

A City Upon a Hill: American Literature and the Ideology of Exceptionalism

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This essay offers an overview of the relation between exceptionalism and American literature, with a focus on how this ideology has shaped both the production and reception of America's literary texts. It suggests, in particular, that exceptionalism bears a relation to the literature that is at once constraining and generative. The assumption that grounds the argument, and that is already evident both in the title and my opening sentence, is that exceptionalism is, precisely, an ideological formation. I say "precisely" with some irony, because both "exceptionalism" and "ideology" are among the more slippery terms in contemporary scholarly discourse. Hence it may be useful to specify at the outset how the two terms are used here.

By "exceptionalism" I mean a way of thinking that, in Joyce Appleby's words, "projects onto a nation ...qualities that are envied because they represent deliverance from a common lot" (419). In America's case, it does even more than that. It imagines the nation as both the surpassing of the past and the hope of the future – as Walt Whitman does in the following passages. At the end of "Song of the Redwood-Tree," apostrophizing the "lands of the western shore," he says

I see in you, certain to come, the promise of thousands of years, till now deferred ...

The new society at last, proportionate to Nature ...

Fresh come, to a new world indeed, yet long prepared,
 I see the genius of the modem, child of the real and ideal,
 Clearing the ground for broad humanity, the true America,
 heir of the past so grand,
 To build a grander future. (154)

American exceptionalism is a doubly teleological vision, in which all of history prior to the formation of the Euro-American "New World" was pointed toward this formation as a goal, and in which that "New World" is not simply a place, but a mission.

This definition of exceptionalism stands in opposition to that offered by Seymour Martin Lipset in his recent book, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*, where the term refers simply to "the ways in which the United States varies from the rest of the world" (17). I align myself instead with Appleby, who argues that "Exceptional does not mean different. All nations are different; and almost all national sentiments exploit those differences" (419). To exploit them is simply part of the formation of a national identity and self-consciousness – as, concomitantly, are the identification and study of a national literary tradition (see Ashcroft *et al* 17). But American exceptionalism is not only the claim that America is different, but that it is unique, one of a (superior) kind – and generally that that kind carries with it a unique moral value and responsibility.

By this definition, there are certain ways in which America is clearly different that in fact run contrary to exceptionalism as a faith. Perhaps the most obvious is our history with regard to slavery and race. In recent years exceptionalism as faith has undergone a revival in American political discourse; certainly it was one of the staples of Ronald Reagan's appeal to the American people. At the same time we have had the highest rates of murder and incarceration of any developed nation, and we are clearly distinct among the wealthy nations in gaps between rich and poor, in percentage of children living in poverty, and in our lack of a national health system. But these are not the sorts of distinctive attributes that count in terms of the political uses of exceptionalism.

Rather, exceptionalism is an *ism*, an ideology that selectively defines

the attributes of the nation in order to justify and celebrate it. If, indeed, as Lipset says, "The United States ... has defined its *raison d'être* ideologically" (18), exceptionalism is a name for both the content and the process of that self-definition. Lipset quotes Richard Hofstadter as noting that, "It has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies, but to be one'" (in Lipset 18). Exceptionalism is at once the ideology that we are, and the fact that, as a nation, we are an ideology (rather than simply, for instance, a political entity or a place with a history). The literary implications and manifestations of all of this are discussed in more detail below.

What, then, is "ideology"? On the one hand, in traditional Marxist usage the term denominates a form of "false consciousness" (Engels uses this phrase in his 1893 Letter to Mehring; see Williams, *Keywords* 127). If Appleby referred to exceptionalism as an ideology, I suspect it would be in this sense. On the other hand, "ideology" is often used more broadly, in a way that its proponents would claim (and I would generally agree) to be more theoretically sophisticated. This seems to be the sense in which Myra Jehlen uses it in defining the subject of her *American Incarnation*:

when the European settlers saw themselves as quickening a virgin land, the modern spirit completed its genesis by becoming flesh in the body of the American continent. The ideology of this incarnation as it fulfilled Europe's ideal liberalism, and as it is represented, appropriately incarnate, in the form and matter of American writing, is my central concern in this book.

(4, emphasis added)

Jehlen later defines this ideology as "[c]onstituting what one thinks and talks *with* rather than *about* ... [r]eaching down to levels of consciousness that are themselves mute – never told but retold inside consciously constructed arguments" (19, emphasis in original). The task of reading this "ground itself, lying below the cited grounds of thought" is one of "trying to see the limits of a language, and therefore to see what it denies as well as what it asserts." It "involves saying what the writer has *not* said (19, emphasis in original).

This view goes back to Louis Althusser's notion of ideology as inescapable, as the very condition of thought, as what he calls "a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real

conditions of existence" (162). We never stand outside ideology (though we may stand outside particular ideologies). Ideologies are not (or not primarily) the contents of thought; rather, they are its conditioning structures and figures. And they are not merely limiting (though they are that); they are also, and importantly, productive. Much has already been said by many writers, and something more will be said here, about how exceptionalism is limiting. But I also want to suggest how it is productive; and particularly how it is so – often in somewhat unpredictable ways – for American literature.

Still, despite his enrichment of our understanding of the term, Althusser ultimately cannot dispense (nor can I) with a certain kind of reinscription of the old idea of ideology as false consciousness. For him it takes the form of his reliance on the opposition between the imaginary and the real ("a representation of an imaginary relation to real conditions"), an opposition tinged in his discourse with Jacques Lacan's reinvention of those terms, but one that still carries with it strong traces of the notion of a reality from which ideology departs. A later move in his essay, in which he posits "science" (as in "scientific socialism") as ideology's other, has the same effect of aligning ideology with falsehood (171, 173).

The point of this rather extended reflection is finally this: when I speak of exceptionalism as an ideology, I both do and do not mean that it is a "false consciousness." There are ways, I will argue, in which, at least in its mainstream versions, it is patently false, both because of what it actively claims and because of what it silently excludes. On the other hand, the recognition of those patent falsehoods may still come under the sign, or in the context, of exceptionalism as a conditioning mode of consciousness, as a representation of individuals' imaginary relation to real conditions. Those, for instance, who criticize the mainstream notion of America as the cradle of democracy by pointing out the nation's failures, injustices, and founding inequities with regard to race or class are, on the one hand, exposing the falsehood of popular exceptionalism – particularly the falsehood of the notion that America is the "land of the free." But on the other hand, at least in the case of canonical American writers – and/or of readers who interpret canonically (that is, according to the canons of Americanness in writing) – this critique itself pretty much invariably takes place within the framework of exceptionalism as a mode of thought.

There are certain identifiable real conditions to which exceptionalism represents an imaginary response. They have to do with the fact that the USA was both the first nation whose hegemonic ideologies and institutions were more or less uncontestedly bourgeois, and the first major one to become "postcolonial" in the contemporary senses of that term. It was the former condition, allegedly guaranteed by the expanse of available "unowned" land, that made America seem the land of open opportunity and the place where the individual (white) man could perhaps, to paraphrase Ralph Waldo Emerson's transcendentalist imperative, build his own world (see Emerson 1020). It was a combination of the two factors (our status as both bourgeois and postcolonial) that made America seem the world's hope for the future, for in becoming post-colonial we had also thrown off the burden of oligarchy.

But exceptionalism was, nonetheless, not only an imaginary response, but a highly problematic one, particularly in two regards. First, there was an obvious contradiction between the ideology of exceptionalism and the material reality of a nation in which all were clearly not in fact equal. The white man's "own world" was built in significant part by the labor of Black men and women he owned, and the ostensibly free and classless opportunity allegedly guaranteed by open land was (or quickly became) more imaginary than real, and in any case depended upon the erasure of the Amerindians and their prior claims to that land.

A second, and related, way in which the promise of American exceptionalism was highly problematic was in its going beyond the political to the mystical, beyond history to destiny. Three things must be said about this strain of exceptionalism at the outset. First, it should be taken as a proof and a reminder that imaginary formations do have real material effects: the notion of "manifest destiny" was not merely an apology, but an energizing force, for American imperialism. Second, this sort of exceptionalism has done far more harm than good; the genocidal effects of the doctrine of manifest destiny alone demonstrate this, even without invoking such other ugly aspects as the connection between exceptionalism and the eugenics movement of the early part of this century. Third, though no positive effects of such exceptionalism outweigh the negatives, it has also been positively productive – not only in literature as an inspiration for Whitman's democratic poetics, but also in other spheres for social critics such as Martin Luther King, who returned to the

notion of America as a potential promised land in eloquent and politically progressive ways.

In terms of the cultural work it has performed, the metaphysical extension of exceptionalism may have been in large part a response to the fact that the United States was the first major postcolonial nation. Among the effects of this were that the new nation had no models for the development it had undertaken, and that it still had links of enormous tensile strength with the imperial power that it thought it had thrown off. In this light mystical exceptionalism can be seen as a sort of overcompensation – a hyperbolic attempt to establish om difference from the metropolis. And its persistence as a symptom indicates that America really did not get over Europe for a very long time (indeed, it is only in the postmodern climate of the utter forgetting of the past that we may be said to have done so: if one has no memory at all the question of origins ceases to matter). For one example of the persistence into modernity and modernism of our colonial past and our mystical compensation, and of how these things have been generative of American literature, consider William Carlos Williams's obsessive attempts to repudiate T. S. Eliot's old-world notion of the tradition, efforts that extend from *Spring and All* through *Paterson* and one of the greatest of exceptionalist texts, *In the American Grain*, and all the way into "The Desert Music." Williams' powerful emphasis on the particularity and curative strength of the local ground gains its intensity in large part from the desire to repudiate our subordination to European culture.

In general, the traditional canon of our literature constantly manifests and reacts to exceptionalist ideology, for two major reasons. The first is simply that exceptionalism has been an integral part of the way many American authors, like Americans in general (particularly but by no means exclusively white Americans), have imaged their nation to themselves. The second is, as Nina Baym's essay on "Melodramas of Beset Manhood" suggests, that exceptionalism has historically been one of the conditioning and gatekeeping principles of canonization in America: traditionally, in order for American literature to be both literature (as opposed to just writing) and American (as opposed to just literature, or just British literature), it must bear the marks of this ideology. It need not unconditionally accept the most optimistic claims of exceptionalism, but it must be clearly locable in relation to this ideology's themes – and

generally, if not always, to the white, middle-class, male who is the dominant subject of this ideology, as well.

It must be emphasized that this is the *traditional* way of looking at American literature, rather than the inevitable way, because this way is now being contested, perhaps more vigorously than ever before – as is the entire discourse of exceptionalism. While I am not eager or even willing, as some Americanists are, either to give up the canonical works or to discard the notion of aesthetic judgement as one criterion for deciding what to read and teach, I think this contestation is extremely healthy, both from a literary and a cultural point of view. In terms of literature it offers us more to be interested in, more texts to learn and to learn to love. In terms of culture it should offer us a deeper understanding of the historical and contemporary multiplicity of American life, and should help us to meet a future in which that multiplicity can no longer be papered over, no matter what those with a nostalgia for a homogeneous and homogenized, white and English-only America – a nostalgia for neverland – might prefer.

One example of such contestation with a broadly historical focus is Appleby's "Recovering America's Historic Diversity: Beyond Exceptionalism"; for two examples of a more specifically literary contestation, consider Baym's now famous article and Annette Kolodny's essay, "Letting Go Our Grand Obsessions: Notes Toward a New literary History of the American Frontiers." The latter was recently published as the lead essay in Michael Moon and Cathy Davidson's *Subjects and Citizens: Nation, Race, and Gender from Oroonoko to Anita Hill*, a collection whose opening sentence claims that it "takes on one of the most vexed issues in American literary studies: American exceptionalism" (I). Kolodny's essay offers a new way of defining the "frontier" and its literature: a way new not only in its conception of what a frontier is, but also in its implications both for what texts it would include as canonical "frontier literature" and for how it would read what it includes. Kolodny (20) specifically rejects the conditioning assumptions of exceptionalism, assumptions that have valued certain texts for their place in a teleological account of America as the realization of European liberal ideals, while erasing others that suggest an other account (by which I mean not only a different account but an account offered by an other – by one who is not the subject of exceptionalist ideology). Kolodny's essay is an excellent

example of the way in which many scholars are trying to re-invent both American literature and American Studies.

Until recently I had accepted the widespread notion that our mystical exceptionalism was in large part a consequence of what has been called "the Puritan origins of the American self." It can be traced back to passages such as the following from what is perhaps the most famous exceptionalist text in colonial American literature: John Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity":

Thus stands the cause between God and us. We are entered into Covenant with Him for this work ... Now if the Lord shall please to hear us, and bring us in peace to the place we desire, then hath He ratified this Covenant and sealed our Commission, [and] will expect a strict performance of the Articles contained in it[.] ...

... For this end, we must be knit together in this work as one man ... We must delight in each other, make other's conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our coinmission and community in the work, om community as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us as His own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways, so that we shall see much more of His wisdom, power, goodness and truth, than formerly we have been acquainted with. We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, "tie Lord make it like that of NEW ENGLAND." For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through tie world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God, and all professors for God's sake. We shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are agoing.

... Beloved, there is now set before us life and good, death and evil, in that we are commanded this day to love tie Lord our God, and to love one another, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His ordinance and His laws, and the articles of our covenant with Him, that we may live and be multiplied, and that the Lord our God may bless us in the land whither we go to possess it. But if our hearts shall turn away, so that we will not obey, but shall be seduced, and worship other gods, our pleasures and profits, and serve them, it is propounded unto us this day, we shall surely perish out of the good land whither we pass over this vast sea to possess it. (179-80)

It is no doubt the case, as Sacvan Bercovitch has argued (see 3-11), that Winthrop's description of the Puritans' covenant and of America as a city upon a hill – or, more broadly, that the genre his sermon exemplifies – is in fact one of the generative sources of exceptionalism as quasi-religious vision. But the time has come to ask what it is that makes this text, or this

genre, canonical *as literature*? I do not believe that the answer lies in any inherently aesthetic or formal qualities. Winthrop is eloquent enough, but why this Puritan sermon and not others? Why, indeed, Puritan sermons at all, and especially why sermons of this sort? Bercovitch (6) agrees with Perry Miller in calling "the New England jeremiad America's first distinctive literary genre." But something becomes a distinctive genre only if its perceivers have an interest in distinguishing it as such. It may well be that there are many other patterns of similarity in texts of the colonial period that we could raise to generic standing if we had some reason to perceive those patterns as significant. In fact, to some extent that is what Kolodny has done in her redefinition of frontier literature.

What, then, is it that makes the "distinctive" elements of the jeremiad distinguishable against, say, the general background of biblical analogy in Puritan writing? Or against the general background of the European encounter with the New World? What makes the particular tropes and topoi of the jeremiad significant enough to delineate a genre? The answer, I would suggest, is that the literary canon itself was constituted, retrospectively, out of and in promotion of an exceptionalist ideology (see Baym 125-27 and Kolodny 20). It may be that Winthrop and his genre – rather than, for instance, Puritan biographies of "great men," or Amerindian texts that witness the encounter with the Europeans (both of which might be candidates for canonization as genres) – have stood at the beginning of our tradition basically in a kind of cultural *nachtraglichkeit*. I would suggest in fact that canon formation in general operates at least in part in this fashion. If this is so, then we see that exceptionalism as a theme has become constitutive of what American literature is. At the very least, it seems safe to say that if the tradition had not itself been constituted by men who saw themselves as heirs to the Puritans and other exceptionalists – if, for instance, the first anthologies used in American literature courses had been edited by powerful critics who were also the children or grandchildren of slaves – the canon might have looked a good deal different.

One notable aspect of the claim that exceptionalism has been constitutive for our literature is that it suggests that the canon has been determined thematically and ideologically, rather than formally or aesthetically (see Baym 125-29 and *passim*). This really comes as no surprise with regard to the American scene. While formal and aesthetic

traits or judgements are never free of thematic or ideological determinations, the disposition in America has been to see the former (the aesthetic) as fundamentally trivial, and as worth attending to only when redeemed by some higher seriousness; the "merely" literary or "merely" aesthetic or "merely" pleasurable isn't enough of a value to define literature. Ben Franklin, a great lover of reading, nonetheless says in his *Autobiography* that he "approv'd the amusing oneself with Poetry now and then, so far as to improve one's Language, but no farther" (511). He found it of value only to the degree that it served a utilitarian end, such as increasing one's vocabulary. It may be in defense against this view of literature – or half in agreement with it – that Whitman insists in "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads" that "it is not on 'Leaves of Grass' distinctively as *literature*, or a specimen thereof, that I feel to dwell, or advance claims. No one will get at my verses who insists upon viewing them as a literary performance, or as aiming toward art and aestheticism" (454). Thus American literature must be exceptional not only by being American, but also by being more than mere "literature": the latter is one of those rather effete European values that the new nation seeks to leave behind.

Moreover, as Nina Baym puts it, "from its historical beginnings, American literary criticism has assumed that literature produced in this nation would have to be ground-breaking, equal to the challenge of the new nation, and completely original" (125). In other words, it had to be as exceptional as the place. This meant that no established standards were relevant to it, so that, to quote Baym again, "the early critic looked for a standard of Americanness rather than a standard of excellence. Inevitably, perhaps, it came to seem that the quality of 'Americanness,' whatever it might be, *constituted* literary excellence for American authors" (125-26). We need not rehearse all of Baym's argument here, but she offers an incisive analysis of how the category of Americanness (which is also the category of exceptionalism – what makes something *uniquely* American) came to exclude women authors.

Of course, the specific exclusion of writing by American women from the canon of "American literature" mirrored the more general exclusion that the ears of 1997 hear (as the ears of 1776 generally could not), in the assertion that all *men* are created equal, and endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights. This formulation from the *Declaration of Independence*, which was in the revolutionary and federalist periods just

the sort of thing that was offered as evidence for the exceptional nature of America, glossed over two other major structures of inequality as well. The first is the racism that excluded people of color from the category of men not because they were a different gender but because they were a different "species" (or, in a wonderfully self-contradictory ideological formulation, a different "species of men" [see Gates 8]). Looking ahead, we may note that the lesson Huck Finn has to learn on the raft is, precisely, that Jim is of the same species – that White and Black people share a common humanity.) The second structure is that of class; the notion that all are created equal is that the individual is, in essence, free of circumstances – implicitly that those born poor are equal to those born rich.

This latter is a fine idea particularly in a judicial context: if one assumes that divisions between rich and poor are inevitable, it is a good thing – though of course never really the case – if they are nonetheless equal before the law. However, while the Enlightenment notion of individualism that this idea carries with it may have had a politically progressive inflection in its day (particularly in championing the bourgeoisie against the *droits de seigneur*), over time it has (as often happens to ideas) been repositioned as a conservative defense of the vested interests of the dominant class – now, 'of course, the same bourgeoisie whom the idea helped to liberate. As Jehlen summarizes it,

The modern revision of identity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had begun by projecting a new division. Countering the inequalities of social origin, it deeded each man with a natal estate in nature and pictured him then entering into political relations voluntarily and freely. This ontological separation and abstraction liberated the individual from a net of social and political interdependencies and, by rendering him inherently whole and self-sufficient, empowered him to act upon the world on his own (and his own behalf). No longer defined primarily by family or class, a man molded himself, then the world in his image. (3-4)

Despite its great usefulness in opposition to a European system of inherited rank, this idea has proved problematic in its application. For, as Appleby puts it, this way of thinking "promotes more than a rejection of the past; it perpetuates the fantasy that we can uncouple ourselves from ... our society's cultural coding" (427). In particular it assumes that class boundaries are completely fluid; indeed the false consciousness that the USA is a classless meritocracy has persisted against all the evidence to

the contrary. In suggesting that the individual exists apart from circumstances, middle-class Americans have all too often inferred that no matter what may be the accidents of one's birth, in America no one has a head start: hence the poor kid who remains poor does so not because she started the race on an unequal footing, but because she is slow – and probably willfully slow. This is part of the logic of opposition to affirmative action in America; the belief is that once legal and judicial restraints on equal opportunity were eliminated, the "natural" equality of all citizens was re-insured. Any governmental help to any particular category of citizens is then seen as unfair, no matter what historical patterns of discrimination might still be in force.

I bring up the problems of race, class, and gender not only because they are now the common coin of cultural studies, or because they are among the major problems that are repressed in the simplistic, "false consciousness" versions of an exceptionalism that sees America as the home of equality and possibility, and the model for the world's future. They are also worth raising because these three repressions are themselves highly productive of canonical American literature, a literature that becomes one significant site of the return of the exceptionalist repressed. This aspect of our literature picks up on the opposite side of the coin of being a chosen people: the promise of a special providence if we keep the faith is also the threat of one if we break the covenant, as Winthrop makes abundantly clear. In a more secular version, this way of thinking suggests that inequality in America constitutes a failure to live up to who we really, essentially are as a nation. Many of our canonical writers have been there to remind us of the tragic or ironic distance between America as dream and ideal – the dream of equality and well-being, liberty and justice for all – and the historical reality of America as place. In *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Pioneers*, James Fenimore Cooper may do his best to affirm an ideology of white manifest destiny, but what makes him still worth reading is always what is left over, the pall that is cast (and the textual tension that is created) by the consciousness of and conscience about the genocidal effects on which this destiny depends. In "Benito Cereno," Melville gives us a savagely ironic portrait of Amasa Delano as the prototypical white American, the naive man of good will whose racism simply will not let him see – and who, when he does see, reacts as the mirror image of the "savagery" he

fears and loathes. Even more brilliantly, Melville positions the reader with Delano, enticing us to an identification with him by which we become implicated in his incapacities of moral vision. In *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain again shows racism to be the darkest blot on the American conscience and continent, the blot that puts all but the outcasts at odds with the positive potentialities of the natural scene. *The Scarlet Letter* examines the difficulties posed for the City on a Hill and its mission by the demands for freedom and self-realization, and the sexuality, of a strong woman – and the difficulties posed for her by the exceptionalist polity. In "The Birthmark" Hawthorne shows how the dream of world-malting and mastery over nature destroys the other and the possibility of love. "Daisy Miller" shows how class snobbery and allegiance to European hierarchic values can make the American man not only a poor perceiver, but a killer, and a violator of that which is "naturally" American. *Absalom, Absalom!* tells the story of the American intent on overcoming the classism he experienced as a child by carving his own world out of the wilderness, and of how he is brought down by his own failure to get beyond the strictures of racism, classism, and sexism. All of these texts – and they are among the greatest texts of our traditionally canonical fiction writers – gain a good deal of their force from the ground of American exceptionalism, from the notion that what is at stake in them is not just individual stories, not just a class or gender or race analysis and critique, but a failure of America: a failure to live up to our exceptionalist destiny. All of them, in varying degrees, invoke this destiny. At the least they are likely to do so by having a particular character who represents either "the American" or "America." In other cases, they rather explicitly refer to exceptionalist discourse.

One of the most vivid examples of all is F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, which is also one of the strongest novels ever written by an American about money and class. Richard Chase (162-67) suggested some time ago that the force of this text is its staging of a confrontation between the hero of American romance – the questing individualist – and the traditional social world of the novel: the world of manners, morals, money, and marriage that is antithetical to the form and the hero of what Baym calls the "melodrama of beset manhood." It is because *Gatsby* is the exceptionalist hero – because he is the conscious amalgam of Franklinitian and Emersonian models of self-creation and transcendence of

I see in you, certain to come, the promise of thousands of years, till now deferred ...

The new society at last, proportionate to Nature ...

Fresh come, to a new world indeed, yet long prepared,
 I see the genius of the modem, child of the real and ideal,
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when the European settlers saw themselves as quickening a virgin land, the modern spirit completed its genesis by becoming flesh in the body of the American continent. The ideology of this incarnation as it fulfilled Europe's ideal liberalism, and as it is represented, appropriately incarnate, in the form and matter of American writing, is my central concern in this book.

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Jehlen later defines this ideology as "[c]onstituting what one thinks and talks *with* rather than *about* ... [r]eaching down to levels of consciousness that are themselves mute – never told but retold inside consciously constructed arguments" (19, emphasis in original). The task of reading this "ground itself, lying below the cited grounds of thought" is one of "trying to see the limits of a language, and therefore to see what it denies as well as what it asserts." It "involves saying what the writer has *not* said (19, emphasis in original).

This view goes back to Louis Althusser's notion of ideology as inescapable, as the very condition of thought, as what he calls "a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real

conditions of existence" (162). We never stand outside ideology (though we may stand outside particular ideologies). Ideologies are not (or not primarily) the contents of thought; rather, they are its conditioning structures and figures. And they are not merely limiting (though they are that); they are also, and importantly, productive. Much has already been said by many writers, and something more will be said here, about how exceptionalism is limiting. But I also want to suggest how it is productive; and particularly how it is so – often in somewhat unpredictable ways – for American literature.

Still, despite his enrichment of our understanding of the term, Althusser ultimately cannot dispense (nor can I) with a certain kind of reinscription of the old idea of ideology as false consciousness. For him it takes the form of his reliance on the opposition between the imaginary and the real ("a representation of an imaginary relation to real conditions"), an opposition tinged in his discourse with Jacques Lacan's reinvention of those terms, but one that still carries with it strong traces of the notion of a reality from which ideology departs. A later move in his essay, in which he posits "science" (as in "scientific socialism") as ideology's other, has the same effect of aligning ideology with falsehood (171, 173).

The point of this rather extended reflection is finally this: when I speak of exceptionalism as an ideology, I both do and do not mean that it is a "false consciousness." There are ways, I will argue, in which, at least in its mainstream versions, it is patently false, both because of what it actively claims and because of what it silently excludes. On the other hand, the recognition of those patent falsehoods may still come under the sign, or in the context, of exceptionalism as a conditioning mode of consciousness, as a representation of individuals' imaginary relation to real conditions. Those, for instance, who criticize the mainstream notion of America as the cradle of democracy by pointing out the nation's failures, injustices, and founding inequities with regard to race or class are, on the one hand, exposing the falsehood of popular exceptionalism – particularly the falsehood of the notion that America is the "land of the free." But on the other hand, at least in the case of canonical American writers – and/or of readers who interpret canonically (that is, according to the canons of Americanness in writing) – this critique itself pretty much invariably takes place within the framework of exceptionalism as a mode of thought.

There are certain identifiable real conditions to which exceptionalism represents an imaginary response. They have to do with the fact that the USA was both the first nation whose hegemonic ideologies and institutions were more or less uncontestedly bourgeois, and the first major one to become "postcolonial" in the contemporary senses of that term. It was the former condition, allegedly guaranteed by the expanse of available "unowned" land, that made America seem the land of open opportunity and the place where the individual (white) man could perhaps, to paraphrase Ralph Waldo Emerson's transcendentalist imperative, build his own world (see Emerson 1020). It was a combination of the two factors (our status as both bourgeois and postcolonial) that made America seem the world's hope for the future, for in becoming post-colonial we had also thrown off the burden of oligarchy.

But exceptionalism was, nonetheless, not only an imaginary response, but a highly problematic one, particularly in two regards. First, there was an obvious contradiction between the ideology of exceptionalism and the material reality of a nation in which all were clearly not in fact equal. The white man's "own world was built in significant part by the labor of Black men and women he owned, and the ostensibly free and classless opportunity allegedly guaranteed by open land was (or quickly became) more imaginary than real, and in any case depended upon the erasure of the Amerindians and their prior claims to that land.

A second, and related, way in which the promise of American exceptionalism was highly problematic was in its going beyond the political to the mystical, beyond history to destiny. Three things must be said about this strain of exceptionalism at the outset. First, it should be taken as a proof and a reminder that imaginary formations do have real material effects: the notion of "manifest destiny" was not merely an apology, but an energizing force, for American imperialism. Second, this sort of exceptionalism has done far more harm than good; the genocidal effects of the doctrine of manifest destiny alone demonstrate this, even without invoking such other ugly aspects as the connection between exceptionalism and the eugenics movement of the early part of this century. Third, though no positive effects of such exceptionalism outweigh the negatives, it has also been positively productive – not only in literature as an inspiration for Whitman's democratic poetics, but also in other spheres for social critics such as Martin Luther King, who returned to the

notion of America as a potential promised land in eloquent and politically progressive ways.

In terms of the cultural work it has performed, the metaphysical extension of exceptionalism may have been in large part a response to the fact that the United States was the first major postcolonial nation. Among the effects of this were that the new nation had no models for the development it had undertaken, and that it still had links of enormous tensile strength with the imperial power that it thought it had thrown off. In this light mystical exceptionalism can be seen as a sort of overcompensation – a hyperbolic attempt to establish om difference from the metropolis. And its persistence as a symptom indicates that America really did not get over Europe for a very long time (indeed, it is only in the postmodern climate of the utter forgetting of the past that we may be said to have done so: if one has no memory at all the question of origins ceases to matter). For one example of the persistence into modernity and modernism of our colonial past and our mystical compensation, and of how these things have been generative of American literature, consider William Carlos Williams's obsessive attempts to repudiate T. S. Eliot's old-world notion of the tradition, efforts that extend from *Spring and All* through *Paterson* and one of the greatest of exceptionalist texts, *In the American Grain*, and all the way into "The Desert Music." Williams' powerful emphasis on the particularity and curative strength of the local ground gains its intensity in large part from the desire to repudiate our subordination to European culture.

In general, the traditional canon of our literature constantly manifests and reacts to exceptionalist ideology, for two major reasons. The first is simply that exceptionalism has been an integral part of the way many American authors, like Americans in general (particularly but by no means exclusively white Americans), have imaged their nation to themselves. The second is, as Nina Baym's essay on "Melodramas of Beset Manhood" suggests, that exceptionalism has historically been one of the conditioning and gatekeeping principles of canonization in America: traditionally, in order for American literature to be both literature (as opposed to just writing) and American (as opposed to just literature, or just British literature), it must bear the marks of this ideology. It need not unconditionally accept the most optimistic claims of exceptionalism, but it must be clearly locable in relation to this ideology's themes – and

generally, if not always, to the white, middle-class, male who is the dominant subject of this ideology, as well.

It must be emphasized that this is the *traditional* way of looking at American literature, rather than the inevitable way, because this way is now being contested, perhaps more vigorously than ever before – as is the entire discourse of exceptionalism. While I am not eager or even willing, as some Americanists are, either to give up the canonical works or to discard the notion of aesthetic judgement as one criterion for deciding what to read and teach, I think this contestation is extremely healthy, both from a literary and a cultural point of view. In terms of literature it offers us more to be interested in, more texts to learn and to learn to love. In terms of culture it should offer us a deeper understanding of the historical and contemporary multiplicity of American life, and should help us to meet a future in which that multiplicity can no longer be papered over, no matter what those with a nostalgia for a homogeneous and homogenized, white and English-only America – a nostalgia for neverland – might prefer.

One example of such contestation with a broadly historical focus is Appleby's "Recovering America's Historic Diversity: Beyond Exceptionalism"; for two examples of a more specifically literary contestation, consider Baym's now famous article and Annette Kolodny's essay, "Letting Go Our Grand Obsessions: Notes Toward a New literary History of the American Frontiers." The latter was recently published as the lead essay in Michael Moon and Cathy Davidson's *Subjects and Citizens: Nation, Race, and Gender from Oroonoko to Anita Hill*, a collection whose opening sentence claims that it "takes on one of the most vexed issues in American literary studies: American exceptionalism" (I). Kolodny's essay offers a new way of defining the "frontier" and its literature: a way new not only in its conception of what a frontier is, but also in its implications both for what texts it would include as canonical "frontier literature" and for how it would read what it includes. Kolodny (20) specifically rejects the conditioning assumptions of exceptionalism, assumptions that have valued certain texts for their place in a teleological account of America as the realization of European liberal ideals, while erasing others that suggest an other account (by which I mean not only a different account but an account offered by an other – by one who is not the subject of exceptionalist ideology). Kolodny's essay is an excellent

example of the way in which many scholars are trying to re-invent both American literature and American Studies.

Until recently I had accepted the widespread notion that our mystical exceptionalism was in large part a consequence of what has been called "the Puritan origins of the American self." It can be traced back to passages such as the following from what is perhaps the most famous exceptionalist text in colonial American literature: John Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity":

Thus stands the cause between God and us. We are entered into Covenant with Him for this work ... Now if the Lord shall please to hear us, and bring us in peace to the place we desire, then hath He ratified this Covenant and sealed our Commission, [and] will expect a strict performance of the Articles contained in it[.] ...

... For this end, we must be knit together in this work as one man ... We must delight in each other, make other's conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, om community as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us as His own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways, so that we shall see much more of His wisdom, power, goodness and truth, than formerly we have been acquainted with. We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, "the Lord make it like that of NEW ENGLAND." For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God, and all professors for God's sake. We shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going.

... Beloved, there is now set before us life and good, death and evil, in that we are commanded this day to love the Lord our God, and to love one another, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His ordinance and His laws, and the articles of our covenant with Him, that we may live and be multiplied, and that the Lord our God may bless us in the land whither we go to possess it. But if our hearts shall turn away, so that we will not obey, but shall be seduced, and worship other gods, our pleasures and profits, and serve them, it is propounded unto us this day, we shall surely perish out of the good land whither we pass over this vast sea to possess it. (179-80)

It is no doubt the case, as Sacvan Bercovitch has argued (see 3-11), that Winthrop's description of the Puritans' covenant and of America as a city upon a hill – or, more broadly, that the genre his sermon exemplifies – is in fact one of the generative sources of exceptionalism as quasi-religious vision. But the time has come to ask what it is that makes this text, or this

genre, canonical *as literature*? I do not believe that the answer lies in any inherently aesthetic or formal qualities. Winthrop is eloquent enough, but why this Puritan sermon and not others? Why, indeed, Puritan sermons at all, and especially why sermons of this sort? Bercovitch (6) agrees with Perry Miller in calling "the New England jeremiad America's first distinctive literary genre." But something becomes a distinctive genre only if its perceivers have an interest in distinguishing it as such. It may well be that there are many other patterns of similarity in texts of the colonial period that we could raise to generic standing if we had some reason to perceive those patterns as significant. In fact, to some extent that is what Kolodny has done in her redefinition of frontier literature.

What, then, is it that makes the "distinctive" elements of the jeremiad distinguishable against, say, the general background of biblical analogy in Puritan writing? Or against the general background of the European encounter with the New World? What makes the particular tropes and topoi of the jeremiad significant enough to delineate a genre? The answer, I would suggest, is that the literary canon itself was constituted, retrospectively, out of and in promotion of an exceptionalist ideology (see Baym 125-27 and Kolodny 20). It may be that Winthrop and his genre – rather than, for instance, Puritan biographies of "great men," or Amerindian texts that witness the encounter with the Europeans (both of which might be candidates for canonization as genres) – have stood at the beginning of our tradition basically in a kind of cultural *nachtraglichkeit*. I would suggest in fact that canon formation in general operates at least in part in this fashion. If this is so, then we see that exceptionalism as a theme has become constitutive of what American literature is. At the very least, it seems safe to say that if the tradition had not itself been constituted by men who saw themselves as heirs to the Puritans and other exceptionalists – if, for instance, the first anthologies used in American literature courses had been edited by powerful critics who were also the children or grandchildren of slaves – the canon might have looked a good deal different.

One notable aspect of the claim that exceptionalism has been constitutive for our literature is that it suggests that the canon has been determined thematically and ideologically, rather than formally or aesthetically (see Baym 125-29 and *passim*). This really comes as no surprise with regard to the American scene. While formal and aesthetic

traits or judgements are never free of thematic or ideological determinations, the disposition in America has been to see the former (the aesthetic) as fundamentally trivial, and as worth attending to only when redeemed by some higher seriousness; the "merely" literary or "merely" aesthetic or "merely" pleasurable isn't enough of a value to define literature. Ben Franklin, a great lover of reading, nonetheless says in his *Autobiography* that he "approv'd the amusing oneself with Poetry now and then, so far as to improve one's Language, but no farther" (511). He found it of value only to the degree that it served a utilitarian end, such as increasing one's vocabulary. It may be in defense against this view of literature – or half in agreement with it – that Whitman insists in "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads" that "it is not on 'Leaves of Grass' distinctively as *literature*, or a specimen thereof, that I feel to dwell, or advance claims. No one will get at my verses who insists upon viewing them as a literary performance, or as aiming toward art and aestheticism" (454). Thus American literature must be exceptional not only by being American, but also by being more than mere "literature": the latter is one of those rather effete European values that the new nation seeks to leave behind.

Moreover, as Nina Baym puts it, "from its historical beginnings, American literary criticism has assumed that literature produced in this nation would have to be ground-breaking, equal to the challenge of the new nation, and completely original" (125). In other words, it had to be as exceptional as the place. This meant that no established standards were relevant to it, so that, to quote Baym again, "the early critic looked for a standard of Americanness rather than a standard of excellence. Inevitably, perhaps, it came to seem that the quality of 'Americanness,' whatever it might be, *constituted* literary excellence for American authors" (125-26). We need not rehearse all of Baym's argument here, but she offers an incisive analysis of how the category of Americanness (which is also the category of exceptionalism – what makes something *uniquely* American) came to exclude women authors.

Of course, the specific exclusion of writing by American women from the canon of "American literature" mirrored the more general exclusion that the ears of 1997 hear (as the ears of 1776 generally could not), in the assertion that all *men* are created equal, and endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights. This formulation from the *Declaration of Independence*, which was in the revolutionary and federalist periods just

the sort of thing that was offered as evidence for the exceptional nature of America, glossed over two other major structures of inequality as well. The first is the racism that excluded people of color from the category of men not because they were a different gender but because they were a different "species" (or, in a wonderfully self-contradictory ideological formulation, a different "species of men" [see Gates 8]). Looking ahead, we may note that the lesson Huck Finn has to learn on the raft is, precisely, that Jim is of the same species – that White and Black people share a common humanity.) The second structure is that of class; the notion that all are created equal is that the individual is, in essence, free of circumstances – implicitly that those born poor are equal to those born rich.

This latter is a fine idea particularly in a judicial context: if one assumes that divisions between rich and poor are inevitable, it is a good thing – though of course never really the case – if they are nonetheless equal before the law. However, while the Enlightenment notion of individualism that this idea carries with it may have had a politically progressive inflection in its day (particularly in championing the bourgeoisie against the *droits de seigneur*), over time it has (as often happens to ideas) been repositioned as a conservative defense of the vested interests of the dominant class – now, 'of course, the same bourgeoisie whom the idea helped to liberate. As Jehlen summarizes it,

The modern revision of identity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had begun by projecting a new division. Countering the inequalities of social origin, it deeded each man with a natal estate in nature and pictured him then entering into political relations voluntarily and freely. This ontological separation and abstraction liberated the individual from a net of social and political interdependencies and, by rendering him inherently whole and self-sufficient, empowered him to act upon the world on his own (and his own behalf). No longer defined primarily by family or class, a man molded himself, then the world in his image. (3-4)

Despite its great usefulness in opposition to a European system of inherited rank, this idea has proved problematic in its application. For, as Appleby puts it, this way of thinking "promotes more than a rejection of the past; it perpetuates the fantasy that we can uncouple ourselves from ... our society's cultural coding" (427). In particular it assumes that class boundaries are completely fluid; indeed the false consciousness that the USA is a classless meritocracy has persisted against all the evidence to

the contrary. In suggesting that the individual exists apart from circumstances, middle-class Americans have all too often inferred that no matter what may be the accidents of one's birth, in America no one has a head start: hence the poor kid who remains poor does so not because she started the race on an unequal footing, but because she is slow – and probably willfully slow. This is part of the logic of opposition to affirmative action in America; the belief is that once legal and judicial restraints on equal opportunity were eliminated, the "natural" equality of all citizens was re-insured. Any governmental help to any particular category of citizens is then seen as unfair, no matter what historical patterns of discrimination might still be in force.

I bring up the problems of race, class, and gender not only because they are now the common coin of cultural studies, or because they are among the major problems that are repressed in the simplistic, "false consciousness" versions of an exceptionalism that sees America as the home of equality and possibility, and the model for the world's future. They are also worth raising because these three repressions are themselves highly productive of canonical American literature, a literature that becomes one significant site of the return of the exceptionalist repressed. This aspect of our literature picks up on the opposite side of the coin of being a chosen people: the promise of a special providence if we keep the faith is also the threat of one if we break the covenant, as Winthrop makes abundantly clear. In a more secular version, this way of thinking suggests that inequality in America constitutes a failure to live up to who we really, essentially are as a nation. Many of our canonical writers have been there to remind us of the tragic or ironic distance between America as dream and ideal – the dream of equality and well-being, liberty and justice for all – and the historical reality of America as place. In *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Pioneers*, James Fenimore Cooper may do his best to affirm an ideology of white manifest destiny, but what makes him still worth reading is always what is left over, the pall that is cast (and the textual tension that is created) by the consciousness of and conscience about the genocidal effects on which this destiny depends. In "Benito Cereno," Melville gives us a savagely ironic portrait of Amasa Delano as the prototypical white American, the naive man of good will whose racism simply will not let him see – and who, when he does see, reacts as the mirror image of the "savagery" he

fears and loathes. Even more brilliantly, Melville positions the reader with Delano, enticing us to an identification with him by which we become implicated in his incapacities of moral vision. In *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain again shows racism to be the darkest blot on the American conscience and continent, the blot that puts all but the outcasts at odds with the positive potentialities of the natural scene. *The Scarlet Letter* examines the difficulties posed for the City on a Hill and its mission by the demands for freedom and self-realization, and the sexuality, of a strong woman – and the difficulties posed for her by the exceptionalist polity. In "The Birthmark" Hawthorne shows how the dream of world-malting and mastery over nature destroys the other and the possibility of love. "Daisy Miller" shows how class snobbery and allegiance to European hierarchic values can make the American man not only a poor perceiver, but a killer, and a violator of that which is "naturally" American. *Absalom, Absalom!* tells the story of the American intent on overcoming the classism he experienced as a child by carving his own world out of the wilderness, and of how he is brought down by his own failure to get beyond the strictures of racism, classism, and sexism. All of these texts – and they are among the greatest texts of our traditionally canonical fiction writers – gain a good deal of their force from the ground of American exceptionalism, from the notion that what is at stake in them is not just individual stories, not just a class or gender or race analysis and critique, but a failure of America: a failure to live up to our exceptionalist destiny. All of them, in varying degrees, invoke this destiny. At the least they are likely to do so by having a particular character who represents either "the American" or "America." In other cases, they rather explicitly refer to exceptionalist discourse.

One of the most vivid examples of all is F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, which is also one of the strongest novels ever written by an American about money and class. Richard Chase (162-67) suggested some time ago that the force of this text is its staging of a confrontation between the hero of American romance – the questing individualist – and the traditional social world of the novel: the world of manners, morals, money, and marriage that is antithetical to the form and the hero of what Baym calls the "melodrama of beset manhood." It is because *Gatsby* is the exceptionalist hero – because he is the conscious amalgam of Franklinitian and Emersonian models of self-creation and transcendence of

circumstances; because he "sprang from his Platonic conception of himself" (Fitzgerald 99) – that he intrigues Americans, and that Nick Carraway, Fitzgerald's moralistic narrator, can declare Gatsby (despite his obvious corruptions), to be "worth the whole damn bunch put together" (154). And what gives Fitzgerald's novel its claim not necessarily to be the greatest novel ever written by an American, but to be the "great American novel," is its analysis of American society in light of the exceptionalist dream. At the very least, this is what makes its ending one of the most resonant passages in American writing:

[G]radually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes – a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees ... had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent ... face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.

And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby ... He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night ...

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. (182)

For a more recent ending, by a writer who speaks from a very different subject-position but who nonetheless invokes the same tradition, consider the last lines of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, with their assertion that the destruction of Pecola Breedlove, a young Black girl, is a failure of the land, and their clear indication that the failure of the land is the failure of its people:

I talk about how ... it was the fault of the earth, the land, of our town. I think even now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late. At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it's much, much, much too late.

(160, emphasis in original)

Like James's Daisy Miller, Pecola Breedlove is an innocent flower cut off by the failure of America.

These two endings point strongly toward a key difference between the traditionally canonical sort of American novels on the one hand, and European – as well as many non-canonical or marginalized American –

novels on the other. The difference, I would emphasize, is that the individual and social failures or tragedies in canonized American novels are rather consistently framed, by authors or readers or both, as failures or tragedies *of the nation* – rather than, on the one hand, of a particular class or gender or social system or, on the other, of humanity in general. Emma Bovary's death may be a function of the social system in which she lives, or of her nation at a particular moment, but it is not so specifically a failure of France as an ideological ideal (at least, I don't think it is). Dickens's innocents may suffer at the hands of a class system or a legal system or a failure of common humanity and charity, but they are not the victims of England's failure *to be England*. Among American novels, Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* is as vivid a narrative as *The Great Gatsby*, and as powerful an indictment of class prejudice. It also grippingly exposes and criticizes the kind of sexism that Fitzgerald's novel only reinforces. Yet in the past Wharton's novel has not had as much resonance for American audiences as has Fitzgerald's. The factors that Baym analyzes as contributing to the exclusion of women authors have everything to do with this. But I think one of the most important factors is that the novel is not framed by the exceptionalist myth: in particular, we are not invited to experience Lily Bart's death as a failure of the nation. Part of the reason for this is that she is not made to stand for America – that is, for the land – as women in general, and women victims in particular, have been made to stand in the traditional, male-authored American novel (as Baym and Kolodny, among others, have pointed out). One of the benefits of getting away from the nationalist/exceptionalist requirement for American literature is that we will longer require this problematic metaphor in order to feel the tragedy of such a death. Another benefit, already suggested above, is that we are thus given works of American literature to love that we were not invited to love before because they were not "American" enough.

Exceptionalist ideology also depends upon at least one other key repression besides those of race, class, and gender – one other whose repressed returns in our canonically critical literature. That is the repression of the materiality and resistance, the otherness, of nature itself. Historically the guarantor of all the boons that make America exceptional is free land, and the landscape is regarded as hospitable to human activity – as, in the ideology's most radical versions, eager to be used (and used

up) by and in human designs. Thus in "Song of the Redwood-Tree," one of his most troubling poems, Whitman has the tree, which is about to be cut, speak as follows:

*Nor yield we mournfully majestic brothers,
 We who have grandly fill'd our time;
 With nature's calm content, with tacit huge delight,
 We welcome what we wrought for through the past,
 And leave the field for them.
 For them predicted long,
 For a superber race, they too grandly fill their time,
 For them we abdicate, in them ourselves ye forest kings! ...
 To be in them absorb'd, assimilated*

(152, italics in original)

A number of canonical texts could be cited against this one, as could a good deal of notable contemporary poetry. Consider, for instance, the pigeon-hunting scene in *The Pioneers*, where Natty Bumppo speaks passionately for nature against its victimization by the westward sweep of Euroamerican designs. Or again recall "The Birthmark" with its critique of the oe'rweening scientific pride that would "perfect" nature. Among contemporaries, the openly ecological writing of Gary Snyder and W. S. Merwin, among others, comes to mind. But perhaps the key text in this regard is *Moby Dick*, in which nature persistently remains other to human readings of and designs for (or, more accurately, against) it. Surely the bitterness of the wounded transcendentalist, Ahab, results from the "failure" of nature to live up to the exceptionalist promise. Surely Melville's portrait of oe'rweening pride in relation to nature resonates against Whitman's appropriation of the voice of the tree to celebrate its demise in favor of manifest destiny – as, more generally, Melville's cautionary tale sounds against the entire transcendentalist and exceptionalist command, as Emerson puts it in "Nature," to "Know then, that the world exists *for you*" (1020, emphasis added).

Thus in many ways our canonical literature has served as part of the conscience of exceptionalism, and of the nation. This critique from within the ideology helps explain why our literature may look highly political and subversive – as many critics, among the most recent of them Frank Lentricchia (241-43), have claimed – and why it may yet at the same time seem to be no more than what Nina Baym calls a "consensus

criticism of the consensus" (129). Writing from the subject-position of an otherness (the feminine) that has been systematically excluded, indeed anathematized as an impediment to the exceptionalist encounter with the wilderness, Baym finds the political critique from within the tradition anything but radical: its problem is precisely that it does not change things radically in the etymological sense of "at the root." While it criticizes the material reality of America, it does not challenge the ideological paradigm. Interested parties can consult Sacvan Bercovitch's *The American Jeremiad* for another powerful analysis of the ways in which the energies of this traditional critique have "served to sustain the culture, because the same ideal that released those energies transformed radicalism itself into a mode of cultural cohesion and continuity" (205).

I want to align myself with those who urge that we attend to voices that pose a more radical threat – voices of others who have not been heard before, and who do not subscribe, even rhetorically, to the exceptionalist ideology. It is part of the business of contemporary American Studies to help us hear them. Yet it's interesting how, even in the case of voices from the position of the other, those who seem to have the most powerful impact are figures such as, in the African-American tradition, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, Ralph Ellison, Martin Luther King, and Toni Morrison, who do invoke exceptionalism.

But we must not, in opening ourselves to others, cease to heed the voices whose critique come from within exceptionalism. There are two sides to what Bercovitch says: on the one hand, it is hard for any really radical critique to take place in America, because critique is so easily absorbed into cultural continuity, and thereby often neutralized. But the other side of this coin is that we have had a continuity of critique – an ongoing testing of our realities against our alleged values – and the effects of this have been in certain ways positive. The history of what has been, on social issues, a surprisingly conservative nation has been made more just (or at least less unjust) by certain critical uses of exceptionalism to hold our ideological feet to the fire. The critique that comes from within exceptionalism (like that which comes from the Enlightenment liberalism with which exceptionalism is so thoroughly imbricated) is not now nor has it ever been politically or culturally or ethically sufficient – but at times it has been effective, where a more radical critique simply fell on deaf ears.

What is the future of exceptionalist ideology in an age of the economic globalization that characterizes late capitalism, and the "incredulity toward metanarratives" that, according to Jean-François Lyotard, constitutes the postmodern condition (xxiv)? Both of these forces, it would seem, should tend to make exceptionalism less a dominant ideology and more a residual one, in Raymond Williams's terms (see *Marxism and Literature* 121-27). And indeed, such a forecast has much in common with the vision of the future projected in the cyberpunk fictions of William Gibson (such as *Neuromancer*, *Count Zero*, *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, "Burning Chrome," "Johnny Mnemonic") – fictions that Fredric Jameson sees as nothing less than a "distorted figuration of ... the whole world system of a present-day multinational capitalism" (37). In Gibson's world, as in our own as the latter is described by many theorists of the postmodern, in the economically most highly developed countries national and nationalist categories seem to diminish in significance in light of the transnational flows of information and capital. In Gibson, the individualist small entrepreneurs who stand on the margins of the law, such as the computer "cowboys" who steal data and money in *Neuromancer* and "Burning Chrome," have little or no sense of national identity, and no discernible relation to any national project.

On the other hand, both theoretical accounts of the present and recent fictions of America's future also provide an alternative vision, one in which exceptionalism could figure much more prominently. In contrast to those who see the role of the nation as diminishing, Michel Foucault points out that "in contemporary societies ... power relations have come more and more under state control" (224). If this is so, it is certainly possible for an exceptionalist discourse to have a significant ideological role to play, both in support of *and* in opposition to this concentration of power as the latter occurs in the United States. On the one hand, it can be one of the ideological frames by which this concentration is justified: "America must be strong to fulfill her destiny." On the other, it might be enlisted in the service of those who, invoking the Boston Tea Party and other icons of the American Revolution, claim the right of the people to throw off the "yoke of tyranny."

On a more specific plane, it seems clear that the forces of ideological reaction have grown radically in the last two decades: the presidency of Ronald Reagan, the growth of right-wing evangelical Christianity as a

political force, the rise of Newt Gingrich and other young New Right ideologues, and the emergence of the militia movement are among the most visible examples. All of these developments are thoroughly imbricated with, and consciously trade on, various brands of exceptionalist ideology. A fiction that projects these trends (rather than the globalization of capital) as dominating daily life in the American future is Margaret Atwood's terrifying *The Handmaid's Tale*. It is less difficult than it ought to be to imagine a future in the grip of a fundamentalist New Right totalitarianism; in such a future, one suspects, the most egregiously destructive versions of American exceptionalism (the belief in a programmatically white America with a Manifest Destiny allegedly ordained by an evangelical Christian God) might play quite a prominent role.

Nonetheless, despite this rather grim reminder of how destructive exceptionalism can be (and has been), I want to end by returning to a recognition of a more ameliorative and productive aspect, at least for literature, of a positive faith in it. In one way it is pleasing formally to end on a note of affirmation. But my doing so is in large part a consequence of the organization (or disorganization) of this essay as it has developed in composition, rather than an expression of any final faith in or desire to recuperate the exceptionalist ideology. Still, having disavowed the meaning of such a pleasurable closure, perhaps we can at least enjoy the fiction of it. The greatest pleasures and values of a positive exceptionalism in our literature, I believe, are to be found in the Whitman tradition, and particularly in the best poetry of Walt Whitman himself. Part of the reason for that is that Whitman took the ideology more seriously and viscerally – and literally – than any of our other significant writers. And by an act of sheer will and unbridled, erotic energy, he worked it into a vision that asserts the transcendence of difference and absence and even death. When Myra Jehlen discusses how America became the literalization, the "incarnation of the spirit of liberal idealism," and how "the crux of the matter is the identification of certain abstract ideals with the physical American landscape" (9, 12-13); when she discusses how "Americans assume their national identity as the fulfillment of selfhood" (9), when she tells how "it is as an American that ... [the abstract individual] becomes not only singular but representative," so that "community ... comes from within" and "it is by being autonomous that each

man thus connects to others" (14-15) – in all of these instances she does no more, really, than to gloss Whitman. Here, then, is a passage that exemplifies Whitman's declaration of the democratic vision to which exceptionalism led him. Would that it had led our politicians and cultural gatekeepers to something similar:

These States are the amplest poem.

Here is not merely a nation but a teeming Nation of nations,

Here the doings of men correspond with the broadcast doings of the day and night.

Here is what moves in magnificent masses careless of particulars,

Here are the roughs, beards, friendliness, combativeness, the soul loves,

Here the flowing trains, here the crowds, equality, diversity, the soul loves.

(243)

This scene of "equality, diversity" is perhaps the nation to which Allen Ginsberg referred as "the lost America of love" when, in his "In a Supermarket in California," he paid tribute to Whitman as "dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage-teacher" (24). At its most positively productive, American exceptionalism allows us to dream that that America of love is not lost – and allows us to go to *Leaves of Grass* to find it again, at least as hope and ideal. What we need as a nation, beyond the exceptionalism that the rhetoric of my ending is unable really to go beyond, is to learn that courage, to find that love of equality and diversity, to give it an American incarnation.

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