THE CONCEPT OF AMERICA

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I am going to offer you a meditation on the concept of America. It will tell you something about the mood in which I do so, if I tell you that, lately, as I sit and listen to the evening news, I am reminded of Ambrose Bierce's remark that "War is God's way of teaching Americans geography." And it will tell you something about my topic if I remark that this quip of Ambrose Bierce's does not seem to have lost any of its edge when transposed from the 19th to the 21st century. Here are five more quotations about America—that have yet to lose their edge:

> Sometimes people call me an idealist. Well, that is the way I know I am an American. America is the only idealistic nation in the world.
>
> Woodrow Wilson

> There is nothing the matter with Americans except their ideals. The real American is all right; it is the ideal American who is all wrong.
>
> G. K. Chesterton

> The business of America is business.
>
> Calvin Coolidge

> I am willing to love all mankind, *except an American*.
>
> Samuel Johnson

> Your American eagle is very well. Protect it here and abroad. But beware of the American peacock.
>
> R. W. Emerson

Now, is there, as President Wilson thought, an internal relation between the concept of America and a certain ideal? Or is it that, as Chesterton thought, there is nothing the matter with Americans except their ideals? Or does America stripped of her ideals amount to nothing more than President Coolidge's vision of her? And, if so, ought one then to sympathize with Dr. Johnson's view of the matter? Or is there a distinction to be drawn, as Emerson thought, between the ideal and its debasement by those who most loudly proclaim it?

A Peculiar Concept

Let's begin by asking: What do we—what should we—mean by "America"? The Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard draws a helpful distinction between *objective* and *subjective* categories. A short and simple way of trying to distinguish the concepts that belong to the former from those that belong to the latter category would be just to say: objective concepts characterize the different kinds of ways in which an *object* can be, whereas subjective concepts characterize the different kinds of ways in which a *subject* or a *person* can be. But this won't quite do: there are many concepts that can be predicated equally of objects and persons—being six feet tall, weighing two hundred pounds, being in a certain location, etc. So our initial formulation stands in need of some qualification along the following lines: objective concepts characterize the different kinds of ways in which objects *qua* objects can be, whereas subjective concepts characterize the different kinds of ways in which subjects *qua* subjects can be. (This allows us to say that being six feet tall, weighing two hundred pounds, being in a certain location, etc., are not characterizations of subjects *qua* subjects, but rather characterizations of them *qua* objects.) Or, as Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms prefer to say: subjective concepts characterize a subject or person *qua existing individual*. Both objective and subjective concepts can be predicated of human beings: a given individual has, say, blue eyes, is six feet tall, weighs two hundred pounds, and is also, say, a husband, a Christian, a philosopher. But the former concepts hold of the person regardless of whether or not he would predicate them of himself; the latter concepts hold of an individual (not merely if he is indeed prepared to predicate them of himself, but) only to the extent that his daily existence is beholden to the ethical or

religious demands such concepts entail—to the extent that his life is shaped by these demands. These latter concepts, Kierkegaard claims, if they are properly understood as subjective concepts—that is, as properly subjective characterizations of the lives of existing individuals—must be clearly distinguished from certain merely objective concepts which these same words ("husband," "Christian," "philosopher") might also be taken to denote.

The word "husband," inflected subjectively, signifies participation in a certain sort of ethical relationship between two individuals pledged to devote their lives to one another; inflected objectively, it signifies a certain juridical status. A husband, in the latter sense, is something one either is or is not (depending upon whether one's papers are in order); a husband, in the former sense, is someone (Kierkegaard says) one *becomes*—it presupposes involvement in an existential task that must be reaffirmed and renewed every day of one's married life. (If a wife says to her spouse "This isn't a marriage!," he does not rebut her charge by producing their marriage certificate.) The word "Christian," inflected subjectively, signifies an involvement in a religious way of life; inflected merely objectively, it signifies certain straightforwardly observable external facts about a person's behavior (e.g., that he goes to church on Sundays, has his children baptized, puts money in the collection box, etc.). Understood the latter way "a Christian" is something one either is or is not. Understood subjectively, "a Christian" is someone (Kierkegaard says) one *becomes*—it presupposes the undertaking of an existential task that must be reaffirmed and renewed every moment of one's existence. (If Kierkegaard says "While Christendom flourishes Christianity gradually withers away!," someone does not rebut his charge by pointing out how full the churches are on Sundays.)

Here is a characteristic passage in which one of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms, Johannes Climacus, offers a comparatively straightforward example of a conflation of subjective and objective categories:

> Once it was at the risk of his life that a man dared to profess himself a Christian; now it is to make oneself suspect to venture to doubt that one is a Christian.… If a man were to say quite simply and unassumingly, that he was concerned for himself, lest perhaps he had no right to call himself a Christian, he would indeed not suffer persecution or be put to death, but he would be smothered in angry glances, and people would say: "How tiresome to make such a fuss about nothing at all; why can't he behave like the rest of us, who are all Christians?" … And if he happened to be married, his wife would say to him: "Dear husband of mine, how can you get such notions into your head? How can you doubt that you are a Christian? Are you not a Dane, and does not geography say that the Lutheran form of the Christian religion is the ruling religion in Denmark? For you are surely not a Jew, nor are you a Mohammedan; what then can you be if not a Christian? (Johannes Climacus, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* [henceforth CUP], edited by S. Kierkegaard, translated by Walter Lowrie (Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, 1968), p. 49)

The term "Christendom" is Kierkegaard's name for such a state of affairs—one in which everyone already thinks they are Christians and thus no one takes the trouble any longer to become one.

Now what about the concept *American*? Should we classify it as objective or subjective? Should it be grouped together with *Dane* or with *Christian*? Well, surely, one can be an American in the same sense that one can be a Dane. Thus understood, an American is something one either is or is not (depending upon whether one's papers are in order, or upon other equally objective facts about, say, one's birth, upbringing or cultural heritage.) But "America" is also the name of a certain moral and political ideal and thus "to be an American" can also signify a commitment to that ideal, and thus an existential task, a way of life, and even a kind of person that one must struggle—and that one can fail—to become. If we are to follow Kierkegaard's lead, then we should seek clearly to distinguish between the objective concept of being an American and the subjective one. This will lead us to the conclusion that one can be an American in the objective sense while failing to be one in the subjective sense. We could then further follow Kierkegaard's lead and introduce the concept *Americadom* to signify a state of affairs in which such a merely objective inflection of the concept has gained ascendancy—a state of affairs in which, because almost everyone in America already knows that he is an American, hardly anyone any longer takes the trouble to become one.

Yet this fails to do justice to the peculiar complexity of the concept of America. As a first step towards appreciating the peculiarity of this concept, it helps to notice that it involves what Kierkegaard

seems to regard as an impossible combination of categories: it combines some of the logical features of an objective concept with some of those of a subjective concept. At one and the same time, "America" names a certain place at a certain time with a certain history *and* it also signifies a certain dream of what might happen in that place if certain moral and political ideals could be realized. To be an American can mean, at one and the same time, to be someone who happens to be a citizen of one particular nation (rather than another) *and* to be committed to a moral and political project whose continuation cannot be guaranteed simply through the continued existence of that nation (as merely one among others).

The aforementioned peculiarity of the concept of America notwithstanding, the following feature of Kierkegaard's analysis remains pertinent: an expression retains its ethical significance only if it continues to be predicated of individuals whose lives reflect a commitment to the exigencies of thought and action it entails; if not—if it comes to be predicated solely of individuals whose lives in no way bear the stamp of such exigencies—it will be drained of its former significance. In the latter case, the expression may continue to circulate in daily use and retain an aura of ethical significance, but it will no longer have its original import. It may, with time, even shed that aura and acquire some other perfectly coherent, utterly non-ethical—descriptive or juridical or institutional—meaning. As a husband can remain "married" in the eyes of the law, even if he has a made a mockery of his vows, so, too, Americans can retain their juridical status as "American citizens" and a place named 'America' will continue to stand as one nation alongside others, even if America makes a mockery of the words that figure in its founding pledges to itself—the pledges that constitute the original ground of its existence.

Parisian Brilliance and American Diffidence

Let's now ask: What do we—what should we—mean when we talk of "American culture," "American literature," "American philosophy?" Here are two more quotations—this time by two philosophers:

> I have attempted more and more systematically to find a non-site, or a non-philosophical site, from which to question philosophy. But the search for a non-philosophical site does not bespeak an anti-philosophical attitude. My central question is: from what site or non-site can philosophy as such appear to itself as other than itself, so that it can interrogate and reflect upon itself in an original manner? Such a non-site or alterity would be radically irreducible to philosophy. But the problem is that such a non-site cannot be defined or situated by means of philosophical language.
>
> Jacques Derrida

> Walden has a reasonably tight bottom at a not unreasonable, though at an unusual, depth. I fathomed it easily with a cod-line and a stone weighing about a pound and a half, and could tell accurately when the stone left the bottom, by having to pull so much harder before the water got underneath to help me. This is a remarkable depth for so small an area, yet not one inch of it can be spared by the imagination. What if all ponds were shallow? Would it not react on the minds of men?
>
> Henry David Thoreau

Much French philosophy has a distinctively *French* sound. And there is nothing in that sound that precludes it from sounding like philosophy. On the contrary, to the ears of many today—and not only of those who live in Paris—it *is* the sound of philosophy. If one comes across a passage from the writings of a French philosopher, such as the passage from Derrida above —regardless of whether one likes its sound (or of whether one takes oneself to understand what it says, or of whether one takes oneself to agree with what one thus understands)—for better or worse, one knows this much about it right off: this stuff is (or is, at least, trying to sound like) *philosophy*.

Derrida is far from alone among philosophers, at least since Kant, in thinking that a radical questioning of philosophy is to be achieved only from a site that is, in some sense, "outside" (what we presently understand to be) philosophy—a site that allows one, without turning one's back on philosophy, to confront it on an altogether new ground. Derrida (and, again, not only Derrida) appreciates the difficulty of finding or arranging for such a site. For a radical questioning of philosophy would seem to require a radically new kind of philosophical discourse—one conducted in altogether different cadences from any in which philosophy has hitherto been attempted. And the problem is that nowadays—especially in France—the call for such a discourse tends to result simply in the production of further sentences whose sound is indistinguishable from that characteristic of business as usual in French philosophy. (Sentences that sound like this: "Such a non-site or alterity would be radically irre-

ducible to philosophy; but the problem is that such a non-site cannot be defined or situated by means of philosophical language.") What else could a call for a different philosophical discourse sound like? Will it not of necessity itself sound like philosophy? And if it no longer sounded like (what we know as) philosophy, how would we be able to recognize it as such?

The sound of much of the language in Thoreau's *Walden* is apt to strike a reader—at least on a first encounter—as not particularly philosophical at all, as not even *trying* to be philosophy. Admittedly, the text does have moments when it seems to want to veer towards (something recognizable as) philosophy. But mostly, on a first listen, it can seem to be nattering on about how much certain items cost, how to live in the woods, hoe beans, or measure the depth of a pond. Indeed, the writing's intermittent gestures in the direction of something that has the aspect of philosophy (such as the concluding lines in the quotation above) may even strike a reader, at first blush, as puzzling digressions from its primary concerns. Not all of the remarks in *Walden* are of this sort, of course. Some of them may even immediately strike one as sage. ("Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes.") And some of them may immediately strike one as clever. ("A man sits as many risks as he runs.") The tone may occasionally even remind one of Socrates ("A man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can afford to let alone.") A sentence or two here or there may even strike one as the sort of thing that might actually have been said by Socrates. ("If I seem to boast more than is becoming, my excuse is that I brag for humanity rather than myself; and my shortcomings and inconsistencies do not affect the truth of my statement.") But the resulting whole, made up of these and other remarks, is not apt immediately to strike one as in serious competition with the enterprises of a Kant or a Hegel or a Derrida. If one comes across a quotation from Thoreau, such as the one paired with the passage from Derrida above– regardless of whether one likes the sound of such writing (or of whether one takes oneself to understand what it says, or, if so, whether one takes oneself to agree with what one thus understands)—the following two features of the prose will be hard to gainsay: it has a distinctively American sound, and its sound is not that of European philosophy. Could the finding or founding of a site from which to question the inheritance of European philosophy possibly sound like *this*? How does one measure the depth of *Walden*?

One cannot understand a work such as *Walden* unless one appreciates that its author thinks that philosophy necessarily exists on a different cultural basis in America than in, say, France—that a different economy of exchange prevails between the culture at large and those who attempt to speak philosophically in it—and this affects what it can mean for a philosopher to attempt to speak philosophically *to* (or *for*) his culture. In order to become clear why this might be thought to be so, it will help first to review some facts—facts about America and facts about, say, France.

If you ask your average intellectually-inclined French citizen if he has ever read any Descartes or Pascal or Rousseau, he will almost certainly tell you that he has (and in most cases he will be telling you the truth). To be a French intellectual and to be simply unacquainted with the classics of French thought and to be happy to admit that one is thus unacquainted is to be a very unusual person indeed. There is no American philosopher ignorance of whose work could strike a measure of fear or embarrassment in the soul of an American man of letters at all comparable to what it would mean for a French intellectual to have never read a word of Descartes. If you attempt to hit upon the name an American philosopher that almost every educated American has read, you will seek in vain. Insofar as you can find a philosopher that most educated Americans have read, it will not be an American—most likely, it would be Plato or Descartes or Hume or Nietzsche. There is nothing you could call "American philosophy" which plays a role in the formation of an American intellectual identity that parallels the role that French philosophy plays in French culture. A highly literate American intellectual may well have read a great many of the classics of English, French, and German philosophy without necessarily having any literacy in something you might call "American philosophy." He may, of course, have also read some pages of William James or John Dewey, but then again he may not have.

To be a French intellectual means in the first instance to have a certain literacy in certain landmark moments of the history of *French* thought. To be an intellectual in the United States means in the first instance to have a certain literacy in certain landmark moments in the history of *European* thought. To be an intellectual in France means, above all, learning how to be a *French* intellectual. The intellectual in America is haunted not by the fear that he might be failing to be an *American* in-

tellectual; more often he is haunted by the fear that he might be succeeding in being just that—and hence perhaps someone a European might look upon as a philistine. Not that there has ever been any shortage of Europeans willing to second Matthew Arnold's quip: "[O]ur Society distributes itself into Barbarians, Philistines, and Populace; and America is just ourselves, with the Barbarians quite left out, and the populace nearly" (*Culture and Anarchy*, Preface (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1960), pp. 19-20). Even if someone were to fall under the illusion that becoming an intellectual in America meant, above all, learning somehow how to become an *American* intellectual, there would be few American landmarks by means of which he could confidently navigate his way towards such an identity.

These facts have a significance that extends well beyond philosophy. There exists no single article of American letters of any sort (say, a novel or an essay) that most Americans share as a common intellectual inheritance in the way that the work of a Descartes or a Rousseau is a shared possession in France. Indeed, it is not an uncommon event in the history of American letters for Americans to become excited about some domestic product (say, the stories of Edgar Allen Poe or the novels of Ernest Hemingway) because a Frenchman (a Baudelaire or a Sartre) told them it is the work of a great writer. To the extent that there is some single object of American culture that a group of randomly selected educated Americans will have in common as a shared American cultural reference point, as likely as not, it will be a classic Hollywood movie.

This is not to deny that many Americans participate in a shared fantasy of a common literary culture consisting of a range of widely cherished documents—to cite a few candidates: *The Constitution of the United States of America*, *The Leaves of Grass*, *Moby Dick*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—but these tend to be cherished at a distance. How many Americans have really read, let alone retained, the words and thoughts contained therein? (Most are at least as likely to remember the details of a TV show or movie or cartoon either about or loosely based on and bearing the title of the text in question.) Regardless of how much significance is attached to the fact of their existence, the bulk of the prose in these documents does not presently circulate in America as shared possessions of the citizenry. With the exception of a few inaudibly famous phrases, there are within American cultural circles no documents of American writing to which one can safely allude with the same confidence in the possibility of shared intimacy that a judicious allusion to a line or scene from a widely cherished Hollywood movie—to cite a few candidates: *The Wizard of Oz*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Casablanca*, or *Dr. Strangelove*—is likely to be able to achieve. If Dorothy were to find herself suddenly transported to a region of America where allusions to literary or philosophical texts were able to forge this sort of intimacy, she would have reason to exclaim: "Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore!"

So let us ask the following question: What, within the history of American thought, is America prepared to count as an instance of an American difference in philosophy—an instance of a mode of thought that is both philosophy and distinctively American? Perhaps the answer will be: Nothing. But then we should want to know: Why? Is it because any American candidate that openly bears the stamp of its Americanness is somehow too American to count as an uncluttered instance of serious philosophy? So that to do philosophy just is to participate in and therefore to accommodate oneself to a European tradition? So that to speak with a voice that is recognizably philosophical is of necessity to speak with a European accent? Or is it because America is, above all, the name of a democracy and a business that is as inherently practical as democracy can have at best only an incidental bearing on how an enterprise as inherently theoretical as philosophy ought to be conducted? If either of these is our conclusion, then it is one which rests on assumptions—assumptions about what can count as an inheritance of philosophy and about the possibilities of thought available to someone who does not wish to suppress the American accent in his voice. Emerson and Thoreau are examples of writers who sought to contest just such assumptions—so that the reception of their thought requires not only a simultaneous rethinking of what philosophy, America and Europe each are, but a rethinking of each in the light of the other.

On this ambitious conception of what the establishment of a genuinely "American philosophy" is to achieve, there will turn out to be a significant internal relation between the concepts *philosophy* and *America*: a relation between what we are able to recognize as philosophy (and whether it presently rests on an impoverished idea of philosophy) and what we are able to recognize as cosmopolitan (and whether it presently rests on an impoverished idea of the cosmopolitan—one which is itself a form of provincialism—and recognizable as such only

from the vantage point afforded by a non-European perspective). For Emerson and Thoreau, a genuinely American philosophy would thus provide a new perspective on our old ways of thinking and living—a perspective which is to enable our European conceptions of the philosophical and the cosmopolitan to come into focus together as somewhat *unphilosophical* (in taking a certain dispensation of philosophy to be philosophy itself) and somewhat *provincial* (in taking the aspiration to an American culture to be a quest for a second-hand version of European culture).

The American philosopher Stanley Cavell remarks: Whereas a French intellectual is committed to seeming brilliant, an American thinker or artist is more likely to play dumb, to undertake to seem like a hick, to play the part of being uncultivated. Consider Aristotle's elucidation of the concept of the sage—it takes the form of a question we are to ask ourselves; the question goes like this: "Who furnishes us with the most accurate standard or measure of good things?" Now, if it is constitutive of what it is to be a French intellectual that one is committed to seeming brilliant, then it is bound to be difficult for such an intellectual to recognize someone who is undertaking to appear lacking in cultivation as the personification of a sage (in Aristotle's weighty sense of the term), and it will be harder still for him to credit the cultivation of such an appearance as itself a guise through which intellectual authority is asserted—as itself a guise of the Sage.

This is not to deny that many American intellectuals are committed to seeming brilliant. All that proves is that many Americans seek to emulate a Parisian model of what it is to be an intellectual. Some of them, given the choice, would even prefer to live in Paris—or, at least, to go there when they die. "Good Americans, when they die, go to Paris" (attributed to Thomas Gold Appleton, reported by Oliver Wendell Holmes, in *Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table* (The Akadine Press: Pleasantville, NY, 2001); p. 125). Oscar Wilde, in his play *A Woman of No Importance*, adds a characteristic wrinkle:

> *Mrs. Allonby:* They say, Lady Hunstanton, that when good Americans die they go to Paris.
>
> *Lady Hunstanton:* Indeed? And when bad Americans die, where do they go to?
>
> *Lord Illingworth:* Oh, they go to America. (*The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Galley Press: Leicester, UK, 1987), p. 421.)

Nor is it to claim that those American intellectuals who do not seek to emulate such a model are therefore eager to mount a critique of European intellectual life. It is to claim only that many American authors and artists and thinkers find the Parisian model cannot be theirs. A European will not understand the intellectual manners of a Henry David Thoreau or Mark Twain or William Faulkner or Robert Frost or Howard Hawks if he fails to appreciate what underlies their apparently intellectually uncultivated postures—as thrifty woodsman or riverboat captain or Southern gentleman or New England farmer or uncouth cowboy—if he fails to appreciate how these modes of cultivating an apparent lack of (European) cultivation are themselves forms through which the American artist or author expresses his refusal of an alien standard or measure of good things and seeks to fashion his own native standard or measure.

These differences between the French and American scenes are themselves a function of a difference in their respective relations to history—and, in particular, to the accomplished edifice of European culture. The French philosopher or author or artist can take that accomplishment for granted and build on it without threat to his identity. The challenge for him, as a French intellectual, lies in finding or clearing room for something new to do within the confines of that edifice. This is not the challenge the American philosopher or author or artist *qua* American generally feels himself to face. Mark Twain narrates the adventures of a Tom Sawyer or Huck Finn in a voice that betrays little hint of interest in or familiarity with the accomplished edifice of European literature. The apparent naturalness of that literary voice—its apparent innocence of European cultivation—is an integral and easily overlooked aspect of its achievement. Emerson and Thoreau seek to fashion a mode of philosophical writing that actively refuses to lay claim to the accomplished edifice of European philosophy, as if philosophy's history could be made to begin again—as if "no time had elapsed [since] the oldest … philosopher … [first] raised a corner of the veil." The American philosopher or author or artist often seems to proceed thus, as if history could be made to begin anew—as if the accomplishments of European culture could constitute only a dangerous temptation for an American, at all costs to be resisted—as if those accomplishments could only become his, for the taking and making his own, at the cost of placing his own identity in pawn.

Among the opening remarks in an address to the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard in 1837, Emerson famously declares the following hope: "Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close. The millions that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests.… In this hope I accept the topic which not only usage but the nature of our association seem to prescribe to this day,—the AMERICAN SCHOLAR."

Ever since at least this address bearing the title, and issuing its call for, *The American Scholar*, it has been a central ambition of American thinking and writing and art to call forth a form of culture in which the American intellectual—philosopher or author or artist—can eschew European models—of philosophy or authorship or art—in a manner that will enable him finally to be able to feel at home in his homeland *qua* philosopher or author or artist (as he imagines his European counterparts are able to feel at home in their respective cultures). The realization of such an ambition is supposed to require a reciprocal change on the part of American thinking and writing and art and on the part of the homeland itself; and the accomplished fact of such reciprocal change is an integral part of what it means, for Emerson, for the American scholar finally to have come into existence. But to say that American thinking and writing and art have been fueled by such an ambition is not to say that such a vision of America has ever yet been realized—that the American philosopher or author or artist has ever yet been able to feel himself permanently or comfortably at home in America.

This it is not to deny what one shrewd native observer of the American scene, Alfred Kazin, has called *the greatest single fact about our modern American writing*—namely, America's writers' (and thinkers' and artists') "absorption in every last detail of their American world together with their deep and subtle alienation from it." What is at issue here is neither the familiar European intellectuals' loudly proclaimed revulsion at and revolt from the diurnal and everyday (familiar since at least Baudelaire) nor the equally familiar European intellectuals' loudly proclaimed longing to be reconciled with and incorporated harmoniously into the rhythms of an already available mode of diurnal and everyday life (familiar since at least Tolstoy). An attentive absorption in the details of an American life that engulfs the author combined with a quiet yet ineradicable alienation from the very life which so absorbs and fascinates him remains a hallmark of great American writing throughout the generations, from that of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Hermann Melville to that of Raymond Carver and Don DeLillo.

This characteristically American ("deep and subtle") form of cultural alienation should not be confused with a far less deep and subtle form of cultural alienation that is equally characteristically American—an alienation that is cultivated and displayed as a badge of honor by a different constituency of American intellectuals—namely, those whose understanding of their identity as "intellectuals" depends upon a principled disinterest in any project of attentive absorption in the details of their American life. Such "American" intellectuals—especially those most preoccupied with what it means to be an intellectual, and most especially those most in the thrall of the Parisian model of what it is to be one—will themselves generally never be able see past the roughhewn manners of a Thoreau or Faulkner or Frost or Hawks to the exquisite cultivation shining through that surface, to the extraordinary rigor of their undertakings (to reinvent philosophy or poetry or the novel or the cinema). But whereas a Parisian intellectual can without threat to himself permit himself to be fascinated by the exotic manners of such an American literary woodsman or cowboy (and thereby discover in them a new and usable measure of the good, the true, or the just), the American intellectual in the thrall of the Parisian model is generally unable to permit himself such latitude. Here his own Americanism comes into play and freezes his powers of perception. He is apt to recoil from what he perceives as the vulgarity of his countrymen's provincialism and amateurism.

But often what chagrins such an American intellectual is simply his Americanism—his fear of his own lack of cultivation.. His recoil from cultural efforts distinctively marked by an American provenance is often a reflection of his own shame—a symptom of his fantasy to be someone he is not. Nowhere are the great achievements of American culture more undervalued than in America, which is not to deny that nowhere are they more celebrated. It belongs to the nature of great American cultural achievements that they not only easily permit, but actively invite their audience thus to underestimate them. To assess such work requires first punching through its false bottom. If it is characteristic of the French thinker or author or artist to be committed to seeming brilliant and to playing the part of the genius, then it is equally characteristic of the

American thinker or author or artist to be committed to diffidence and to playing the part of someone who is just doing his job—say, measuring the depth of his pond.

America's Drama of Self-Constitution

Here is another quotation from the American philosopher, Stanley Cavell:

> It is simply crazy that there should ever have come into being a world with such a sin in it, in which a man is set apart because of his color—*the* superficial fact about a human being. Who could *want* such a world? For an American, fighting for his love of country, that the last hope of earth should from its beginning, have swallowed slavery, is an irony so withering, a justice so intimate in its rebuke of pride, as to measure only with God.

The drama of America begins with its birth; and it is essential to its myth of itself as a destiny that its birth be unlike that of other nations. Long before there was a Russian or English or French nation or revolution or constitution, there were already a Russian or English or French kingdom or empire or realm, already Russian and English and French history and architecture and literature, and already a distinctively Russian and English and French language and people and identity. The issue in founding America was not just to arrange for there to be one more such place alongside Russia and England and France. It was to show the world what a nation and a constitution and a revolution could and should be, and thereby to create not only a new nation, but a new concept of nation—one that was to have no history or literature or identity prior to the completion of its revolution and the realization of its constitution, comprising a people united by neither language, creed nor blood—one whose history and literature and identity were forged through a vision of how a people might be united such that they no longer could be divided. But how is one to tell if such a revolution attains its end, if such a constitution is fully enacted, if such a union stands achieved?

America arguably began as theater. Its revolution, unlike the English and French and Russian revolutions, was not a civil war; it was fought against outsiders, its point was not reform but independence. And one might argue that America's beginning as theater was both its blessing and its curse. It bore some of the earmarks of other revolutionary conflicts: shots were fired, colonies liberated, ties with a monarch severed, royalist administrators evicted, and so forth. But such a beginning was largely a blessing for the very reasons that might lead one to declare that the American Revolution was not a revolution at all: in its declaration of independence America did not declare war on itself, no king was beheaded, no guillotines were erected, no people's tribunals convened, there was no orgy of bloodletting to expiate, and the empire to which it had once belonged continued happily on without it. These seemingly unrevolutionary aspects of its Revolution were a blessing because it meant America could begin the business of nationhood with a public debate over its founding principles to determine how each could have a voice in the ensuing whole and what kind of voice it should be, rather than with a tribunal of inquisition to determine who was a friend of the Revolution and who Its enemy, sorting its citizenry into those who formed part of the solution and those who formed part of the problem. The American revolutionaries had no need to justify an extended internecine conflict in the name of an indivisible will of the people, in whose name violence could be demanded and in expectation of whose gratitude all sins would be washed away. Instead of having to invoke the will the people, the Founding Fathers could afford to seek their consent. Instead of insisting upon the indivisibility of such a will, they could seek to accommodate and protect a diversity of opinion. Instead of replacing religion with the state, they could seek to separate them.

Was the American Revolution therefore a success? How does one measure the success of a revolution? Hannah Arendt has devoted a book to this topic. She notes a marked tendency—exacerbated by a literary and philosophical concentration on the example of the French revolution—that she thinks is apt to cloud our thinking on the topic. The tendency is to identify the concept of revolution with the idea of a violent overthrow of an existing order (something she takes to be a merely accidental feature of the concept). This identification leaves out what she takes to be the essential end of revolution: namely, *the institution of a new order*—not merely in the superficial sense that a new one replaces an old one, but in the deeper sense that it brings into being the conditions of the possibility of a new kind of order—one which alters not only the quantity of freedom but also its quality.

A revolution is to be assessed not by how much it destroys, but by what it creates—not by its powers of dissolution, but by its powers of constitution. If, rather than measuring the success of revolutions by the degree to which they afford freedom *from* a

prior state of affairs, we instead go by the degree to which they enable freedom *for* the institution of something radically new—an unprecedented yet stable form of social order—then, Arendt argues, this will dramatically affect an estimate of the relative success of the American and French revolutions. But she thinks this is not the measure usually employed. Arendt laments: "It was the French and not the American Revolution that set the world on fire, and it was consequently from the course of the French Revolution, and not from the course of events in America or from the acts of the Founding Fathers, that our present use of the word 'revolution' received its connotations and overtones everywhere.… The sad truth of the matter is that the French Revolution, which ended in disaster, has made world history, while the American Revolution, so triumphantly successful, has remained an event of little more than local importance" (*On Revolution* (Penguin: New York, 1963), pp. 55-56).

An American such as Thoreau might easily agree with Arendt that it is lamentable that the French revolution has been the preferred model for subsequent "revolutions," while still feeling that the question has yet to be answered what it would mean for the American Revolution to have been "triumphantly successful." Does it mean, as the National Anthem declares, that America is now the land of the free and the home of the brave? If so, Thoreau would want to know what those words mean, particularly since, at the time of writing *Walden*, America was hiding from itself the withering irony of its having swallowed slavery. Thoreau thinks his countrymen have allowed themselves to mistake the first act (the framing of a constitution) for the drama itself (the actualization of the freedoms it envisions), and thus to remain unclear as to what ought to count as their having finally departed from the conditions England lives under. Do we know what the next act of the drama is to be and when it ought to be performed? Or has it already been performed? Is America now the land of the free? It has, we are often told, freed its slaves. So was the Civil War the second act of the Revolution?

America's Civil War does in some ways resemble other countries' revolutions: one half of the country fighting the other, brother sometimes taking arms against brother, one side fighting to uphold tradition and property, the other claiming to represent freedom and equality. But it was not a revolution—the point, according to one side, was to make what was formerly one nation two, and the point according to the other side, was to ensure that it remained one. And to the extent that either point was settled, it was not by its being settled in the way things are settled in a revolution, not merely because America has as such never suffered defeat, but because, since its initial inception, its subsequent growth pains have been accompanied neither by the sort of overthrow of an existing order that would mark (and has marked) the completion of a successful revolution in England or France or Russia nor by the sort of change in political constitution that would mark the completion of a successful revolution by Hannah Arendt's lights.

Surely, this is a blessing that has helped to protect it from some of the recurrent crises of coherence and confidence that afflict so many other nations. Yet the fact of America's innocence of such national traumas does not by itself answer Thoreau's question: Is the drama of America—the drama of the nation's taking possession of itself—accomplished or still underway? Is the absence in its history of the moments that are formative in the history of other nations—moments of traumatic birth or loss or change of identity, of defeat from without or overthrow from within, of collapse of empire or toppling of *ancien regime*, of change of constitution or convulsion in system of government—its curse or its blessing? There is, after all, no shortage of those on the outside who think that it has been its curse that it has been so seemingly blessed—and therefore that there is nothing America needs today more than a humbling. What should those on the inside think?

Here is my final quotation. It is also from Stanley Cavell. These lines were written during the Vietnam War:

> So America's knowledge is of indefeasible power and constancy. But its fantasies are those of impotence, because it remains at the mercy of its past, because its present is continuously ridiculed by the fantastic promise of its origin and its possibility, and because it has never been assured that it will survive. Since [America] had a birth, it may die. It feels mortal. And it wishes proof not merely of its continuance but of its existence, a fact it has never been able to take for granted. Therefore its need for love is insatiable. It surely has been given more love than any other nation: its history, until yesterday, is one in which outsiders have been drawn to it and in which insiders are hoarse from their expressions of devotion to it.… It is the need for love as proof of its existence which makes it so frighteningly destructive, enraged by ingratitude and

> by attention to its promises rather than to its promise, and which makes it incapable of seeing that it is destructive and frightening. It imagines its evils to come from the outside. So it feels watched, isolated in its mounting of waters, denying its shame with mechanical lungs of pride, calling its wrath upon the wrong objects. It has gone on for a long time, it is maddened now, the love it has had it has squandered too often, its young no longer naturally feel it; its past is in its streets, ungrateful for the fact that a hundred years ago it tore itself apart in order not to be divided; half of it believes the war it is now fighting is taking place twenty-five years ago, when it was still young and it was right that it was opposing tyranny.. *Union* is what it wanted. And it has never felt that union has been achieved. Hence its terror of dissent, which does not threaten its power but its integrity. So it is killing itself and killing another country in order not to admit its helplessness in the face of suffering, in order not to acknowledge its separateness. So it does not know what its true helplessness is.

As I read these lines today, thirty-five years after they were written, I find them to have acquired a peculiar pertinence in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001.

America has seldom received more declarations of love, from outsiders as well as insiders, than on the days immediately following the events of that day. Yet America remains, now more than ever, incapable of seeing how it appears from the outside, often squandering that love as unreservedly as it is proffered. America, so confident of its own goodness, has always found it difficult to see itself—as those on the outside see it—as destructive and frightening. But this self-blindness has deepened, now that the fantasy has been catastrophically reinforced that America's evils come from the outside. As America responds to her momentary feeling of impotence with awesome displays of power, and to her continuing fear of violation with calls for unprecedented acts of surveillance, a question about the times in which my own text (on "The Concept of America") is written arises: Are we seeing the curtain open on a further act in the drama of America's self-constitution? Or has the drama become irretrievably stuck, somewhere in the middle of the third act?

At the time of writing this essay, some things are as different from the days of the Vietnam War as one could wish for: the nation is not only not divided against itself, but its citizens are eager to declare that they stand behind its president; its young are not ungrateful and openly protesting its hypocrisy in the streets; its fears of violence are directed not at the actions of its own citizens but at those of outsiders, thereby enabling it to unite against a common enemy. And even if America is not quite able to tell itself now, with all the confidence it could muster when younger, that it is opposing tyranny, it can tell itself that its enemies are the enemies of freedom and thus would-be tyrants. So whatever threats there may be, surely there is none that threatens the union as such—surely, there is no national trauma underway—now that its people are suddenly able, once again, to stand united, indivisible, and firm. And yet.

America's sense of its own helplessness in the face of suffering was seldom more acute than on that September 11th and its appetite for action seldom more provoked. America feels again, as seldom before, mortal—and wishes proof not merely of its continuance, but proof that it is indeed America (and not just some heavily armed superpower) that thereby continues. Thus the rhetoric of proof vastly exceeds any reality that it thus demonstrates. Seldom have those in power felt less humility when invoking—seldom have they found it easier to pronounce—words such as "freedom," "justice," "truth." Every action America commits, every treaty it breaks, every bomb it drops, every border it crosses, it declares it does in the name of freedom, suggesting that this is something that it thinks it can—and revealing that this is something it has never believed it can—take for granted.

The struggle for union is not yet at an end. Today the young are not notably ungrateful; and they are certainly not in the streets protesting America's betrayal of its promises to itself. But that is not to say that they are grateful, or even that most of them remember exactly what those promises—what exactly the Revolution or the Constitution—were. America is not (at least not yet) presently killing another country. But that is not to say that it is not killing anyone. True, its fears are presently directed not at the violence of insiders but at those of outsiders. But that is not to say that it is able to tell the one from the other. It is true—and a good thing—that it stands united against its present common enemy. But that is not to say that it knows where that enemy is or what would count as having defeated him. And even if it can tell itself that its enemies are enemies of freedom; it must now rest uneasy in the knowledge that it has made a habit of befriending its enemies' enemies whether or not they are

truly its or freedom's friends. Its enemies of today it was calling, only yesterday, friends—friends it was eager to help against a prior common enemy. Amidst these shifting allegiances, it becomes increasingly difficult to tell freedom's friends from its foes—not only when looking at those on the outside but also at those on the inside, and not only for those on the inside looking around but also for those on the outside looking at us.

America could not disguise from itself that the Vietnam War (and the War at Home it provoked) was a struggle over its own soul. But now that America can tell itself that it has been attacked, that it is vulnerable, and that it acts only to protect itself, it has become easier than ever for it to disguise from itself how its continuance depends not only on what it does, but on how it does it. If it is to have a soul worth saving, attacks on it from without must not silence its ongoing argument from within over what would count as its having a soul worth saving. For it belongs to that peculiarity of the concept of America that I have sought to elucidate here that there is no contradiction in the following thought: America might cease to exist on the very day that its citizens become convinced that the continued existence of "America" has been safeguarded and now rests assured.

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