

## American 'Exceptionalism' and Its Exceptions

Jan B. Gordon

'In this country we are very vain of our political institutions, which are singular in this, that they sprung, within the memory of living men, from the character and condition of the people, which they still express with sufficient fidelity, -and we ostentatiously prefer them to any other in history. They are not better, but only fitter for us....'

(Emerson *P*, 199)

In one of the more familiar of his numerous forays into American politics, the author of *Representative Government*, in a single sentence simultaneously refers to the vanity of Americans who believe in the singular, exceptional nature of their institutions and the need to modify a conviction of superiority to more pragmatic concerns, the displacement of blind *fidelity* by a more pragmatic *fitness*. Democratic institutions do not travel well, and perhaps we should make fewer attempts to export them as superior products, insofar as they are only "fitting" for us. These sentences conform to Sharon Cameron's perceptive observation that in Emerson's work "obliquity sweeps aside objections" making them tangential insofar as they rather illogically "disable their ability to interfere with the essay's claims" (Cameron 36).<sup>1</sup> Yet, tangents often matter, especially when tangential to *fidelity*, insofar as the supplement often subverts.

This sort of economic or ideological "hedging" of conflicting assertions is precisely what has long made the logic of Transcendentalism so baffling. It seems retrospectively, a critique, not radically dissimilar from that offered to the hapless formalist minister in *The Divinity School Address* who had read

many religious texts but in the entire discourse, gave no evidence that “he had ever lived at all” (Emerson *DSA*, 81). It also of course criticizes American Exceptionalism: the belief that, as one of our iconic hymns would have it, “God shed his Grace on thee,” and therefore that our democratic institutions only *fit* us. We were, in this model, the *singular* beneficiaries of divine election, as if the country had inherited a divine legacy. If this be the case, then such recent initiatives as “spreading democratic institutions,” much less “regime change,” seem delusional at best and occasionally even hypocritical. It is very difficult to reconcile what is presumably exceptional with *universal* values and avoid hypocrisy or, alternatively that we Americans arbitrarily create the sacred from situational ethics:

We may be wise in asserting the advantage in modern times of the democratic form, but to other states of society, in which religion consecrated the monarchical, that and not this was expedient.

(Emerson *P*, 199)

We almost forget that America was a country where religion almost “consecrated the monarchical,” vestiges of which to this day, surround the instantiation of, if not the monarchical, at least our elected officials. The President of the United States assumes office with his hand upon the Holy Bible and witnesses testify in our judicial system by promising to “tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God” with hand on Holy Writ. In the mid-fifties the words “Under God” were added to the Pledge of Allegiance, as if to reaffirm what appears on both paper and metallic specie, “In God We Trust.” In an ever-weakening currency these days, without the backing of gold as formerly, one can only hope that God’s Trust Bank is worth our faithful deposits sufficient to return them with interest when called

upon. Even though Melville's *The Confidence-Man* should remind us, if Walter Benn Michael's research did not, that once upon a time there were a plethora of privately issued currencies in circulation, all of which at various times demanded and occasionally received acceptance as legal tender.<sup>2</sup> Hence, in our immediate past, our unity evoked a mythic *United States* involving God, a unified country, and a unified currency—the acceptance of all three in a kind of “holy consanguinity,” despite the eye on a pyramid (on the \$ 1 bill)—a familiar Free Mason icon, appropriated, like Hester Prynne's curious complexion, from the East.

Perhaps we should be more tolerant of countries whose foundational myths are in fact rooted in an orthodox, inaccessible belief system, as ours originally was. Sacvan Bercovitch has over the years advanced the idea that “the City on the Hill” was conceived of as a quasi-political project embodying Divine hope for mankind.<sup>3</sup> Among the early Puritan divines, exemplified above all in the rhetoric of Cotton Mather, America was a promised land, the New Jerusalem, fully justifying what he termed a “Jeremiad.” Not exactly a *Jihad*, but not so far way either. Although the myth promulgated by my junior high school American history teacher with the unforgettable name, Edsel Ford, presumed that the Puritans were in search of religious freedom, recent research has suggested that the Puritans had considerable freedom of worship in a yet dis-united Britain. They could not hold political office then and, until the nineteenth century, limited to members of the Established Church. But they underwent considerably less persecution than did Protestants and Catholics during the same period: the Thirty Years War on the continent and the English Civil War combined to kill nine million !<sup>4</sup>

There was no one to convert (at least prior to departure for the New World) insofar as the various (native) American Indian tribes were relatively

unknown. Hence, the ill-fated Jamestown Colony as well as the more successful Massachusetts Bay Colony might be alternatively imagined, not as religious havens, but as “concessions” serving the political, economic, and religious needs of the colonists at the same time that it preserved a necessarily centripetal British Establishment. British history is replete with sending the country’s ne’er-do-wells or those with anti-social behavior to the colonies (often imaginatively re-constructed as “empty countries”) in the hopes that they might make a “name” (and fortune) for themselves. Was America then, in the strategy of the Crown, an opportunity for an “alternative Establishment” that would return a handsome profit on relatively small investment while keeping a watchful eye on the Spanish threat to the south and the French threat in what was to be French Canada? Just as with Singapore almost exactly two-hundred years later, rocky, inhospitable New England was a “buffer,” satisfying both British domestic needs and a policy of political “containment” of rival, conflicting European interests, particularly given the alliances of Phillip II of Spain with central European (non-Catholic) powers.

If the first non-native Americans were in fact economic migrants whose sponsored passage was so easily adaptable then and now to our myths of (religious) “freedom fighters” in flight from English religious persecution, then the displacement of the economic rationale by the theological would be logical enough. At the present time, religious persecution in one’s home country (say, Afghanistan) is sufficient grounds for a hearing before a magistrate of the U. S. Immigration and Naturalization Service in consideration of temporary citizenship. That “fast track” to citizenship is the envy of undocumented, yet resident Mexican economic migrants cheaply harvesting greens for America’s nightly salads, but under no religious persecution in their native country. Has sympathy for “religious persecution” been, historically,

part of our collective American DNA, because it “sells” better in masking our economic need for cheaper labor?

This is to say, that religious persecution has a long history of making political “sense” in America, insofar as it exacts sympathy, which may explain why Israel, that new “City on the Hill” where the desert has been made to bloom—initially by the religiously persecuted from World War II, but now with a substantial minority population of Arabs and Asian Jews—enjoys overwhelming public support in the United States among major parties. If America was the “New Jerusalem” in the dream visions of the pilgrims crossing the Atlantic as if they were being “delivered,” much as Moses did the Israelites in Egypt (or as typologically Christ did the mariners on the Sea of Galilee in the *New Testament*), America seems to be returning the favor with unrestricted support for an Israel with a “New Jerusalem” as its capital, even if it involves displacing occupants claiming legal, if not historical, possession of the land.

Actually, the metaphor, “City on the Hill,” was originally used by John Winthrop in 1630 before the *Arabella* made landfall, in reference to his perception that “the eyes of all people are upon us,” i. e., that the colonists were a potentially universal example. Its transformation into a description of the uniqueness of the American political system with its enhanced theological overtones came only later, periodically renewed in John Kennedy’s speech on the eve of his inauguration, and then by Justice Sandra Day O’Connor (who recited Winthrop’s speech in its entirety at President Reagan’s funeral), then in Sarah Palin’s acceptance speech for the Republican nomination for Vice-President in 2008. Its most recent use is in the title of a documentary film made by a temporarily reborn Newt Gingrich and shown at the Kennedy Center entitled “A City Upon a Hill: The Spirit of American Exceptionalism.”

This is to say that the phrase itself has been put into a semiotic system to aid in the construction of an American Exceptionalism as its theological endowment, a covenant like that of Jerusalem, in need of restoration. This rhetorical rearrangement of verbal lines of descent, as we shall see in Thoreau, is crucial to a certain kind of America—a country allegedly closer to God.

No wonder that the most important figure of “deliverance” in modern America, a Southern rather than a New England Divine, should have begun an address recited in school rooms throughout the planet with a dream vision of a Promised Land, not exactly a “City on a Hill,” but close enough, where children of different color might sit at the same table—even as he intimated that he would not be the one to lead them to the land across the waters. Without African-American Christian churches and their organizational skills and the moving, participatory sermons and an accompanying musical culture which screamed suffering (and to which we all danced as teenagers in a recalcitrant South), America may have delayed the attempt to cross the river. The Rev. Martin Luther King, then, used the same ideological model, the “City on the Hill,” to advocate a more progressive, liberal vision of the future kingdom. His ideal is neither Gov. Winthrop’s universal, nor Sarah Palin’s restorative model, but a dream vision of the liberated future.

There is an impulse in every culture to remain satisfied in that “chevy on the levy” of *Bye-Bye Miss American Pie*, and to use loss and nostalgia to turn back or, to “walk on by,” but King’s “City” is by no means nostalgic. The same metaphor is being used, but to *different* ideological ends. This dual usage should suggest that the “City on the Hill” is simultaneously a vanished ideal in need of restoration and one existing only in an indeterminate future, thereby appealing to both conservatives and liberals. This may explain its endurance: fantasy is indifferent to restoration.

A recurrent theme of our political rhetoric—the logic by which we define ourselves as a nation—has long emphasized America’s uniqueness: the “last, best hope of mankind” or, as for George Bush *fills*, “the indispensable nation.” Yet no one, to my knowledge, has ever explained why this singular indispensability rests upon America so exclusively in a world where several European countries (France, Germany, the former Soviet Union) have disappeared or changed geographic shape repeatedly over the years, and where a number of Asian nations have taken shape. Heirs of God’s grace, for which the first immigrants in a country shaped by immigration offered “grace” and created a national holiday, seems of a piece with our near-religious conviction in our *exceptionalism*, as if there were in the various charters enabling colonies, something like the Covenant of the ancient Hebrews enabling a myth of a “Chosen People.”

Assuming that you follow the rather strict rules (which endow the United States with the largest per capita prison population in the world), Americans are the largely self-designated “chosen people.” We are as Americans simultaneously separate from the rest, and yet charged with the responsibility of spreading the “word” of (impossibly) “self-evident” truths: universal entitlement not merely to the land, but to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Such is a difficult mission. But, of course we must never forget that this exceptionalism was from the outset, autonomously self-proclaimed in a *Declaration of Independence* rather than in the binding of the colonies and Great Britain by covenant. No exchange of protocols defining limits, conditions, and vehicles of enforcement exist, but rather a mere announcement/pronouncement. For the philosopher, J. L. Austin, the *Declaration of Independence* would be a *speech act* that, like the ceremonial utterance, “I pronounce you man and wife,” achieves a state simply by virtue of

being spoken.<sup>5</sup> America was created *sui generis*, as God created the world in *Genesis*, by verbal *fiat*. It would have limitless borders, affirmed by Manifest Destiny.

Seventeenth-century radical protestants (an admittedly arbitrary designation which would surely include the Pilgrims) would have had a conviction of universal sin—a democratization of Adam's Original Sin. All are sinners in the hands of an angry God, to appropriate the title of one of Increase Mather's more familiar sermons. And because of the universal application of that belief, the first immigrant Americans, albeit only ideologically self-banished, shared a universal "longing" for Paradise in which the idea of America itself came to mythically participate. A desire for perfection (on earth or in heaven) by the theologically outcast, led to the construction of an equally imaginary grace-filled Eden. This apparent paradox surely accounts for what Harold Bloom has called the "inward turn"—a concentration upon the *self* and private states in our artistic life—placed at the feet of Emerson, the author of an essay entitled, *Self-Reliance*, after all.<sup>6</sup> This "confessional mode," a fixation upon the state of the soul in response to the events of daily life is, to be sure, a refrain in Emerson's thought, perhaps most succinctly expressed in the words, "the indwelling Supreme Spirit cannot be gotten rid of" (*DSA*, 75). Our first public spokesmen, the New England Divines, often urged their congregants to keep a so-called *Day-Book*, a combination of calendar and diary wherein might be charted a synchrony between the soul and the evolving seasons' progression through time in a specific locale. This uniquely American genre surely informs one of our national classics, Thoreau's *Walden*, with its beginning in an artificial (self) declaration of Thoreau's independence from America on 4 July 1845. The inner life of the soul on a pilgrimage to self-communion that promises to reveal all secrets is a formula for success

in various incarnations from *True Confessions* magazine to guests on Oprah Winfrey. All are committed to a rebirth and resurrection, a “new” whatever.

An irony should not be lost on us. Although its existence has been publicly assumed in a number of “John Roe” and “Jane Doe” judicial decisions, a genuine right to personal privacy as an exclusive claim has never been fully established in American law, only the privilege against self-incrimination with which it is often confused. Hence the absence of the *Day-Book* or the unexplained erasure of crucially revelatory portions of it may have dire consequences, as President Nixon discovered. Nothing succeeds in America quite like the revelation of past sins in some presumably sincere confession precisely because all of us are originally sinners and we share sympathy with able to advance those who allow us to see them re-immersed, to “come clean,” as it were. The “second chance,” redemption, is so woven into our public life that even Nixon was able to advance claims for a “New Nixon” as was Sinclair Lewis’ *Elmer Gantry*. The pretense of private revelation is related to the Book of Revelations, apparently, as long—and herein perhaps is the rub—it is believable. The *Day-Book*/diary combines the Books of Nature and Grace.

In extreme gratitude to God, the first settlers to these shores gave thanks, but as legend has it, at the advent of the second winter, not the first. With what in retrospect appears as good reason, for in the first winter almost half the Plymouth Colony had perished to starvation, Indian attacks, and illness! A successful harvest, along with the peaceful participation of the Wampanoag Indians (economic success and a temporary peace treaty with heathens) were crucial to survival at the nation’s founding moment, as well, I would argue, as now. We know what happened to the Indians a century later during the forced migration known as the “Vale of Tears” during the Jackson Administration: they became outcasts, confined to special enclaves, “settlements,” overwhelmingly

confined to our expansive “west bank,” in the absence of covenants.

Is it possible that the paradoxes of American exceptionalism which I am feebly addressing, owes something to our Puritan ancestry? Because all were doctrinally *fallen* or geographically *outcast* and believed in the universality of original sin (unlike the British of the Established Church much less the Latitudinarians and Cambridge Platonists), only those who could thread the “needle’s eye” (the narrow path to Heaven) might qualify for membership among the saved, the Elect. The “rest”—both Native Americans and later immigrants—ran the risk of being social or geographic outcasts.

Short of Judgment Day in the brief time in which all of us live our daily lives, how could one determine whether or not he was among the Elect, and hence destined for paradise? The individual was trained to look for *signs* in the natural world which gave “evidence” of election, and hence necessitated an acute reader. This is to say that nature had to be read in a certain way, as a potential revelation of one’s scant future chances. Rather than a collection of contingent objects and effects, one read nature like the detective looks at a crime scene (Original Sin) or a certain kind of reader looks at a literary text: as unassociated clues to be symmetrically or logically arranged with sufficient internal consistency as to *reveal* a truth. Our ancestors read nature, much as the Burmese ask visitors to accompany them to the fortune-teller. Puritan nature was a repository of signs in need of interpretation by the “bearer” and self-appointed readers. The *data* of the natural world was a depository—not unlike a bank account.

Again, it is Emerson, above all in the lengthy essay, *Nature*, where particular natural facts are easily converted to particular spiritual facts. Commenting upon primitive language acquisition—both ontogenetic (among children) and phylogenetic (among primitive tribes)—Emerson notes (erroneously) that

words begin as natural facts:

...this origin of all words that convey a spiritual import—so conspicuous a fact in the history of language, —is our least debt to nature. It is not only words that are emblematic, it is things which are emblematic. Every *natural* fact is a symbol of some *spiritual* fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of mind, and that state of mind can only be described by presenting the natural appearance as its picture.

(Emerson *N* 21, italics added)

Given that “the world is emblematic” (Emerson *N* 25), then words are a kind of missing link, binding the Book of Nature and the Book of Grace.

If nature was indeed a hieroglyph, it surely necessitated a different kind of reading, insofar as the reader was “looking” for something: evidence of his private election in detected symmetries or divine *patterns* vulnerable to an imaginary totalizable meaning, revelation. The alternative was a world of random, differential contingencies, indicative that one had inherited in full measure the fallen state, chaos. The need to retain *fideism* may account for the penchant in contemporary literary criticism and philosophy, until very recently, to eschew contingency altogether. One consequence of this admittedly Manichaean perspective is evident throughout Emerson's thought, but nowhere more so than in the essay, *Compensation*. Because it is constituted as a binary (+/-) semiotic system, Emerson's fallen nature “hates monopolies and exceptions” (*C* 117). Nature as an amalgamation of contingency is abandoned. The dualism found in man (the blessed and the damned) underlies all creation, including language itself:

An inevitable dualism bisects nature, so that each thing is a half, and suggests another thing to make it whole; as spirit, matter; man, woman; odd, even;

subjective, objective; in, out; upper, under; motion, rest; yea, nay.

(C 117)

The more successfully we imaginatively link random contingencies into a presumed unitary *reading* (freed from a necessary dualism) that self-consistently *means*, the closer the individual is to Paradise. No wonder we literary critics try to wed ourselves to an often exclusionary “right reading,” i. e., one that purports to explain (by unifying) more random facts or events by stringing them together in uniquely impossible ways.

And, to be sure, some of the attempts by figures in our national literary pantheon to advance a univocal meaning from dissociated objects and effects seem farfetched indeed, as farfetched as the re-siting (by reciting differentially) the self-contradictory exceptionalism purportedly advanced by the concept of the City on a Hill. For Henry David Thoreau, words are not merely metaphors, but natural facts. The more distant our removal from nature and the natural order, the more “far-fetched” become our metaphors and tropes so that “the language of our parlors...degenerates into *palaver* (*W* 276). Thoreau’s pun which privileges progressive degeneration in our use of language is part and parcel of an interest in the direct sounds of the natural world. *Walden* is filled with the sounds of owls, nightingales, the splashing of pickerel in the pond rendered by the author into a kind of transcribed phonetic script, like the “hoo-hoo” of the owl or the “whistle of the locomotive” of the Fitchburg Railroad (*W*, 139, 124, 127). What characterizes these natural and commercial voices is that they speak “without metaphor” (*W*, 133) —a world where “likeness” has disappeared, in favor of shared “Sounds,” in fact the title of Chapter IV of *Walden*. Words are the Oversoul speaking to us directly, but in a kind of code that evades the metaphoric.

Near the end of *Walden* Thoreau advances an undisguised onomatopoeic theory of word origins, so that the word "leaf" has the same root as "lobe," "lungs," and even "lips" all of which he imagines to share the same shape. Deep down the words are able to be strung together because language is indexed to a *shared shape* in the natural world. Language is not *an ad hoc* arbitrary construction, but a secret sign system awaiting revelation by those who string together disparity into a *system*:

The ear may be regarded...as a lichen, *umbilicaria*, on the side of the head with its lobe or drop. The lip—*labium*, from *labor* (?) —laps or lapses from the side of the cavernous mouth. The nose is a manifest congealed drop or stalactite. The chin is a still larger drop, the confluent dripping of the face. The cheeks are a slide from the brows into the valley of the face, opposed and diffused by cheek bones. Each rounded lobe of the vegetable leaf, too, is a thick, and now loitering drop, larger or smaller. The lobes are the fingers of the leaf; and as many lobes as it has, in so many directions it tends to flow.

Thus it seemed that one hillside illustrated the principle of the operation of nature. The maker of the earth but patented a leaf. What Champollion will decipher this hieroglyph for us, that we may turn over a new leaf at last?

(W 339-340)

The new spring is open only to the "blessed" reader adept (as an "adept"?) at a kind of supernatural "reading" that reveals nature's body and man's body as co-extensive. We should note how analogously shaped objects with no other logical relationship are randomly *collected* and yet constitute a kind of *ad hoc* alphabet bearing a message to a supernaturally-skilled reader. Everything is potentially illustrative (of something).

To imagine every natural object as part of an emblematic chain whose significance is accessible only to the visually *elect* is to be involved in the calculated reduction, if not elimination, of the contingent. A leaf can never be

a leaf if it is quickly assimilated and unified within some higher metaphysical order. The French philosopher, Quentin Meillassoux, has addressed this false unification as crucial to the maintenance of faith (and faithful interpretations) in his *After Finitude*.<sup>7</sup> Raising separable contingency to an exceptionally mystical totalization might be one description of a *United States of America* periodically threatened by local, centrifugal separatism(s) that would re-confederate it, ideologically and politically.

\*\*\*

Despite our demonization of first, the Taliban and more recently, the Muslim Brotherhood in various countries of the Middle-East and North Africa during their spring (but decidedly not yet Thoreau's chapter, "Spring," in *Walden*), one of our foundational national texts, *The Scarlet Letter*, in its opening chapters shows that our country too was almost a theodicy. The lack of color in austere clothing that completely hides the body; the very stove-pipe, elongated hats; prohibitions against the decorative; the persecution of heretics like Mistress Hibbins, the witch; and the concentration of thought upon the afterlife and a ready supply of martyrs—would not be out of place in any of an assortment of theodicies that spring to mind. "There but for the grace of God," at least in Hawthorne, could have gone the original Thirteen Colonies.

And yet, the new country pulled back, I would argue, as a direct consequence of the toleration of exceptions to its self-proclaimed, divinely-grounded Exceptionalist foundations. And Hester Prynne, forced to wear the best-known hieroglyph in American literature, is surely crucial to the separation of powers, under threat throughout our national history. How did we avoid becoming a theodicy given the self-definition of the "mission" of our first immigrants and their later heirs, like the disciples of John Smith, who followed him to Utah, all reading signs to some or other Promised Land, revealed by divination? To

read such *signs* is of course to be like any perpetually restless traveler reading road signs, and may go a long way toward explaining why we have the names of so many long and winding roads and highways in our national culture: the Mississippi River as a superhighway in *Huckleberry Finn*; Bobby Troup's *Route 66*; the travelling Joads in *Grapes of Wrath*; *On the Road*; *Tobacco Road*; *The End of the Road*; and the ubiquitous sound of "*Hit the Road, Jack*", blared from baseball stadium sound systems when the visiting pitcher disembarks the mound for a journey to the showers.<sup>8</sup>

All involve settlers looking for some truth by "moving on" to define their own homogenous space and re-dedicate themselves and the country to some Spirit away from whomever the "Other" is defined to be (until next time). Suburban America and the novels and music it has spawned may well represent one large temporary "settlement" (many of which are now "underwater" in terms of their Homesteader's mortgage), a symbolic "end of the road." Lighting out to the "New Territory," as did Huck Finn, has become more hazardous in a less mobile populace. That loss of geographic mobility threatens our national (notional) faith as well as a necessary restlessness that informs the American Dream. Instead, we stay in a house that will never be "ours."

We would seem to have even now a love/hate relationship with theodicies ranging from a "special relationship" (Israel), to a mutually beneficial alliance (Saudi Arabia), to a pariah relationship (Iran). All are in varying ways theodicies, and endangered. As Hawthorne suggests, we have apparently always had this inconsistency in dealing with radical religion in our own national history, be it in the figure of Anne Hutchinson (charged by Winthrop with "traducing the ministers") or the Quaker, Mary Dyer (hanged on Boston Common). Why should those who embrace some obscure God beyond the political or attempt to ground the political in his decipherable traces, not be a

conundrum for American foreign policy now, in the country with the largest number of church attendees per capita in the world ?

*The Scarlet Letter* is a foundational text precisely because it articulates this historical ambivalence in Hester Prynne's refusal to "name the father" of her illegitimate child (the British), but also in her refusal to become a prophetess, to move on. Like those later creative spirits hauled up during the nineteen fifties to name "associates" before the House of Representatives Subcommittee on Un-American Activities who refused to testify on grounds of self-incrimination, Hester will not talk even after being released from incarceration. The sole condition of her probation is that she become a walking (pilgrim) grapheme whose donned scarlet letter "A" must be read by all in a community, Salem, with its history of alleged witches' mis-readings of the natural world. The "meaning" of the letter "A" is unmistakable, not unlike the semiotic system constructed by those searching for "evidence" of election or those less fortunate, the damned, for whom the discontinuity in the natural world is a clear sign of one's outcast status in the puritan drama of revelation and thus hope of redemption.

The scarlet "A" is ineffective, despite its easy metaphoric representation, unless it is supplemented by oral consent: a naming of names. The "scarlet letter had not done its office" (SL 160) because its bearer, Hester Prynne, not only will not orally admit the biological father of her child, but has the audacity to claim that Pearl, lacking a human father, is thereby closer to the Divine Father, like America, an argument that would make the child a martyr, as was Jesus of Nazareth, similarly lacking an earthly father. Such is a dangerously *exceptional* faith. The signifier apparently needs the consent of the heart, genuine contingency, which is exclusively the domain of *voice*, not writing. She is as simultaneously *readable* and *unreadable*, as her love child, Pearl,

who dances her response to the rote memory (because written) catechism administered by Gov. Bellingham and the Rev. Wilson, the union of state and church that defines a theodicy. Her whirling Dervish dance in satanic red garments and penchant for throwing leaves about (not Thoreau's "readable" leaf in nature) are both resistant to reading and to any notation system: "Whenever that look appeared in her wild, bright, deeply black eyes, it *invested* her with a strange remoteness and intangibility; it was if she was hovering in the air and might vanish" (*SL*, 94, italics added). Her conduct, like faith, is *invested*.

The wild dance before her interlocutors is uniquely irreducible and unrepeatable, like sex with the dark man in the forest. For American readers, Pearl's animated spirit is a combination of Twyla Tharp's ballets and the late Michael Jackson's "Moonwalk," insofar as it resists the dialogic query or any test: historically, a classical American art form. Insofar as she appears as possessed, the child too constitutes an alternative faith.

Hester's success in surviving her incarceration and probation at the hands of a very orthodox community, and her social integration as a businesswoman, is an allegory of America's escape from theodicy. Theodicies work to either restrict or control the forms which dissent might assume in subverting any governance which seeks to bind earthly power to supernatural power in an imaginary covenant. By definition, there could be no exceptions to the disappearance of all horizons between heaven and earth; as contemporary advocates of de-construction would have it, "nothing lies outside the text" (which would encompass all), as is clearly the case for Thoreau in *Walden*. Such would create a democracy of subscribers and dissidents alike. Under such severe restrictions due to her refusal to enunciate the name, "Dimmesdale," she nonetheless declines the temptation to board a vessel

for home, thereby forfeiting the “experiment” in the New World, as Thoreau abruptly did at *Walden*, to take his laundry home to his mother. Although she considers escape from persecution, she can neither return to the Europe from which she came by accepting a berth offered her by a European shipmate cognizant of “these sour old Puritan rulers” (SL 220) nor take flight to the American interior to begin a new life under a new name, as did her husband, Chillingworth.

Hester Prynne survives rather by virtue of her entrepreneurial skills, as so many immigrants have done throughout American history. Self-taught in the skills of embroidery during her prison stay, Hester early on begins to embellish and embroider not her rather sad past, but the very letter “A” which is her contingent punishment! In a Puritan New England cloaked in the colorless costume of its ascetic faith, she takes the symbol of her disobedience to Salem’s Divine Law by adding value, as opposed to confirming religious values. This is an elaborate supplement, indeed, not part of any Emersonian “compensation” which would symmetrically convert evil to good, absence to presence. She uses her acquired, yet risky art instead of founding a *speculative* faith:

It was the *art*—then, as now almost the only one within a woman’s grasp—of needlework. She bore on her breast, in the curiously embroidered letter, a specimen of her delicate and imaginative skill of which the dames of the court might gladly have availed themselves, to add the richer and *more spiritual adornment* of human ingenuity to their fabrics of silk and gold.

(SL 85, italics added)

Hester Prynne, in other words, establishes a new faith, an “exception” to a hegemonic Puritan faith, by investing in the ephemeral: “by degrees nor

very slowly, her handiwork became what would now be termed *fashion*" (*SL* 86, italics added). While in prison she has learned a commercial skill: she converts the hieroglyph of her isolation into an enviable fashion statement by adding value. And, for the reader attentive to changes of fashion in a novel that initially would eschew it, a change comes over dress in *The Scarlet Letter*. The ruffed sleeves and elaborate embroidery previously used only to dress the recently deceased for burial now adorn the sleeves of Gov. Bellingham in life. She alters the "color" of the culture, not by "coming down to us in history, hand in hand with Anne Hutchinson as the founder of a religious sect" (*SL* 159), but rather with a "freedom of *speculation*" (*SL* 159, italics added) which is assuredly as much economic as philosophical. She embraces commerce as an alternative faith, a spiritual adornment that comes to be a community necessity, not the accusatory red of the Whore of Babylon.

Both sympathy for her condition and the fact that "she really filled a *gap* which must otherwise have remained vacant" (*SL* 86, italics added) are explanations for the commercial success that enables her to support an illegitimate daughter and establish a study group-cum-shelter for abandoned women in her sea-side cottage-cum-health care facility for "the wounded, wasted, wronged, or misplaced passion" (*SL* 245), victims of a Puritan culture. In a no less tyrannical theological environment she comes to be less scorned and more attended as a necessary purveyor to a community where commerce is liberalized as a prelude to incremental ideological liberalization. Hester begins as a master of marketing, no less than do today's expensive denim jean designers in America, who add value to an emblem of working-class social losers with gold-plated rivets and a "Gloria Vanderbilt" label. The scarlet letter, as does the novel that bears its name, evolves into a *logo*, that combination of art and commerce that displaces more traditional faiths with an alternative

belief. Hester Prynne is a different kind of prophetess. She fills a different “Gap” (sic), what advertisers term a “niche market.”

The novel reaches its climax as we might expect, with “the woman of the scarlet letter in the *market place*” (SL 231, italics added) where Dimmesdale delivers his Election Day Sermon. This commercial plaza also hosts what will become the American melting plot including “sunburnt sailors” (SL 230) from pirate ships and native American Indians in their colorful headdress, as well as now slightly less austere Puritans in ruffles. In the retrospective time-scheme of *The Scarlet Letter*, international trade (and the open-ness that comes from open markets and smuggling) has already resulted in the abandonment of the Salem custom-house, from which Hawthorne himself had been dismissed—surely, one of the “structural barriers” to more open trade. The “demon offspring” (SL 228), Pearl, has returned to Donald Rumsfeld’s “Old Europe” and her mother’s skill is now exported to Europe, initially to a grandchild. This in an expansion of what had been a local market in embroidery and knitting, to an export market. Hester of course has had practice in penetrating difficult local markets with her art.

In one of our foundational texts, the exception to America’s self-proclaimed Exceptionalism was not entirely some a *priori* “blessed” status that a succession of home-grown prophets attempted and still attempt to restore or find anew, but the *speculations* that Henry Ford offered: “the business of America is business.” Does this mean that the secularization of presumed emblems of subjugation as defined in the West may help to modify the rigors of a theodicy? If so, then Muslim women wearing the *niqab* need a marketing agent to gain international acceptance (Etihad Airways may be going part way with its flight attendants’ devoutly obedient, yet aesthetically beautiful uniforms). Will international commerce subvert China’s doctrinaire ideology?

My argument is hopefully more nuanced. In a number of the classics of American literature, speculative free enterprise emerges from places where we least expect to find it, even among novelists and thinkers that seem to embrace the ideology of American Exceptionalism, and the exclusive mission of the American Dream. And these entrepreneurs carry incredible risks which continue to be occasionally rewarded, not unlike Pascal's infamous "wager of faith." Our national literature is replete with those who *invest* in free enterprise rather than being *invested* by faith, almost unwittingly, as a shadowy, substitute religion.

Among them is the Thoreau whose *Walden* is replete with records of accounts, meticulously enumerating costs and profit from the beans and other produce grown from scratch during his two year stay, with seeds listed as a *cost*: "nothing was rendered me of which I have not rendered some account" (*W* 67). This meticulous record-keeping is opposed to the John Fields of the world (Chapter X, "Baker Farm"), who never save or economize. Melville's *Moby-Dick* has a chapter dedicated to the economy of whale-oil. Huck Finn appears as what he is, a "huckster," calculating what he will sell and how to earn a profit from the rubes on the river shore. And, of course *The Great Gatsby's* Jay Gatz leaves behind not merely his dreams of Daisy and a shattered American Dream, but a notebook/diary combining an exercise program with a *Day-Book*, a reminder to himself to save money each week, with the required amount periodically increased.

Even in Emerson's supposedly "emblematic" nature, there was a moment when he read the winter landscape in "Nature" not as a hieroglyph, but as a highly unstable *bank*. Reminding his readers that "good thoughts are no better than good dreams unless they be executed," Emerson turned away, as did Hester Prynne, from ideology, even in a supposedly emblematic landscape, by

appealing to the variable and freakish drift of an alternative investment which can never be *read* in advance, but is another *Day-Book*:

Debt, grinding debt, whose iron face the widow, the orphan, and the sons of genius fear and hate...is a preceptor whose lessons cannot be foregone.... Moreover, property, which has been well-compared to snow, –‘if it fall level to-day, it will be blown into drifts tomorrow’—is the surface action of internal machinery, like the *index on the face of a clock*.

(N 28, italics added)

Economic “Self-Reliance” trumps ideology, using a metaphor inherited from 18<sup>th</sup> century European deism: a pre-set, yet self-justifying mechanism—in an economy of risky (can be “blown into drifts”) speculative investment—no longer emblematic, yet easing assimilation. Recently U. S. Immigration and Naturalization has inaugurated an easy path to citizenship: a \$ 500,000 investment (whose success may depend upon “contract labor” earning less than minimum wage, as well as successfully obscuring its perhaps laundered origin) in a new business enterprise that meets approval. Unlike Hester, the investor needs no developed skill to “buy in” (and thereby modify) an unstated American “value,” more universal and valuable than democracy: money. The fulfillment of the “American Dream” now apparently has less need of Hester’s hard-earned skills (advocated by hypocrites who urge the oppressed to “stay in school” or learn a trade in prison) and a greater need for a compromised belief in the uniqueness of American Exceptionalism, advocated so presciently by Emerson. God Bless!

I wish to thank the members of the Department of British and American Studies of Nanzan University and the Chubu branch of the American Literature Society of Japan for providing me with the dialogic opportunity

to deliver an earlier version of these thoughts in March of 2011 at Nanzan University in Nagoya.

#### NOTES

- 1 See the argument advanced by Sharon Cameron, "Representing Grief: Emerson's 'Experience,'" *Representations* 15 (1986), pp. 15–41. Although interested in Emerson's treatment of mourning in the essay, Cameron's argument could be extended to include within grief, a characteristic rhetoric in which all men as well as nature are imagined as in some sense "fallen." The sense of loss is then internalized in various ways to make it part of a shared democratic experience. The rhetorical "hedging" (of ideological investment?) to which she alludes in Emerson might be part of the attempt to mourn the fall while seeing it as a prelude to a more "Fortunate Fall"—a resurrection. Both contradictory motifs must be maintained.
- 2 Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1987).
- 3 Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremaid* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1980).
- 4 James Carroll, "The Harsh Truth of the 'City on the Hill,'" *International Herald Tribune* (29 November 2011), p. 29.
- 5 J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1962). The impossible self-creation of the United States of America surely caught Hawthorne's attention in his figure of Governor Bellingham. The man who lends his name to at least two American cities historically married his much younger house-keeper by administering and affirming his own marriage vows in his capacity as Governor, bonding church as state as self by mere enunciation. The irony of his administration of the catechism to the recalcitrant Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter*—another test of faith—is surely replete with irony.
- 6 Harold Bloom, *A Map of Mis-reading* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 175–76.
- 7 Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2009).
- 8 By contrast, British fiction is surely more recuperative with its plethora of houses to be restored to rightful owners or to be passed on to descendants who might maintain its cultural, political, and aesthetic values: *Waverley*; *Mansfield Park*; *Wuthering Heights*; *Bleak*

*House; Middlemarch*; the fictional D'Urberville estate in Hardy's novel; *Howard's End*. Viewed in this way, in the United States the "house" (until recently) has always been easily "flipped" by those striking out for some new territory. The threatened collapse of "house-values" has always been with us, as Poe recognized.

#### WORKS CITED

- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Representative Selections, With Introduction, Bibliography, and Notes*. Edited by Frederic I. Carpenter. American Book Company: New York, 1937.
- P "Politics"
- DSA "The Divinity School Address"
- N "Nature"
- C "Compensation"
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter* (SL). With a foreword by Leo Marx. New American Library: New York, 1980.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden* (W) in *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau* (Vol. II). AMS Press: New York, 1968.