... having feasted him after their best barbarous manner they could, a long consultation was held, but the conclusion was, two great stones were brought before Powhatan: then as many as could layd hands on him, dragged him to them, and thereon laid his head, and being ready with their clubs, to beate out his braines, Pocahontas the Kings dearest daughter, when no intrety could prevail, got his head in her armes, and laid her owne upon his to save him from death: whereat the Emperour was contented he should live to make him hatchets, and her bells, beads, and copper....

Of course it may never have happened at all and even if it did we think we may be a little tired of it. Yet three and a half centuries have elapsed, and this interminable sentence about an incident from the travels of Captain John Smith still lives. Americans, their literature swarming with its offspring, still without revulsion can summon up the old image: Smith pinned down by savages, his head on a rock, all those clubs about to smash it; and the lovely Indian princess, curiously moved out from the crowd and across all the allegiances of her family, home and land, her religion and her race, lowering her head to his. Why can this commonplace, even banal, picture absorb us yet?

Shopworn by sentimentality, Pocahontas endures and stands with the most appealing of our saints. She has passed subtly into our folklore, where she lives as a popular fable—a parable taught children who carry some vague memory of her through their lives. She is an American legend, a woman whose actual story has blended with imaginary elements in time become traditional. Finally, she is one of our few, true native myths, for with our poets she has successfully attained the status of goddess, has been beatified, made holy, and offered as a magical and moving explanation of our national origins. What has happened to her story, why did it happen—and in fact what really was her story? It may be that our very familiarity with Pocahontas has kept us from looking at her closely enough to see what is there.

I

Even in the sketchiest of outlines, the story from which all the folklore and legends take off is a good one. As every schoolchild knows, the English arrived in Jamestown in 1607. During December of that year, while exploring the Chickahominy River, Smith—who had worked his way up from prisoner to leader of the expedition—was captured by men of chief Powhatan, and two of his companions were killed. It was at this time that he reputedly was rescued from
death by the chief’s favorite child, a young girl—no more than twelve or thirteen—called Pocahontas. Then, after what struck him as some very odd behavior on the part of the Indians, he was allowed to return to Jamestown, a place where—the great majority of its members dying within a year of their arrival—one of the most appalling casualty rates in history was being established. By placating Indians and planting corn, and with the help again of Pocahontas, who is said often to have brought supplies, and once to have come through the forest on a dark night to warn of an attack by her father, Smith is usually credited with having temporarily saved the colony. He gave the credit to her, however, as having done most, “next under God,” to preserve the settlers.

The Captain returned to England in 1609, and in that year ships under Sir Thomas Gates brought relief to a group of people so desperate that one man had eaten his wife. The Sea Venture, flagship of the fleet, was wrecked in Bermuda, but its survivors somehow built a new vessel, and with it made Jamestown. One of its passengers was an Englishman named John Rolfe. Some time elapsed before he saw Pocahontas, because for a while she had no connection with the vicissitudes of the colonists. But in 1613, while visiting the chief of the Potomacs, she was tricked into captivity by an Indian bribed with a copper kettle, and taken as security for English men and equipment held by Powhatan. Now she met Rolfe, whose first wife had died in Virginia, and soon they expressed a desire to marry. Powhatan gave his approval but Rolfe had to get permission from his own superiors, and wrote Sir Thomas Dale a passionate, tedious letter protesting that he wished to marry Pocahontas despite, as he put it, her “rude education, manners barbarous and cursed generation,” for the good of the plantation, the honor of England, the glory of God, and his own salvation—not “to gorge myself with incontinency” but, according to God’s wish, to convert the girl. Even Smith had said that conversion was the first duty of the settlers; permission was granted. Dale gave the girl a good deal of religious instruction, christened her Rebecca—it was the first such conversion by the colonists—and in April of 1614 she and Rolfe were married.

Rolfe, it is generally believed, was primarily responsible for the production of the tobacco—detested by both King James and Smith—which made the colony permanent, and in 1616 he and his wife and their son Thomas were taken abroad by Dale to publicize the success of Jamestown. Thus it was that Pocahontas, less than six weeks after the death of William Shakespeare, arrived in England. In the party too was an Indian named Tomocomo, whom a thoughtful Powhatan had sent as a scout. He had a sheaf of sticks in which he was to place a notch for each white person he encountered, and some equally trou-
blesome instruction to see this “God” about whom the English talked so much.

Pocahontas fared better, for a time. She was honored by the church and feted by the King and Queen, to whom Smith in glowing terms had commended her as his savior. James Stuart demanded to know if her commoner husband had not committed a treasonable act in marrying a princess. The Lady Rebecca became the toast of London, where alert pubs changed their names to “La Belle Sauvage.” But not everything went well. She saw Smith again and was mysteriously displeased. Then while preparing for her return to Jamestown she was taken sick, very likely with smallpox, and died. She made a godly end, according to Smith, at the age of perhaps twenty-two, and was buried on the 21st of March, 1617, at Gravesend, on the banks of the Thames.

Her father survived her by only a year. Her husband returned to Virginia alone, married once again, and was killed four years later by Indians. Her son Thomas grew up in England, and then came back to this country to start the line of proud Virginians—of Jeffersons and Lees, of Randolphs, Marshalls, and an estimated two million other people—who to this day trace their ancestry back to the Indian girl. Smith transferred his affections to New England, which he named, but was never able to get the colonial job he wanted and died in bed in 1631. As for Pocahontas, the exact place of her burial is unknown, and the only tangible remains of her are a pair of earrings and a portrait, done in 1616, showing a dark and handsome if uncomfortably young lady, incongruously overdressed in English clothes.

There are other details of a more or less factual nature that have been added to this story by people who knew Pocahontas, or who wrote of her during her lifetime. Smith himself supplies some of them. It is he who describes that day in England when he somehow so upset her, and she “turned about, obscured her face,” on seeing him—an event which, since Smith either could not explain it or did not wish to, has tantalized generations of romantics.

There is also the testimony of Samuel Purchas, who was present when Pocahontas was received by the Lord-Bishop of London with even more pomp than was accorded other great ladies of the time, and who records in *Hakluytus Posthumus* or *Purchas his Pilgrimes* (1625) the impressive dignity with which the young lady received her honors. And in his *True Discourse of the Present Estate of Virginia* (1615) Ralph Hamor put down the pious details of her conversion and marriage.

But not all these additions conform to the somewhat stuffy reputation that has been built for her. Smith, for instance, coldly comments that he might have married the girl himself—or “done what
he listed" with her. He also supplies a colorful but usually neglected incident relating how she and "her women" came one day "naked out of the woods, onely covered behind and before with a few green leaves... singing and dauncing with most excellent ill varietie, oft falling into their infernal passions"; and also tells how, later, "all these Nymphes more tormented him than ever, with crowding, pressing and hanging about him, most tediously crying, Love you not me?"

In addition, William Strachey, in his *Historie of Travaile into Virginia Britannia*, written about 1615, supplies information which does not appear in Sunday School versions of the story. The first secretary of America's oldest colony and the friend of great poets, including Donne, Jonson, and probably Shakespeare, Strachey disturbs the tenderhearted by noting that Rolfe's future bride is already married, to a "private captaine, called Kocoum." Even worse is his description of Pocahontas in earlier days as a "well-featured but wanton yong girle" who used to come to the fort and "get the boyes forth with her into the markett place, and make them wheele, falling on their hands, turning their heels upwards, whome she would followe and wheele so herselfe, naked as she was, all the fort over."

These are all the important sources of the Pocahontas story. Strachey's intelligence was not published until some 234 years after he wrote. Smith's swashbuckling accounts of his own adventures were taken as gospel for even longer, though for quite a while the story of Pocahontas had very little circulation, and was seldom repeated outside a couple of books on Virginia. But when about the start of the nineteenth century Americans began to search intensely for their history the romance was resurrected, and Pocahontas began to loom large as the guardian angel of our oldest colony. Exaggerating even Smith's accounts of her, historians entered into a quaint struggle to outdo each other with praise, concentrating of course on the rescue story. Considering the flimsiness of the evidence, it is odd that for a long time no one seems to have entertained the slightest doubt of its authenticity. On all sides, instead, sprung up the most assiduous and vigilant defense of the lady. Here the case of the Honorable Waddy Thompson is instructive. Poor Thompson, who had been our minister to Mexico, published in 1846 his "Recollections" of that place, and in his desire to praise a girl named Marina, "the chère amie and interpreter of Cortez," he let slip a remark he must have regretted the rest of his days. He said that Pocahontas was "thrown into the shade" by her.

The response to these imprudent words was dreadful; an anonymous Kentuckian rushed into print a whole pamphlet Vindicating her Memory. He appealed to all Virginians, to all Americans, and
finally "to the admirers of virtue, humanity, and nobleness of soul, wherever to be found," against this Erroneous Judgment. Pocahontas had every gift Marina possessed, and—no chère amie—she had also, he added, her "good name." Indeed, it is not possible to improve on her, and to demonstrate either this or his scholarship the gentleman from Kentucky appended long accounts of her from the work of twenty-six historians, including French, German, and Italian representatives. Her character is "not surpassed by any in the whole range of history" is one estimate.

The author of this pamphlet also spoke of "proof" that Pocahontas rescued Smith, which he called "one of the most incontestable facts in history": "The proof is, the account of it given by Captain Smith, a man incapable of falsehood or exaggeration... hundreds of eyewitnesses... and to this may be added tradition." Here the gentleman defends, somewhat ineptly, what no one is known to have attacked, despite the fact that there have always been excellent reasons for contesting the rescue. For one thing, the Captain had a real inclination toward this sort of tale. His Generall Historie of 1624, which tells the full story for the first time, reveals a peculiar talent for being "offered rescue and protection in my greatest dangers" by various "honorable and vertuous Ladies." Most striking of these is the Lady Tragabigzanda, who fell in love with him when he was in bondage, not this time to her father but to her husband, the powerful Bashaw Bogall of Constantinople. She delivered him from this slavery, and sent him to her brother, "till time made her Master of her selfe"—before which, however, Smith made a fantastic escape.

Then, much worse and apparent from the beginning, there is the well-known fact that Smith's True Relation of 1608, which tells of his capture by Powhatan, and speaks also of the chief's kindness and assurances of early release, contains no mention at all of any rescue. He had plenty of other opportunities to tell the story, too, but neither he nor anyone else who wrote on Jamestown is known to have referred to the event until 1622, when he remarked in his New England Trials, which includes his third version of his capture: "God made Pocahontas the King's daughter the means to deliver me." Then in 1624 when his Generall Historie was published he told the story as we know it, and also printed for the first time his letter of eight years before to Queen Anne.

The obvious inference here is that if the rescue was actually performed Smith would have said so in the first place or, if he had not, would have told the story to others who would have repeated it. His Historie is boastful; it is hard to know how much of it he may have made up or borrowed from other travelers of the period. And there was a historical precedent for the Pocahontas tale: the story of a
soldier, Juan Ortiz, who was lost on an expedition to Florida in 1528 and was found there by De Soto about twelve years later. Ortiz said he had been captured by Indians, and saved at the last second from burning at the stake by the chief’s daughter, who later came at night in peril of her life to warn him of her father’s plot to kill him. This story had appeared in London, in an English translation by Richard Hakluyt, in 1609, the year of Smith’s return to that city.

Despite all grounds for suspicion, however, Smith’s tale went unchallenged for well over two centuries—until about 1860, that is, when two historians, Edward D. Neill (who became known as the scavenger of Virginia history) and Charles Deane, began to make what now seem the obvious objections. These men were quickly joined by others, and in order to publicize Deane’s case there entered the cause no less an intellect than that of Henry Adams. Writing anonymously in the North American Review in 1867, Adams lowered his biggest guns and patientely blasted what he called “the most romantic episode” in our history into what must have seemed to him and his crushed readers total oblivion. Henry Cabot Lodge concurred that the rescue belongs to fiction. Many other great men expressed themselves on the question, and quickly it became the custom to speak of the Pocahontas “legend.”

Other historians, however, rushed to the defense. Chief among these were John Fiske, the philosopher and historian, and William Wirt Henry. Fiske in 1879 flatly dismissed the dismissals, and went on to champion the story. Why is it not in the True Relation of 1608? Because the editor of that work had obeyed an injunction against printing anything that might discourage potential colonists, and in a preface had explained that Smith had written “somewhat more” than was being published. Certainly the Captain was not allowed simply to go free, after having killed two Indians. The rescue by Pocahontas was quite in accordance with Indian custom. Any member of a tribe had a right to claim a prisoner as son or lover—but how could Smith have known enough about this to invent the tale? That scene in which he describes the weird behavior of his captors following his rescue was clearly a ceremony of adoption into the tribe, the natural consequence of Pocahontas’ act. Why didn’t Smith tell the story to his compatriots? Because he feared that if they knew the favor of an Indian woman was possible they would desert.

And so the battle, which continues to the present day, was on. There is a rebuttal. Why for example censor from Smith’s first book a charming rescue story (which might cause desertions) and include as the editor did an excessively discouraging description of one of Smith’s companions, “John Robinson slaine, with 20 or 30 arrowes” in him? There is no easy answer to that. But, after the short
period of the story’s disrepute [conveniently passed in time for the Jamestown Tercentenary of 1907], wide acceptance ruled again—especially with proudly celebrating Virginians, who appeared to have forgotten that by their rules the girl was colored. Credence in the story, however, is of course not limited to the South. Indeed by 1957, when the 350th anniversary of the founding was elaborately solemnized, most Americans, including a majority of the published authorities, seemed to subscribe to the tale as fact. For the celebrations Paul Green wrote a “Symphonic Outdoor Drama” called The Founders, in which the key events of the young lady’s life took on the force of ritual observance in performances at Williamsburg. Since the evidence is not decisive, perhaps everybody has a right to believe as he wishes.

II

Exactly what happened would not seem to make any enormous difference anyway. What counts more is the truly extraordinary way in which the story—despite the profound awkwardness of a climax that comes in the very opening scene—pervades our culture. Pocahontas is represented in countless paintings and monuments; she gives her name to ships, motels, coal mines, towns, counties, and pseudonymous writers, to secret orders and business firms. There are histories of her and Smith by everyone from poet (John Gould Fletcher) to politician (“Alfalfa Bill” Murray, a descendant). But all other signs of her fade before the plays, poems, novels, and children’s books which for the last 150 years have flooded our literature. Dramatizing the story from the alleged facts, and filling gaps or inadequacies with invented material usually presented as fact, there are so many different treatments, ranging from the serious to the absurd, that they begin to look numberless.

But they fall into patterns. The first person to make literary use of Pocahontas was no less a writer than the rare Ben Jonson, who included an obscure reference to her in his Staple of News of 1625. Then, much later, she was treated at length in a little novel called The Female American (1767). Here the story as we know it is, however, simply a rehearsal for far greater events, and the really memorable thing about the book is that its author was an English lady known as Unca Eliza Winkfield, who changed Pocahontas’ name to Unca, and Smith’s to Winkfield, and gave her a daughter called, once more, Unca.

The writer who really started things, by first romanticizing the story in a proper way, was still another Englishman—an adventure-some fellow named John Davis, a sailor who came to this country in
1798 and spent nearly five years traveling about on foot. Very young and romantic, hyperthyroid, chronically tumescent and rather charming, Davis wrote a book about his journey called *Travels of Four Years and a Half in the United States of America*. As a part of this work he "delivered to the world" the history of Pocahontas which, he announced, was reserved for his pen. Possessed of a lively and libidinous imagination, which he seemed unable to distinguish from his written sources, Davis tore into the story with hearty masculine appetite.

He begins with Smith in the hands of Powhatan, who keeps offering his prisoner a woman. "The squaws fight fiercely for the honor, but to Pocahontas' "unspeakable joy" Smith is stern and turns them all down. After she has rescued him she comes to Jamestown, weeping "in all the tumultuous extasy of love." In order to cure her Smith slips off to England, instructing his compatriots to tell the girl he has died. She prostrates herself on his empty grave, beats her bosom, and utters piercing cries. One night while she is strewing flowers about his resting place she is come upon by Rolfe, secretly in love with her and of late much given to taking moonlight walks while composing love poems. ("Of these effusions I have three in my possession," says Davis, and he prints them.) Surprised by Rolfe's appearance, Pocahontas inadvertently falls in his arms, whereupon he seizes his opportunity and drinks from her lips "the poison of delight." A woman is "never more susceptible of a new passion than when agitated by the remains of a former one," is Davis' dark but profitable explanation, and thus it is that hours later, come dawn, Rolfe "still rioted in the draught of intoxication from her lips." Eventually they marry ("nor did satiety necessarily follow, from fruition," the author adds anxiously). They go to England, and Pocahontas dies there.

Davis made it clear that he wrote as a historian: "I have adhered inviolably to facts; rejecting every circumstance that had not evidence to support it," he insisted, speaking of "recourse to records and original papers." The man was too modest, for of course these were, like Rolfe's poems, original enough but with him. And he should be given credit too for having seen the possibilities of uniting richly embroidered history with a mammary fixation (habitually the bosoms of his Indian women are either "throbbing" or "in convulsive throes"). That he did see the promise of this combination, and in advance of his time, is indicated by the fact that he himself soon wrote what he called a "historical novel" on "Pokahontas." The book is formally titled *First Settlers of Virginia* (1806), but it simply pads the previous account of the girl's adventures to novel length. Dropping Rolfe's claim to the poetry, Davis managed to add a couple of mildly pornographic native scenes, to use Smith's story of the enamored Indian girls ("Love you not me?") twice, and to present
Pocahontas as "unrobed" in her first scene with Rolfe. He also preface a second edition with a letter from Thomas Jefferson to the effect that the President of the United States "subscribed with pleasure" to this Indian Tale.

After Davis, the deluge. This began with a vast number of plays now mostly lost, but including four prominent and commercially successful ones which are preserved. To James Nelson Barker, ex-mayor of Philadelphia and future first controller of the Treasury in Van Buren’s cabinet, goes a series of firsts: his Indian Princess of 1808 [although anticipated in 1784 by the little-known German Pocahontas of Johann Wilhelm Rose] was the first important Pocahontas play and the first to be produced of the Indian plays which soon threatened to take over our stage completely; it is generally cited also as the first American play to appear in London after opening in this country. Hugely popular, and rather deservedly so, Barker’s success was followed by that of George Washington Parke Curtis, step-grandson of our first president, with his Pocahontas of 1830, and by Robert Dale Owen. The latter, son of the more famous Robert Owen, founder of the radical Owenite communities, and himself a very early advocate of birth control, the free discussion of sex, and the rights of women, made his Pocahontas [1837] an anachronistic feminist. His play, though over-long, is not incompetent and reads very well beside The Forest Princess [1844] of Charlotte Barnes Conner. Mrs. Conner, an actress, stuck close to the worst nineteenth-century concepts of theatre and produced a series of unlikely postures which are epitomized in her final scene, where a pious Rebecca dying in England, hand stretched heavenward, speaks her last iambics:

I hear my father—Husband, fare thee well.
We part—but we shall meet—above!

after which the hand drops with the curtain.

John Brougham’s Pocahontas [1855] was honorably designed to stop this sort of thing, and his travesty did stop the production of “serious” Pocahontas plays for quite a time, greatly diminishing the popularity of the Indian drama to boot. But today his play is, to speak politely, “dated,” for the humor depends mainly on puns (”What iron fortune led you to our shores?“ “To now ill-use us would be base illusion!”) [italics his], line after line for two long acts.

Brougham’s burlesque was extremely well-received, however, and it performed a service for our drama that nothing has adequately performed for our poetry. Pocahontas poems, produced in the nineteenth century by the carload, are almost uniformly dull, tasteless, and interminable. The efforts of Lydia Huntly Sigourney and William Makepeace Thackeray stand out only a little from the average.
Most nineteenth-century Pocahontas poems seem to begin either with some silly sylvan scene or with "Descend O Muse, and this poor pen..." Smith always arrives as expected, but the Muse invariably has other things to do.

Equally forbidding are the Pocahontas poems written in the manner of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Longfellow neglected to produce any Pocahontas items himself, but there are a great many poems, and several plays in verse, which have sought to rectify his oversight. These pieces are all distinguished by lines of unrimed trochaic tetrameter ("By the shore of Gitche Gumee / By the shining Big-Sea-Water") which produce a stultifying effect the poets seem to equate with an Indian atmosphere; they suffer from what might properly be known as the Curse of Hiawatha. Of course Longfellow got his famous Hiawatha line from a German translation of a national epic of the Finns, but this is not known to have stopped anyone, and on they go:

Then the maiden Pocahontas
Rushes forward, none can stop her,
Throws her arms about the captive,
Cries,—"oh spare him! Spare the Paleface!"

What burlesque and abuse cannot destroy will just have to wear itself out. Although the machinery that mass-produces low-quality Pocahontas literature has long shown signs of collapse, the end is not yet. As recently as 1958 a Pocahontas novel by one Noel B. Gerson, with nothing to recommend it but the story, was smiled on by a very large book club. And so still they come with the story, juggling the climax or devising a new one, and trying to make up somehow for the fact that Smith never married the girl. Both problems can of course be solved at once by ending with the scene from Smith in which he and Pocahontas meet in London. Here Rebecca is overcome at the sight of her lost Captain and dies in his arms, usually of a broken heart; indeed it has become a convention to do it that way. But that has not helped, and it is the plays, particularly, which indicate that an industry really is exhausted. The best written and most interesting parts of their scripts are those that deal with such matters as the construction of campfires with electric fans, logs, and strips of red cloth.

One last sign of the popular Pocahontas drama's waning was the appearance (once Brougham was well-forgotten) of an Everything but the Kitchen Sink School. There exists, for instance, an operetta in which Smith has a "regulation negro" servant, comically named Mahogany, who plays a banjo. A better sample is the Pocahontas (1906) of Edwin O. Ropp. Mr. Ropp named three of his Indians Hiawa-
tha, Minnehaha, and Geronimo; and there is a rough spot in the action when a man named simply Roger (Williams!), insisting on the freedom of religious thought, disappears for good in the Virginia forest. As for Pocahontas, she is taken through her marriage with Rolfe, to England and back again to Virginia, where she lives out her days in the wilderness with her husband, two children, and their Christian grandpapa, Powhatan, singing the praises of home sweet home, as the play ends with lines lifted from the poem of that name. Mr. Ropp dedicated his play, it should be recorded, to a Moral Purpose, to the Jamestown Exposition of 1907, and to Those Who Construct the Panama Canal. The world was ready for another burlesque when, in 1918, Philip Moeller published his *Beautiful Legend of the Amorous Indian*. In this play only one character, the senile mother of Powhatan, speaks Hiawathan, and there is a heart-warming moment in the dialogue when Powhatan’s wife says of her aging mother-in-law: “When she talks in that old manner it nearly drives me crazy.”

III

It is not hard to find reasons for the low quality of a large part of our Pocahontas literature: the writers had no talent, for instance. A less obvious difficulty has been that most of the poets and playwrights have prided themselves that their works were founded firmly on “historical sources.” This impeded the imaginations of most of them, who tried to romanticize history instead of letting the facts act as a stimulus to fiction. As a result of sentimentality and inaccuracy, there is little or no historical value in their products. And because the works are based so solidly on “history,” often footnoted, they seldom have any value as fiction, for invariably events are related not because they are dramatic but because they happened—which is aesthetically irrelevant. If the story is to satisfy a modern audience, it must be treated imaginatively.

Properly told it could be a truly epic story. This is indicated by the fact that elements in the relationships of the characters are so like those in other epics of other countries—the *Aeneid*, for instance. Aeneas, we recall, was an adventurer who also sought a westward land and finally anchored at the mouth of a river. The country there was ruled by a king, Latinus, who had a beautiful daughter, Lavinia. Latinus had dreamed that his daughter’s husband would come from a foreign land, and that from this union would spring a race destined to rule the world, so he received Aeneas and feasted him. Later tradition goes on to record the marriage, the birth of a son, and the founding of the city in which Romulus and Remus were born. Other
raised Pocahontas to full mythic stature. In some notes he made for the poem, Crane saw her as "the natural body of American fertility," the land that lay before Columbus "like a woman, ripe, waiting to be taken." He followed his notes, and the part of his long poem called "Powhatan's Daughter" develops them. Starting with the quotation from Strachey (which he took from a transition review of Williams by Kay Boyle) the poet in a waking dream at the harbor dawn finds someone with him ("Your cool arms murmurs about me lay...a forest shudders in your hair!"). She disappears, then, from his semiconsciousness to reappear later as the American continent, most familiar to hoboes who "know a body under the wide rain," as the poet himself is familiar with trains that "Wail into distances I knew were hers." The land blooms with her, she becomes a bride (but "virgin to the last of men"), passes herself then to a pioneer mother, a living symbol of the fertility of the land, and makes her last appearance as the earth again—"our native clay...red, eternal flesh of Pocahontas..."

Like these four poets, Archibald MacLeish in his Frescoes for Mr. Rockefeller's City (1933) was discovering his own land and his faith in its future. Dedicating his book to Sandburg, and deriving a symbol from Crane, MacLeish describes a "Landscape as a Nude"—the American continent as a beautiful naked Indian girl, inviting lovers. With this repetition the concept has taken hold. Thus we have a sort of American Ceres, or Demeter, or Gaea, developed from Pocahontas—a fertility-goddess, the mother of us all. We, by our descent from her, become a new race, innocent of both European and all human origins—a race from the earth, as in ancient mythologies of other lands, but an earth that is made of her. We take on a brave, free, mythical past as our alternative to the more prosaic, sordid explanation of history. And the thing is alive, as an image of the beautiful Indian girl is set in perpetual motion, and comes cartwheeling through our veins and down our generations.

IV

For all our concern with Pocahontas, one of the most interesting facts about her seems to have escaped everyone: the story John Smith told, which we have embraced so long, is one of the oldest stories known to man—not just roughly speaking, as in the Odysseus and Aeneas myths, but precisely in all essential parts. The tale of an adventurer, that is, who becomes the captive of the king of another country and another faith, and is rescued by his beautiful daughter, a princess who then gives up her land and her religion for his, is a story known to the popular literatures of many peoples for
many centuries. The theme was so common in the Middle Ages that medieval scholars have a name for it: "The Enamoured Moslem Princess." This figure is a woman who characteristically offers herself to a captive Christian knight, the prisoner of her father, rescues him, is converted to Christianity, and goes to his native land—these events usually being followed by combat between his compatriots and hers. Latin anecdotes from the *Gesta Romanorum*, which contains the germs of plots used by Chaucer and Shakespeare, were widely read in translation in late sixteenth-century England (hence Smith may have known them). Tale V, called "Of Fidelity," is about a youth wasting away as a prisoner of pirates. Their chief has a lovely and virtuous daughter who frees the young man and, being promised marriage, goes to his country. The origins of this version may be in Seneca the Elder, who at the beginning of the Christian era formulated precisely the same situation in his *Controversia* as an imaginary legal case for debate. It is possible that he in turn got the story from the Greek Sophists, who had a lively interest in literature and disputation. . . . It has always been an uncomfortable fact of the Pocahontas story, and an apparently formidable obstacle to its survival, that after appearing to offer herself to Smith the heroine never married the hero. It is a startling fact, and bewildering, that this curiosity has been an element of the story from the beginning. . . . It is extremely curious that there appear to be no accounts in which we are told specifically that what we might expect invariably to happen actually happens.

The presence of a disturbing element in a popular story is hard to explain. The notion that melodies unheard are sweetest and cannot fade, that the lover who has not his bliss then can love forever and she by fair does not seem to account for this peculiarity; it was never that way at all. Yet there must be something obscurely "right" about an apparently unsatisfactory ending, or over the many centuries we should have succeeded in changing it. And the durable popularity of the story also urges the presence of some appeal that is not on the surface, some force that has given an advantage in the struggle for survival which we should make out if we can. The notion that the story is symbolic of something is not new. The monks who used it for religious instruction hundreds of years ago sensed this and had their own reading: the young man, they said, represents the human race. Led irresistibly by the force of original sin into the prison of the devil, he is redeemed by Christ, in the form of the girl. But this interpretation incongruously makes Jesus the daughter of Satan, and seems also a little arbitrary. It is too utilitarian—but in that it offers one clue to the story's longevity.

Nothing survives indefinitely without filling some function, and
the usefulness of this story is clear: the tale approves and propagates the beliefs of anyone who cares to tell it. An informal survey of the children's sections of two small Midwestern libraries disclosed twenty-six different books on Pocahontas—and no wonder. Quite apart from the opportunity she presents to give children some notion of self-sacrifice, she is, in addition to all her other appeals, perfectly ideal propaganda for both church and state. The story has long been, among other things, a tale of religious conversion, and in its American form is so eloquent a tribute to accepted institutions that there is no need to deflate its power by so much as even mentioning the obvious lesson it teaches. Of course the thing is a little chauvinistic. It is always either indifferent to the attitudes of the betrayed or unconscious of them. Indeed it is a tribute to the high regard we have for ourselves that Pocahontas has never once been cast as a villainess, for she would make an excellent one. From the point of view of her own people her crimes—repeated acts of treason, and cultural and religious apostasy—were serious. But one does not resent a betrayal to his own side, and we can always bear reassurance: love exists, love matters, and we are very eligible, Pocahontas tells us.

The story will work for any culture, informing us, whoever we are, that we are chosen, or preferred. Our own ways, race, religion must be better—so much better that even an Indian (Magian, Moor, Turk), albeit an unusually fine one (witness her recognition of our superiority), perceived our rectitude. But it nicely eases the guilt we have felt, since the start of its popularity, over the way we had already begun, by 1608, to treat the Indians. Pocahontas is a female Quanto, a "good" Indian, and by taking her to our national bosom we experience a partial absolution. In the lowering of her head we feel a benediction. We are so wonderful she loved us anyway.

And yet the story has an appeal which easily transcends such crude and frequently imperialistic functions—especially in the rescue scene, which implies all the new allegiances that follow from it. There is a picture there, at least in the American rendering, which has compelled us for so long that it must certainly contain meanings that go beyond the illustrations of it in the children's books. It is characteristic of all hallowed images that they cannot adequately be put into words, and no single rendering would articulate all that might be stated anyway. But these are feeble excuses for total silence, and it does not take any great sensitivity to perceive that Pocahontas' gesture—accomplished not by any subterfuge, but by the frank placing of her own body between Smith's and death—is fairly ringing with overtones. This is because we see her act as a rite, a ceremonial sign which bestows life. A surface part of that symbol-
ism has always been clear. The Indians understood it as we do, and immediately Smith was alive and free. But what we have not been conscious of, though the modern poets sensed something like it, is that her candor was that of a bride. That is one thing, buried beneath awareness, that has dimly stirred us. Unable to put it into words, we have let the girl keep her secret, but the ritual that we feel in her action is itself an unorthodox and dramatic ceremony of marriage, and we are touched. We see Pocahontas at the moment of womanhood, coming voluntarily from the assembly to the altar, where she pledges the sacrifice of her own integrity for the giving of life. This is an offering up of innocence to experience, a thing that is always—in our recognition of its necessity—oddly moving. It is an act which bespeaks total renunciation, the giving up of home, land, faith, self, and perhaps even life, that life may go on.

Perhaps this helps to explain why it is that what, in its flattery of him, is at first glance so much a man's story should also be greatly promoted by women. Apparently it is a very pleasant vicarious experience for us all. Yet in the depths of our response to the heart of the story, the rescue, there is something more profoundly wishful than a simple identification with persons in a touching adventure. All myths have an element of wish somewhere in them. But there is something about this one that is also wistful, as though it expressed a wish that did not really expect to be gratified. It is as though something in us says "if only it were true. . . ."

We surely ought to know what it is we wish for. In our fondness for Pocahontas can we make out a longing that is buried somewhere below even the affection we bear for our fair selves and white causes? This yearning might be for another kind of love entirely, a love that has forever been hidden under the differences that set countries, creeds, and colors against each other. From the freedom and noble impracticality of childhood, we as a people have taken this Indian girl to heart. Could we be hinting at a wish for a love that would really cross the barriers of race? When the beautiful brown head comes down, does a whole nation dream this dream?

But it is still only a dream. And that fact helps to explain why it is that from the very beginning the story has had what looks like the wrong ending, why the wedding of the protagonists remains a symbol that was never realized. To be sure the girl eventually married, and the groom was usually the hero's compatriot, but by then the event has lost its joy and its force—seems a substitute for the real thing, and not at all satisfactory. But the story might have died centuries before us, and we would have made much less of Pocahontas, if the substitution were not in some way fit and right. We sense that the adventure has to end the way it does partly because we know the difference between
what we dream and what we get. We are not particularly happy with the denouement, but we feel its correctness, and with it we acknowledge that this is all just make-believe.

To understand the rest of our dim and reluctant perception of the propriety of the story's outcome, Americans must see the Indian girl in one last way: as progenitress of all the "Dark Ladies" of our culture—all the erotic and joyous temptresses, the sensual, brunette heroines, whom our civilization (particularly our literature: Hawthorne, Cooper, Melville, and many others) has summoned up only to repress. John Smith is the first man on this continent known to have made this rejection; his refusal to embrace "the wild spirit" embodied in the girl was epic, and a precedent for centuries of denial. Prototypes too, and just as important, were the arrogantly hypocritical Rolfe and the rest of the colonists, who baptized, christened, commercialized, and ruined the young lady. With censorship and piety as tools, American writers—a few poets, far too late, aside—completed the job, until Pocahontas was domesticated for the whole of our society, where from the very start any healthy, dark happiness in the flesh is supposed to be hidden, or disapproved. Pocahontas is the archetypal sacrifice to respectability in America—a victim of what has been from the beginning our overwhelming anxiety to housebreak all things in nature, until wilderness and wildness be reduced to a few state parks and a few wild oats. Our affection for Pocahontas is the sign of our temptation, and our feeling that her misfortunes in love have a final, awkward fitness comes from our knowing that all that madness is not for us.