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SACVAN BERCOVITCH

Discovering "America": A Cross- Cultural Perspective

John F. Kennedy-Institut
für Nordamerikastudien

Freie Universität Berlin

Lansstrasse 5-9

1000 Berlin 33

Germany

Sacvan Bercovitch

Discovering "America": A Cross-Cultural Perspective

When I first came to the United States, I knew virtually nothing about "America." I attribute my immigrant naiveté to the peculiar insularity of my upbringing. I was nurtured in the rhetoric of denial. To begin with, I absorbed Canada's provincial attitudes toward "The States" -- a provinciality deepened by the pressures of geographical proximity and hardened by the facts of actual dependence. Characteristically, this expressed itself through a mixture of hostility and amnesia, as though we were living next door to an invisible giant, whose invisibility could be interpreted as non-existence. The interpretation was reflected in the virtual absence of "America" throughout my education, from elementary and high school, where U.S. history ended in 1776, to my fortuitous college training at the adult extension of the Montreal YMCA, where a few unavoidable U.S. authors were taught as part of a course on Commonwealth literature. I learned certain hard facts, of course, mainly pejorative, and I knew the landmarks from Wall Street to Hollywood; but the symbology that connected them--the American dream which elsewhere (I later discovered) was an open secret, a mystery accredited by the world--remained hidden from me, like the spirit in the letter of the uninitiate's text.

A more important influence was the Yiddishist-Left Wing world of my parents. I recall it as an outpost barricaded from the threat of assimilation by radical politics and belles lettres, an immigrant enclave locked into a Romantic-Marxist utopianism long after its disillusionment with Stalin, and fortified by the alleged spiritual values of art in the face of what seemed permanent economic depression and utter cultural estrangement. It was there, far more than at school, that I learned the strategies of denial. Their object in this case was Canada. I cannot recall a single reference to national matters in serious conversation. Literary discussions ranged from Sholom Aleichem to Kafka, with polemical excursions to Yiddish contemporaries published in the local newspaper, Der Keneder Odler ("The Canadian Eagle," a mixed metaphor, carrying cross-cultural ironies for me even then). Politics consisted in a conflict of imaginary options for world-revolution, extending from Trotsky's lost cause to the visionary boundaries of anarchism. It seems appropriate that I should have graduated from high school not to college, but, for several years, to a socialist kibbutz in what used to be called the Arabian desert.

The harvest of these experiences was an abiding suspicion of high rhetoric, especially as a blueprint of the future, and an abiding fascination with the redemptive promises of language, especially as a source of personal identity and social cohesion. Still, nothing in my background had prepared me for my encounter with a secular modern nation living in a dream. "I hear America singing," writes Whitman, and concludes: "The United States are themselves the greatest poem." So, too, Emerson: "America is a poem in our eyes." I

arrived at a similar conclusion, but from a different perspective and to a different effect. My experience of the music of America (as I came to think of it) was closer to the epiphany of otherness recorded in Kafka's "Investigations of a Dog." The canine narrator of that story tells us that one day in his youth a group of seven dogs appeared before him, suddenly, "out of some place of darkness," to the accompaniment of "terrible" and ravishing sounds:

> At that time I still knew hardly anything of the creative gift with which the canine race alone is endowed...for though music had [always] surrounded me...my elders had [never] drawn my attention to it.... [A]ll the more astonishing, then...were those seven musical artists to me. They did not speak, they did not sing, they remained generally silent, almost determinedly silent; but from the empty air they conjured music. Everything was music, the lifting and setting of their feet, certain turns of the head, their running and standing still, the positions they took up in relation to one another, the symmetrical patterns which they produced.... [M]y mind could attend to nothing but this blast of music which seemed to come from all sides, from the heights, from the deeps, from everywhere, surrounding the listener, overwhelming him.... I longed to ...beg [the musicians] to enlighten me, to ask them what they were doing.... [Their music] was incomprehensible to me, and also quite definitely beyond my capacities.... I rushed about, told my story, made accusations and investigations.... I was resolved to pursue [the problem] indefatigably until I solved it.

The pursuit unfolds as a series of ingenious inferences, deductions,

and explications extending to virtually every aspect of "dogdom," from the higher laws of "universal dog nature" to the specialized issue of "soaring dogs" (how do they "remain for the most part high up in the air, apparently doing nothing but simply resting there?") and the still-controversial "rules of science" for getting food: should you bring it forth by "incantation" or "water the ground as much as you can"? Or is it that "the earth draws one kind of food out of itself and calls down another from the skies"?[1] Nothing, it seems, escapes observation, except the presence of human beings.

Kafka's story is a great parable of interpretation as mystification--facts marshalled endlessly to build up contexts whose effect, if not intent, is to conceal or explain away. It is also a great parable of the limitations of cultural critique -- limitations, not just illusions, for in fact the story conveys a good deal about the dog's world, in spite of the narrator's inability to transcend it; or rather, as a function of his non-transcending condition. In this double sense, negative and ambiguous, Kafka's "investigations" apply directly to my own as an Americanist. The general parallels may be drawn out through a Chinese box of skewed interpretive positions: dog vis-à-vis human, Russian-Jewish immigrant vis-à-vis French Canadian Montreal, Canada vis-à-vis The States, and eventually "America," as I came to understand it, vis-à-vis the cultural norms and structures it represents.

These are not precise symmetries;[2] but they point to certain common principles of exegesis. I begin with the negative implications. (1) To interpret is not to make sense of a mystery out there. It is to discover otherness as mystery (something

"overwhelming," "incomprehensible"), and then to explain the mystery as the wonders of an invisible world, a realm of meaningful "silence," resonant with universals. (2) To investigate those wonders is not to come to terms with the new or unexpected. It is to domesticate the unknown by transferring the agency of meaning from the mystery out there to realities we recognize, and so to invest the familiar--ourselves, or our kind--with the powers of a higher reality ("universal laws," "the rules of science," the view of eternity). (3) To establish the laws and rules of that higher reality is not to break through the limitations we experience. It is to deny our conditions of dependency by translating those limitations into meta-structures of culture, history, and the mind (the canine principles of music). As for motives, we may infer from Kafka's parable that they are either self-defensive or self-aggrandizing, and that in either case interpretation is a stategy for repressing the actual worlds around us which expresses itself through yearnings for a world elsewhere.

We might call this the hermeneutics of transcendence. The possibilities it offers for self-aggrandizement (repressing otherness for purposes of control or incorporation) are not far to seek: one need only think of the manifold uses of "he" for God and/or humanity. But this is to interpret from the vantage point of dominance. From the dog's subordinate point of view, or the scholar's, to magnify the categories of our containment is to diminish our capacities for understanding. This is repression in a familiar psycho-cultural sense: interpretation as a strategy for concealing our subjection to a master discourse. Again, the advantages are not far to seek--among these, evading the facts of subordination in ways that allow for

compensatory modes of control--but the sense of reassurance this brings comes at the expense of critical awareness.

A negative prospect, as I said, especially since it is Kafka's donné that we have no choice but to interpret. However, it is complemented in the parable by the enabling ambiguities of limitation. As the title suggests, "Investigations of a Dog" points not only to the dog's attempts to describe Kafka's world, but, at the same time, to Kafka's attempts to describe dogdom. And the result, as I interpret it, is not a double impasse. It is a model of cross-cultural criticism. Its terms are reciprocity, as against dichotomy: not canine or human, but the contingencies of both, as revealed (in degree) through the re-cognition of limitation. We might call this the hermeneutics of non-transcendence. It may be said to reverse traditional comparativist methods by its emphasis on the historicity of "archetypes" and "essences." Its aim is not to harmonize "apparent" differences (in the manner of pluralist consensus), but on the contrary to highlight conflicting appearances, so as to explore the substantive differences they imply. This entails the recognition of universals as culture-specific barriers to understanding; it is grounded in the faith that barriers, so specified, may become (within limits) avenues of discovery; and its logic may be briefly stated. If dreams of transcendence are indices to the traps of culture, then inquiry into the trapping process may provide insight both into our own and into others' actual non-transcending condition. Such insight is problematic, provisional, and nourished by a frustrating sense of boundaries. It denies us access to apocalypse, but it helps make our surrounding worlds

visible.

I would like to think that my own investigations as an Americanist show the benefits of this approach. For purposes of analysis, I review these thematically, rather than chronologically. My subject is the discovery of an other America, in the double sense of Kafka's parable: negatively, as cultural otherness, and ambiguously, as a set of cultural secrets, the other America hidden from view by interpretation. Emerson's American Scholar grows concentrically toward transcendence, in an expanding circle from nature to books to representative selfhood. My own unrepresentative (not to say eccentric) experience may be described as a series of increasingly particularized border-crossings: first, into "America" proper; then, into the interdisciplinary field of American Studies; and finally, into the special area of American literary scholarship.

* * *

I crossed into The States with a Canadian's common-sense view of the Americas: two continents, North and South, each of them a mosaic of nations -- which is to say, a variety of European models of civilization -- joined by the semi-tropical bush-countries of Central America. How could I not see "America" as a cultural artifact? I knew that that sort of definition applied to all national identities -- except Canada, which by consensus was "a country without a mythology."[3] But if Canada was an exception that proved the rule, "America" was its antithesis, the example par excellence of collective

fantasy. Consider the claims of Puritan origins. By comparison, myths of other national beginnings were plausible at least. The mists of antiquity cover the claims of Siegfried and King Arthur and the exiled Trojan heroes who sired Virgil's Rome. Scripture itself authorizes Joshua's claims to Canaan. But we know that the Puritans did not found the United States. In fact, we know that by 1690, sixty years after the Great Migration and a century before Independence, not even the colony of Massachusetts was Puritan. Nonetheless, the belief in America's Puritan ur-fathers was evident everywhere three centuries later, at every ritual occasion, from Thanksgiving Day to July Fourth, throughout the literature, from Harriet Beecher Stowe to Thomas Pynchon, and in every form of literature, including endless debates about whether or not the Puritan legacy was a good thing, and academic polemics against the predominance of early New England scholarship.

My study of Puritanism started out as an investigation of what appeared to me a cultural secret. I expected to discover the creation of a national past, the invention of a Puritan tradition commensurate with the needs of a modern republic. Instead, as I traced the act of creation back through the nineteenth into the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries, I found that its roots lay with the Puritans after all.[4] The tradition had been made up, as suspected, but it was built out of historical materials, selected for historical reasons. The fantasy of Puritan origins had worked, culturally, because in part the New England Puritans represented the movement toward modernity, and the myth they invented to express this aspect of their venture had in turn provided the culture with a useful, flexible, durable, and compelling fantasy of American identity.

I mean "compelling" in a descriptive or ethnographic, not a celebratory sense. My discovery pertained to the historicity of myth, and the secret it yielded applied as well to my Canadian geography of the New World: what I had considered to be my neutral, common-sense view of the territory out there as an extension of various European civilizations. To see "America" as myth was to historicize the Canadian identity--i.e., to see in it the contours of another, complementary myth. I refer to the dominant vision of Canada: a "loose scattering of enclaves or outposts of culture and civilization" (according to that national consensus), protected from a "hostile bush-country" by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.[5] The Mountie is a symbolic figure in this design, of course. But the design itself represents a distinctive national fantasy, which I now saw as a variation of the same myth of conquest that had shaped the growth of the United States.

"Canada" was the colonial version of the myth, a story told by invaders who claimed authority for conquest from abroad--from European royalty and civilizations centered in England and France.[6] "America" was the indigenous imperialist inversion. It relocated the seat of empire from the Old World to the New; it reversed the very meaning of "newness" from its colonial status of dependency to a declaration not just of independence but of superiority (political, moral, even spiritual); and in this new sense it sanctified the "empty continent" as itself constituting the natural-divine patent for conquest. Gradually, the imperial counterpart to the bush-country police became the frontiersman, living in harmony with nature and yet the harbinger of civilization, a paradox explicable by the fact that the frontier

itself had been transformed from its colonial sense of "barrier" into an imperial summons to expand.

The issue, then, was not a clash of opposites, Canadian facts versus American fantasies. It was a juxtaposition of myths, colonial vis-à-vis imperial, each of them a border-land of fantasy and fact. The colonial version had issued in "Canada," a country with a mythology elsewhere, systematically de-centered and characterized, accordingly, by a rhetoric of absence: non-Indian, non-European, non-American, non-mythological. The other, imperial issue was "America." As I followed its changing terms of identity (Puritan errand, national mission, manifest destiny, the dream), the windings of language turned out to be the matter of history. "America," an act of symbolic appropriation, came alive to me as the twin dynamics of empire: on the one hand, a process of violence unparalleled (proportionately) by even the Spanish Conquistadors, and sustained into the twentieth century by a rhetoric of holy war against everything un-American; on the other hand, an unleashing of creative energies -- enterprise, speculation, community-building, personal initiative, industry, confidence, idealism, and hope -- unsurpassed by any other modern nation.

It amounted to a demonstration from within of Walter Benjamin's thesis about the dynamics between "barbarism" and "civilization."[7] Benjamin was seeking to historicize art's claims to transcendence. My cross-cultural view was geared to the dynamics themselves. What I discovered in the interconnections between violence and culture-formation was transcendence in action: "America," an interpretation, through which the worlds out there had been

triumphantly repressed, rhetorically and historically -- first, by the myths of their inhabitants ("savage," "primitive") attended by the facts of genocide; and then by symbols of the land ("virgin," "wilderness") attended by the creation of the United States as "America."

* * *

So what began as English graduate studies in the United States became instead a trail into the myth and symbol thickets of American Studies. I encountered in its foundational works a scholarly achievement commensurate with the cultural creation of "America": Perry Miller's intellectual construction of national origins out of the esoteric writings of forty Protestant sectarians; F.O. Matthiessen's aesthetic construction of a national literary tradition out of the masterpieces of five self-declared "isolatoes"; Frederick Jackson Turner's historical construction of the national character out of a frontier West that largely excluded its native inhabitants, not to speak of the nation's non-westering immigrants. In all of these monumental works, as well as in their successors, an extraordinary capacity to analyze intricacies of thought, emotion, and imagination seemed bound up with an extraordinary unwillingness to extend analysis beyond the intricacies themselves. The "America" they revealed appeared out of nowhere -- "out of some place of darkness," or rather a <u>spirit</u> of place,[8] variously labelled nature, the New England mind, the Jeffersonian '76, pioneer democracy -- like the seven musical performers in Kafka's story.

I registered the anomaly as a cultural secret of academia. American Studies, as it had developed from the Forties through the Cold War decades, seemed a method designed not to explore its subject, somewhat as the dog's investigations, though conjured up by the music, are deliberately, exclusively, and astonishedly focussed elsewhere -- on the wonders of canine artistry ("the lifting and setting of their feet, certain turns of the head ... the position they took up in relation to one another, the symmetrical patterns which they produced"). The analytic tools of American Studies consisted of the same materials, the same patterns of thought and language, which Americanists had set out to investigate. As in Kafka's story, analysis was the celebration of a mystery.

Nonetheless, their work had a compelling range and force, which I attributed to a daring act of transgression: the application of aesthetic criticism to what by tradition belonged to the province of cognitive criticism. I refer to the familiar distinction between art and artifact, Kultur and culture, that reaches back through German Romanticism to the theological separation of sacred from secular. Theology, we know, had actually mandated separate methods of exegesis for that purpose: one method for unveiling the meanings of the Bible, proceeding from text to transcendent text, and from one divinely-inspired (if perhaps anxiety-ridden) authority to the next; and another, profane method, an empirical approach suitable to ordinary books concerning the empirical truths of this world. The modern literary equivalent for that dichotomy, based on the sacralization of art, is the opposition between text and context. The latter is the arena of cognitive criticism, since "context" designates

the world pro-fana, the "background" areas surrounding the temples of genius, a secondary reality illuminated by "secondary sources." Aesthetic criticism is designed to reveal the richness, the complexity, and the (unfathomable) depths of the "primary text" in its own "organic" terms. This so-called intrinsic method may draw on matters of context --psychology, sociology, philosophy, science -- but only insofar as they serve the ends of appreciation. It may even reach outside of the strictly aesthetic to the realm of spirit (moral truths, universal values) provided that what it finds there is reincorporated, truth and beauty entwined, into the meta-contextual pleasures of the text.

American Studies seemed to have developed through a reverse strategy of incorporation. It drew methodically on contextual matters -- it actively elicited cognitive analyses (of the American "mind," "heart," and "character") -- but it required these to conform to the principles of aesthetic appreciation. If "Ameria" was not literally a poem in these scholars' eyes, it was a literary canon that embodied the national promise. The Puritans had discovered "America" in the Bible; Jacksonians discovered the Bible in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution; American Studies added to this Biblia Americana the national literary classics. It may even be said to have concentrated upon them as the key to it all, somewhat as Christian typologists had discovered the secrets of Holy Scripture, Old and New, from Genesis to the End-Time, in stories of Christ. What followed was a series of investigations of the country's "exceptional" nature that was as rich, as complex, and as interdisciplinary as "America" itself -- a pluralist enterprise armed with the instruments

both of aesthetic and of cognitive analysis, all bent on the appreciation of a unique cultural artifact. Aesthetic instruments had a privileged place here because it was as art, by modern consensus, that the spirit most fully revealed itself. But the instruments of cognitive analysis were no less important. It was their task to reconstitute history itself as "American"; and, as we might expect, they did so most appreciatively when they repressed the adverse facts of American history, or else, more effectively still, represented these as a violation of the nation's promise and original intent.

The music which thus came, in Kafka's words, "from all sides, from the heights, from the deep, from everywhere," sounded to me like ideology. I sometimes thought of it as musak, and I recognized in its strains a long series of scholarly ventures in culture-formation, the nationalist project of modern literary history that had been baptized over a century before in the trinitarian faith of Volksgeist, World-Spirit, and the sanctity of art. One extreme application, or distortion, of this genre was the aesthetics of fascism. Another extreme was the humanist enterprise (mingling chauvinism, utopianism, and social critique) of Georg Gottfried Gervinus, Francesco de Sanctis, and Desiré Nisard. American Studies stood at the latter extreme, of course, and no doubt it was the humanist difference which allowed me to appreciate the insight it embodied into the dynamics of culture. Without quite articulating it as a principle of analysis, American Studies taught by example, in practice, that rhetoric is not a surface coating, "mere metaphor," upon the deep structures of the real. It is substantially, fundamentally, what the real is, even (or especially) when the rhetoric serves to repress and deny. The dog's

interpretations mask the rules of music, but they reveal the world he inhabits. Among other things, culture is how people interpret and what they believe.

A simple lesson, but it required time, observation, and participation to absorb. My outsider's view of American Studies was that its "America" was a context made text by Americanists. My American experience persuaded me that the poem was in some important sense an accurate representation of the way things worked. "America" was more than a figment of the imagination, an imperial wish-fulfillment dream brought to life in the assertion of nationhood. It was a way of imagining that expressed the mechanisms through which the made-up becomes the made-real. Like other modern nations, "America" was an imagined community. It was also a process of symbol-making through which the norms and values of a modern culture were internalized, rationalized, spiritualized, and institutionalized -- rendered the vehicle, as the American Way, both of conscience and of consensus.

The music of "America" still sounded to me like ideology, but it was ideology in a new key, requiring a blend of cognitive and appreciative analysis. I turned, accordingly, to the more flexible, non-pejorative definitions of the concept available in anthropology: ideology as a web of ideas, practices, beliefs, and myths through which a society, any society, coheres and perpetuates itself. I hoped that ideological analysis, so conceived, would allow me both to exploit the insights of American Studies and to revise its outlook. American Studies had set out the interactions between symbol and fact, rhetoric and history, by synthesizing their different forms of

discourse. I wanted to separate those forms (and their functions) in order to investigate the conditions of synthesis-making. To that end, I hoped that ideological analysis would allow me to mediate between the world and the word in such a way that the word, "America," might be contexualized, recovered for purposes of cognitive criticism, while the world of America might be apprehended in its fantastic textuality, as the development of a triumphant rhetoric and vision.

Necessarily, this set me at odds with the dominant concepts of ideology in the field. I thought of these as three models of the hermeneutics of denial: (1) The consensus model, adopted by the leading schools of literary and historical scholarship during the Cold War decades. This denied that America had any ideology at all, since ideology meant dogma, bigotry, and repression; whereas Americans were open-minded, inclusive, and eclectic. (2) The official Marxist model, imported into academia during the Depression, and revived in the Sixties. This denied that ideology had any truth-value, since it was by definition false consciousness, the camera obscura of the ruling class. (3) The multi-cultural model, a medley of various indigenous themes, from the melting pot to the patch-work quilt, melded together or interlaced with various forms of neo-Marxism. This denied that America had an ideology, on the grounds that there were so many ideologies, all in flux: republicanism, agrarianism, free enterprise, consumerism, liberalism, working-class consciousness, corporate industrialism, and so on, to the point where it came to seem the other side of consensual open-endedness.

Against that background my concept of ideology was intended to insist on (1) the ideological context of common sense eclecticism; (2)

the truth-value of ideology, as a key not to the cosmos but to culture, which mediates our access to cosmic truth; and (3) the de facto coherence of American culture, as for example in the ideological symmetries underlying the models of multi-culturalism and consensus. The symmetries seemed to me transparent in the relation I spoke of between the world and the word: the changing, conflictual, and yet continuously sustaining relation between the United States--in all its multifarious "realities" (pragmatic, agrarian, consumerist, etc.)--and the abstract meanings of "America." Heterogeneity was not the antithesis to those abstractions; it was a function of hegemony. The open-ended inclusiveness of the United States was directly proportionate to "America's" capacity to unify and exclude, and more precisely to unify by exclusion. The culture seemed indefinite, infinitely processual, because as "America" it closed everything else out, as being either "Old World" and/or not-yet-America.

I am describing a broad symbolic strategy, but my concern here lay with a specific academic enterprise. It seemed to me that the process by which the United States had become America was nowhere more clearly displayed than in the bipolarities of American Studies: on the one hand, a multi-culturalism (or experiential pluralism) that rendered invisible the structures of national cohesion; on the other hand, a consensual identity, "American," that by definition transcended the "ideological limits" of class, region, generation, and race. As this principle applied to American literary studies in particular, the relation between text and context opened into what I came to think of as a cultural symbology: a configuration or tangle of patterns of expression, interpretation, and belief common to all

areas of society, including the aesthetic. So understood, "high literature" was neither an imitation of reality nor a Platonic (or Hegelian) ladder to a higher reality. It was a mediation between both, which I thought of in terms of ideological mimesis: a representation of the volatile relations between conceptual, imaginative, and social realities that was different from, often opposed to, and yet fundamentally reciprocal with the ways of the world in which it emerged. I intended my concept of ideological mimesis to convey not only literature's multi-valence, but its capacities (in degree, within limits) for autonomy. Nonetheless, I again found myself at odds with the dominant models of analysis in the field, in this case the field of literary studies. I think here in particular of the New Criticism, which through the Sixties and the Seventies still reined in the area of textual analysis, and of oppositional criticism, which then as now comprised the most influential literary group in American Studies.

My objections to the New Critics antedated my discovery of "America." They thrived on the invisibility of context, somewhat as Kafka's narrator's ingenuities depend on his disembodiment of the music; or as the mystery he marvels at of "soaring dogs," floating on air, depends on the invisibility of whatever or whoever is holding them up. My own reading had convinced me, on the contrary, that literary texts were deeply embedded in issues of context; that this embeddedment was a central source of creative, moral, and intellectual vitality; and that to deny that source of empowerment on principle, or by professional reflex, was a form of aesthetic minimalism which drained literature of its richest meanings. It was also to instate

certain cultural values under the cloak of invisibility, as embodying the transcendent unities of the text. And finally, under the guise of reverence, it was to evade the most challenging questions posed by the trans-historical qualities of literature, which center on the relation (not the dichotomy) between "trans" and "historical." Criticism may aspire to judgments of eternity, but it takes place in history. The very forms of canonization (as Kafka's parable reminds us) are mediated by historical consciousness; we break through its limitations only in degree, and only by recognizing that we live in history, even if we live on literature.

But of course New Critics were ipso facto not Americanists. My direct engagement was with the oppositional critics. That term is a recent coinage, designating certain post-Marxist forms of cultural praxis. But in American Studies it has a far broader import. I have in mind the adversarial stance of Americanist literary critics from the very inception of the field: the school of subversion (as it has been called) that constitutes the mainstream tradition of American Studies from Vernon Parrington and Lewis Mumford through Matthiessen and Henry Nash Smith, and that has continued to provide many of its most distinguished figures. The principles of oppositionalism, so understood, center on an essentialist conflict between an always oppressive society and an always liberating literature -- a sacred-secular library of America set against the ideologies in America of racism, imperialism, patriarchy, and capitalist exploitation. My objection to this particular text-context dichotomy was more complicated in application than that to the New Critics, but it was based on a similar premise. My reading of the classic American

authors convinced me that they were imaginatively nourished by the culture, even when they were politically opposed to it. Melville's famous affirmation of the subversive imperative comes in an essay extolling America's destiny; and a similar dynamic informs the cultural work of Hawthorne and Emerson, as it also underlies the multiple connections between Nay-saying and representative selfhood in the adventures of George Harris, Ruth Hall, Huckleberry Finn, Frederic Henry, the Invisible Man, Oedipa Maas, and Rutherford Calhoun.[9]

In all cases, the complementarity of text and context revealed a cultural symbology which not only tolerated but elicited resistance as a staple of social revitalization. This did not mean that the literature was not subversive in some sense. My disagreement with the oppositionalists lay not in particular interpretations of texts, but in their overall tendency toward allegory. I saw this as a sort of beatification of the subversive; as a denial against all historical evidence (from every field of art) of the continuously enriching reciprocity between dominant forms of art and forms of ideological domination; as a transfer of the powers of appreciative criticism (centered in the mystique of the text) to political agency; and as a confusion, accordingly, of literary analysis with social action. It was as though (in a mirror-inversion of Kafka's parable) to deconstruct the musicians' patterns of performance--or to uncover adversarial tendencies within the symmetries they enacted, or to discover different groups of performers--were to threaten the entire world of music, and potentially to undermine the moral and social structures within which the musicians functioned.

This romance quest for the Subversive seemed to me to have its

roots in a venerable (though "dark" and often mystical) branch of hermeneutics, the esoteric tradition that bridged gnosticism, kaballa, and the Romantic vision of Satan as the secret hero of Paradise Lost. And in turn that visionary fusion of politics and Art recalled the radical aesthetics of my youth. Here again literature was invested with the spiritual values of protest, and literary criticism, by extension, raised almost to the status of revolutionary activity. But the national emphasis in this case -- the focus, positive and negative, on the Americanness of American literature -- called attention to a cultural difference in the very concept of radicalism. I refer to a broad tradition of political dissent inspired by the figural "America." Its connection to literary oppositionalism, as this unfolded from the Vietnam years through the Reagan Eighties, was both theoretical and institutional. Briefly, the student rebels of one period became the academic authorities of the other. The continuities this transformation implies -- beyond, or rather within, the profession of "generation gap," "rupture," and "politicization" -- require me to return once more to my literal-metaphorical moment of border-crossing, this time into the suprising radical America of the Sixties.

* * *

It was not the radicalism that suprised me. Quite the contrary: I had exected to find the land of Sacco and Vanzetti an unincorporated America of class contradictions, residual resistance, and emergent struggle. And so it was. But the protest rendered invisible the cultural limitations which these conflicts implied. The sources of

conflict persisted -- indeed, according to the protesters they had deepened -- but they were described in terms that reinforced this society's values and myths. The counter-culture swam into my view in a series of abstractions, two by two, like the procession of leviathans at the start of Moby-Dick, as the gates of Ishmael's wonder-world swing open: Freedom versus Tyranny, Opportunity versus Oppression, Progress versus Chaos; and mid-most of them all, like a Janus-faced phantom in the air, "America," real and ideal. The real faced toward doomsday. The ideal, facing the millennium, appeared sometimes in the form of national representatives (Jefferson, Lincoln), sometimes as representative texts (the Mayflower Compact, the federal Constitution), sometimes in cultural key words ("equal rights," "self-realization"), or else in the appositional symbology of pluralism ("heterogeneity," "nation of nations").

My common-sense response was co-optation. What else could this Americanization of utopia be but some long-ripened generational rite of passage, a ritual recycling of the energies of radical change into the structures of continuity? In this culture, I concluded, the conservatives were on the left; their characteristic strategy was to displace radical alternatives with an indigenous tradition of reform. Thus the alternative implicit in Nat Turner's revolt had been absorbed into the exemplary American protest embodied in The Narrative of Frederick Douglass; so, too in the long run, were the alternatives offered by Paul Robeson and Malcolm X. The quintessentially liberal programs for change that linked Elizabeth Cady Stanton to Gloria Steinem encompassed, blurred, and eventually eliminated other feminist alternatives (those which did not focus on "America"), from the Grimké

sisters to Emma Goldman and Angela Davis. It was the cultural work of Emerson and Emersonians, from (say) William James through Paul Goodman, to obviate socialist or communist alternatives to capitalism. This form of cultural work joined Jefferson to Thoreau and both to Martin Luther King, in an omnivorous oppositionalism that ingested all competing modes of radicalism--from the Fourierists to Herbert Marcuse and Noam Chomsky--in the course of redefining injustice as un-American, revolution as the legacy of '76, and inequities of class, race, and gender as disparities between the theory and the practice of Americanness.

These dissenters, it seemed clear, had miscalculated not just the power but the nature of rhetoric. They had thought to appropriate "America" as a trope of the spirit, and so to turn the national symbol, now freed of its base historical content, into a vehicle of moral and political renovation. In the event, however, the symbol had refigured the moral and political terms of renovation -- had rendered freedom, opportunity, democracy, and radicalism itself part of the American Way.[10] But the results of their miscalculations, as I traced these back through the nineteen hundreds, had unexpected consequences. What I learned from that century-long lesson in co-optation altered my views both of American protest and of the radical outlook I had brought to it. The culture, I discovered, had indeed found ways of harnessing revolution for its own purposes; but the ways themselves were volatile, even (to a point) open-ended. They tended toward subversion even as they drew such tendencies into persistent, deeply conservative patterns of culture.

In short, the issue was not co-optation or dissent. It was

varieties of co-optation, varieties of dissent, and above all varieties of co-optation/dissent. "America" was a symbolic field, continually influenced by extrinsic sources, and sometimes changing through those influences, but characteristically absorbing and adapting them to its own distinctive patterns. And in the course of adaptation, it was recurrently generating its own adversarial forms. The "alternative Americas" it spawned were (like the originating symbol) ideology and utopia combined. They opposed the system in ways that reaffirmed its ideals; but the process of reaffirmation constituted a radical tradition of a certain kind. Hence the ambiguities that linked Douglass to King, Thoreau to Goodman, Stanton to Steinem. In all these cases, dissent was demonstrably an appeal to, and through, the rhetoric and values of the dominant culture; and in every case, it issued in a fundamental challenge to the system: racism subverted in the story of a self-made man; patriarchy subverted through a revised version of the Declaration of Independence; the authority of government subverted by a July Fourth experiment in self-reliance.

The theory of co-optation assumes a basic dichotomy between radicalism and reform, as though one could be for or against an entire culture; as though not to be against a culture fundamentally (whatever that means) was to be fundamentally part of it; and as though one could hope to effect social change by advocating ideas or programs that were alien to whatever held together the society at large--which is to say, to its strategies of cohesion. The radical/reformist reciprocities I discovered pointed me in a different direction. They called for a reconsideration of the entire structure of dichotomies by

which I had found American protest wanting. The European forms of radicalism I had inherited were indeed opposed to that tradition, but they, too, I recognized, were couched in a rhetoric that expressed the cultures within which they had been generated. And they had given rise to forms of social action that were ambiguously liberating and/or restrictive, progressive and/or repressive, revolutionary and/or reformist. The difference between the two traditions was not that of empirical analysis versus symbolic projection, activism versus aquiescence. It was an opposition between distinctive processes of culture-formation, entailing (in each case) mixed forms of empirical analysis and symbolic projection, and, as it happened, resulting in major differences both in modes of social cohesion and in prescriptions for social renovation. Insofar as this opposition, too, was a false one -- insofar as (say) Walden resists The Communist Manifesto absolutely, denies altogether the theory of class identity or the socialist state -- it is because each rests on a hermeneutics of transcendence. Thoreau's appeal to self-reliance, like Karl Marx's to class struggle, implies a chiliastic solution ("the only true America," "the dictatorship of the proletariat"), built on apodictic either-or's (individualism or conformity; revolution or oppression), and, as in Kafka's parable, a wholesale transfer of agency, from culture to the higher laws of nature, history, and the mind.

What did seem to me distinctive in degree about the American instance was the cultural function of radicalism. It was a strategy of pluralism everywhere to compartmentalize dissent so as to absorb it, incrementally, unus inter pares, into a dominant liberal discourse. But American liberalism privileged dissent. One reason

for the impact of the Puritans was their success in making a dissenting faith the cornerstone of community; and the continuities this suggests may be traced through the rhetoric of American Revolution and the Emersonian re-vision of individualism as the mandate both for permanent resistance and for American identity -- a transcendental license to have your dissent and to make it too.

This was the context as well of oppositional criticism as I encountered it in the late Sixties; and it remains the context of American literary studies in our time of dissensus.[11] For although dissensus involves the disintegration of traditional structures of academic authority, nonetheless the conditions of dissensus do not transcend ideology. On the contrary: they are a purer expression of the liberal market-place than the genteel modes they superseded, which offered at least a certain resistance to the pluralist incorporation of academia. This is not to disparage the work of oppositional critics, then and now. They have raised important issues, exposed the constrictions of established theories and the injustice of established practices, and properly called attention to the pressures of history not only upon the literature we interpret but upon our categories of interpretation. In these and similar ways they have been right to call their criticism subversive. But subversive in what sense, and to what ends, and for whom?

My misgiving first expressed itself in my sense of wonder at the scope and intensity of their political claims. Particular questions of interpretation apart, why were these Americanists so intent on demonstrating the subversiveness of authors who for the most part had either openly endorsed the American Way, or else had lamented American

corruption as the failure of New Eden? Or mutatis mutandis, why were they so intent on asserting the regenerative powers of literary studies (their own) that were not only inaccessible but unintelligible to society at large? I recall thinking in this regard of two Thurber cartoons, which might be considered examples by contrast of the advantages of cross-cultural perspective. One of these shows a copyist sitting before Rubens's "Rape of the Sabine Women" and carefully reproducing the flowers in a corner of the scene. The other cartoon shows a woman smiling like the Mona Lisa, while the perplexed man on the couch next to her asks: "What do you want to be enigmatic for Monica?" What did these oppositionalists want Emily Dickinson and William Faulkner -- or more strangely still, their recondite readings of Dickinson or Faulkner -- to be radical for?

For an "America," I believe, that rendered invisible the interpreter's complicity in the culture. I do not mean complicity as a synonym for moral (or even clerical) treason. One may be complicitous simultaneously in various aspects of culture: those which help people rationalize their greed, those which help naturalize existing or emergent networks of power, and those which open the way to fundamental moral and social improvements. In this case, however, complicity involved a strikingly uncritical stance (considering the professional self-reflexity of these critics) toward precisely these sorts of ambiguities. In allegorizing the powers of opposition -- and in effect transcendentalizing the subversive -- these critics seemed almost wilfully oblivious to their own cultural function. It was as though their method had somehow recast oppositionalism itself in the image of "America"; as though, to recall the terms of Kafka's parable,

they had appropriated to their academic performances the radical potential of the symbology they opposed. One general symptom is the alliance between radicalism and upward mobility in the profession at large -- the rites of academia encoded in writings of dissent. A more telling symptom for my purposes is the cultural function of American Studies. Surely, it is no accident that, of all academic specialties, this field has been the most hospitable from the start to new waves of immigration from the other America into the profession. Nor is it by accident that, in spite of its very name, American Studies (as in United States) has gravitated toward a denial of cohesion; that this rhetoric of denial has presented itself in protests against exclusion (i.e., for integration); that the protest has taken the form of hyphenated ethnicity -- Italian-American, Irish-American, and Jewish-American hand in hand with African-American, Asian-American, and Native American -- and that the result has been an adversarial form of interpretation which roots subversion in institutions of culture. It makes for a paradox that could obtain, in the old immigrant myth, only in America: a school of subversion geared towards the harmony of political activism and the good life, and directed (under the aegis of American literary studies) towards a fusion of personal, professional, and national identity.

I have found in this institutionalization of dissent still another boundary demarcating the problematics of cross-cultural criticism.[12]

* * *

Towards the end of Kafka's "Investigations of a Dog," the narrator is granted a visionary consolation. As he lies alone, near death, utterly exhausted by a long series of frustrations, suddenly, he tells us,

> a beautiful creature ... stood before me.... My senses ... seemed to see or to hear something about him [of which he himself was unaware].... I thought I saw that the hound was already singing without knowing it, nay, more, that the melody, separated from him, was floating in the air in accordance with its own laws, and, as though he had no part in it, was moving toward me, toward me alone.

I suppose that an analogy might be drawn to those ineffable moments of wonder that light up the republic of American letters: Whitman's vision of America singing, what turns out to be an epic "Song of Myself"; the African slave Phyllis Wheatley's first sight of what she later learned to call "the land of freedom's heaven-defended race"; the westward caravan at the start of The Prairie, face to face with Natty Bumppo, towering against the sunset; Mary Antin's Pisgah-view (from Ellis Island) of the new promised land; the uncut forests of Long Island at the end of The Great Gatsby, pandering in whispers to the last and greatest of human dreams; Perry Miller's vocational epiphany at the mouth of the Congo River, a calling (he reports) from the primal darkness to tell the story of a brave New World; John Boyle O'Reilly's immigrant vision, at Plymouth Rock, "Of light predestined" streaming from "The Mayflower's ... chosen womb"; and before even those mythic Puritans, the discoverer Columbus, as Emerson identifies him, and with him, at the beginning of his career, in the opening pages of Nature:

> this beauty of Nature which is seen and felt as beauty, is the least part....
>
> The presence of a higher, namely, of the spiritual element is essential to its perfection. The high and divine beauty which can be loved without effeminacy, is that which is found in combination with the human will. Beauty is the mark God sets upon virtue.... When a noble act is done ... are not these heroes entitled to add the beauty of the scene to the beauty of the deed? When the bark of Columbus nears the shore of America; -- before it, the beach lined with savages, fleeing out of their huts of cane; the sea behind; and the purple mountains of the Indian Archipelago around, can we separate the man from the living picture? Does not the New World clothe his form with her palm-groves and savannahs as fit drapery?[13]

I offer this emblem of discovery as an ultimum of the rhetoric of transcendence -- an interpretation of origins and ends that appropriates the mysteries of gender, nature, and the Oversoul to the culturally transparent "I." And it is worth remarking that Emerson's American Scholar fits well into its "living picture." He, too, stands at the rhetorical "shore of America": a "New World" which he claims by naming, as being his by visionary right, simultaneously his and not-his, a hero's-trophy of beauty, virtue, savagery, and representative selfhood. In the Scholar's case, as in Columbus's, that triumph of Culture is perhaps the richest example in modern history of the dialectic Benjamin speaks of between barbarism and civilization. Even as it renders unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, "The American Scholar" renders them, transcendentally, unto

God--raises the discoverer's veni-vidi-vici, as it were, into the music of the spheres by investing his "noble act" with the "presence of a higher, namely, of the spiritual element essential to its perfection." Like Columbus, the American Scholar makes his discoveries draped in nature's purple: the "purple mountains of the Indian Archipelago" extending in his case to the Rockies of the "continental" West. Toward him, too, and his hermeneutic "bark," the "savages" hasten in wonder, "fleeing out of their huts of cane," as once the Magi hastened from the East to witness the Nativity. Except that in the later essay the object of discovery is an approaching millennium--Incarnation and Revelation combined--and the savages are no longer visible. In their place, Emerson paints for us an awakening "our": "the sluggard intellect of this continent ... look[ing] from under its iron lids" towards "the postponed expectation of the world ... a new age, as the star in the constellation Harp, which now flames in our zenith, astronomers announce, shall one day be the pole-star for a thousand years."[14]

My own "America" (if I may call it so) elicited a different sense of wonder. Or to put this in its proper prosaic terms, it elicited a critical method designed to illuminate the conflicts implicit in border-crossing, and to draw out their unresolved complementarities. I spoke of this method at the start as unrepresentative, thinking of the corporate American figured in Emerson's Scholar. But the contrast itself suggests another constituency: the other America hidden from view by that interpretation; or as I put it, appropriatively, the unincorporated country of Sacco and Vanzetti, a rhetorically United States of nonetheless mainly unresolved borders--between class and

race, race and generation, generation and region, region and religion, religious and national heritage--and a constantly shifting array of cultural crossings, including those between Jewish-Canadian marginality and Emersonian dissent.

The benefits of that method still seem pertinent to me, perhaps more now than ever, with the impending Americanization of what has been called, imprecisely, our post-capitalist world. I began this present investigation, after much hesitation about theme and focus, directly after a lecture I attended by a visiting Russian economist, Stanislav Shatalin. It was a dramatic occasion, since Shatalin was directing the market-place transformation then underway in the USSR; and it had an added personal edge (I fancied) for me alone, since he happened to come from the same region from which my parents had emigrated at about the time of his birth. "We have been wandering in the wilderness for forty years," was Shatalin's summary of the Communist experience; "the time of ideology is over, and the time for truth has arrived" -- by which, he explained, he meant free enterprise, individualism, and liberal democracy.[15] As he proceeded to outline his 500-day truth-plan, conjuring up transcendent things to come, I found my thoughts turning gradually elsewhere -- drifting back, as though in accordance with a law of their own, to the process of my personal and professional discovery of New Canaan. I had had a different border-crossing experience, and I had a different, because cross-cultural, story to tell. My proper theme and focus, I realized, was the music of America.

Endnotes

1. Walt Whitman, "I Hear America Singing," and Preface to Leaves of Grass (1855), in Complete Poetry and Collected Prose, ed. Justin Kaplan (Library of America: New York, 1982), pp. 174, 5; Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet," in Essays and Lectures, ed. Joel Porte (Library of America: New York, 1983), p. 465; Franz Kafka, "Investigations of a Dog," trans. Willa and Edwin Muir, in The Complete Stories, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York, 1971), pp. 294, 280-81, 285-87, 315, 303.

2. Indeed, they imply a series of axes of dominance, as in the repressed master-dog metaphor, or in the relation between interpreter, "musicians," and music. I take up these questions in a second part of this essay (still to come), together with certain corresponding issues of cultural essentialism and cultural relativism.

3. Douglas LePan, "The Country Without a Mythology," in The Book of Canadian Poetry, ed. A. J. M. Smith (Chicago, 1957), p. 8.

4. What I found has sometimes given me pause: Puritanism as a venture in utopia; a group of radical idealists whose insulated immigrant enclave was meant to provide a specimen of good things to come; a latter-day Zion at the vanguard of history, fired by a vision that fused nostalgia and progress, prophecy and political action. The analogies to the rhetoric of my own past seem so striking it still

suprises me that they did not occur to me at once, and stop me in my tracks. I prefer to think of it in retrospect as a happy coincidence of history and subjectivity -- an example of the non-transcendent process of scholarly intuition.

5. Northrop Frye, The Bush Garden (Toronto, 1971), p. 138; Margaret Atwood, Survival (Toronto, 1972), pp. 31-33.

6. The dominant English Protestant influence allowed for the "mosaic" concept, as distinct from the monolithic Catholic versions of other colonial myths, from Mexico through Central and South America, and to some extent including Catholic Quebec.

7. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in Illuminations, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 1968), p. 256.

8. I adopt D.H. Lawrence's term deliberately, to suggest the limitations of even the most brilliant cross-cultural investigations. In this respect, Studies in Classic American Literature is itself a model subject for cultural study: a fascinating mixture of outsider's perspective, insider's mystifications (e.g., "spirit of place"), and common transatlantic myths, notably those rooted in Romanticism. Equally suggestive is Alexis de Tocqueville's Democracy in America, with its extraordinary mixture of French aristocratic "foreignness," rehashed American myths (ranging from Puritan origins to the "empty continent"), and common "modern" assumptions, notably those stemming from the Enlightenment.

9. I am partly indebted for this (more or less random) list to a recent column by George F. Will, "Beyond the Literature of Protest," in the Washington Post of December 13, 1990 (p. A23):

> Rutherford Calhoun is one of those rapscallions who have enlivened American Literature [ever] since Huck Finn decided civilization made him itch and lit out for the territories.... Calhoun is black.
>
> So is his creator Charles Johnson, who teaches at the University of Washington, and has written ... an emancipation proclamation for black writers. It is his novel "Middle Passage," the winner of the National Book Award. It is an example of triumphant individualism on the part of both Calhoun and Johnson.
>
> Johnson noted that he is the first black male to win the award since Ralph Ellison won in 1953 for Invisible Man. Ellison's aim, says Johnson, was [the] creation of "a black American personality as complex, as multi-sided and synthetic as the American society that produced it.... Literature, he says ... that is an extension of an ideology ... lacks the power to change the reader's perceptions as the writer's perceptions change.... The novel is about--quietly about--patriotism."
>
> "If," Calhoun muses, "this wierd, upside-down caricature of a country called America, if this land of refugees and former indentured servants, religious heretics and half-breeds, whoresons and fugitives--this cauldron of mongrels from all points of the compass--was all I could right call home, then aye:

I was of it...."

> Johnson anticipates in the 1990s a black fiction "of increasing intellectual and artistic generosity, one that enables us as a people--as a culture--to move from narrow complaint to broad celebration." I think he means celebration of the possibilities of American individualism. I know that his novel, and the award, are reasons for celebration.

A few notes may help situate Will's and Johnson's celebrations in relation to my own views. (1) Huckleberry Finn lights out for the territory in order to go "howling after the Indians" with Tom Sawyer, and he does so after a very long episode in which his "individualism," along with Tom's, is rather severely questioned. (2) Patriotism, even in its "quietest" manifestations, is not an example of thought freed of ideology, and neither, for that matter, is the concept of an art free of ideology. (3) Both Ellison's "synthetic" America and Calhoun's "upside-down caricature" of it are versions of a mainstream cultural ideal. (4) Will is wrong to identify Johnson's views specifically as a movement away from the Sixties: see for example Coretta Scott King, "King's Dream ... is really the American Dream," Atlanta Journal and Constitution, Jan. 5, 1986, p. 7.

10. A century before, Southern leaders had learned that "America" could not be manipulated to mean the ideals of feudal hierarchy, because it already represented something else -- a set of culture-specific ideals, among these representative individualism, pluralist democracy, and the rights of personal ascent. In the 1960s, as a century before, those ideals functioned through the denial of

their cultural specificity; but of course there were certain adjustments now to meet new circumstances. First, "America" served to exclude the ideals of progressivist (rather than feudal) collectivism. And second, the protest leaders did not retreat into new havens of un-American resistance -- except perhaps for those who seceded into the groves of academe, like the Southern Agrarians -- because by and large this new generation of rebels had already identified their ideals, the very terms of their dissent from the status quo, with pluralist democracy, representative individualism, and the rights of personal ascent.

11. I should distinguish here between two kinds of oppositional criticism, one centered in the literature, the other in criticism itself. In what follows, my critique of the first group of critics -- we might call them authorial oppositionalists -- is more elaborate, because they have predominated from the beginning of American Studies. The second group of critics -- we might call these self-reflexive oppositionalists -- represent a more recent development. They have come (in varying degrees) to acknowledge literature's cultural embeddedment, but they then proceed to transfer the source of opposition from aesthetics to praxis, from the object to the method of study.

12. I do not claim this as a neutral territory of analysis. As I hope my essays make clear, cross-cultural criticism is not a form of cultural relativism. Non-transcendence is also a realm of ideals, however subject to contingency; of the real, however vulnerable to

interpretation; and of radical agency, within the limits imposed by the social and rhetorical construction of radicalisms.

13. Kafka, "Investigations," pp. 312-14; Wheatley, Collected Works, ed. John C. Shields (New York, 1988), p. 154; O'Reilley, "The Pilgrim Fathers," in Old Colony Memorial: Plymouth Rock, Old Colony Sentinel, LXVII, no. 31 (Plymouth, Aug. 3, 1889), 3; Emerson, Nature, in Essays and Lectures, ed. Porte, pp. 16, 17.

14. Emerson, "The American Scholar," in Essays and Lectures, ed. Porte, p. 53.

15. Shatalin delivered the talk on Oct. 2, 1990 (summarized in Meeting Report of the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies, VIII, no. 1, 1991), at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

I am grateful to the Center for providing the resources for the writing of this paper, which was delivered as a talk at the John F. Kennedy Institute of the Free University of Berlin. Above all, I would like to record my gratitude to Ursula Brumm, Heinz Ickstadt, and Winfried Flück for their hospitality during my visit. I hope they will regard this paper as a token of my abiding admiration and friendship.

HARVARD UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF
ENGLISH AND AMERICAN
LITERATURE AND LANGUAGE

WARREN HOUSE
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS 02138
(617) 495-2533/34

May 10, 1991

To Professor Ickstadt:

Professor Bercovitch has asked me to send you these revised pages. They should replace the corresponding pages in the version of his essay which has already been sent to you.

Thank you.

Margaret Reid

Stellen ausgetauscht

[illegible]

28.5.91

arrived at a similar conclusion, but from a different perspective and to a different effect. My experience of the music of "America" (as I came to think of it) was closer to the epiphany of otherness recorded in Kafka's "Investigations of a Dog." The canine narrator of that story tells us that one day in his youth a group of seven dogs appeared before him, suddenly, "out of some place of darkness," to the accompaniment of "terrible" and ravishing sounds:

> At that time I still knew hardly anything of the creative gift with which the canine race alone is endowed...for though music had [always] surrounded me...my elders had [never] drawn my attention to it.... [A]ll the more astonishing, then...were those seven musical artists to me. They did not speak, they did not sing, they remained generally silent, almost determinedly silent; but from the empty air they conjured music. Everything was music, the lifting and setting of their feet, certain turns of the head, their running and standing still, the positions they took up in relation to one another, the symmetrical patterns which they produced.... [M]y mind could attend to nothing but this blast of music which seemed to come from all sides, from the heights, from the deeps, from everywhere, surrounding the listener, overwhelming him.... I longed to ...beg [the musicians] to enlighten me, to ask them what they were doing.... [Their music] was incomprehensible to me, and also quite definitely beyond my capacities.... I rushed about, told my story, made accusations and investigations.... I was resolved to pursue [the problem] indefatigably until I solved it.

The pursuit unfolds as a series of ingenious inferences, deductions,

and explications extending to virtually every aspect of "dogdom," from the higher laws of "universal dog nature" to the specialized issue of "soaring dogs" (how do they "remain for the most part high up in the air, apparently doing nothing but simply resting there?") and the still-controversial "rules of science" for getting food: should you bring it forth by "incantation" or "water the ground as much as you can," or is it that "the earth draws one kind of food out of itself and calls down another from the skies"?[1] Nothing, it seems, escapes observation, except the presence of human beings.

Kafka's story is a great parable of interpretation as mystification--facts marshalled endlessly to build up contexts whose effect, if not intent, is to conceal or explain away. It is also a great parable of the limitations of cultural critique -- <u>limitations</u>, not just illusions, for in fact the story conveys a good deal about the dog's world, in spite of the narrator's inability to transcend it; or rather, as a function of his non-transcending condition. In this double sense, negative and ambiguous, Kafka's "investigations" apply directly to my own as an Americanist. The general parallels may be drawn out through a Chinese box of skewed interpretive positions: dog vis-à-vis human, Russian-Jewish immigrant vis-à-vis French Canadian Montreal, Canada vis-à-vis The States, and eventually "America," as I came to understand it, vis-à-vis the cultural norms and structures it represents.

These are not precise symmetries;[2] but they point to certain common principles of exegesis. I begin with the negative implications. (1) To interpret is not to make sense of a mystery out there. It is to discover otherness as mystery (something

discourse. I wanted to separate those forms (and their functions) in order to investigate the conditions of synthesis-making. To that end, I hoped that ideological analysis would allow me to mediate between the world and the word in such a way that the word, "America," might be contexualized, recovered for purposes of cognitive criticism, while the world of America might be apprehended in its fantastic textuality, as the development of a triumphant rhetoric and vision.

Necessarily, this set me at odds with the dominant concepts of ideology in the field. I thought of these as three models of the hermeneutics of denial: (1) The consensus model, adopted by the leading schools of literary and historical scholarship during the Cold War decades. This denied that America had any ideology at all, since ideology meant dogma, bigotry, and repression; whereas Americans were open-minded, inclusive, and eclectic. (2) The old-fashioned Marxist model, imported into academia during the Depression, and revived in the Sixties. This denied that ideology had any truth-value, since it was by definition false consciousness, the camera obscura of the ruling class. (3) The multi-cultural model, a medley of various indigenous themes, from the melting pot to the patch-work quilt, melded together or interlaced with various forms of neo-Marxism. This denied that America had an ideology, on the grounds that there were so many ideologies, all in flux: republicanism, agrarianism, free enterprise, consumerism, liberalism, working-class consciousness, corporate industrialism, and so on, to the point where it came to seem the other side of consensual open-endedness.

Against that background my concept of ideology was intended to insist on (1) the ideological context of common sense eclecticism; (2)

Towards the end of Kafka's "Investigations of a Dog," the narrator is granted a visionary consolation. As he lies alone, near death, utterly exhausted by a long series of frustrations, suddenly, he tells us,

> a beautiful creature ... stood before me.... My senses ... seemed to see or to hear something about him [of which he himself was unaware].... I thought I saw that the hound was already singing without knowing it, nay, more, that the melody, separated from him, was floating in the air in accordance with its own laws, and, as though he had no part in it, was moving toward me, toward me alone.

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>
> The presence of a higher, namely, of the spiritual element is essential to its perfection. The high and divine beauty which can be loved without effeminacy, is that which is found in combination with the human will. Beauty is the mark God sets upon virtue.... When a noble act is done ... are not these heroes entitled to add the beauty of the scene to the beauty of the deed? When the bark of Columbus nears the shore of America; -- before it, the beach lined with savages, fleeing out of their huts of cane; the sea behind; and the purple mountains of the Indian Archipelago around, can we separate the man from the living picture? Does not the New World clothe his form with her palm-groves and savannahs as fit drapery?[13]

I offer this emblem of discovery as an ultimum of the rhetoric of transcendence -- an interpretation of origins and ends that appropriates the mysteries of gender, nature, and the Oversoul to the culturally transparent "I." And it is worth remarking that Emerson's American Scholar fits well into its "living picture." He, too, stands at the rhetorical "shore of America": a "New World" which he claims by naming, as being his by visionary right, simultaneously his and not-his, a hero's-trophy of beauty, virtue, barbarism, and representative selfhood. In the Scholar's case, as in Columbus's, that triumph of Culture is perhaps the richest example in modern history of the dialectic Benjamin speaks of between savagery and civilization. Rendering unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, "The American Scholar" also renders them unto God--raises Caesar's

veni-vidi-vici, as it were, into the music of the spheres by investing it with the "presence of a higher, namely, of the spiritual element essential to its perfection." Like Columbus, the American Scholar makes his discoveries draped in nature's purple: the "purple mountains of the Indian Archipelago" extending (in his case) to the Rockies of the "continental" West. Toward him, too, and his hermeneutic "bark," the "savages" hasten in wonder, "fleeing out of their huts of cane," as once the Magi hastened from the East to witness the Nativity. Except that in the later essay the object of discovery is an approaching millennium--Incarnation and Revelation combined--and the savages are no longer visible. In their place, Emerson paints for us an awakening "our": "the sluggard intellect of this continent ... look[ing] from under its iron lids" towards "the postponed expectation of the world ... a new age as the star in the constellation Harp, which now flames in our zenith, astronomers announce, shall one day be the pole-star for a thousand years."[14]

My own "America" (if I may call it so) elicited a different sense of wonder. Or to put this in its proper prosaic terms, it elicited a critical method designed to illuminate the conflicts implicit in border-crossing, and to draw out their unresolved complementarities. I spoke of this method at the start as unrepresentative, thinking of the corporate American figured in Emerson's Scholar. But the contrast itself suggests another constituency: the other America hidden from view by that interpretation; or as I put it, appropriatively, the unincorporated country of Sacco and Vanzetti, a rhetorically United States of nonetheless mainly unresolved borders--between class and race, race and generation, generation and region, region and religion,

religious and national heritage--and a constantly shifting array of cultural crossings, including those between Jewish-Canadian marginality and Emersonian dissent.

The benefits of that method still seem pertinent to me, perhaps more now than ever, with the impending Americanization of what has been called, imprecisely, our post-capitalist world. I began this present investigation, after much hesitation about theme and focus, directly after a lecture I attended by a visiting Russian economist, Stanislav Shatalin. It was a dramatic occasion, since Shatalin was directing the market-place transformation then underway in the USSR; and it had an added personal edge (I fancied) for me alone, since he happened to come from the same region from which my parents had emigrated at about the time of his birth. "We have been wandering in the wilderness for forty years," was Shatalin's summary of the Communist experience; "the time of ideology is over, and the time for truth has arrived" -- by which, he explained, he meant free enterprise, individualism, and liberal democracy.[15] As he proceeded to outline his 500-day truth-plan, conjuring up transcendent things to come, I found my thoughts turning gradually elsewhere -- drifting back, as though in accordance with a law of their own, to the process of my personal and professional discovery of New Canaan. I had had a different border-crossing experience, and I had a different cross-cultural story to tell. Its proper theme and focus, I realized, was the music of America.

Endnotes

1. Walt Whitman, "I Hear America Singing," and Preface to Leaves of Grass (1855), in Complete Poetry and Collected Prose, ed. Justin Kaplan (Library of America: New York, 1982), pp. 174, 5; Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet," in Essays and Lectures, ed. Joel Porte (Library of America: New York, 1983), p. 465; Franz Kafka, "Investigations of a Dog," trans. Willa and Edwin Muir, in The Complete Stories, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York, 1971), pp. 294, 280-81, 285-87, 315, 303.

2. Indeed, they imply a series of axes of dominance, as in the repressed master-dog metaphor, or in the relation between interpreter, "musicians," and music. I take up these questions in a separate essay, together with certain corresponding issues of cultural essentialism and cultural relativism.

3. Douglas LePan, "The Country Without a Mythology," in The Book of Canadian Poetry, ed. A. J. M. Smith (Chicago, 1957), p. 8.

4. What I found has sometimes given me pause: Puritanism as a venture in utopia; a group of radical idealists whose insulated immigrant enclave was meant to provide a specimen of good things to come; a latter-day Zion at the vanguard of history, fired by a vision that fused nostalgia and progress, prophecy and political action. The analogies to the rhetoric of my own past seem so striking it still