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The Winthrop Variation



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THE WINTHROP VARIATION

This address is for Heinz Ickstadt, an expression of gratitude for two decades of friendship. A merely academic expression, constrained by the rules and regulations of conference papers, but I hope the deep and warm personal feelings will show through the academese. To that end, I've tried to bring together the substance of our first and last encounters. The first was a conversation twenty years ago at an ASA Conference on the legacy of New England Puritan rhetoric; the last was a correspondence (based on a seminar I gave here last spring) concerning chess as a model of literary and cultural studies. Heinz may not recall the ASA encounter, so I record the questions he put to me then, just after I'd talked about Winthrop's lay-sermon of 1630, "A Model of Christian Charity." To start with, a general question: what does Christian Charity have to do with Winthrop's subject, which is the legitimation of a new community (rules and regulations, law and order)? Then a specific question: what's so special about that capstone phrase, a city on a hill? Wasn't it then and always just a homiletic cliché?

Winthrop and chess: once I fixed upon the idea it seemed the obvious choice for the occasion. This was a chance to reflect back on my scholarship from the standpoint of current notions about cultural study. Maybe I could explain what I'd been trying to say all along about the cultural work of literature. Better still, it might be an opportunity to bridge twenty years of friendship by answering Heinz's questions at last. Hence my title: "The Winthrop Variation."

A variation in chess is a move which opens a new set of possibilities within the rules and regulations of the game. Rules and regulations: a variation, like any move in chess, has to do with function in context. We say a variation is brilliant not because it

transcends the game — not because it reaches to some higher realm beyond the rules— and not because it demonstrates our capacity to ascend or escape into a world elsewhere of free play — but just the opposite. It's brilliant insofar as the variation leads us to a deeper understanding of how the rules work. Appreciation, so conceived, is a function of cognition, and cognition requires us to acknowledge the power of limitations. The boundaries that hedge us in constitute the conditions of agency and innovation. In this sense, the variation in chess is a model for what I think of as an aesthetics of non-transcendence -- in effect, an aesthetics geared towards understanding the cultural work of literature.

It may be well to stress the negative: non-transcendence, not anti-transcendence. I happen to believe in transcendence, but not as an object of analysis. My quarrel with appreciative criticism is that it tends towards the categories of transcendence (universals, totalities, absolutes) through a process of mystification. In that process, questions of function and context are programmatically transmuted into the quasi-religious terms we have inherited for celebrating capital-A Art. What I've termed non-transcendence seeks to reverse the process. Its purpose is not to demystify, though that may follow, but rather to understand the mystifying process and its implications. The point is to see how certain universals (like Christian Charity) function; to trace the historical steps by which certain forms of transcendence (like "America") were constructed and sustained; and to describe the contexts within which certain kinds of texts (like Winthrop's Model) were made objects of veneration. In all these ways, analysis is redirected away from the noumenal sphere of capital letters towards our time-bound, lower-case world. To paraphrase Wittgenstein, the philosopher of language-games — the master of the manifold uses of the chess analogy — I want to lead meaning back home to culture.

In that spirit, I ask you now to entertain the following proposition: “America” is a symbol that designates a distinctive social-symbolic system, as “chess” designates a game with distinctive rules. These rules have been said to point to universals which transcend the game — for example, the extraordinary importance of the queen has been explained in terms of the Oedipus Complex. But isn’t that just to leap from one game into another? In any case, to understand what a chess piece signifies is to engage in questions of function and context. For example: in what directions can the knight move? And under what circumstances? So too with America: it points to a dream of absolutes --freedom, opportunity, the good society --but we don’t know what these abstractions signify unless we understand the function and context of the rhetorical pieces that make up this particular dream.

My focus here is on one piece, Winthrop’s “city on a hill,” which I assume provides an index to the significance of his address as a whole. That assumption follows from the rules of the game of literary and cultural analysis. Here and elsewhere, I mean Winthrop’s address retrospectively, as we have inherited it: as for example John F. Kennedy adapted it in the 1960s and Ronald Reagan twenty years later. That City is one key to a network of meanings through which the culture has perpetuated itself. As for the rules of the game at large, they involve the reciprocity between: (1) the norms of a certain way of life, associated with capitalism and modernization; (2) an ambiguous territory, simultaneously confined to the United States, identified with the New World, and defined as boundless; (3) certain strategies of socialization, which we might think of as a metaphysics of the marketplace (e.g. multi-denominationalism, states’ rights, and lately multi-culturalism); and finally, (4) certain symbolic structures, such as those inscribed in the City upon a Hill.

So understood, the meaning of any single rhetorical piece is overdetermined. This City cannot signify a feudal aristocracy, or a theocratic hierarchy, no matter how utopian. But there is ample room for agency, within bounds. I think here of the complex negotiations potential in the reciprocities I just mentioned (territory, marketplace, way of life, forms of speech), and of the extraordinary potential of language to convey that complexity. Like an effective strategy in chess, an effective social symbology opens up a variety of possible combination of moves in any given situation, and so not only allows for but elicits innovation. Consider Whitman's "I contradict myself? Very well, then, I contradict myself. I am large. I contain multitudes." It is a shout of joy from a poet who recognizes the multitude of moves available to the language-experimenting "I" under the rules of social mobility and liberal subjectivity. One would have to imagine a chess game that allowed the knight to move in eight different directions at once, simultaneously capturing and not capturing opposing pieces. Indeed, one might distinguish in this sense between high and low culture, or to put it more starkly between art and propaganda. Propaganda takes only one or two of the eight moves, and so seems to close down options. Art risks multiple moves at once and so seems to slip through or soar beyond limitations. Whitman's editorials seem propagandistic; his poems universal. The difference lies not in his refusal to play the game but on the contrary in the depth of his understanding of its rules. The creative move tests the rules by forcing them to their limits. It is thus an assertion of limitations, a full display of the power of boundaries. It may also be a clue to transgression, a test that directs us by indirections to a different kind of game

In my talk on Puritan rhetoric twenty years ago, I emphasized the powers of cultural boundaries. Today I want to explore the second, transgressive attributes of the chess variation. What does the knight signify? One answer would be technical

and practical, formulated from within the game as it is played — a list of possible configurations in a variety of contexts.. Another answer would be historical and speculative. Here we would be free to expand those possibilities. We would have to speak from within the game of chess, of course, but not necessarily from within the form of the game as we now play it. Hindsight is a wonderfully flexible form of play, precisely because it reminds us of the arbitrariness of the rules we've inherited. From this flexible historical and speculative vantage-point, we could recall that chess, the so-called game of fate — ostensibly the game par excellence of fixed rules and regulations — is just as non-transcendent as all the other games we play. In fact, it's more non-transcendent, the most non-transcendent of all. As even a quick survey shows, chess of all games is the one most susceptible to the vicissitudes of history and culture. There were not always knights on the chess board. Like all other chess-pieces, the knight is the product of the most unlikely cross-cultural, multi-national recombinations. Once, the queen herself was just a petty counselor, called Vizier or Senex, the weakest of the chess-men on the board. Then, at about 800 AD, after long dispute, the Senex underwent a sex-change, became a queen. And then, in 1496, four years after the Columbus move, somewhere in Isabella's Spain, the queen was declared (what we now know her to be) the most powerful unit on the board.. Historically considered, chess is the game of inter-contextuality par excellence.

The model of chess I'm suggesting is counter-intuitive -- indeed, I mean to suggest that the "intuitive" is itself a feature of the cultural rules we inherit -- and it's meant to offer a counter-intuitive perspective on the rhetorical norms we play by. Those norms seem to have been always in place. (Wasn't the city on a hill always available to the rhetoric of Christian charity?) But in fact they are part of a larger, shifting, fundamentally mutable set of rules and regulations. Suppose, then, from this historical

and speculative vantage ground, that we try to imagine how it was that the knight came into play. In what context was that function conceived? How was the piece instituted? Let us rule out God as the answer; and let us assume that genius, if it had a role, was at once circumscribed and enabled by what were then the rules of the game. And now let me translate the conditions of analysis which all this implies into the terms I've set out for literary and cultural criticism. Philosophically, they are akin to the terms of Wittgenstein's language-game: Meaning is not unique; it derives from public and habitual practices. The extraordinary variation is a building-block of culture, but as such it depends for its life on what is culturally ordinary (customs, usages, institutions). Historically my terms are those I outlined earlier: A social symbology is a language-game that combines two conditions of play: (1) Context: a set of dominant symbolic patterns (involving tradition and convention) that provides a framework for constructing meaning and yet is itself subject to revision, reform, and even fundamental change. (2) Function: a finite but shifting and flexible set of symbolic strategies (involving agency and innovation) through which dominant patterns are built up, held together, revised, or torn down and rebuilt.

How do context and function work together? How, to turn specifically to the Winthrop variation, are the boundaries of a social symbology established? I imagine that process as an open-ended but massively-entrenched and (since the Renaissance) constantly embattled field of expression, at once more conservative and more volatile than the paradigmatic structures of science described by Thomas Kuhn. The rhetoric of America is perhaps the central instance. Its capacities for absorption are emblazoned in the national motto, "out of many, one." They are documented in the processes by which such risky catch-words as "individualism," "independence," and "revolution" have been made a summons to conformity, and most recently, in the way

that a variety of academic radicalisms have become ladders to commercial success. And yet, like the game of chess as we now play it, “America” has drawn perforce on many earlier models. One of these, a persistent and influential one, is the model of Christian charity.

The symbology behind that religious model is the incarnation-game. You’re all familiar with it. The model of Christian charity is Christ. Its rules posit a double reality which is paradoxically one, material and spiritual. The goal is to make the paradox visible, while at the same time indicating the qualitative difference between material and spiritual realities, as between Caesar and God, death and life. Broadly speaking, two kinds of moves are allowed. These are sometimes described as horizontal (in and of this world) and vertical (connecting heaven and earth). For my purpose, it would help to think of these lines as linear (as the rook moves) and diagonal (as the bishop moves). **[HANDOUT]**. In traditional rhetorical terms, the linear move is a form of indirect representation, by simile or by analogy: e.g. the rich, like the elect, are few in number; or, Charles I is king of England as God is king of heaven. Representation here is indirect in the sense that it assumes a basic disparity within the comparison. We are meant to understand that the rich are not really the elect. They are like them—figurally like, as distinct from essentially alike. This sort of representation functions to highlight the difference in context between the literal meaning of the referent -- that is, its linear meaning, in and of this world -- and its spiritual meaning.

The diagonal move has something like the contrary purpose. It is a form of direct representation, as by figura or synecdoche: e.g., Moses is a type of Christ; or, the true believer is an image of God’s people. Here we are to understand that the true believer is one of God’s people-- is actually and substantially chosen by God. Whether or not Moses appears to you or me to be like Christ, he and Christ are essentially alike.

Moses re-presents Christ literally and spiritually, both historically and under the aspect of eternity.

Now that these terms are clear (I hope) -- clear and distinct -- let me ask you to picture them as chess moves: the analogy or indirect representation is the rook, the linear move; the figura or indirect representation is the bishop, the diagonal move. With this picture in mind, I proceed to "A Model of Christian Charity."

What's striking about this document is the way that Winthrop makes use of both kinds of move. He introduces the indirect form of representation first, through the image of hierarchy. His address opens with a picture of rich and poor, king and ministers. As God (he explains) has ordained variety and difference throughout creation, so it is (quote) the "glory of princes to have many officers." The analogy tells us that order is pervasive and absolute and at the same time it reminds us of the chasm separating earthly from divine power -- "the condition of mankind," as Winthrop puts it, as distinct from that of the kingdom of heaven. Next comes direct figural connection: "We are all one in Christ," Winthrop intones, "members of the same body," "knit together in love." Here the picture he offers is one of essential equality. The community he portrays partakes of the spirit (reflects it in a glass, darkly) and so transcends the limits of time, office, and place.

Of course, these two images are not contradictory. Indeed, they often appear as complementary forms of speech, secular and sacred. In the tradition that Winthrop inherited, the word "model" denotes either a replica, as in an architect's design, which represents but is not itself the building, or else a perfected pattern of what we see — a kind of ideal mirror-reflection — as Christ's life re-presents the believer's journey to God. It is an ideal in which the believer (through grace) partakes, and so directly (if imperfectly) embodies.

Replica or mirror-reflection, representation or re-presentation: the distinction makes all the difference in the world. Or more precisely, it marks the difference between this world and the next. And yet the two kinds of speech are as close as “like” and “alike.” They are complementary pieces in the same game, like rook and bishop. They work together on the premise that their functions are distinct. In order to make all this as clear as possible, Church authorities from Augustine through Aquinas made that distinction (representation or re-presentation) a central tenet of Christian hermeneutics. By that rule — to represent is not ipso facto to re-present — Luther denied the Pope’s right to stand in for Christ. The Holy Roman Empire, he charged, was a counterfeit replica of the true church. By that rule, too, Milton justified regicide by appealing directly to Christ, the true mirror-reflection of God as king — as Charles I (in his view) was emphatically not. The Reformers were charged with blasphemy, they called themselves Protestants, Dissenters, but so far as they were concerned, they had come to fulfill the exegetical law, not to break it.

What shall we say then of Winthrop’s apparent confusion? Representation and re-presentation blur and shift in his Model. It almost seems a sleight of hand. His image of Christian charity moves in two directions at once. Or rather, he seems to use the same piece of rhetoric, “Christian charity,” to make two different kinds of move. He identifies this particular community first as a hierarchy in the form of a colonial venture authorized by royal patent, and then (as it were in the same breath) as a spiritual unity in imitatio Christi. We might imagine him moving a certain chess piece horizontally, saying “My rook goes here”; and then, in his next move, moving the same piece diagonally, as he announces (with equal authority): “My bishop now goes there.” We could excuse this as shoddy play, an amateur’s blunder. But Winthrop was a qualified professional at this game. Or we might interpret his move as a kind of technical

slippage, a moment of absent-mindedness. After all, the Puritans he was addressing did claim a double identity, as settlers and as believers. But the result will not allow that excuse either. The fact is, Winthrop won the game. His variation took hold. It inspired many similar variations. It led to America's City upon a Hill. Here is his famous end-game: **[HANDOUT — TEXT]**

Thus stands the case between God and us: We are entered into a covenant with Him [and if He] shall please to hear us then hath He sealed our commission. But if we shall neglect the observation of these articles [and] fall to embrace this present world seeking great things for ourselves and our posterity, the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us. Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck is to follow the counsel of Micah. We must be knit together in this work as one man. We must delight in each other, make others' conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together – always having before our eyes our community as members of the same body. [Thus] the Lord will delight to dwell among us, as His own people, and we shall see much more of His wisdom, power, goodness, and truth than formerly. 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 we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. And to shut up this discourse with that exhortations of Moses in his last farewell to Israel, Deut. 30: Beloved, there is now set before us life and death. We are commanded this day to love one another and to keep His

commandments. [If] we will not obey we shall surely perish out of the good land [which] we pass over this vast sea to possess it.

What does this City signify? First, with regard to function: it carries forward the double model that Winthrop started with — direct and indirect, re-presentation and representation, oneness and hierarchy. Its scriptural origin is the Sermon on the Mount (the Beatitudes), where Christ speaks to believers (“the salt of the earth”) individually and universally. The believer shines as a city upon a hill, synecdoche of the church spiritual. [GENEVA GLOSS] Typologically, the reference is to Jerusalem, the holy city, considered as prefiguration of the end-time New Jerusalem. And as you know, this prefiguration refers back to Moses’ “farewell exhortation” -- his final advice to the Israelites as they prepare to enter Canaan -- for by the rules of this game, the promised land is a figure or type of heaven. [GENEVA GLOSS]

This configuration Winthrop turns into a means of legitimating a particular economic and social hierarchy. He invokes it as an ideal of spiritual unity (love, absolute mutuality) that authorizes certain secular forms of “subjection.” But he does not thereby collapse the distinction between type and analogy. That is the second point to observe about Winthrop’s game-plan. He uses the combination of rhetorical moves, linear and diagonal, representation and re-presentation, to instate a tension between them. On the one hand there is the figural Jerusalem which cannot fail. On the other hand there was the old literal Jerusalem which did fail, once and for all. Winthrop’s City signifies both of these -- not one or the other, promise or threat, but a willful conjunction of the two -- literal and figural held together in a state of permanent conditionality.

Again, an obvious deviation from the rules. And again, we cannot explain it as a slip or a mistake, because it's the move that won the game. This is to argue by hindsight of course. But hindsight is an argument that counts if we're concerned with the process of "Making America." In this perspective, Winthrop's bi-polar model, joining two separate and distinct forms of discourse, is a ritual of founding, a ceremony designed both to infuse hope and to establish law and order.

It requires an extraordinary turn of the chess analogy to convey the scope and force of that achievement. Imagine the following scenario: (1) a form of chess that allows for only linear or else diagonal moves; (2) a situation in a particular match where one of the players perceives that he may win if he can move a certain piece in a direction which is both diagonal and linear, as in fact the knight's move is in modern chess **[HANDOUT]**; and (3) that he succeeds by negotiating a special set of conditions. "Let's try an experiment," he proposes. "If I win the game, then we'll assume that this new-fangled move was valid, a legitimate variation of play. If I lose, we'll declare the move to have been illegal. In that case, the piece I used will simply revert to its former linear or diagonal status." Does this seem far-fetched? Let me tell you that precisely that sort of change occurred in Reformation Germany, shortly after the Peasant Revolt, when the caste-bound Indian foot-soldier or pawn (renamed "Bauer," farmer), was permitted to become a queen upon reaching the eighth rank (the opposite end of the board) — on the condition that it did reach the eighth rank.

Winthrop's variation may be said to build upon that strategy, but it goes further still. The Bauer retains a singular concrete identity at any given time -- either pawn or else queen. The ideal, we might say, is upward mobility, but basically the game-plan remains class-bound. It is assumed that in principle, as a rule, pawns will remain pawns. Winthrop's move challenges that structure -- and even (by indirections) the

principle behind it -- by its emphasis on potential. It is intended precisely to blur the choice between pawn and queen, bishop and rook, or rather to keep such alternatives open at all times. Winthrop's linear-diagonal knight is fundamentally, by definition, provisional. Its function is quasi-apocalyptic. The terms are not win or lose -- all or nothing -- but rather win and lose, all and nothing..

Winthrop's variation is more than a shift in the terms of the incarnation-game. It's a shift in the objects at stake. The paradoxes of incarnation deal with heaven and earth. Winthrop's provisional knight works to sustain the tension between states of process: between present and future, destiny and experience, migration and possession: the literal (linear) transition toward a new country and the spiritual (diagonal) rights to its ownership. And the transition itself, so conceived, effects a sea-change in identity -- from the related-but-distinct concepts of settlers and saints to the mixed image (ambiguously hierarchical and egalitarian) of a company in covenant; an old-new chosen people voluntarily in passage to an always uncertain apocalypse: doomsday and New Jerusalem.

What the City upon a Hill makes visible is a far-reaching rhetoric of conditionality: a ritual of order-to-be that potentially unites a group of colonists in the bonds of grace, and so grants them provisionally the good land they have come to claim by prophecy and royal patent.

I will elaborate later on the ingenuities involved in this strategy. For the moment I want to use the hindsight this gives us to speculate on motive. Winthrop's rhetorical daring appears to be something of a desperate measure. The two-stranded model he advanced was intended for a community that posed a double threat to order, as religious dissenters and as worldly entrepreneurs. Winthrop's appeal to unity-in-love ("knit together as one man") reminds us, on the one hand, that the Puritans were

militant sectarians. Predictably, the history of the New England Way turned out to be a history of theological warfare. On the other hand, Winthrop's appeal to hierarchy reminds us that these religious zealots were intent on rising in the world. Their leaders were college-educated clergy, merchants, and lawyers, like the Cambridge law graduate, John Winthrop, grandson of a self-made businessman, and son of a nouveau-riche merchant fallen on hard times. The statistics of the 1630 Great Migration are: 10% poor (servants), 10% lower class (unskilled laborers), 1% aristocracy and riffraff combined, and the rest (79%) "middling": artisans, tradesmen, shopkeepers, independent farmers. They came to the New World at a time of severe economic depression in England, not only as rebels against Anglican rituals, but equally as youngish (thirty-something on the average), ambitious, mobile professionals who had been enticed by the promises of a chartered profit-seeking corporation. Behind Winthrop's opening insistence on hierarchy (rich and poor, officers and subjects) lie his well-grounded anxieties about governing a colony of middle-class dissidents who (as he put it, grimly) were "seeking great things in this present world," "for [them] selves and [their] posterity."

Winthrop's misgivings are transparent in the confidence of his rhetorical moves. The text shows that at once he envisioned his two-stranded model, analogy and figura united under the aegis of probation, he proceeded to apply it boldly and consistently. He argues first by analogy (prince and steward); then by direct re-presentation (elect and damned). And then he proceeds to apply Christian Charity in both spheres. Winthrop identifies these, properly enough, through the dualism of justice and mercy, and what he calls the "double law" of nature (the moral law) and grace (the law of the gospel). But by this point doubleness has become a bi-polar monism. By either law, Winthrop observes, we arrive at the same literal-spiritual end. Social order is here

established by common moral considerations and by the gospel. In one case, we are “commanded to love [our] neighbor,” in the other, to act toward others “out of the same affection which makes [a man] careful of his own good, according to [the example] of our Savior.” The link between the two kinds of law, it turns out, depends on the capacity of the colonists to act in such a way as to make visible the reciprocity between nature and grace.

What does reciprocity look like in this context? Let me pause to sketch this new rhetorical piece – Winthrop’s provisional knight, his two-faced bishop-rook. One face is hierarchical, looking towards the secular world, and concerned with justice according to the law of nature. Its model is the moral chain of command implicit in the divine right of kings. Historically, it represents the expansion of empire, from Europe to America. The other face is egalitarian, looking towards heaven, and concerned with mercy, according to the law of love. Its model is the gospel spirit uniting the body of the true church, and expanding, historically, from old Canaan through Christ to the end-time kingdom.

And now, with this sketch in view, I want to shift my perspective and move from hindsight back to history. By what authority in 1630 did Winthrop impose his new-fangled conditions? Once more we face the question of function and context. By function here I mean the strategies available to Winthrop to resolve his problem of legitimation. The context may be gleaned from an antiquarian gloss, composed by Winthrop’s son sometime in the mid-1630s:

[HANDOUT — CONTEXT]

Written on board the Arbella, on the Atlantic Ocean, by the Honorable John Winthrop, Esquire, in his passage (with the great company of

religious people, of which Christian tribes he was the brave leader and famous governor), from the Island of Great Britain to New England in the North America.

The key words are “honorable,” “esquire,” and “company.” I refer in general to the well-documented transition in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (the Tudor-Stuart Period) from medieval to modern systems of organization. In particular, I think of that aspect of the transition which is signaled by Winthrop’s claim to leadership. “Company” is a pun on worldly and religious business, but its primary meaning in 1630 was the Massachusetts Bay Company, Incorporated, a group of entrepreneurs, colonial speculators, and court-appointed officials, many of them Puritans, whose governing board had voted on November 7 (a providential date) — November 7, 1629 — to invest Winthrop, “as [a] Justice of the Peace,” with “authority [in the new settlement] as in England.”

Now, Justice of the Peace is the office designated by “honorable” and “esquire,” and it had taken on a dramatic new importance during the Tudor period. Previously, the chief law enforcer had been the sheriff, who controlled the courts of common law in the medieval village jurisdiction, technically known as the tourn [t-o-u-r-n]. It was a hierarchical form of control, of course, but it was based largely on local tradition – customs and codes handed down orally from one generation to another; in effect, a medley of Anglo-Saxon, Latin, and Norman-French precedents, locally applied according to village or tourn memory, in more or less consensual ways, within relatively autonomous because relatively insulated communities.

The transition I mentioned from Medieval to Renaissance England might be described, legally, as a movement from tourn to corporation, and from sheriff to justice

of the peace. That movement followed upon profound and lasting cultural changes -- economic upheavals, class realignments, demographic shifts, and technological and scientific revolutions. It issued in the centralization of authority under crown and court. By 1588, when Winthrop was born, a new system of law was in place. I quote here from the standard legal history of the period:

In the courts held by the Justices [of the Peace] was vested all the common law jurisdiction of the country, civil and criminal. Royal justice had won a complete victory of the older [feudal and communal] local courts. But [in 1500] there was still left to the old courts and the old officials — [that is,] to the tourn and the sheriff — certain police duties and criminal jurisdiction. Royal justice won its final victory when [under the Tudors] it practically absorbed this last remnant of their jurisdiction.

(W. S. Holdsworth, A History of English Law [London, 1903], p. 123)

The practical terms of absorption entailed a centrally-regulated network of judicial redistrictings – now termed counties, boroughs, corporations, and companies. These were administered by court-appointed justices of the peace, who thus effectually became watch-dogs of an emergent modern social apparatus, a nation-state in which the law was relatively codified and statutory, and the monarch was titular head of the church.

Among other things, this vast reorganization was remarkable for two overarching ironies. The first has to do with cultural contrasts. The process of centralization reveals that this so-called consensual, static world of the medieval tourn was a configuration of relatively independent communities, whereas the highly

regulated modern world of boroughs, companies, and corporations was the product of upheaval and fragmentation. The second irony pertains directly to Winthrop's model. In the late-sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century England, the agents of centralization often turned their jurisdictions into centers of dissent. For the fact was that justices of the peace characteristically came from the class that also characteristically produced the Puritans, who then proceeded to turn their delegated powers against the central authorities. Many counties and boroughs (such as the county of East Anglia, from which Winthrop came, along with most of the Arbella passengers), became strongholds of Puritan influence, under the governance of Puritan justices of the peace, abetted by dissenting clergy. The clergy set out the articles of faith for what would become England's Puritan Commonwealth. The justices of the peace sought to provide the terms of communal solidarity. Their lay-sermons, variously gathered in historical, legal, and theological collections -- a large, rich, and unduly neglected archive -- marshal the expected scriptural arguments for separatism or congregational independence. But they also built upon a different, secular theme. In defying the nation's civil and religious center, they turned for an alternative authority to the memory of what they pictured as the good old days of sheriff and toun -- an elaborately-constructed nostalgia for the harmonious, consensual, and independent life of the medieval village. As a Royalist J.P., Edward Charles, put it, their appeal to independence was a "subterfuge for sedition," a not-so-indirect condemnation of central authority through the invocation (I now quote a Puritan J.P., Richard Adams) "the true England," "happy land of our fathers and their fathers before them."

I believe we may trace the myth of the middle ages to these documents. They carry in embryo the dream-visions of Morris, Ruskin, and Tennyson -- a longing for

some quasi-feudal stability and spiritual kinship in a world of change. This is not the place to discuss either their rhetoric or their legacy, but one point is worth noting, in view of the ironies I just mentioned. In rebelling against national authority, the English Puritans reinforced a new, emphatically Protestant model of nationalism. Their appeal to the past eventually extended from medieval to antiquarian fable and lore – from sheriff and toun to Robin Hood, King Arthur, Alfred the Great, Druid legends – and so helped provide a secular myth of origins for the modern English state, and what was to be its far-flung empire, reaching in the New World from the tropical Bahamas to Canada's Dominion of the North.

This is precisely what Winthrop's model works not to accomplish. Considered as an example of the cultural work of literature, its most conspicuous aspect -- vividly dramatized by its uniqueness in the annals of Puritan J.P.'s -- is the absence of any reference or even trace of medievalist nostalgia. It is not that Winthrop shied away from the conflict between real and ideal. If anything he magnifies this by substituting Christ for the sheriff. Apparently, however, he considered it inadequate or inappropriate to invoke antiquated feudal ways as corporate standards. And the reason, to repeat, may be inferred from his peculiar problem of authority. I quote here from a recent detailed study of the Great Migration:

[The] emigrants [came from] places where commercial activity [and] religious dissent combined to loosen the ties of traditional authority. [In] England as a whole, [for example,] farmers outnumbered craftsmen by more than seven to one; among the prospective colonists artisans were nearly twice as numerous as farmers. [Moreover,] these farmers, who comprised 16% of the population, were "relatively prosperous," "literate,"

and “independent.” [As for the artisans, they] usually practiced skilled trades that placed them on the middle rungs of the economic ladder.

(Virginia Dejohn Anderson, New England's Generation: The Great Migration and the Formation of Society and Culture in the Seventeenth Century [Cambridge, 1991], pp. 31-32)

In other words: the English country in 1630 was composed of diverse elements, many of them deeply traditional, most of them steeped in residual habits of life. It would have been historically appropriate as well as ideologically expedient for the magistrates to appeal to the ideals of a common past. It would also have been rhetorically sound, an innovation within the traditional boundaries of Christian hermeneutics. The rhetorical connection between sheriff and Justice of the Peace – like that between King Arthur and Cromwell (which became a theme of the 1640s) – joins space and time, real and ideal; but as a model of identity it remains in and of this world, a linear move, confined to the story of England.

The medievalist fantasy was an ingenious variation, but it could not accommodate the circumstances of the Arbella emigrants. Winthrop was responding to a special problem in religious and social cohesion, one that required (in Perry Miller's words) an ideal commensurate with the Protestant Ethic. Winthrop's variation is a move in that direction. It consecrates the modernizing tendencies embodied in his delegated function (J.P., Esquire) while legitimating the separatist tenets of his religious company's dissent. And much more than that. In the double process of consecration and legitimation, Winthrop invents a new history for the colony, replacing its secular past, medieval and renaissance alike, with the progress of the church. As Winthrop, in Reason Three, outlines the history of Christian Charity, it runs from Eden

(“man in the estate of innocency”) — I’m now quoting Winthrop — to the Israelite “household of faith,” to Christian believers “in the apostles’ time” (that is, as recorded in the New Testament) and climactically, in this time, to the covenanted “community of peril.”

I want to focus on this last image for a moment, because it becomes Winthrop’s dominant figure for the New England venture. “Community of peril” contrasts dramatically with the benign, harmonious vision of the town and in doing so it offers a fit correlative for Winthrop’s strategy of probation. It also establishes a distinctive ancestry for his imperiled City upon a hill. “Christ,” Winthrop explains, gave

a general rule (Math. 7:22): Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye the same to them. [That] rule must we observe in case of community of peril. Hence it was that in the primitive church they had all things in common. Likewise in the return out of captivity, Nehemiah exhorts the Jews to liberality in remitting their debts to their brethren. This is to be observed [as well] in the latter stories of the churches.

I have omitted a key phrase from this passage in order to stress once more what Winthrop omits from his genealogy: not just family and friends, sheriff and town, but English history altogether. In its place, as New England antiquities, Winthrop offers a procession of communities of peril: the Israelites returning from Babylon to Jerusalem; “the primitive church” in flight from Roman persecution; and the “latter-day” Reformers reestablishing the “true religion” (as the formulaic Calvinist phrase had it) after “the long night of Papal captivity.” This is no random gathering of exempla. It is the official outline of Protestant apocalypica: the figural continuity from the Old Testament to the

New and thence (along the lines of sacred history) to the prophecies of the “latter-days” — the “latter stories of the churches,” by which Winthrop means the Protestant Reformation.

Now I turn to the phrase I left out, Winthrop’s solitary reference actual historical origins:

That rule must we observe in case of community of peril [as] did some of our forefathers in times of persecution here in England and so did many of the faithful [elsewhere in Europe] in other [Protestant] churches, whereof we keep an honorable remembrance of them [in] latter [day] stories of the [martyrs].

“Here in England” may be read as a transitional phrase, a gesture toward the old rules of the game. After all, Winthrop’s identity as an imperial magistrate, theirs as colonial subjects, required the Arbella passengers to think of England as home. By all common sense criteria, they were Englishmen and -women. But we have textual grounds for reading the phrase in quite the reverse sense, as a move on Winthrop’s part towards absorbing England, too, into his variation, as a synecdoche for a corrupt Old World. I don’t think he intended this. It was a move intended by a nascent social symbology – that is, by the new game rules latent in Winthrop’s innovation. But latency also implies agency. To give credit where credit is due, we must note that Winthrop, for all his common-sense, mentions only some “forefathers,” and these few only to elicit memories of religious persecution. They were Protestant saints hounded by the benighted Church of Rome -- martyred in England, he stresses, as the saints had been martyred in pagan Babylon and Rome.

Now, some of these Reformation heroes may really have been related to some of the company then present, but that is not Winthrop's point. His genealogy is a model of spiritual descent that identifies him as the "brave leader" of "Christian tribes" fleeing what he had called a year before (quote) "a land of destruction," ripe for some sweeping "catastrophe and punishing plagues from heaven." In that figural perspective, his phrase "here in England," spoken in passage to a New World, is a wonderfully revealing conjunction of agency, tradition, and transgression. Winthrop's ambiguous reference to the English forefathers is an index to the enormous visionary shift underway in his model. Seen in retrospect, the City upon a Hill is a prototype of the way literature has functioned in the process not only of "Making America," but of modern nation-building in general. The Winthrop variation deploys uncertainty as a means of socialization; it transmutes historical displacement into a new identity. What is displaced is both visionary (a medieval utopia) and actual (familial, communal, and geographical origins). What comes into place is broadly modern: a community written into existence by mutual contract and personal consent, through a declaration of rules, ideals, and a constitution-to-be. It is also, as things turned out, specifically American: a new view of history. Some later catch-phrases for its newness would be "nation of futurity" and "country of tomorrow"; in Winthrop's exploratory version it is simply, astonishingly, the concept of a history before the fact.

"We must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill": the imperative ("must consider") centers upon a potentially millennial future (prefigured by the image of Moses at Canaan's frontier). Potentiality, however, means self-doubt: "we shall be" entails the prospect of being "made a story and by-word through the world." And vice-versa: the threat entails the dream of what "we shall be." Part of what I called astonishing about Winthrop's strategy is the fact that his double-edged rhetoric of peril

has it both ways. Its conditional tense defines the community as secular, experimental, and fallible; and that same conditional tense is the premise of spiritual transformation. It is as though (1) an accurate replica might yield a perfect mirror-reflection; and (2) the force of that possibility were not a promise of perfection but instead the excitement of living in the “might be.” If we keep discipline, says Winthrop, we will be a beacon to the world; if not, we will become a by-word for failure. The “we” is circumscribed by a double “if.” What we are at any given time is beacon and by-word. That and is a formula for perennial anxiety. And anxiety is Winthrop’s formula for empowerment. In game-terms, it is the conditional link that allows for the simultaneity of linear and diagonal identity. The “if” that doubly circumscribes the “we” affirms that we are already chosen because we are now under probation. By that symbolic logic, Winthrop already grants the emigrants, before reaching harbor, the territorial rights to the (quote) “Canaanites” “good land,” which they, the emigrants, have “pass[ed] over this vast sea to possess.” By that emphasis on peril, he already releases these entrepreneurs, as emigrants, as immigrants and colonists, from the burdens of their secular past.

In effect, by implication, Winthrop’s model is the marriage of corporation and incarnation. It re-presents a modern enterprise in the context of figural history and it represents a figura of Christian charity – “this love, the bond of perfection[which] knits all parts together [in] one body” -- in the context of a newly-enfranchised company by contract. In saying this I am obviously returning to the perspective of hindsight. Hence my qualifications: In effect, by implication. It is not necessary to exaggerate the achievement in order to appreciate its significance. I began by alluding to the (quote) “shining city on a hill” inscribed on the plaque outside Harvard’s Kennedy Institute and to Reagan’s vision of (quote) “the American Way as a model of Christian charity.” But I

have assumed throughout that Winthrop's variation is conspicuously transitional. Its sources lie in the rules and regulations of an Old World game: the Bible, the Church Fathers, and the Protestant Reformation. These are the lines along with Winthrop's new-fangled rook-bishop moves. Even when it arrives, hypothetically, at its special destination, "New England in the North America," it occupies essentially an Old World position: Winthrop has European Protestants in mind when he says that "the eyes of all people are upon us." It would be another forty to seventy years before the colonists would have an indigenous myth of their own founders – a full-blown legend of a golden age of tribal first-fathers, rivaling the medieval town, or ancient Rome, or even the primitive churches, and located wholly within the "American strand." Another generation or two, that is, had to elapse before Winthrop's rhetorical piece could claim a proper place for itself, its own New World Square, a sacred-secular space replete with its own history -- conditional beginning, conditional middle, and conditional end. And of course a century would have to elapse after that before Winthrop's knight could have a proper set of royalty to defend – a group of Founding Fathers, constructed according to Enlightenment rules of power, eliciting progressivist forms of anxiety (every pawn a king, potentially), and moving within republican lines of pragmatism and promise.

Still, Winthrop does say "all people," as though "the people" at large were the authorizing constituency, and as though all of history were at stake. More important is the geographical shift that follows from his emphasis on process. By the logic of conditionality, Winthrop re-focuses the objective upon the meaning of the New World. There is the place of crisis and trial. That is where the spirit may be made visible: diagonally, through the regeneration of individuals; and linearly, through the community's secular-moral growth — in Winthrop's words, a sacred covenant to

progress here in this world, in this land, in “wisdom, power, goodness, and truth.” The City upon a Hill represents the first ideal to take the fate of the New World as its condition of failure and success. As a symbol, it derives from two traditions that proved inadequate as the spiritual framework for modern nationalisms: kingship and Christianity. Winthrop varied both those traditions to accommodate a modern venture, and in the course of variation he opened the prospect for something new under the sun, the America-game.

Scriptural References

(1) Moses' "Prophetical Song":

The Lord thy God will ... gather thee from all the nations... and bring thee unto the land [of promise] ... and thou shalt possess it, and he will do thee good, and multiply thee above thy fathers.... And the Lord will put all these curses upon thine enemies ... and make the plenteous in every work of thine hand.... See, I have set before thee this day life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may ... dwell in the land which the Lord swore unto thy father, ... to give them. (Deut. 30:3-20)

Geneva Gloss on "choose life":

"By faith in Christ ... love and obey God: which thing is not in man's power, but God's spirit only worketh it in His elect."

(2) City on a Hill:

Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick, and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine, before men, that they may see your good works. And glorify your father which is in heaven. (Mat. 5:14-16)

Geneva Bible gloss on Matthew 5:

"Christ teacheth who are blessed.... Your office is to season men with the salt of the heavenly example.... Because you are seen far off, give good example of [everlasting] life.

Text and Context

Text:

Thus stands the case between God and us: We are entered into a covenant with Him [and if He] ... shall please to hear us ... then hath He sealed our commission.... But if we shall neglect the observation of these articles... [and] fall to embrace this present world...seeking great things for ourselves and our posterity, the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us....

Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck ... is to follow the counsel of Micah We must be knit together in this work as one man.... We must delight in each other, make others' conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together – always having before our eyes ... our community as members of the same body.... [Thus] the Lord will ... delight to dwell among us, as His own people, and ... we shall see much more of His wisdom, power, goodness, and truth than formerly.... 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 ... we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world ... And to shut up this discourse with that exhortations of Moses ... in his last farewell to Israel, Deut. 30: Beloved, there is now set before us life and ... death.... We are commanded this day to ... love one another ... and to keep His commandments.... [If] we will not obey ... we shall surely perish out of the good land [which] we pass over this vast sea to possess it.

Context:

Written on board the Arbella, on the Atlantic Ocean, by the Honorable John Winthrop, Esquire, in his passage (with the great company of religious people, of which Christian tribes he was the brave leader and famous governor), from the Island of Great Britain to New England in the North America.