographical mode.

Again, this is not just a matter of Smithian idiosyncrasy. It is the same quality that Greenblatt perceives and finds so disturbing in Hariot's *A Briefe and True Report*: a willingness to straddle both sides of the line to which the reader responds by invoking, as if by force of nature, the name of Machiavelli. What readers such as Greenblatt are seeking, however, is not a formal connection with *Il principe* but a dialectical model which will expose "instability" and "plenitude" as mere illusions. Thus the potential anarchy in Hariot's account is, in a curious way, moralized. Greenblatt raises but cannot allow for the possibility that instability and plenitude might be the dominant qualities of Hariot's thought—that in Hariot's effort to "think" Virginia, to master it comprehensively, confusion reigns in a very significant way. To accept this notion would be to experience a sort of epistemological vertigo; Greenblatt instead contains it within a structure of determinate political relations where it becomes, as it were, only a dream of falling.

Yet I think we must accept this notion, if only because so much of the record of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English colonization belongs to Hariot's and Smith's way of thinking. We encounter in this record a history of competing rationales, in which the models for English activity in the New World run against each other in disorderly fashion like ships torn from their moorings in a storm—and this storm is the normative state of affairs. There is nothing unusual about Smith's inability to "navigate" in a single direction in the *Generall Historie*; it is a characteristic feature of colonialist description in the period. In the manuscript known as the *Discourse of Western Planting*, written in 1584 to promote Sir Walter Raleigh's Virginia expedition, Richard Hakluyt the Younger presents in the space of a few pages some widely different models of colonial activity. Though he makes much of missionary enterprise among the natives, his primary emphasis is on establishing trade relations: "after the seekinge the advancement of the kingedome of Christe, the seconde chefe and principall ende of the same [western discovery] is traficque, which consisteth in the vent of our clothes and other commodities of England, and in receaving backe of the nedeful commodities that wee nowe receive from all other places of the worlde." Such trade will require fortified factories, to fend off French, Spanish, and Portuguese competitors; but these fortifications grade rapidly into a rather more militant variety: "wee are to plante upon the mouthes of the greate navigable Rivers which are there, by stronge order of fortification, and there to plant our Colonies. . . . And these fortifications shall kepe the naturall

people of the Contrye in obedience and goodd order.”²⁸ Hakluyt then proposes a decidedly Machiavellian sort of diplomacy as a way of expanding the colony’s size and power: “yf the nexthe neighbours shall attempt any annoye to our people . . . wee may upon violence and wronge offred by them . . . enter into league with the petite princes their neighbours that have alwayes lightly warres one with an other, and so entringe league nowe with the one, and then with the other wee shall purchase our owne safetie and make ourselves Lordes of the whole.”²⁹ Later, “admittinge the worse that people will neither receive our commodities, nor yelde us theirs againe,” Hakluyt suggests an alternative approach that will allow the colonists to “become great gayners will or nill the naturall inhabitantes of those Regions or others: And that is by enjoyng certain naturall commodities of the landes infinitely aboundinge in no accompte with them and with us of greate price.”³⁰ In these passages Hakluyt presents a series of particular responses to contingent situations, but he provides very little sense of the relations between his responses: the rationale that would include both peaceful trading and mercenary warfare, both a strong defensive (if not offensive) posture and the enjoyment of commodities “in no accompt with” the natives, is never very clear.

A similar sort of confusion emerges in Raleigh’s *Discoverie of the Large, Rich and Bewtiful Empyre of Guiana*, written twelve years later. Late in this account of his abortive voyage into the Orinoco River basin in 1595, Raleigh hints that the English by establishing a military force in South America may ultimately be able to restore the Incas to their rightful domain; in support of this he cites an apocryphal prophecy: “from *Inglatierra* those *Ingas* should be againe in time to come restored, and deliuered from the seruitude of the [Spaniards].” In return for the services of this English militia, the Inca emperor “would yeeld her Maiesty by composition so many hundred thousand pounds yearely, as should both defende all enemies abroad, and defray all expences at home, and . . . he woulde besides pay a garrison of 3000 or 4000 soldiers very royally to defend him against other nations.” After proposing this elaborate scheme, in which installments of Inca wealth serve to balance Elizabeth’s books, Raleigh reverts almost immediately to a much cruder approach: the Inca emperor “hath neyther shotte nor Iron weapon in all his Empyre, and therefore may easely be conquered.”³¹ Here Raleigh briskly dismisses the

28. E. G. R. Taylor, ed., *The Original Writings and Correspondence of the Two Richard Hakluyts*, 2 vols., Hakluyt Society, 2d ser., 76–77 (London, 1935), 2:274.

29. *Ibid.*, 2:275.

30. *Ibid.*, 2:280.

31. Sir Walter Raleigh, *The Discoverie of the Large, Rich and Bewtiful Empyre of Guiana*, ed. V. T. Harlow (London, 1928), p. 75.

distinctions to be made between arguments for “protection” and arguments for conquest—probably because for him, as for Hakluyt, the distinctions did not hold.

We can see at this point that Smith’s writing, for all its quirkiness, belongs within a tradition of sorts, a tradition that consists not so much of fixed generic expectations as of persistent habits of mind. As Gary Nash has pointed out for the southern colonies and Richard Johnson for New England, English attitudes toward the natives were decidedly heterogeneous and continued to evolve throughout the colonial period;³² the gradual hardening of Indian policy in the colonies had more to do with responses to the pressure of historical accidents (such as the relative success of Opechancanough’s assault in 1622) than with any sort of well-defined or even poorly defined imperialistic program that the colonists brought with them from England. It would be more accurate to say that the colonists imported a multiplicity of approaches which only sorted themselves out over the *longue durée*. In the first volume of his massive study *The Shaping of America*, the geographer D. W. Meinig distinguishes among eight specific phases of colonial activity—exploration, gathering, barter, plunder, outpost, imperial imposition, implantation, and imperial colony—with the first five phases belonging to what Meinig calls the “prelude” and the last three to “fixation.”³³ Though Meinig says that “this is not a rigid sequence,” he suggests that one phase leads logically into the next in most instances.³⁴ The model is a useful one, but I think it is also important to recognize that the various stages could and did occur simultaneously or in different orders, and in the literature of colonization the rationales for these phases could coexist without one rationale necessarily dominating the others. Meinig also points out that the sequence leads to different outcomes: the natives might be expelled beyond a “firm frontier” (Virginia); they might establish a mutually beneficial trading economy with the Europeans (Canada); or they might fuse in various ways with the colonists to create a polyglot culture (Mexico).³⁵ We can say that these outcomes are the result of the distinct cultural traditions and expectations of the three colonial powers in the Americas—that an English colony by its nature would not closely resemble its French or Spanish counterpart.

32. Gary B. Nash, “The Image of the Indian in the Southern Colonial Mind,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 29 (1972): 197–230; and Richard R. Johnson, “The Search for a Usable Indian: An Aspect of the Defense of Colonial New England,” *Journal of American History* 64 (1977): 623–51.

33. D. W. Meinig, *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History*, vol. 1 (New Haven, Conn., 1986), pp. 65–66.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 71–72.

Yet we also know that each power was constantly—we might even say, neurotically—aware of the colonial activities of the other two and used those activities as models (albeit often in a negative or distorted form) for its own. In any case, we should be extremely cautious about hypostatizing a single, stable version of colonialism out of the flux that surrounds the early English activity in North America; perhaps we could better devote our efforts to trying to describe the flux itself.

This is slippery terrain, even with the advanced climbing gear that postmodernist literary history has provided for us. In spite of our training and experience as critical readers in the late twentieth century, we find it difficult to accept forms of cognitive activity (which, in historiographical terms, is as much as to say forms of textual activity) that appear to function neither dialectically nor monologically. We hesitate in the face of historical situations in which the actors, with sound minds and in all apparent innocence, can embrace starkly conflicting premises as if these premises were equally valid and efficacious. This raises (as it does for Greenblatt, who quickly dismisses it) the prospect of an extreme relativism at work under the external certainties of the English Renaissance, and leads to what we would call, in current parlance, an “aporia.”

Yet the fall into relativism implies a predisposition toward doubt (“If *X* is untrue, then why not *Y* and *Z*?”) which Smith, for one, does not demonstrate to any significant degree. He accepts without hesitation the harsh conventions of colonialism, as in his conclusions regarding the 1622 massacre in book 4 of the *Generall Historie*:

it is more easie to civilize them [the natives] by conquest then faire meanes; for the one may be made at once, but their civilizing will require a long time and much industry. The manner how to suppress them is so often related and approved, I omit it here: And you have twenty examples of the Spaniards how they got the West-Indies, and forced the treacherous and rebellious Infidels to doe all manner of drudgery worke and slavery for them, themselves living like Souldiers upon the fruits of their labours.³⁶

36. *CW* 2:298–99. Kupperman suggests that Smith’s opinions became more reactionary over time, as he came to rely on his memories and on secondhand information rather than on any concrete experience of conditions in Virginia. A passage like the one above is, in Kupperman’s judgment, “a caricature of his earlier views” (Kupperman [n. 12 above], p. 12). One of the fascinating features of the *Generall Historie*, however, is its “synchronic” character: Smith has made little effort to create or organize any sense of historical development in his own thinking, so that we have a difficult time as readers in distinguishing between “earlier” and “later” perspectives; they all seem to occupy the same moment in the textual “present.” In this sense, Smith’s book is one of the least historical of histories.

While we may not detect much uncertainty here, we may still be aware of a certain dissonance in the passage; even in presenting the Spaniards as exemplars, Smith displays a certain amount of scorn at the way they have acquitted themselves, “living like Souldiers” upon the “drudgery worke and slavery” of the natives. Throughout the *Generall Historie*, Smith has contended that the desire of the settlers to live “like Souldiers” in this fashion—through pillage and extorted labor—is the source of many of the problems at Jamestown. Another interesting qualification occurs shortly before the passage I have just quoted: Smith, drawing his account of the massacre largely verbatim from Edward Waterhouse’s *A Declaration of the State of the Colony and Affaires in Virginia* (London, 1622), interrupts an expostulation on the general cowardice of the natives with a parenthetical remark: “But I must tell those authors, though some might be thus cowardly, there were many of them had better spirits.”³⁷ We hear in this what we have heard several times before: Smith speaks not with one voice but with many voices; each voice speaks with authority and conviction; each voice speaks “the truth.”

What are we to make of this? Faced with the task of finding order in the midst of disorder—for this is, after all, the perennial task—most contemporary critics of early colonial literature have opted for what White would call the “ironic” reading of the historical record.³⁸ This usually involves excavating what is “hidden” according to one of the many formulations of concealment that are now available to us; and what is almost always exposed to view is a monological vision of reality which the text has artfully masked or dispersed but which the careful use of dialectical method has brought to light. This may indeed prove satisfactory for many kinds of texts and for many periods and types of cultural activity—but not, it seems to me, for Smith’s *Generall Historie* or for much of the colonial literature written in North America and England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. This literature subverts itself so readily and displays its tensions and contradictions so openly that the present terms of our discussion will not take us as far enough towards either a critical or a comprehensive understanding of the textual record of English colonialism, though it may lead us towards a seemingly coherent one.

As readers we cannot dispense with dialectical method—certainly I have not done so in this essay—but I would argue here that in confronting writers like Smith we should try to read less ironically and to

37. *CW* 2:298.

38. See Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973), esp. pp. 230–64.

investigate the “surface” of the text with greater patience and commitment. Finally we should acknowledge—and not merely by offering the increasingly perfunctory *mea culpa* of our “compromised” position as critics and historians in (and of) the present time—the significant differences between the efforts of Smith and his predecessors to rationalize their activities and our own attempts to make sense of our colonial past. We might be tempted to associate Smith’s mixed rationales with our own conception of pluralist thinking, but this would have little explanatory value, since pluralism as we know it depends upon notions of tolerance, freedom, and the autonomy of the individual conscience that were only sketchily developed in the early part of the seventeenth century and that would have seemed quite alien to someone like Smith. We should rather treat Smith’s writing and thinking as multivocal in a way that we cannot precisely duplicate in our own writing and thinking but that involves us in one of the most ancient and challenging of historiographical and critical tasks, a task that we might call “thinking across a distance.” The ethnohistorians have thought about American colonialism in this way more successfully, I think, than have their counterparts in literary studies, and the latter could benefit greatly from a closer look at the work of the former.

Part of the challenge for us as literary historians, of course, is simply in taking the distance seriously. We ought to grant to Smith’s text and others like it the sort of powerful otherness that we routinely confer on the more conventionally “literary” works we wish to talk about—which is to say, the otherness of a mind not our own, observed in the difficult act of representing the world on paper. When we take this approach—when we study colonial texts such as Smith’s with close attention and with the full resources of criticism at hand—we will almost certainly have to reconsider and revise the language we use at present to describe the character of English colonialism in North America. Smith’s account of Jamestown in the *Generall Historie* suggests that the advance of colonization on this continent, with all its attendant and enduring agonies, is less a matter of the “evil” in people’s hearts than of the confusion in their minds. If we study this confusion more carefully than we do at present, we may be able to avoid some potent confusions of our own.