Dædalus

Winter 2012: On the American Narrative

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## On the American Narrative

# Introduction

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Some countries have a master narrative, some not. Those that do are expected to live up to its demands, or incur the shame of neglecting them. Countries too recent or too disheveled to have such a narrative generally settle for a political economy and hope to see it thrive. But even great empires decline and fall. There are countries that have a grand narrative but not the economy to sustain it: like Greece, they have fallen into the decadent phase of their story. Each member country of the European Union – twenty-seven at last count – has agreed to put aside its grand narrative, if it has one – or at least to keep quiet about it – in return for the boon of sharing a political, social, and economic entity – Europe – and, in particular, for the satisfaction of enjoying a vast commercial market and the rules, legal and civic, increasingly prescribed by Brussels. A few countries, Turkey for instance, are deemed too irregular for membership – at least for the time being. The common understanding of the EU is that the imperatives of trade, banking, regulation of borrowing and debt, and other such practices must come first: narratives may be recalled on high, innocent anniversaries.

The United States could not help having a master narrative, in view of the dramatic quality of its remote origin and its enhancement by large, diverse immigrations. Historian Gordon Wood has noted that "the founding of the nation lay not with the Declaration of Independence in 1776 but with the early explorations or, more often, with the earliest

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settlements and events of the seventeenth century – with Jamestown in 1607, John Winthrop and the Puritans in 1630, and Lord Baltimore's statute of religious toleration in 1649."[1] Wood adds to these, as he must, the story of the simple Pilgrims of Plymouth Colony, as told by their leader William Bradford:

> This was the story of a small band of English refugees, numbering only a hundred or so, driven from their homes for their religious views, journeying first to Holland and then to the New World, binding themselves together with their "Mayflower Compact" in 1620, in an apparently democratic fashion, suffering terrible losses their first year in Plymouth, and all along wanting nothing more than to be left alone to practice their "Separatist" religion.[2]

But even if we call these adventures a foundational story, a myth, or a master narrative, we lack a universally agreed upon form for reciting it. Rather, there are several claimants.

The most remarkable of these is *exceptionalism*, the assumption that America not only differs from other countries in this or that respect, but differs from them in principle and in practice. Being exceptional also entails being exceptionally good, worthy, virtuous. The term *Manifest Destiny* did not appear until 1845, but the sentiment or conviction in its favor long preceded the phrase. John Adams, in a revised version of the second part of *A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law* (1765), wrote: "I always consider the settlement of America with reverence and wonder, as the opening of a grand scene[,] a design in Providence for the illumination of the ignorant and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth."[3] "All over the earth" is an immense ambition, hard to take seriously now that the United States seems to be a country much like any other but larger, more diverse, almost ungovernable, and rampant with unemployment and debt. But a secular version of the ambition is still operative in the several American wars presented to the world as crusades: Mexico (1846 – 1848), Korea (1950 – 1953), Vietnam (1955 – 1973, when American involvement ended), Grenada (1983), Iraq (2003), Afghanistan (2001, and not yet over). Many Americans still regard themselves as the Chosen People, the United States "Our Israel," as Increase Mather said in the foreword to *Elijah's Mantle* (1722). Melville cherished the sentiment so much that, in 1850, he added it to Chapter 36 of *White-Jacket*:

> Escaped from the house of bondage, Israel of old did not follow after the ways of the Egyptians. To her was given an express dispensation; to her were given new things under the sun. And we Americans are the peculiar, chosen people – the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world. Seventy years ago we escaped from thrall; and, besides our first birth-right – embracing one continent of earth – God has given to us, for a future inheritance, the broad domains of the political pagans, that shall yet come and lie down under the shade of our ark, without bloody hands being lifted.[4]

Emerson, not surprisingly, presented this sentiment in its most sublime form. Literary critic Richard Poirier has remarked, in a commentary on one of Emerson's most opaque phrases in "Experience" – "this new yet unapproachable America I have found in the West" – that "the word 'America' in Emerson can refer to two quite different entities":

> One is the United States of America, a nation that exists on a continent "discovered" by Columbus. Alternatively, or at the same time, America exists as a recurrent dream or myth that has inhabited the hu-

> man imagination for many centuries and endures there still, free of any of the contaminations coming from its actual occupation by the United States. In Emerson, the word "America" frequently refers not to a place but to an idea, a myth that belongs to the world and that can be visited in the imagination, in what we share of "the old paternal mind," as he called it in the Journals in 1845. Centuries before the United States was formed, America was already formed in literature. "A good scholar," he wrote in 1847, "will find Aristophanes & Hafiz & Rabelais full of American history."[5]

About America as an actual country, Emerson could be, as Poirier notes, "energetically dismissive," as in a selection from his journal dated June 1847:

> Alas for America as I must so often say . . . Eager, solicitous, hungry, rabid, busy-body America attempting many things, vain, ambitious to feel thy own existence, & convince others of thy talent, by attempting & hastily accomplishing much; yes, catch thy breath & correct thyself and failing here, prosper out there; speed & fever are never greatness; but reliance & serenity & waiting & perseverance, heed of the work & negligence of the effect.
>
> America is formless, has no terrible & no beautiful condensation.[6]

But the myth, being timeless, has endured.

Exceptionalism is a peremptory ideology, but is vulnerable to bad news. Gordon Wood has remarked that "since the late 1960s American historians have become less and less interested in celebrating the uniqueness of the United States":

> The war in Vietnam if nothing else convinced many Americans that the moral character of the United States was not different from that of other nations and that the nation had no special transcendent role to bring liberty and democracy to the world. During the past several decades many American historians, if not the general public, have shed whatever faith they might once have had in the traditional idea of American exceptionalism.[7]

But the claim can be retained in another form, that of covenant.

Historian J.G.A. Pocock has observed that "a conventional model of American historiography would present it as obedient to two imperatives":

> The first is the necessity of a foundational myth, felt for obvious reasons by a nation founded in experiment and sustained by immigration. . . . In the United States, whose history is so largely a history of the mutations of Protestantism into civil religion, the myth of foundation further takes the form of a myth of covenant. The nation is held to have made at its beginnings a commitment, in the face of God or history or the opinion of mankind, to the maintenance of certain principles; and it is the historian's business to ascertain how the commitment was made, what the principles were, and whether the covenant has been upheld or allowed to lapse.

Pocock's easy slide in "God or history or the opinion of mankind" shows that he regards these values as having about equal force: that is, not much. The covenant, such as it was, offers an apparent choice of two styles: "One is liturgical, the recital of how the covenant was kept; the other, and by far the commoner, is jeremiad, the recital of how it was not kept and of what sufferings have fallen on the nation by reason of its sins and shortcomings."[8] Pocock continues:

> The recital of historical change, of how altering conditions of existence may have rendered the terms of the covenant obsolete or their performance impracticable, will in all probability be carried out according to the stylized rhetoric and cadences of

> the jeremiad mode. It should be further noted that there are few obstacles to asking whether the covenant was worth making in the first place or whether it was not radically flawed. It is perfectly permissible to criticize the covenant, as long as you do not suggest that it was not made, or that it is or ever has been possible for America to escape from it. Notoriously, American political culture is a guilt culture, whose sins and failures are necessary to the affirmation of its uniqueness as a nation chosen, whether by God or itself, to a peculiar destiny in the fulfillment of certain promises. To suggest that there was guilt in the promises themselves is permissible; to suggest that there were no promises and no covenant would be to strike at the heart.[9]

Guilt: one thinks of Hawthorne, Poe, and Faulkner. Sins: slavery, the extermination or assimilation of the redskin. In Guy Davenport's words:

> The Puritans who thought they were bringing salvation to the Indian (the gift was more like gunpowder, rum, measles, and paranoia) were bringing instead the god Progress in whose superficial goodness and single-minded jealousy of its prerogatives was concealed the plan of genocide which in fact developed as the white man's only real attitude toward the Indian for three hundred years. There are pioneer Bibles in the library of the University of Texas bound in Indian skin.[10]

The second conventional foundation of American historiography, according to Pocock, is "the premise of inescapable liberalism": its decisive formulation is political scientist Louis B. Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955) and his edited book, *The Founding of New Societies* (1964). Hartz's America "was liberal without the struggle to establish liberalism." Pocock claims that he himself has uncovered "pre-Revolutionary conditions helping to bring about that underlying dissatisfaction with liberalism which characterizes the American liberal mind." The language of republicanism, he maintains, "had survived to furnish liberalism with one of its modes of self-criticism and self-doubt." He now thinks he erred in not realizing "the extent to which my propositions were destructive of the American covenantal paradigm":

> If American thought was involved in a quarrel with history from a time before Independence, for reasons which Americans shared with British and European thinkers, then the Declaration, the Constitution, and the *Federalist Papers* – the sacred texts of the founding – could not be a covenant with history but must merely continue it, and the quarrel with its own history in which America has so manifestly been engaged could not be a simple pursuit of the terms of the covenant. The exceptionalist thesis would crumble, and in the act of offering to contribute to the explanation of American history, I would be guilty of denying the uniqueness of American guilt and exposing America to the terrors of a history it shared with other cultures.[11]

Pocock, for reasons largely biographical, is pleased to find that the American conditions that apparently support the exceptionalist thesis are often found conducing to a different ideology in Europe; he makes fun of Americans who prefer "the splendid misery of uniqueness."[12] If the history of the United States is largely a history of the mutations of Protestantism into civil religion, those mutations can hardly be cited as evidence for the exceptionalist thesis: many countries have had such mutations.

How the Civil War is featured in the American narrative is still a question. It is implausible to think that it was merely a small story within the large one of excep-

tionalism or Manifest Destiny. Scholars from Charles A. Beard to Eric Foner and James M. McPherson call it "the second American revolution," an ingenious term since it allows us to correlate this second with the first, or indeed merge the two. In *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution* (1990), McPherson says that "the events of the 1860s in the United States equally deserve the label revolution," in company with the English Revolution of the 1640s and the French Revolution of the 1790s.[13] The historian George Fredrickson comments:

> What is likely to emerge is the conclusion that the Civil War was not so much a second (and more decisive) American revolution as the completion of the first. It strengthened – but did not create – American nationalism. It moved African-Americans a step further toward equal citizenship, extending a process that began with gradual emancipation in the northern states during the post-Revolutionary era. It assisted the forces promoting capitalist development by shifting the balance of power from a primitive capitalism of ruthless accumulation and forced labor to a more progressive capitalism based on technological innovation and wage labor, although it would take almost a century for the South to overcome its legacy of social and economic backwardness. It encouraged new patterns of thought and culture but did not obliterate older ones.[14]

This is a fair comment, but it blurs the difference between a Union Army fighting Confederates and insurgent Americans of the Revolution fighting British soldiers. A narrative has to be masterful indeed to encompass civil war and the several smaller stories recited in this issue of *Dædalus*. William Chafe, whose essay opens the volume, doubts that we still have such a narrative.

Several other contributors to this issue write of their chosen topics in varying tones of sadness. It is difficult to be buoyant these days, when so much news is dismal and when it is so hard even to imagine the prophetic exultation of America in its beginning. But sadness and disappointment are parts of the local narrative, too.

ENDNOTES

1 Gordon S. Wood, "The Relevance and Irrelevance of American Colonial History," in *Imagined Histories: American Historians Interpret the Past*, ed. Anthony Molho and Gordon S. Wood (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 145.

2 Ibid., 145 – 146.

3 John Adams, *Revolutionary Writings 1755 – 1775*, ed. Gordon S. Wood (New York: Library of America, 2011), 691.

4 Herman Melville, *White-Jacket*, quoted in Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 156 – 157.

5 Richard Poirier, "An Approach to Unapproachable America," *Raritan* 26 (4) (Spring 2007): 7.

6 Joel Porte, ed., *Emerson in His Journals* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982), 372.

7 Wood, "The Relevance and Irrelevance of American Colonial History," 157.

8 J.G.A. Pocock, "Between Gog and Magog: The Republican Thesis and the *Ideologia Americana*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 48 (2) (April – June 1987): 337 – 338.

9 Ibid., 338.

10 Guy Davenport, *The Geography of the Imagination* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), 355.

11 Pocock, "Between Gog and Magog," 342.

12 Ibid., 346.

13 James M. McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 21–22.

14 George M. Fredrickson, "Nineteenth-Century American History," in *Imagined Histories*, ed. Molho and Wood, 179.