INTRODUCTION: TOMORROW'S AMERICAN

> We think our civilization near its meridian, but we are yet only at the cock-crowing and the morning star. In our barbarous society, the influence of character is in its infancy. As a political power, as the rightful lord who is to tumble all rulers from their chairs, its presence is hardly yet suspected.
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> Emerson, "Politics" (1844)

> A nation, properly to boast itself, and to take and maintain its position with other States, must prove itself in possession of self-evolving attributes. Its character must be as individual as that of the noblest citizen that dwells within its limits.
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> William Gilmore Simms, "Americanism in Literature" (1845)

If one can ever justifiably use the term "consensus" in speaking of the values of an entire people, it is surely appropriate to Americans between 1828 and 1850. The consensus that intellectual historians have uncovered may have rested upon conveniently undefined abstractions, but it was nonetheless broad and intensely cherished. The very survival of the American Republic, together with its undeniable growth and visible if not universal prosperity, seemed to show that divine Providence was looking upon the Great Experiment with favor. Wherever one's private forebodings might have pointed, only a diehard Federalist or a temperamental croaker would have dared publicly to oppose any of the following desiderata: man's natural right to political liberty and equality, the Constitution as the Republic's palladium of collective freedom, equality of economic opportunity in a free marketplace, private property as a spur

to individual achievement, enlarging the domain of freedom, America as an asylum for oppressed peoples, and the treasured trinity of free schools, free religion, and free land. Loyalty to one's region was assumed somehow to complement loyalty to one's nation. Freedom of religion was expected to protect rather than discourage popular piety by permitting the egalitarian roots of democracy and Christianity to grow together more naturally.[1]

The building of institutions to encourage these values seemed to show that America was at least on the progressive rise of its historical cycle, if not bound for the Millennium, some form of secular utopia, or the best of all possible nation-states. Whenever these collective abstractions were brought to bear upon such vexingly particular issues as a national bank, tariffs, slavery, majority versus minority rights, qualifications for statehood, land-settlement policy, Indian removal, or libel, it quickly became apparent that the terms had different meanings depending on the values and interests of their users. Such variety of interpretation, however, served only to reaffirm the imaginative power and flexibility of the concepts themselves. The most reliable and well-trodden road to popular approval, for any political or social group, was to denounce one's opponent as an aristocrat, a usurper of power, a believer in big government, an atheist, or a defender of any kind of legal privilege.

Recurrent problems in affirming the national consensus surface in two of the age's most widely known documents, Andrew Jackson's "Farewell Address" of 1836 and George Bancroft's "Introduction" to his *History of the United States* (1834). By returning to Washington's ceremony of a presidential farewell, Jackson evidently sought to assure the nation that the founding fathers' dream had been realized:

> The progress of the United States under our free and happy institutions has surpassed the most sanguine hopes of the founders of the Republic. Our growth has been rapid beyond all former example in numbers, in wealth, in knowledge, and all the useful arts which contribute to the comforts and convenience of man, and from the earliest ages of history to the present day there never have been thirteen millions of people associated in one political body who enjoyed so much freedom and happiness as the people of these United States. You have no longer any cause to fear danger from abroad; your strength and power are well known throughout the civilized world, as well as the high and gallant bearing of your sons. It is from within, among yourselves – from cupidity, from corruption, from disappointed ambition and inordinate thirst for power – that factions will be formed and liberty endangered. It is against such designs, whatever disguise the actors may assume, that you have especially to guard yourselves. You have the highest of human trusts committed to your care. Providence has showered on this favored land blessings without number, and has chosen you as the

> guardians of freedom, to preserve it for the benefit of the human race. May He who holds in His hands the destinies of nations make you worthy of the favors He has bestowed and enable you, with pure hearts and pure hands and sleepless vigilance, to guard and defend to the end of time the great charge He has committed to your keeping.[2]

The imperious mode of this exhortation surely led many Americans to believe, with Herman Melville, that Andrew Jackson had been the champion of a "great democratic God," selected from the "kingly commons" to be hurled upon a warhorse and thundered "higher than a throne."[3] Jackson's eloquence in the forum may now seem to be rhetoric in the study, but it is rhetoric of the sort that masks revealing problems. Twice in this passage Jackson couples the words "freedom" and "happiness," yet the only sign he provides of an American's happiness is the astonishing growth of the nation in size and prosperity. The sudden intrusive warning about the possibility of internal corruption thus suggests that Jackson's reliance upon external prosperity to illustrate internal happiness is perhaps an unconscious rationalization. By then assuring the nation that its providential mission is for the benefit of the entire human race, he sidesteps the problems of Indian removal and emerging sectional conflict so that he can close with reassuring prophecy. The notion of providential mission ultimately serves Jackson much as the notion of sacred trust served Webster – as a goad to spur possibly unworthy sons into strenuous effort in a perplexingly unspecified direction.[4]

George Bancroft's "Introduction," which remained essentially unchanged in all the editions Bancroft supervised, offered similar assurances to generations of American readers. Seemingly without a trace of doubt, Bancroft declares that the charge of America's historian is "to follow the steps by which a favoring Providence, calling our institutions into being, has conducted the country to its present happiness and glory." The introduction consists of a listing, almost a litany, which celebrates those qualities which are continuing to render the nation great: equality of political right, popular sovereignty, economic prosperity, domestic peace, cultivation of national resources, internal improvements, the complementary growth of farming and manufacturing, the Bill of Rights, and absorption of immigrant nationalities. Bancroft asserts that "the force of moral opinion is rapidly increasing," but he shows us only external conditions that might promote "happiness and glory." Although the narrative of the *History* acknowledges that the continued success of a libertarian policy depends on the internal virtues of its citizenry, Bancroft's introduction invokes the sheer power of America's transformative energy, while assuming that the people's inner and spiritual grace has already been achieved. Those readers who formed first conceptions of the country upon Bancroft's introduction rather than his text would not have known that slavery,

sectional hostility, poverty, or political parties even existed in antebellum America.[5]

The reifying of these two cultural visions must ultimately depend upon the energetic and virtuous character of the American people. When Jackson declared, "No free government can stand without virtue in the people," he was reminding contemporaries of an unwelcome warning voiced by Washington, Jefferson, and John Adams before him: Liberty will last only as long as the people are worthy of it. The recognition that a republic presumes the virtue of its citizenry was to lead generations of cultural observers, European and American, to attempt a definitive account of the American character, partly out of intrinsic interest and partly to determine whether the Republic was to last. Even before the United States was recognized as an independent nation, Crèvecoeur's essay "What is an American?" endeavored to persuade prospective settlers that there was, indeed, one American character shaped by the conditions of a prosperous, agrarian, freeholding economy. Noah Webster compiled his dictionary in order "to inspire them [the people of this country] with the pride of national character." Although Washington Irving never completed his book on America, it was to begin with an essay titled "American Character." At the time Emerson was working on *Nature*, he was convinced that "history . . . ought to be written in a settled conviction that no event is casual or solitary, that all events proceed inevitably from peculiar qualities of the national character which are permanent or very slightly modified from age to age." The phrase "national character" served as one of the topics – and hence one of the lenses – through which the long procession of European observers, including Michel Chevalier, Francis Grund, Adam Gurowsky, Harriet Martineau, Phillip Schaff, and Alexis de Tocqueville, attempted to focus and organize their impressions.[6]

The attempt to render national character proved not to be readily transportable to the New World. It was comparatively easy to discover a national character in the substance of historical legends, the crises of history, the effects of long-standing institutions, the manners of fixed classes, or the customs of a single race. But how was one to define the national character of a people who, at least publicly, prided themselves upon being without a determining past, without constricting institutions, without fixed classes, and without homogeneity of race and region? Crèvecoeur provides the prototypical illustration of the problem:

> *He* is an American who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great Alma Mater. Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world.[7]

To be the new man, to be free, to be melted into a new race was not to have a describable national identity of one's own. It was merely to represent the promise of being freed from all that was Europe. Crèvecoeur's farmer is an American only through the power of a negative definition. Because he is so belligerently new and free, he cannot possess those positive traits which accrue through living commitments. Crèvecoeur does the best he can to endow James with both a character and local loyalties, but James's Americanness is defined largely by the autonomy of his agrarian household and by his political freedoms, rather than by any inner qualities.

It was logical to expect that, once the Republic had been firmly established, the inner character of the representative American would have begun to emerge. Later European visitors, however, showed even less certainty than Crèvecoeur in fleshing out the American. Tocqueville declared that the Americans' migratory habits and egalitarian laws were producing "one national character," but he did not specify what it was. After protesting that Parson Weems's glacial portrait of George Washington provided no model American for the 1830s, Harriet Martineau lamented that "the old world must have patience; for the Americans have no national character yet; nor can they have, for a length of years." Two decades later, the revolutionary Polish aristocrat Adam Gurowski, recognizing that his repeated insistence on American "elasticity" and "adaptability" was not gratifyingly specific, acknowledged that "hitherto the American mind has not reached the elevated standing of an absolute, intuitive individuality." Even Philip Schaff, who knew and admired Americans as thoroughly as any European, contended only that "in this chaos of peoples the traces of a specifically American national character may be found." "Though the main features of the American character may be already quite plainly discerned," Schaff concluded, "yet it is only in its formation state."[8]

One problem was that the political ideals which provided the seedbed for an American's virtues were often claimed to be the virtues themselves. Terms such as "democracy," "liberty," "equality" and "progress" not only constituted a political faith. For new men in a new world, these collective abstractions served as a way of defining their communal as well as individual character. In a typical patriotic oration, Williams Evans Arthur described a representative countryman as the embodiment of the nation's religion:

> The American is the ark of safety, the anointed civilizer, the only visible source of light and heat and repose to the dark and discordant and troubled World, which is heaving and groaning and livid in convulsions around him! He is Liberty's chosen apostle; he is a master workman and universal space is his workshop, and universal perfectibility his hallowed aim.[9]

Arthur may assert that the American is both the Christ and the master-workman of Liberty, but his mingling of religious and political terms

serves to hide rather than reveal any individuating character. His metaphors describe how an American functions at the expense of what he intrinsically is.

Accustomed to such rhetoric, Tocqueville perceived the paradox it contained: All Americans would be individuals, yet all would be the same. Tocqueville could thus appreciate the novelty of the American term "individualism" while simultaneously insisting upon democratic conformity and the tyranny of majority opinion. Although the prospect of each citizen's unique identity is implicit in the individual's right to liberty, equality of political right encourages the hope that a democratic people will develop one character. Emerson, himself forever searching for traces of the true American character, was equally conscious that the very universality of American ideals worked against individualism. Although Emerson might write, in a public essay, "The appearance of character makes the State unnecessary. The wise man is the State," he also acknowledged in his journal that "character is scarcely allowed any rule at all. Everything governs but that. It is a force not yet known."[10] Forever trusting that America was evolving its national genius, and forever disgruntled at the paltry realities, he could assert that character is the only theocracy, write an essay on the subject, and yet include no American, not even Washington or Webster, among his *Representative Men*.[11]

Fully to appreciate the magnitude of this dilemma, we must recognize that the American character, like America itself, was not a present reality but a future prospect. In each of the preceding quotations, Tocqueville, Martineau, Gurowski, Schaff, and Emerson implied that the American character was yet to be. Because America and the American were becoming vacant mirror images of one another, no one was quite sure whether the individual should be defined through the nation, or the nation through the individual. Whichever way one perceived this reciprocal process, however, the search for the American demanded that one glimpse the future through an embryonic present.

Consider a number of the phrases by which even nonmillennialist Americans of these decades defined the merits of their new culture: the Genius of America, the Grand Experiment, the Sacred Trust, the American Scholar, the Universal Republic, the Open West, Young America, and Manifest Destiny. Each of these entities was a moral abstraction predicated upon an inadequate present and an almost certain future. Each contained a grand providential contract contingent upon Americans' remaining worthy of their democratic ideals, material advantages, and founding heritage. Rhetorically, such terms were admirably suited to adapting the mode of the American jeremiad to republican values.[12] Their cultural realization, however, had to remain unfulfilled. If developmental energies were to be released, such abstract goals could neither be attained nor

abandoned. Even expansionists as unblushingly certain as William Gilpin insisted that America's destiny was still "untransacted." Within one paragraph, Walter Whitman would confidently predict a "holy millennium of liberty," only to fall into a doubt from which sheer reaffirmation provided the only exit: "If it should fail! O, dark were the horror and dreary beyond description the horror of such a failure – which we anticipate not at all."[13]

The people's contract with a progressive Providence, like the Puritans' covenant with their God, released both the exhilaration of a great promise and the anxiety of fulfilling it, thereby impelling Americans toward a future at once bright and vacant. This divided response pervaded writers of widely varying backgrounds and beliefs. Emerson's resolute will to believe led him to dedicate his 1822 notebook "to the Spirit of America. I dedicate it to that living soul, which *doth* exist somewhere beyond the Fancy." Even so settled a gentleman as Gulian Verplanck observed, "We are all pressing and hastening forward to some better future. The momentum of the whole, composed of myriads of living forces, is upon each individual, and he flies forward with accelerated velocity, without any other power over his own motion than that of the direction of its course." According to Harriet Martineau, energetic pursuit of an undefined future allowed Americans not to think about sectional conflict:

> With a dark and shifting near future, and a bright and fixed ultimate destiny, what is the true, the only wisdom? Not to pry into the fogs and thickets round about, or to stand still for fear of what may next occur in the path; but to look from Eden gate behind to heaven gate before, and press on to the certain future.[14]

Ascribing a different cause for the shapeless magnitude of the nation's quest, Tocqueville contended that the Americans' commitment to equality of right was impelling them "unceasingly toward that unmeasured greatness so distinctly visible at the end of the long track which humanity has yet to tread." As late as the mid-1850s, the man who had devoted himself to memorializing the nation's glorious past and happy present could assert that his generation's seeming failure could be no cause for lasting discontent. Writing to Evert Duyckinck, George Bancroft declared: "Happy man, that you are to be so young. You will live to see great things achieved in your country. The men of your day will go far beyond those of mine; America is destined to take the highest place in the empire of mind. I feel myself at most to be but a pioneer; and rest my hopes on those who come after me."[15]

A nation that will exist "in the empire of mind" is very like Emerson's anticipation of "a Columbia of thought and art which is the last and endless sequel of Columbus's adventure," or like Tocqueville's admission that "in America I saw more than America. I sought there the image of

democracy itself, with its inclinations, its character, its prejudices, and its passions." Such futuristic image making evidently engrossed the populace for reasons that extend beyond Horace Bushnell's perception of "the remarkable power of abstractions in the American mind." "America," after all, had for decades retained a remarkable power of abstraction upon European imaginations. American citizens were engaging in a particular mode of defining self and country, a mode first recognized, as one might expect, by a European long resident in America. In his reflections on "National Character of the Americans," Francis Grund observed:

> An American does not love his country as a Frenchman loves France, or an Englishman England: America is to him but a physical means of establishing a moral power—the medium through which his mind operates—'the local habitation' of his political doctrines. His country is in his understanding; he carries it with him wherever he goes, whether he emigrates to the shores of the Pacific or the Gulf of Mexico; his home is wherever he finds minds congenial with his own.[16]

If home, as Melville would later imply, is any gathering of congenial democrats, then the West was not so much a place as a future wherein America might be realized. Following through the implications of these ideas, Grund arrived at the proposition that "America" is no more, but no less, than a future ideal created by its beholder:

> I will now add that the Americans *love* their country, not, indeed, *as it is*, but *as it will be*. They do not love the land of their fathers; but they are sincerely attached to that which their children are destined to inherit. They live in the future, and make their country as they go on.[17]

At this point Grund turned to other concerns, but his last sentence implies that an ever newly created ideal only draws one's eyes toward an ever-receding horizon.

For the journey to create America, the individual citizen was equipped, Tocqueville asserted, with a new and untried source of knowledge. Deprived of the institutions and hierarchies that gave men of the Old World their identity, yet contemptuous of the very idea of a past, Americans would be likely to extend individualism into the belief that all knowledge could be found within the self:

> To evade the bondage of system and habit, of family maxims, class opinions, and, in some degree, of national prejudices; to accept tradition only as a means of information, and existing facts only as a lesson to be used in doing otherwise and doing better; to seek the reason of things for oneself, and in oneself alone; to tend to results without being bound to means, and to strike through the form to the substance – such are the principal characteristics of what I shall call the philosophical method of the Americans.[18]

Tocqueville's belief that the American seeks the reason of things *in himself*[19] is no casual by-thought, but a conclusion based upon a group of logical propositions apparent elsewhere in his second volume. The Americans' belief in equality, he claims, renders them less likely to see distinctions among citizens: "In democratic communities, where men are all insignificant and very much alike, each man instantly sees all his fellows when he surveys himself." As a consequence, the American is prone to assume that "all the truths that are applicable to himself" must be "equally applicable to each of his fellow citizens and fellow men." Knowledge of self thus becomes knowledge of others; individual reflects nation; microcosm reflects macrocosm. Those Americans who believe the self to be divine may be exhilarated by the prospect of a pantheistic utopia, but all Americans must share in the discouraging process of self-enclosure: "Everyone shuts himself up tightly within himself and insists upon judging the world from there."[20]

Although the applicability of Tocqueville's ideas to Whitman's poetry has long been conceded,[21] we need to consider whether those ideas have a broader literary reach. To use more current terms, Tocqueville is asserting that the democratic American must be a solipsist who creates the world in his own self-image by projecting his self onto the world. When we consider that in the 1830s most Americans were living on the edge of at least twenty-five hundred miles of wilderness, under an experimental polity, without settled institutions or a visible history, but with real prospects of going ahead to some unknown and better future, is it not likely that they should have perceived their world as an extension of their selves? Faced with a bewildering variety of regional cultures that supposedly constituted one America, would not those citizens posit an America in the image of their own region? Under such conditions, the outside world, the Not Me, becomes a limitless void, the representative American becomes an extension of oneself, and America becomes one's unknowable future ascribed to all citizenry. Intending no exclusion, Northern white male Protestant writers would thus be led to write of the American character without recalling that the South, blacks, Indians, or women participated in America.

Assessments of Americans' responses to their environs unintentionally suggest that fear of vastness led many citizens to imagine the future of the wilderness in comfortingly personal terms. Tocqueville observed that most Americans were unable to perceive the natural beauty surrounding them because they loved to imagine themselves, in the aggregate, as subduers of the wilderness. Amazed at white settlers' indifference to an Indian dying in the streets of Buffalo, Tocqueville remarked, "In the heart of this society, so policed, so prudish, so sententiously moral and virtuous, one encounters a complete insensibility, a sort of cold and

implacable egoism when it's a question of the American *indigenies*." While invoking the presumably inexhaustible resources of the continent, Whitman would note that "the mind becomes almost lost in tracing in imagination these hidden and boundless tracts of our territory." Francis Grund, who had observed businessmen in three Northern cities, remarked that "an American merchant is an enthusiast who seems to delight . . . to risk his capital and credit on some *terra incognita*, rather than follow the beaten tracks of others." Well aware that Americans regarded the sea as their second frontier, Verplanck gloomily concluded, "We are all of us as waves in the shoreless ocean of human existence."[22]

In all these passages recurs a haunted sense of inhabiting a void that one can reduce to order only by a strenuous imposition of the will. Either the other can be seen as an extension of self, or the other does not matter. An especially telling measure of this tendency is Frederick Merk's account of a common American explanation for the Mexicans' curious determination to continue resisting American Manifest Destiny by force of arms: American troops actually believed that "the Puros, or republican elements were . . . fighting our troops for no other purpose than to make sure those troops would not be called home. Nothing was so feared by the better elements as withdrawal of our forces, which would have the effect of delivering the people over to their native oppressors."[23]

No writer was more aware than Emerson of the American tendency to see one's own character in a void. Emerson's insistence that "it is the constant tendency of the mind to Unify all it beholds, or to reduce the remotest facts to a single law," closely resembles Tocqueville's contention that the American democrat needs "to explain a mass of facts by a single cause." Emerson's claim, "In man the perpetual progress is from the Individual to the Universal," reaffirms Tocqueville's belief that the democratic imagination sees all one's fellows in oneself.[24] In 1838, at the fullest tide of his hope, Emerson proudly wrote "Each man projects his character before him – praises it, worships it."[25] To engage in such projection is, quite literally, to make an icon of the self perceived in one's future.

If Tocqueville was correct, what Emerson perceived in himself he should also have perceived for his nation. And, in fact, shortly before writing the preceding entry, Emerson had declared America to be "a vase of fair outline but empty, which whoso seeth may fill with what wit & character is in him." During the late 1830s, he was so confident that the vase and the void could be admirably filled that he urged: "Every new mind ought to take the attitude of Columbus – launch out from the ignorant gaping World, & sail west for a new world." America, in sum, was the world of self-making, a state of mind in which, by sheer force of imagination, one could create oneself as the American Scholar or the