A FAIR FIELD FULL OF FOLK. SUSAN MERRITT'S REPUBLIC AT THE FOURTH OF JULY PICNIC

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> It is a pleasure to reflect, that on the same day, in all parts of the world where a few Americans are assembled, they are in the habit of rejoicing together with decent hilarity, and of cherishing those social sentiments which were so feelingly participated in their common toils, sufferings and dangers. At home or abroad, what breast is not then as it were electrified by sympathetic recollections?

Thus, in 1799, from Madrid where he was ambassador, David Humphreys celebrated the 4th of July with *A Poem on the Love of Country.*[1]

The "few Americans" of whom Humphreys speaks were nearly all male and certainly all members of political or commercial élites or maritime officials who had actively participated in the war and its aftermath, who felt themselves at once sons and fathers of the new republic. They were in the early flush of patriotic celebration and commemoration, measuring themselves, their war, their populace, their military leaders, their republican institutions, against the immobile oriental world or the swiftly changing French and European scene, and finding themselves feeling pride and even a bit of exultation at their difference. They had broken historic continuity and they were aware of it. They still assumed that all inhabitants of the republic felt as they did; official festivities would come later.

For Humphreys, who had taken part in the war and, particularly tied to Washington, had spent many months at Mount Vermon and, subsequently, as the new President's personal eyes and ears about Europe, and then as first ambassador to Spain and Portugal, the 4th of July was "to independence consecrate". And love of country, "mystic tie! / That binds us to our native soil and sky!". The celebrations he allows us to glimpse are commemorative – indeed, the poem consists in large part of the list of commanders of American troops, each with an adjective, an image, recalled to momentary life – and they are sober, though convivial. Certainly private, inasmuch as each participant has memories of his own; yet public as well. But public in the sense of an extended "family", the "band of brothers" who had engaged in "common toils, sufferings and dangers".

Though I should not wish to belabor the point, it seems to me that this is a crux, as important as it is, in the end, intuitive. For Humphreys, Americans, members of the new republican state, are a nation in as much as they are voluntarily inter-related by the common experience of war by individual and collective choice. The republican state itself is, at last, no more nor less than the institutional expressionof these "social sentiments". I think we cannot dismiss as chance the turn of phase with which

1. David Humphreys, *A Poem on the Love of Country*, in *The Miscellaneous Works of David Humphreys*, T. and J. Swords, N.Y., 1804; "In Celebration of the 23rd Anniversary of the Independence of the United States of America".

Humphreys, a Connecticut man born and bred, echoes a Christian phrase especially dear to evangelicals: "Where a few Americans are assembled" in the name if love of country, there also is the Republic. In fact, the lines previously cited begin, "Hail *sacred Love of Country*! mystic tie!", and the italics are Humphreys'.

Such spontaneous celebration, with its backward commemorative memories was also strongly forward-looking, the point of equilibrium for visions of a future whose possibilities seemed virtually limitless *because* grounded in that shared past. Humphreys also wrote, during the same European years, a poem on the *Future Glory of The United States of America,* in which he described "a new city rise the type of heav'n":

> On broad Potowmac's bank then spring to birth,
> Thou seat of empire and delight of earth!
> Of WASHINGTON assume the glorious name,
> Immortal pledge of union and of fame!
> Hail site sublime! unconscious of thy doom,
> Thou future city burst the shapeless gloom,
> From long oblivion wake – unrivalled rise –
> And spread thy destin'd beauties to the skies!
> Through rows of goodly trees with umbrage fair,
> And streams, whose freshness cools the summers air;
> (...)
> I see thy spacious streets their walks extend,
> The domes rise beauteous and the arches bend –
> I see thy portals proud, adorn'd with art,
> Where thronging nations enter and depart –
> Where lifts the CAPITOL its golden spires,
> I see Columbia's delegated sire
> Intent on high debate – awful!– serene! –
> (...)
> To our new empire, lo! what crowds repair,
> Walk in its light and in its blessings share;
> For there th'oppress'd a place of refuge find,
> The last asylum for distrest mankind.[2]

The sort of celebration Humphreys speaks of eludes the convenient categories proposed by Bodnar: they are neither "public", in the sense of officially appointed and enacted ceremonies with a prescribed script and a specific interpretative reading of an event or a concept, nor "vernacular", in the sense of celebrations organized "from the bottom up" as a different or even counter-reading of the same events and contexts or the proposal of alternative objects of commemoration and identity.[3] Nor are they precisely "private" or "public" in the sense used by Mary Ryan to consider nineteenth century patriotic celebration and commemoration.[4]

At the same time, the pervasiveness of such representation, testified not only by Humphreys' easy assurance in framing the multiple scenes of "decent hilarity" (one

2. *A Poem on the Future Glory of the United States of America.* In Humphreys, *op.cit.*

3. John Bodnar, *Remaking America. Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century,* Princeton, Princeton, 1992.

4. Mary Ryan, *Women in Public. Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880,* Johns Hopkins, Baltimore, 1990.

is tempted to image the Shakers, Humphreys' New England contemporaries, singing and dancing in praise of a new community life), but by other memoirs, is very closely linked to having lived the experience and thus destined to give way over the early decades of the nineteenth century. There is no sign of whether women as well as men participated in this private/public celebration in Humphreys lines, though his other patriotic poetry and diplomatic usage make it likely.

Humphreys' celebration was a secular one, even if the language in which he refers to it recalls Scripture. Not so the contemporary official commemorations. At the turn of the century, the 4th of July was still largely a date to be recalled in church and prompted both reverent memory of the dead and thanks to God for the success of the war for independence. The common people might celebrate the date privately – though perhaps in the public space of the tavern and the street – but the élites were still uncertain as to the utility, in terms of a compact, governable, state, of doing so with public civic ceremony, which would necessarily entail dealing with the language of the Declaration from which the date took its specific import.[5] Events in France since 1789, as well as internal evidence of popular readings of the war as revolutionary and the constitutional republic as an instrument of equality, made a broadcast of the "self-evident truths" a chancey prospect.[6]

Nonetheless very soon, by coupling the date firmly with an "authoritative" reading of the Declaration – grasping the nettle, as it were – and, as well, with the figure of Washington, whose timely death allowed the rapid, piloted, rise of myth,[7] it became possible to craft a civic celebration which firmly structured a public ethos that satisfied élite groups while marginally accomodating spontaneous celebration.

Among the traditional ritual patterns of civic tone available were official processions. These might be more or less complex and had, in origin, included militia on foot or on horseback, civic dignitaries, one or more bands and flags in a pre-arranged order of march along an established itinerary delineating and defining official public space. The itinerary might begin from one civic building and end at another or at a church; or it might move to the militia field or the Common if local authorities judged that compatible with solemnity and order. Often a document was presented or a speech made.[8]

The Federal processions (1787-1788), which formed the great instituting precedent

5. Among the few authors who mention some aspects of the process which finally made of the Fourth of July a "formulaic" occasion (as Kammen puts it), see Bodnar, *op. cit.*, Ryan, *op.cit.* and Michael Kammen, *A Season of Youth. The American Revolution and the Historical Imagination*, Knopf, N.Y., 1978.

6. Though Stanley Elkins and Eric McKitrick tend to soft-pedal the significance of such popular readings (*The Age of Federalism. The Early American Republic,1788-1800*, Oxford,1993), relegating Slaughter's incomplete but important *The Whiskey Rebellion: Frontier Epilogue to the American Revolution* (NY, 1986) to a list in note and Gordon Wood, too, prefers agencies not popular in his work, other recent work by Ruth Bloch, Alan Taylor and Joshua Miller, as well as significant essays by Alfred Young, do point to widespread popular elaboration of views of the Republic which were different and alternative to the reading offered by governing élites. See also, in Italy, Marco Sioli's *Contro i Padri Fondatori* (Milan, 1994), Susanna Delfino's *Terra e felicità* (Milan,1992) and essays by both in Milan Group *Quaderno* 3 and 4, as well as L.Valtz Mannucci, "The Contribution of the Common People to American Constitutional Debate", R. Martucci, ed., *Constitution & Revolution, aux États Unis d'Amérique et en Europe, 1776-1815*, Laboratorio di storia costistituzionale, Macerata, 1995.

7. See Barry Schwartz, *George Washington: The Making of an American Symbol*, The Free Press, N.Y., 1987. Bodnar points out the use of the occasion by competing political factions, until the deaths of Jefferson and Adams in the mid-twenties.

8. Especially in Massachusetts the pattern included an oration in the model set by the "massacre" anniversaries of the 1770s; a number of such orations survive in pamphlet.

for such national civic commemoration and celebration, had in part taken this severe form, which posed the populace as audience and testimony of élite transactions regarding the commonwealth. However, precisely during this prolonged "occasion", a newer sort of procession had begun to emerge. It combined with the traditional representation of authority elements of the spontaneous processions, marches and "rites" enacted by middle and lower classes to celebrate ratification.

Substantially the new procession included the presence of self-organized artisan groups, often with "floats" of economic/political cast, in movement rather than in "tableau" – in Philadelphia bread was made and distributed along the line of march – and, sometimes, with skits or dialogue in addition to the banners with slogans or key-words or symbols.[9] In an important sense the populace was now itself representing the transactions of power as well as testifying to them. However, over the months involved in ratification, the artisan celebration was slowly surroundings by – normalized into – an expanded official procession. Retaining artisan autonomy vis à vis each group's organization, the new official procession set each group into an over-all choreography, an organized order of march, alternating artisan floats with military troops, bands, official floats with emblematic formulations of the republic and the constitution and allegorical figures providing a classic or otherwise remote genealogy for the new republican state.[10]

The delineation of civic space, too, became a symbolic concern – though it was resolved in that initial, intense, period in several ways, responding to the intuitions and convictions of varying local élites. Boston chose a circular pattern, its procession leaving from Faneuil Hall, the center of civic discussions, and returning to it after passing through the streets. Philadelphia organizers instead pointed their Federal procession from the center outward to the suburbs; Charleston, from the docks to the center; New York set a circle, but "broke" it with dinner and so left it incomplete. Besides the conception of civic space, the Federal processions differed, too, in two other important areas: that of speeches and that of refreshments. Boston's, chronologically the first, eschewed fixed oration, according the seats of government only a nod in passing – an interesting point if one considers the established rite of the Boston massacre anniversary speech –; Philadelphia programmed an extended oration by George Wilson as the point of arrival of the procession; New York proposed toasts at a seated banquet housed in a special pavilion designed for the occasion by Pierre L'Enfant. The Boston procession had been organized by a mixed committee in which artisans participated; the other processions were planned by élite figures.

"Refreshment" was a fundamental "figure" of common eighteenth century civic life – soldiers' diaries show the stop for "refreshment" (drink) to be an integral part of the transferal of the militia from its home town to the siege of Boston, just as it was a part of training day or election day in the South.[11] In the context of the Federal

9. Spontaneously organized *codae* were also enacted, especially in Boston, where a row-boat was carried to the Common and burned as "the old Constitution", and in Philadelphia, where, again, a boat figured and a dialogue commented the majority in the ratifying assembly under the figure of "soundings". See below, notes 10,11 and 12 for further information.

10. I have discussed the Federal Processions at length in a paper presented at a conference in Haifa in 1990 and thereafter circulated informally. Reference to some aspects appeared in the essay, "The Look of Revolution: Presentation and Representation in the American Revolution", *Quaderno* 2, Milan Group: *The Languages of Revolution*, Milan, 1989.

11. See Loretta Valtz Mannucci, "Uomini e gentiluomini all'assedio di Boston", *Comunità*, n° 188, 1986, pp. 221-353. I have also analysed Munford's *The Candidates, or The Humours of a Virginia Election* (1770, pub.

processions, food and drink were more specifically *agape* of the community, whether resolved informally, as in Boston, where kegs were broached outside Faneuil hall, or in more structured – socially controllable – forms like the buffet tables in Philadelphia, the seated banquet in Charleston or the solemn repast in L'Enfant's ten-spoked half-circle pavillion with its combination of classic elements and touches from the mediaeval tournament. "All" of the community, or at any rate all of the male community, was symbolically present at such feasts. Sometimes it was even physically present in a degree determined by itself; perhaps, in Philadelphia, some women were on the scene, too. Yet the civic *agape* was a largely theatrical, representational, event.

In Boston some of the organizers spilled the liquor, to avoid boisterous excess; in Philadelphia distance and the heat of July, in Charleston the confinement of tables and chairs, in New York the pavilion, all delimited civic space and made it manageable by the organizing élites, who were males of substance (and who did not fail, nonetheless, to marvel at the decorum and order of the people during the event, evidently not wholly conscious of what they had done to stage it). The spontaneous celebratory "codae", with political enactments, signaled that such organization had not, however, fully absorbed the tendencies of the common sort for something more physical, for a less "decent" hilarity.[12]

The kind of celebratory formulae presiding the Federal processions require élites full of confidence and sure of their touch with ordinary people, perhaps themselves somewhat transported by a sense of great new things in act in which they too are involved – one thinks of Lafayette, still young and still in the wave of his American experience, presiding too, at the first anniversary of the Fédération, whose organized representation of the sovereign nation was in many ways similar to the Federal celebrations. Despite the Jeffersonian rhetoric, American élites of the first years of the nineteenth century were no longer so sure of themselves or of "the people". The recovery of the chief traits of the Federal processions would come about slowly and incompletely, and with a more conscious intent of consolidation of a national republican attitude in which all roles were clearly scripted. Civic celebrations centered on the 4th of July emerged importantly at last in the 1820s and 1830s, and the date was identified as "Independence Day" (and the revolution became the more controllable, less passionate, War for Independence). The date solemnized an official reading of the origins – and thus the sense – of the Republic. It did not supplant spontaneous celebration – which by its nature was "revolutionary", "subversive" or, more simply, "uncontrolled" – so much as by-pass it. It occupied, or meant to occupy, all of the central civic space, non only conceptually, but physically, relegating any other affirmation of content to the periphery.

At first the renovated anniversary celebration developed as a party occasion with the reading of the sense of the Republic (now seen as born at the moment of the

1798) in a paper presented at the annual conference of the Italian Association of 18th Century Studies in 1992; see, as well, Rhys Isaac's comments in *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790*, North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1982.

12. Since these were port cities, such *codae* often turned upon the imaging of the Republic as "ship". The first instance I have found appears in diaries during the siege of Boston where a real small boat, captured from the British, circulates along the line of siege over several days with "enactment". The boat appears in official ratification processions and in spontaneous *codae* with different meanings. See note 9 above, "Uomini e gentiluomini...", *op. cit.*, and "The Look of Revolution...", *op. cit.* The Haifa essay also touches this argument.

Declaration, rather than at that of the Constitution) expressed in Federalist or Democratic or National Republican terms. Occasionally, there were competing civic celebrations held by both parties, or the locally active versions of them. Increasingly, however, over the '30s, a set structure came to prevail. Its nature was "apolitical"/ "national" such as to place its organization "naturally" in the hands of those governing the town (the majority which the political rhetoric of the period make equal to "the people" and "the nation").[13] So Independence Day imperceptibly became the anniversary of the Republican State, rather than of the revolutionary war which had made it possible. And it opened the way to the sacralization of the constitution which would be achieved only when another civil war sanctioned a univocal reading of its institutional choices. The pattern of celebration became then a rite of confirmation which could be altered only at the cost of the unity it purported to embody.

The 1830s were years of swift change in the United States. Burgeoning industry and expanding commerce, enlarged port cities and created inland cities. Strong immigratory currents composed of people whose cultural patterns, religion and, sometimes, language differed from those of the "revolutionary Americans", and whose political and social experience and historic memory could scarcely be those of "patriots", swelled a working population which was beginning to lose its habitual vision of itself as work changed and artisans and farmers lost private independence in the older sections of the country, or moved West.[14]

At the same time, virtually universal white male suffrage created in the political world the need to court the common man and, at once, to control him. Mass political parties with on-going, modern, organization and newspapers came to dominate or rationalize the exercise of national power and the professionalization of political (governing) activity. The political meeting as it appeared in the South during colonial days, with its "image candidates" and its democratic rhetoric – and its deliberately rowdy, "bodily", atmosphere, liberally under-pinned with hard liquor, song and shenanigans – became standard American electioneering.[15] Finally, the language of revivalism, rife across the land, raised the pitch of political discourse as well; and

13. It was also "evangelical" in that it brought "god" into the proceedings in the form of church organs/ presence within the celebrations or even as their center. The Republic was thus seen to be at once "nature's nation" and "god's nation", where "nature" was organized land and "god" church discipline. See, for ex., The 4th of July celebration of 1837 in Rockdale, Penn. (Anthony Wallace, *Rockdale. The Growth of an American Village in the Early Industrial Revolution*, Knopf, N.Y.,1972, p. 312; by 1860 the intertwining of Sunday school,militia and picnic with roast beef, had become firmly consolidated in Rockdale, p. 458). Cfr., also, Ryan, *op. cit.*

14. Increasingly, romanticism and the passage of time substitued the "pioneer" for the ex-revolutionary soldier as the figure of the real American and the patriot began to be seen as the person "taking" the West. The tendency appears too in burgeoning American landscape painting, see Angela Miller, *The Empire of the Eye; Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825-1875*, Cornell, Ithaca, 1993. Both "Manifest" and "Untransacted" Destiny seemed politically and artistically to point away from areas long-settled, like New England, and were accompanied by xenophobia. (See, typically, Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land. The American West as Symbol and Myth*, 1950, revised 1970, Harvard, Cambridge).

15. Though Southern elections showed this pattern from the 18th century, it was Andrew Jackson and the Democratic Party which nationalized it. See Robert Remini, *The Election of Andrew Jackson*, Lipincott, Philadelphia, 1963. Michael Chevalier, a French traveler, noted an "eagle — not a painting, but a real live eagle — tied by the legs, surrounded by a wreath of leaves and hoisted upon a pole, after the manner of the Roman standards, being carried by a stout sailor" in a Democratic victory parade in New York in 1832 (Michael Chevalier, *Society, Manners and Politics in the United States*, Boston, 1839). By the mid-fifties, Temperance had reduced the incidence of drink but though "fun" was less, rowdiness remained.

the moving line of Westward expansion, nationalistic in its feeling because its referent was the federal government, made the 4th of July a necessary – and abstract – symbol, the easier to organize as representation of the Republic in that it need not there displace any preceding usage.

By mid-century the 4th of July celebration had certainly become codified in its official version of affirmation of civic unity "under order"; independence as a good in itself, requiring no qualifiers or exegesis. That was the form that it would retain permanently, indeed. However, if the formal pattern held center stage, it was not, as it had never been, the whole story. Other spaces continued to exist.

A final element made both the new orthodoxy and other proposals easier. The last survivors of the revolutionary generation had disappeared in the 1840s and early 1850s.[16] Not only were presidents no longer grounded in direct knowledge of the origins of the Republic; not only had the last official "Fathers" died in the 1830s; but the grandfathers of ordinary people had also died. One could no longer look into Prescott's blue eyes and hear him talk of Bunker Hill. Some veterans of that battle had been present at the laying of the cornerstone for the monument in 1825, though they were, in a sense, already ghosts, for Webster spoke of them as ancestors even as they sat before the platform from which he spoke.[17]

With the end of bodily continuity, the celebration could take on whatever commemorative and symbolic tone happened to be the most convenient without fear of being contradicted by reality. The forties had proposed several new themes around which to construct the Fourth of July. The annexation of Texas and the subsequent war with Mexico, bringing with its victory territories of far different tradition and population, had engendered a new view of nationality as "manifest destiny"; expansion was not merely a fact or a sign of American manhood, but a scope with its own built-in rationale. Showing the colors and parading militia or other troops now affirmed a national *aim* wherein defense of independence and of hearth was no longer central. It was a nationalism far more comprehensible to Europeans, but distanced from preceding interpretations of the national image.[18]

By 1850, the crisis over the admission of California as a non-slave state had also taxed the view of independence as a unitary phenomenon, though ultimate confrontation had been postponed for the decade. Finally, the forties and fifties saw the presence of xenophobic nationalism in presidential elections, whether, as in the 40s, directed at the exclusion of Catholics or, as in the 50s at the refusal of "foreign

16. Van Buren was the first president with no direct personal memories of the revolutionary period. The 1832 pension law, based on six months of revolutionary war service, including militia call-outs, had elicited more than 70,000 applications.

17. Although, into the 1890s, one might speak to someone who *had* looked into Prescott's eyes: something worth considering when we look at the circulation of historic memory (See Abraham English Brown, *Beside Old Hearthstones*, Lee and Shepard, Boston, 1904). The presence of "about 200 veterans of the revolution, of whom forty were survivors of the battle" at the laying of the cornerstone at Bunker Hill in 1825 is reported by Richard Frothingham and cited in *The Daniel Webster Reader*, ed. Bertha Rothe, Oceana, N.Y., 1956. At the inauguration in 1842, Frothingham reports 108 veterans still present.

18. Early nationalism was self-contemplatory and rather static; the nation — "a people" — composed by political choice and its organization as republic were "active" as an example of the possibility of such a state. During the third and fourth decades of the 19th century, nationalism became, instead, dynamic and expansionist and the nation took on the aspects of a biological "folk" with a "mission" to carry its organization into new territories. A view which Thoreau perceived with preoccupation and denounced in the forties in his essay on civil disobedience toward taxation for the war against Mexico.

contamination" of "American stock". So nationalism had taken on both violent and racist connotations.

The 4th of July, in as much as it *was* the premier celebration – both ritual and festival -- of nationality and unity, mirrored the various readings of the sense of the Republic, following the local prevalencies. The revolution had already become the "war for independence" the "founding fathers" had already become the only protagonists and the "embattled farmers" merely their devoted followers. Now the sense of the Republic might at will be read as that of occupying the entire continent and making of its institutions the realization/conversion/inclusion of any civic structures it might encounter, or as fundamentally involving the freeing of territory of any "extraneous" inhabitants. It might involve -- or forbid – the abolition of slavery. With those who had lived the experience dead, the sense of the past might be changed. Dates and events might be filled with new content, according to the needs of governability or the opinions of political correctness of the prevailing élites.

Yet, this availability for discourse made it also possible to fill the occasion with another vision: to make of the premier national holiday, the stage for presentation of a different ideal of the Republic.

That, I think, is the really remarkable thing we have before us when we look at Susan Merritt's Fourth of July picnic. Such a statement is remarkable in itself, so much so that it appears to be the only one of its kind. But it is doubly remarkable in that it is a statement made by a woman; perhaps, again, a nearly unique expression of political thought imaged.

Women have not been very visible in this paper so far. That is not so surprising since they had little to do with the kind of public space in which the 4th of July ritual/ celebration developed. In descriptions of the Federal Processions we find a woman working on a Philadelphia artisan float and we find another "at a window" during the New York procession receiving the homage of the crew of the ship/float Hamilton to which she had consigned a banner. If they were also present at some of the refreshments completing these processions, it was not felt necessary to mention the fact.

During the early decades of the nineteenth century, women – especially young girls – were included as allegorical figures on floats: that is in the "festival" area of the occasion, rather than in the ritual. And, of course, there will have been urban lower class women at the spontaneous, rowdy, celebrations. As the central scenography hardened into civic national representation, women of the middle classes were often by-standers, audience for the formal enactment, witnesses to the event and, of course, custodians of the children brought to view it. They were not part of political meetings in an active manner, but here too their presence grew and this because of the inter-sexual nature of the revival camp-meeting and other evangelical open-air occasions or, for the lower middle class New England factory workers, through the strike.

Where women must early on have been "present", though at least in part "invisible", was in the portion of the celebration of the Fourth of July which involved food. The preparation and the consumption of food in a communal setting is a deeply significant part of ritual to which it contributes physical and sacral elements: in republican, patriotic American celebrations, food clearly reflected the kind of organization of society proposed and differed if chosen by the common people and

by them offered or by the "better sort". This distinction made, it must be said that both "high" and "low" feasting was definitely "male-minded"; they were to eat it and they chose it. Drink, whatever its nature, was certainly acquired and dispensed by men and the "fundamentals" – spit- roasted meats, steamed shellfish, bread, beans, cheese – were all "male" (though the last three might be made by women). If there were "relishes" or pickles, or cakes and pies, these were, instead, "female" and would probably have been not only provided but presided over by women.[19]

By mid century, burgeoning industry and the fervor of religious revivalism and abolitionism had made women of various social levels more public, both in the sense Humphreys suggests and in that of open public participation in civic events.

So, as we look at Susan Merritt's Fourth of July picnic, we are impressively looking at the uncontested presence of women in the public sphere and that presence is shown forth at the most significant national symbolic occasion: the ritual/celebration of the moment of separation and declared, conscious, national affirmation. That would, in itself, be enough to make of this relatively small work (26 by 36 inches) a fundamental document of American history. This fact is somehow acknowledged by the inclusion of the painting in various texts[20] and, indeed, by its very survival where all of Merritt's other work has disappeared.[21]

But the work is much more than a description of civic presence on a high civic occasion, more than the inclusion of women in "public-life". It is also an interesting work of art and, as I have previously stated, an example of "three dimensional thought",[22] an imaging of the ideal republic. I believe that its very survival and the

19. For a brief review of the cultural significances of food in social and ritual performance see Richard Bauman, ed., *Folklore,Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments*, Oxford, N.Y., 1992; especially the chapters, "Food" (Judith Goode), "Ritutal" (Roy Rappaport) and "Festival" (Beverly Stoeltje). " Festival food ... will embody the identity of the group and represent the occasion, so festival foods are always specific ... what food is served,who serves it, how it is prepared,the spices or condiments associated with it,the bread,and the drink all communicate about 'our tradition'." "In this setting many people ingest their tradition simultaneously, confirming their identity as a group by eating certain foods during a certain period of time." (Stoeltje, *op.cit.*).

20. For example, in the American Heritage series, *American Manners and Morals*,(American Heritage, N.Y. 1969), where it is given a double page color reproduction, although a strip on the left side is omitted. Here the painting is dated "c.1845" and the artist given as Susan Merrett. The Library of Congress also offers a color print of the painting with the same information. The Art Institute of Chicago, which at present holds it, does not, however — rather surprisingly —, have it on display.

21. The only work of interest available on Susan Merritt is the little book written by Patrick Leonard, Jr., *Miss Susan Torrey Merritt of South Weymouth Massachusetts. An Artist Rediscovered*, President Press, Quincy, Mass., 1976. Leonard had gone carefully over all the local records available and convincingly argues for the spelling "Merritt" as well as for a later dating of the painting based on the clothing and, especially, the bloomers; he places it at about 1853, though a safer estimation might be about 1851. Leonard finds reference to an estimated 66 works by Merritt shown at the Weymouth Fair artistic competition between 1867 and 1878, drawing his information from local newspapers; these include oil, watercolor, pencil, decorated ware and painted stones; subjects mentioned: flowers, winter scene, seashore paper weights, fish. Leonard also believes Merritt painted fans for a local manufacturer.

22. "Three dimensional thought" is a concept formulated by designer Jean Muir (*Sunday Times*, London, 6 March, 1993) to indicate a kind of intelligence which expresses itself through image and object (through en-visionment). In these terms, concepts may be "imaged" in the mind and communicated through visual expression (see also Barbara Karsky in this volume). Angela Miller, in fact, analyses Thomas Cole's "View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts" (1836) (better known as "The Oxbow") precisely in terms of imaged thought regarding nature and nation. This painting, too, like Merritt's, shows an "unstable present that preserves choice" (Miller, *op.cit*, p. 48). Miller also examines Cole's "The Garden of Eden" (1827-28), especially noting the way in which the "fallen world" on the left of the painting "resists visual penetration" through shadow and "flatness", while "the linear and planar perspective established by Eden [center of painting] carries the eye back through space" to "lofty distant Mountains"; and adds,"Poised

terms in which it is described by those who have spoken of it are indications of this inner content which, however, we may better uncover through a more attentive analysis.

II

A fair field full of folk. That is what we are looking at. The immediate impression is of a realistic, static, "posed" daguerreotype of a community on any New England Fourth of July afternoon, just before picnic refreshments end the public day. From a representational point of view we have a strong feeling of space; more than half of the painted surface is "background", or "natural context". The painting is strongly horizontal –"grounded" – and the physical terrain presents a double ranked dip slightly to the right of center, so that the "action" – the scene – is held in a hollow, as though lifted on the palm of nature for our inspection, all unsuspecting. A critic has spoken of a "bird's eye view" and it is certainly this compositional choice which makes that definition come to mind. Yet, in itself, such a formulation points us to something quite deeply set into the representation: the distancing of the viewing eye. The viewer is placed before the scene, but also decisively out of it. The artist is seeing with her mind's eye and not her physical eye. She, too, is outside the scene. It is a position for reflection and not for emotional participation. And we are made technically more aware of this by Merritt's choice to make the figures individually and place them in/on the scene grouped or alone as transitory presences on an independent background. The raised nature of the paste-on, however slight the thickness, signals the fragility, the specificity and the reasoned nature of the figures composing the communal scene. She and we are not allowed to imagine the casuality of presence or of placement. People in a fair field gathered for celebration invite a thought, suggest a "land".

The people who so appear in the scene are, further, engaged within its confines; they are not posed "for us", they do not invite us into their world.[23] They are inter-related as a community of choice (each figure "comes from" outside and is visibly "stopping there") and that inter-relation is harmonious and restful. The stylized, formal deportment of the adults and the distancing of our viewing position proclaims an over-all quietude, binding together age groups and social classes. Children opening picnic baskets or playing or talking together or with adults; young men and women,

between the extremities of wilderness and overcivilization, the pastorale moment promised an escape from history into a mythic republic" (*op.cit.*, pp. 50-51). Merritt's painting, refusing pastoral, refuses a mythic republic and suspends history's course, while making it wholly the result of human choice. Neither wilderness nor overcivilization, nature remains autonomous context, susceptible to arrangement ("gardening") but profoundly engaged on its own processes. An "impenetrable (unreadable) left side carries the eye up in space where it is then redirected down into the realm of humanity and its daily domestic ordering. The static quality already mentioned does however, confer what Daniels calls "hallowed site" status to the scene: not "village green" internal and "governed", but "border" meadow on the "frontier" (outskirts) of the town, tamed but extra-law, idoneous to be a female proposal (Stephen Daniels, *Fields of Vision. Landscape, Imagery and National Identity in England and the United States*, Princeton, 1993). Daniels declares that 19th century landscapes "picture the nation".

23. For a most illuminating examination of the positioning of the viewer — already touched upon in note 21 above in a specific context — see the more theoretic work by Rudolf Arnheim, *The Power of the Center. A Study of Composition in the Visual Arts*, new version, University of California, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1988 and, in particular, Chap. III, "The Viewer as Center". See also Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality. Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, University of Chicago, Chicago, 1980.

alone or in couples or with friends of their own sex; young fathers, young mothers; women together, men together; people on foot, on horseback, in a carriage; women about the two tables, a man carrying buckets, members of the civic band with instruments slung loose over their shoulders; all of this movement and more, are held within the viewing eye as tranquillity, as unified impression. Community unity is so pervasive that we only subsequently see that several young girls are wearing bloomers: no one in the scene is looking at them; they are not objects of anger or derision; they are not "banded together"; they are neither defensive nor defiant. They are wearing bloomers because they like to wear them. This in itself is significant – our non-surprise (the non-surprise of the artist and of the contemporary in-scene public, going about its own pleasure), the normalization of what was a "scandalous" avant-garde theme of the moment, shows us something about Susan Merritt, in her mid-twenties and destined never to marry (perhaps as a "political" choice?) and her view of the ideal republic. There are also groups of blacks, adult and children, male and female: no one "observes" them either; they are "there", a specific but conceptually indistinguishable part of the whole community "on holiday" in celebration of itself.

The late 1840s, when the bloomer had been invented and championed by the new movement for female emancipation founded at Seneca Falls, and even more the early 50s, after the crisis over the admission to the Union of California, were years of fervent abolitionism. New England women were devoted to both causes and – with the close experience of the new Massachusetts factories producing a female presence not only in print but in public meetings – these inclusions calmly declare resolved, in the republic meeting on the 4th of July, clashes destined to erupt in war on the one hand and a long, painful, wait for recognition on the other. We do not need to be able to date the picture exactly to know what is being said here, nor do we need the confirmation of verbal documents to knew that Merritt was saying it. But, was Weymouth Landing so forward-looking at that period, so lacking in traditionalism and bigotry that bloomers (with their aura of "free love") and blacks were ordinary and drew no special attention/tension? Was Merritt "just taking a likeness" of reality? Or was she rather positing a perfected reality? This is also the same historic moment when, not so very far from Weymouth, in the same county, at Roxbury, a utopian community had been attempted, with ideas of equality and harmony and the Shakers, still at Harvard village, were also close at hand.

Let us now turn again to the whole scene; the fair field full of folk is not just what we are looking at *here*. It is a powerful literary *topos* – and this holds true whether Susan Merritt consciously knew it or not. It is part of the bed-rock of traditional English literary culture and, more specifically still, of popular culture reaching back into the same agricultural society roots the garden of Eden came from.[24] A fair field

24. As we have seen (note 21 above) painters like Thomas Cole openly equated the garden of Eden with discourse on the American continent. A prior New England generation to Merritt's would have also formulated their view of nature as a garden/refuge through familiarity with Milton, and in such paintings as Cole's that presence — that verbal eye — is discernable despite the romantic tone. In a recent book, *Uncommon Ground. Toward Reinventing Nature* (Norton, N.Y., 1995), William Cronon, in presenting the essays he has edited, introduces the concept of Eden, linking it to the different but related concept of wilderness (again, Cole presented the contrast between garden and wilderness — "inside" and "outside" — leaving the middle area of human artifice unresolved). Cronon delineates eight views of "nature": 1) "nature as naive reality"; 2) "nature as moral imperative"; 3) "nature as Eden"; 4) "nature as artifice, nature as self-

full of folk is what Piers Ploughman saw in the 14th century and it is where his pluri-voiced poem begins; a poem that slowly transforms a simple working farmer, one of the field of folk, into the figure of Christ, savior and chastizer, without canceling the reality of Piers as ploughman, rooting in "real life" the fierce attack upon contemporary Britain.

"A fair field" is a fundamental thing in an agricultural society. It has a personality of its own, apart from what is done to or on it. It *is* reality, the home (home*land*), the grounding of civil society (the words in themselves tell the tale). "Full of folk" it appears as a figure of England to Piers/Langland (our people on good land). In Milton's *Paradise Lost* – mid-seventeenth century – Adam and Eve tend a fair garden and it make their home, the prototype of all civic society.

The folk we see fill the field before us, but they do not work it. It is not their home. Indeed, it is deliberately *other* than their home, for we can see the town on the horizon behind them, cut off by the delimiting trees and half-hidden. We view them in sight of organized (civil) society, but physically outside it. This is a temporary and "invented" space; that is, theatrical or organized space. Space where a society is shown representing itself to itself. Something is being declared and confirmed. What?[25]

This question has suggested itself to the closest commentator of the painting, Patrick Leonard, and he has essentially begged the question by convincing himself that the picture is a sort of anniversary card for a sister who married on the 4th of July: that is why, he thinks, the picture has survived while all the rest of Merritt's work, though winning local prizes during her lifetime, has been lost.[26] Alfred Young, who went to see the original to answer some questions for me,[27] feels this "political" quality, too, and, characteristically comes to grips with it and makes a hypothesis:

> There is a frozen quality to the people. There is a *tension*: this seems to be *before something will happen*, but what: doubtless the serving of food....The food is out there but no one is eating. In fact there is *almost no action* by anyone. All the interaction is in small groups and it is all verbal. The children are not even playing. (My italics)

This is the "stillness" we noted earlier beautifully expressed. And we may now notice that is achieved not only by the normalization of posture emphasizing the verticality of the figures through the hang of clothes and distancing further the body

conscious cultural construction"; 5) "nature as virtual reality"; 6) "nature as commodity"; 7) "nature as demonic other, nature as avenging angel, nature as the return of the repressed"; 8) "nature as contested terrain". Several of these meanings prove fruitful in viewing Merritt's painting, but perhaps the most interesting observation is the measure in which the landscape in itself communicates "the radical otherness of nature ... the fact that it lies forever beyond the borders of our linguistic universe ... Just when we think we have gotten our picture right, just when we think that Eden is once again ours, the alien other reasserts itself". "And yet the rock remains, as do the trees...the wind and the sky. They are first and foremost themselves....We may do our best to make them bend to our wills. But in the end they remain inscrutable, artifacts of a world we did not make whose meaning for themselves we can never finally know".

25. The literature on the organization of public celebrative space is vast, especially in the field of French history. For our purposes Bodnar, *op. cit.*, though less elegant, is useful.

26. See Leonard, *op. cit.*

27. The long personal letter, dated 8 September, 1993, from which the quotations below come, has been invaluable. There is no way in which I can fully express the debt of friendship I happily owe Al Young since first I was fortunate enough to meet him at a conference in Bremen in 1978.

by cutting out and pasting on, but by the eschewing of all "speaking gestures".[28] Though a number of figures touch each other – the ladies in the couples walking under the trees in the upper right-hand quarter of the painting; the two gentlemen talking near the rider, and some of the young boys in the group playing close by, in the lower left-hand quarter; two couples of ladies on the right-hand table and three ladies on the left-hand table, in the conceptual "center" the two black ladies in the nearest dip in the field; the two black gentlemen in the foreground – and a few have slightly raised an arm as they speak (but the hand is fingerless and grips the waist), only two make a "speaking gesture". Both are female: the little girl held in the gentleman's arms in the center foreground, who stretches out her left hand and arm as if to indicate intention and directed interest; and the young girl in bloomers, standing alone at the end of the right-hand table, who faces us and, with a very stylized right-angle gesture of her left arm indicates the group of six clearly important gentleman conversing, at whose center stands – full front with his hands in his pockets – the only male with a pocket watch and chain and a very visible necktie in the picture. In neither case is the gesture "speaking" to its object; the gentleman holding the little girl gazes towards us absorbed in his own concerns: *we* are spoken to, if we wish to listen, of the child's curiosity, of her "reaching out" to private reality in the form of material and shape but also, of male power; the girl in bloomers also speaks for the viewer and again indicates the traditional "circle" of public power. In both cases the men have their backs turned to the tables. They do not hold them in account. Yet we, with the artist, "see" that they are the focus of the moment.

Young's first hypothesis as to why the scene is suspended ("frozen") is tentative and, I think, equally important:

> why this non-action: could say she is portraying a moment before the celebration with food happens.

But he is not convinced. Though he feels the "weight" of the painting, he concludes it to be casual:

> My simple explanation is that this is all she could handle... She couldn't do any better.

Although the analysis we have just made of the gestuality of the painting already suggests that this explanation is mistaken, there is still a lot to explore here. But first of all perhaps, "better" than *what*? The answer is a revealing one. Young, in fact, then compares Merritt's picture unfavorably to the work of Lewis Krimmel of Pennsylvania who did the 4th of July in 1819 and an election day in Philadelphia about 1812. The painting appears on the book Al has edited entitled *Beyond the American Revolution*, and Krimmel shows all the realistic representation of a scene in movement: a moment that is as "specific" (*aimed*) as a newspaper account. The images of election day and the 4th, and the passage from one to the other at those dates, fits into the scheme of the development of celebration of the 4th we looked at earlier.

28. See E. H. Gombrich, *The Image and the Eye. Further Studies in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, Phaidon, Oxford, 1982; especially Chap. 3, "Ritualized Gesture and Expression in Art". See also, Fried, *op. cit.*; Arnheim, *op.cit.*

Krimmel is showing us politics; he is talking about the republic as it is, a male domain full of contention and physicality put forward as "virility" or "force". He invites the viewer to step in and to take part/sides. He is decidedly not "talking about Jerusalem"!

The suspension we sense in Merritt, though some figures *are* moving and some children *are* playing, though caught at the opening moment of their game or activity with the picnic basket, is "tension", but something is *already* "happening": the community is gathered in its plurality and in its unity, in its potential. The food is served – cakes, pies, pastries, interspersed with flowers. Food for "high" celebration, to feed the eye and the nose before feeding the mouth; bodily, but out of the common way, as the clothing worn and the poses assumed are those of the high ritual occasion, of the expression of a communal ideal, Humphrey's "decent hilarity" writ large as a nation, though we are "warned" that the present composition may contain further, future, points of equilibrium; "something will happen". Merritt does not "know"; she "wishes"; she "suggests" directions and difficulties, private and public. The "speaking gesture" points to perfected reality.

The tables are rightly at the center of our – and her – attention, for they are the epitome of perfected reality, solid, physical, "connected", but not assertive; cakes and sweets are creation and imagination. They are "lovely" and humble as the Shaker verses centered on the little "i" David Grimsted examines. The ritual consumption of food in the Western and Christian traditions was centered in the hunt and the battle with "the wild". It was sacred to a male view of power and society and dominated by roasted meats – the whole ox led in procession through Boston streets and roasted to celebrate the beheading of the French King[29] – and strong drink. Political meetings and officially organized celebrations of the 4th of July continued this usage, which we have seen firmly linked to the new republic through the banquets of the Federal Processions. Refreshments were deliberately "low", meant to draw in and satiate "the mob". There is no mob in Merritt's republic, not even the "normalized" one which might gather for a clam-bake or a spit-roasted ox.

Now we should look into the *picture as a picture*, and *at* the picture in the context of English and American use of landscape in the late 18th and first half of the 19th centuries. This picture, as we have already seen, communicates as one picture; but it is technically two pictures bonded together. Although the twentieth century will give us experimentation with cut-outs and application (and the Victorian era leave compositions of memorabilia – flowers. locks of hair and the like), the combination we find here is unusual to the point of being unique and communicates a very different message from that of the other two genres mentioned. The landscape here is watercolor: if we mentally remove the figures, we have a view consonant with tropes much visited in the early nineteenth century, that is nature, still half "wild", with trees and field; and nature domesticated, with fence and beyond it tilled fields, houses, a town, a bit of sea; and behind, pressing down upon the two, a very ample sky, occupying about half of the painting.[30]

29. See Waverley Root and Richard de Rochemont, *Eating in America. A History*, Ecco Press, N.Y., 1981.

30. See: Miller, *op.cit.*; E.H. Gombrich, *op.cit.*, Chap. 7, "'The Sky is the Limit': The Vault of Heaven and Pictoral Vision", which especially discusses the problem of the "middle ground" that Merritt, at first perception, seems to privilege, indicating the important interplay between perceiving and expecting ("we can never separate the static view from the flow of information that precedes and follows it"). See also, Rudolf Arnheim, *op.cit.*, on the placing of the center .

The figures and furnishings in the foreground are, instead, another painting made up of individual gouache cut-outs, carefully detailed, highlighted significantly with gold paper in the appointments of the tables, thus set apart – "absolutised" – in respect to both the land and the people. The cut-outs are meticulously placed and pasted onto/into the field as far as the beginnings of the natural "flies" constituted by the woods. The people and the "props" are "on stage" – not home, but "out" for the day. They are technically enacting civic society; using nature, but not at one with it. Setting their aspirations in gold in its midst, but not yet taking hold of them.

Especially, they are not transforming nature, though they accept what transformation has already been wrought.[31] The two regimes are clearly defined by the technique. The field cannot depart the scene; it is permanently "there", while the people are only visiting. They may be "dis-assembled" into individuals or families and placed into their boxes/homes, like paper-dolls when playtime is over, or, recomposed into the "real" civic world of the town waiting in the background. However transient, nonetheless, something beyond paste – the decision and will of the human maker of the painting – indicates that their presence is not imaginary. They are no phantoms: their shadows are painted onto the natural scene.

A shadow is not, like political institutions or social relations, a human choice, but the action of the sun, the sign of time at its most specific. And it is time – beyond, "outside", both terrestrial nature and humanity – that links the two worlds/paintings and freezes them in that moment of that day, suspended on the brink of a future, at the end of a day. A day of anniversary, that is the celebration of the Republic, presented as the ideal civic society institutionalized: a new order for the centuries as its Great Seal proclaims. That's pretty static, too. So we can set up a hypothesis of our own: the picture is meant to represent the Republic as now and now as a suspended moment, about to do and become, with the acquired past a band whose instruments of ritual and martial commemoration, of power proclaimed, hang without voice, their job done, on peripheral figures barely "on stage". And yet, the trumpeteer faces us and his trumpet is held to play, half raised. There is no tribune and no orator, though the probable politicians stand, as we saw, in circle and converse with each other. Merritt has broken up the military, male, order of the Republic and set forth a domestic, female, Republic; *agape* on cloths of gold.

Let us now go for a moment to landscape. As Merritt prepared this painting and collage, academic American landscape was pervaded by woods and rivers, the untamed space of the various Wests and "wildernesses". In picture after large picture the only human figures to be found are too tiny to see clearly as individuals, dwarfed by the scale of nature around them as they bravely and rather ridiculously tuck themselves into a corner of the painting to demonstrate the awesome size of the American landscape (continent, Republic). The eye is centered on nature and must make a conscious effort to seek out the people. The viewer is asked to marvel and "feel" the romantic force of human frailty: and then marvel that such creatures have dominated and ordered such scenes.[32] What will, what national destiny, what Divine favor, Nature's Country!

31. In this, Merritt differs sharply from the male landscapists of the middle decades of the century, who viewed both the "untouched" scene and the transformed scene with trepidation and even, at times, with fear. See Miller, *op.cit.*, on Cole's series on Empire (1840s) and on the Hudson School; and Daniels, *op. cit.*

32. See, for example, paintings of the '50s and '60s by Frederic Edwin Church, Asher Durand or Albert Bierstadt. On a more prosaic plane, see Currier & Ives , who reached most middle class families in calendars or prints, for example , in Daniels, Chapter 5.

Look again at Merritt's painting: it is centered visually on the field itself, and the centering is accentuated by the double roll of the terrain and by the un-centering of the tables. The tables, off-center for the visual field – the sheet employed – are however, the center of the civic representation. The field is the center of itself and disturbingly, of the painting as a painting. The longer we look, the more the field imposes itself upon us; a part of the tension Young notes is here.[33] This "throwing off" of the reading eye in the end draws the observer to the three female figures in the space between the two tables, creating an arbitrary "operational" center, whose very lack of "firmness" reinforces the attention/tension and "'imposes" a reading. Though the field and the trees surrounding and defining it overwhelm the figures, they – and the viewer – can displace focus to the women and the tables and, through them, make of the folk the dominating discourse of the painting.

The group of people as the dominating conceptual center and the landscape as self-centered is a technical scheme present in English aristocratic portraiture in the late 18th century. The Lord, Lady, horse, dog, children "have" a park (park-land) at their backs; it is the stage for their presence/ acts/pleasure. It is not "wild" but rather, sapiently "natural", its trees arranged to make prospects, walks and rides, its hillocks and hollows to afford a dell in which to hold a "sylvan collation" or a streamlet to admire. A nature shaped by autocratic power to enhance and reflect privilege by its very seeming spontaneity. Yet, at the same time, still harboring the seeds of otherness.

Here too, in Merritt's painting, we have nature as park-land – that is, not land to work on, or land to struggle through in peril, but land to stroll on, to make a stage of – thus, we have folk who can afford to make land landscape. We have a domestic representation of republican power and decorum: the "sylvan collation" as popular sovereignty and no need to play at the shepherdess. The linear deportment of all the figures, who hold themselves with quiet pride and talk in small groups or stroll is similar, viewed over-all, to scenes of life at court in the 18th century formal gardens and terraces. The hasty lack of composure, the garish and inappropriate costumes, ascribed traditionally to "lower classes" or "common folk" are absent; though less formality is observed, as Young notes, "the dogs do not bark".

The people and their frozen moment are the foreground: the land the center; the sky the backdrop. The lower third is the people's domain; the middle third, the center, belongs to the land; the upper third is sky. The trees rise up linking the people to the earth and stretching the land toward the sky. This pattern, this role of the tree, has deep roots in the mythic descriptions of the origins of the earth and the creatures inhabiting it and in this picture the mythic back-up works powerfully. Perhaps Weynomth Landing had a park picnic grounds that looked just like this: there is no need for Merritt to have "invented" anything. The sensitivity or intuition or "eye" which prompted her to organize her picture this way, is enough: the content is there

33. See both Gombrich on visual perception as a slow process in time (pp. 48-51) and Arnheim whose complex discussions of composition and perception in the texts previously indicated have been invaluable: "the visual power of a center not marked on the retinal image and therefore,strictly speaking, not there at all", which Arnheim (p. 114) applies to an abstract painting by Franz Kline, is an especially useful concept for Merritt: "the place of the balancing center is empty, but what matters here is that the positions and spatial interrelations of the shapes [people] make sense only if one sees them as related to that center". Arnheim goes on to discuss "tilt" and the play of vectors oriented to an oblique reading; tilt, "greatly increases the tension of the scene" he remarks (p.143) in discussing another painting.

for the viewer who comes from a Western culture whether that viewer consciously "knows" the myths involved or not, for they are echoed in countless experiences encountered in the course of normal involvement with the culture.

The land, the stage, is bounded and its containing function sharpened by the semi-circle of towering trees whose columns begin in the lower corners.[34] They are not the classic colonnades L'Enfant wished for the new capitol to raise up from the woods, and which we heard Humphreys invoke as symbol of the Republic. This "colonnade" is less rational, less ordered, less constructed and less constrictive: and it does not suppose either real or masonic/governing architects, Fathers or officiating secular Priests. It is not even a "temple of nature" for adepts. It is a light screen excluding town, history, daily time – the Republic as it is – without removing it from view. The town as physical construct is excluded from this moment – it is "outside" – a point of reference from which the folks have come. The town's houses, church steeple, watchtower, bay and, on the far limits, what seems to be a factory chimney with a plume of smoke (the day makes this perplexing), are neat, clear, but external, Weymouth was a shoemaking town in this period, though not an important one, and it also had an ironworks.[35] We see fields but cannot tell if they are cultivated. The organized world waits beyond the visual rim on the skyline, not engaged.

Visually, the upper section of the painting presses down upon the folks – the Republic – gathered in the lower third. The figures nearest to our and the painter's eye as we look down, are all cut off, without feet to stand on, except for the two black men talking. These two figures are "centered" by isolation – a wide grassy space surrounds them – and by having the one more physically central in relation to the composition face us; he is also nearly centered by the vertical formed by the young man with the little girl is his arms (one of two "speaking gestures" in the painting, as we have already seen), who is also wearing very light colored trousers which increase the indicatory thrust. Arnheim observes that elements which proceed "behind" the frame of a painting – here feet and lower legs – increase the sensation that the world depicted continues, that it has an autonomous "life" of its own.[36] The composition then seems to move forward toward the observer – forward therefore in time, as well as space. The downward visual pressure again contributes to the feeling that something is about to happen: it pictorially "charges" the scene so that it assumes finally the weight of *proposal* of a republic.

Further technical analysis will strengthen and clarify this. Imperfect or "displaced"' centering, destructuring a unified "secure" reading at first glance, has, we have observed, to underpin the feeling of tension and instability – of anticipation of movement. This holds true of the landscape and of the gathering of folk upon the filed. But now we should raise our eyes to the upper area of the painting, where we can see that it regards the pseudo-natural artifacts of human presence defining the sky, as well.

34. Valuable for the function of trees as intermediaries between "upper" and "lower" worlds — "chaos primeval" and "transcendent eternity" — is Jacques Brosse, *Mitologia degli alberi; Dal giardino dell'Eden al legno della croce,* Rizzoli, 1994 (original edition in French, Plon, 1989). The tree appears in many mythologies as axis of the universe; its roots in subterranean depths, its branches stretching to the sky, deriving sustenance from earth and sun; in the mythic tree Yggdrasill the cosmos is perennially regenerated.

35. See Leonard, *op.cit.* And again thanks to Al Young who also sent on some pages from a history of Weymouth discussing local industry.

36. See Rudolph Arnheim, *op. cit.*, Chap. IV, "Limits and Frames".

The painting does not have a strong left to right orientation, thus "disappointing" our habitual reading movement, but it does have a strong downward thrust, as we have seen; this induces us to look first at the folk. However, the eye is again draw soon into the "empty" field because it *is* empty, although the eccentric double dips frustrate our fixing on the real center, or "vanishing point". In turn this makes us look up sharply and we find ourselves conscious of having already included the two flags which mark the occasion as patriotic and the folks, as republic engaged in civic celebration rather than friends celebrating some private happiness. Now is the moment to look at the flags.

Though they define the sky both physically and symbolically, they too are not perfectly centered. The one on the left side (the compositionally "heavier" side according to Arnheim's theories) is further from the median line halving the picture than the flag on the right. It differs in other interesting ways as we shall soon see. First, we ought to observe that the flag on the right is the national flag, standing free from the ground up with all of the staff in view, though brushed by the tips of leafy branches on both sides. It floats out against the sky unimpeded, halyards clearly drawn straining, in a breeze of its own which equally spreads the other banner, but ruffles no gowns or cloths, blowing only it the ideal "upper air". Visually, as we fix on the middle ground before raising our eyes, it appears as if it were a tree amid other trees and, as "tree" it is slim as a sapling, though it has sprung up higher than the trees nature has made; it bends very slightly in the wind with the weight of the flowing flag. In "nature's country" the republic is man-made nature: but the declaration here is that the sense is rhetoric indeed and the construction very deliberately human and separate. The republic is what people make of it.

Now I think we can make a few hypotheses about what the flag is meant to indicate and then draw back to see it in the semi-circle which it completes and, at last, bring in the other banner and examine what we can draw from the relationship between the two. Lowering our gaze along the flagpole, the eye is invited to deviate slightly to the left by a group of three figures, occupying the center of an oval space and "pointed out" by the arrangement of the three verticals (two trees and the flagpole); in fact, the center tree is slightly advanced to make a point and aligned with the central figure, a lady with her back to us, flanked by a girl and a man. The eye again drops – or comes forward – through the dip in the terrain, across an ample empty area of field, through two matrons in conversation, one facing us; a young girl in profile; to rest upon the young man holding the little girl whose "speaking gesture" we have already mentioned. So we have both an "arrow" and a vertical aimed at this interesting couple.

The direction is enforced by a void below the matrons defining a diamond pattern, whose lateral points, left to right, are two black ladies conversing (left one facing us), and two matrons whose faces are hidden by bonnets. The young lady in profile makes the lower point of the figure and is coupled with another girl in profile looking back. But the ideal line does not stop with the man holding the child. He too is part of a diamond pattern whose left point is made up of three little girls and a little boy carrying a tiny, stiff, American flag and whose right point is three little boys, one again carrying a flag. None of the figures around this tipped square are oriented to it; all turn away. The lower point is composed by two black gentlemen, one of whose feet have their soles outside the "frame". The function of these figures in designing

and enhancing the importance of the field as a generating ground completes the complex pictorial narrative which moves from far to near and comes to rest on a central concern of the historic moment.

But Merritt is not merely talking about the present and its possibilities. She makes it clear that there is more in the unmistakable and unequivocally significant central symbol: the flag on the Fourth of July. As I have already noticed, the flagpole also closes the circle of the trees: a deliberately irregular colonnade, an "anti-temple" and a deliberately man-made artifact, blowing in an ideological breeze. It also has clearly 39 stars and this has alerted – and bothered – all those who have commented the picture, for there was no moment in history in which the American flag had, indeed, 39 stars. We can scarcely suppose Merritt to be so ignorant as to not know the number of states in the Union, nor so incompetent as to not count how many stars she painted. So we must deal with the fact that she consciously painted 39 stars on the national flag, knowing that this was incorrect. Why? Why would the daughter of a New England town whose sons had fought the revolution and upheld the formation of the new republic do this? The picture shows that Merritt believes in equality both for women and blacks and that she views "authorities" as not central and official discourse as something to destructure. It seems then to me that the 39 stars are the supreme political sign, the high moment of wit and declaration: the flag we see unfurled upon the ghostly breeze is, I suggest, that of her idea of the Republic, three dimensional thought high above civic and natural realities, visible in this suspended moment, concealed or not attainable in the real republic. Potential, perhaps, as the sound of the half raised trumpet in the least important corner of the painting.

This is where we can, at last, look upon the other banner. As we saw, the banner to the left is not only asymmetric to the national flag if we take the central median of the picture, it is eccentric to the left-hand space as well. It is also then unable to dominate (organize) that part of the sky. It is also not visibly grounded. It does not adhere to, or rise from, the terrain, though it too has clearly drawn halyards, but "streams", apparently without base, attached to a slip of a wand which, however, does not bend in the breeze; topping "nature" with a jaunty independent, statement. Almost a kite, it negates links to the "war for independence" in which the existing institutionalized republic is being legitimated by power. Its white lettering and stars, whose number has no import save as bright border of its red field, declare for another unborn Republic, though one not without a tremor of past deeds. The two banners together divide the sky in thirds without reference to the centering in the land or the centering of the civic society as it is. The sky is a domain of its own: a third point of view pictorially dominated by the two banner/ideas. Visually, it is related to the other two areas as symbolic comment.

I want now to turn back to the opening question and close upon it: what is being declared and confirmed, what society is representing itself to itself? I want once more, and more confidently, relying on what the picture tells us in its very structure, to declare that this is a potential – possible – society, "shadowed" in an already existing ritual moment of celebration. Further, the evidence strongly suggests that the Republic of the 39 stars is a woman's Republic.

This is the moment to notice that we are looking at the tables from a position not only outside and above the scene, but displaced drastically to the lower right hand corner. We hang suspended over the garden in the position of the sun and the artist views the scene with us from that odd point. This raises the visibility of the remnants of the band and of the trumpeteer and would suddenly lead the eye across and slightly upward on a fairly flat trajectory again to the three ladies standing between the tables and back into the field with, perhaps, a pause for the other three ladies holding hands behind the left table (a parallel through carefully not mirror image, for the two groups look out toward us not to each other). The greater "emptiness" of the upper left-hand quarter, deflects again to the liberty banner. So the right side, traditionally the "weaker" in a reading leads to the banner and this to the national flag and both back down to the three women and to the two tables which form a diagonal square with them. The lower left side cannot be read directionally at all; it allows for no "progress" through or around the painting. If it is not to be weighted, its message is: "still to be defined/organized".

The tables indicate our view point: if they were not half "turned", we might believe we were viewing the field and the folk upon it as one unified scene. The many frontal faces (and the flags) all point this way; all "oblige" us to fix the perspective of the field/landscape as "real". The shadows show us, indeed, the sun coming rather low off-right (but not however, from behind the trees, rather from in front of the scene above to the right). The only jarring visual clue that puts us, too, out, above to the right of the lower right-hand corner of the picture is provided by the tables: we can see in three-quarters their right side.

Thus the gold-paper highlighted tables speak to us – like the breeze that spreads the flags – of that which is not reality, here and now. The elegant tables with cakes and delicate foods meant for pleasure and not business, the pretty clothes, the choice

of the moment of the day, the consigning of institutional protagonists to the wings to carry buckets or instruments, or wander through on horseback, or stand in circle off to the side, all seem to mark a change in the role of men as organizational centers of civic life.

The civic organization here proposed is essentially anarchic, composed of random small groups and individuals, held together by the shared pleasure of the company, some choosing to be with members of the opposite sex, many to be with members of their own. No "ordering" is visible except for that of things – tables and objects thereon. Among the random groups those of only women prevail and the presence of several women, together and alone, wearing a form of bloomers confirms the impression of choice. Finally, the three women between the two tables – a young girl with her hair still down, a bonneted and shawled matron and a young wife with her hair smoothed back and pinned – assume, as the eye seeks a resting (organizing) point for a vision of the whole, a subtle but notable weight and a vague secular sacrality, as if emblems of the ages of maturity and of the "seat" that is not there at the "head"/"center" of the tables (of good, domestic, government). The "echo" in the three women who hold hands to their right (our left) heightens the feeling of "import".

The three women, we have noted, are the point of an ideal triangle whose base is formed by the two flags. A strong structural message from the ideal plane to the center of the human plane: a woman's republic would be well-appointed but light-handed and pleasant, full of conversation and sociability. Its organizational patterns would be eccentric – anarchic – without confusion or exclusions; people would "coordinate" themselves, allowed to be alone or to join together as moved. The republic would inhabit an open and well-tended nature which does not "challenge" or "seduce", but offers such pleasing prospects as may delight tranquillity and reflection and play. It would include children as "citizens" with participatory rights in the pleasures, and men, too: but it would require them to be on "Sunday best" behavior; no excessive drink, no violence, no anger.[37]

Indeed, the decorous tone would cancel all differences and manners make all equal: clothed creatures whose bodies were healthy and pleasant to see, but neutralized in a general de-sexualization underlined by the upright stance all but the two tiniest children maintain. An interesting hidden discourse which echoes some of the religious utopia being experimented in those years, and one which sheds light on and is, in turn, illuminated by the fact that Susan Torrey Merritt never chose to marry and, although she painted pictures until her death, never again felt the need to attempt the double technique nor the civic theme.

37. In this rather like the world prospected by the rules of behavior the young Washington had diligently copied to guide him in acting the gentleman and whose origins lay far back in the courtly world of the Rennaissance; see, Marco Sioli, ed., *George Washington. Regole di civiltà e di comportamento decoroso*, Ibis, Milan, 1996, Introduction.