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INTRODUCTION

America and China: what a contrast in national identity! To speak of China is to invoke an ancient history, a long procession of emperors and empresses, a variety of political and economic systems, shifting power-relations between hostile warlords, a civic religion, Confucianism, that predates the modern world. Even the notion of China as the center of the world, perhaps the central symbolic view of China, comes to us from the misty past. To speak of America, on the contrary, is to invoke modernity itself: progress, freedom, opportunity. These are images, of course, symbols of community rather than historical descriptions. But symbols have an enormous power in their own right. What people believe shapes the reality they inhabit. Symbols of community may have their origin in political modes of control: for example, in attempts to mask actual conflicts and contradictions, or to reconcile the discrepancies between fact and ideal. But once those symbols become expressions of community – the imaginative framework within which a group or a nation understands itself, defines its essence and purpose – they become inseparable from the course of history. This was the case with the history of the United States. It is not too much to say that that history was the process by which a small group of British colonies usurped the meaning of America, invested it with the concept of a special mission, and in doing so declared itself the nation of the future. Behind that declaration lay a series of symbolic self-definitions, beginning with the New England Puritans. After it, from 1776 through the nineteenth century, came a series of symbolic formulations and reformulations that fostered and directed the expansion of an East-coast republic into a transcontinental empire, and beyond that, in our own time, into a global “American Way.” This book is about the process by which “America” became the most powerful national symbol in the modern world.

The process itself is a complicated one. It leads from seventeen-century Puritan New England through periods of secularization, of revolution, industrialization, vast social transformations, and profound cultural changes, prompted by successive waves of immigration, a violent civil war and two world wars. How did the Puritan vision manage to persist through these upheavals? The answer may be simply stated: the New England Puritans provided the nation-to-be with a unique spiritual as well as worldly identity, one that located the meaning of America in America, as “America.” All other New World colonies looked for their sense of purpose to Europe the settlers of New Spain (Mexico) to Spain, the settlers of New France (Canada) to France, the settlers of Virginia to England. The New England Puritans effectually declared their independence from their Old World past. They described themselves as a “people” chosen to realize the promise divinely granted exclusively to America. What they meant by “New England” was a model community that would show a corrupt England the True Way, both to social harmony and to personal fulfillment.

In short, the Puritans invested “America” with sacred meaning and themselves, as “Americans,” with a sacred purpose. It is no accident that they were the first to confer the name “American” on the continent’s white immigrants, rather than (as all other settlers did) on the native inhabitants. Nor is it by accident that in the mythology of the United States – a mythology current to this day – the Puritans are celebrated as the Ur-fathers, harbingers of the American Revolution. Nor, finally, is it by chance that the Puritans’ Thanksgiving Day had become the national holiday, or that Plymouth Rock and the Mayflower are regarded as national shrines, or that the Puritans figure centrally in the American literary tradition, or that Puritans rhetoric became a staple of political discourse, from the Revolutionary period through the Civil War to the presidencies of John Fitzgerald Kennedy and George W. Bush. It is from within this tradition that Ralph Waldo Emerson called the United States “the country of tomorrow,” that Herman Melville declared it a “New Israel” bearing “the Bible of the Free,” that the Russian Jew Mary Antin celebrated her U.S. citizenship as a migration to The Promised Land, that Martin Luther King demanded the fulfillment of the “American Dream,” that Bill Clinton campaigned for a “New Covenant” and Ronald Reagan reminded Americans that they were a “people chosen to begin the world again.” Politically and aesthetically, one of the wonders of our modern world is the triumph of the Puritan symbol of America.

The symbol opens into a myth grounded in Christian tradition, and may seem strange to Chinese readers. But I think it can be grasped through two key concepts. One of these is Protestantism, a branch of Christianity that took root in the sixteenth century, as a revolt against the rituals of the then-dominant Roman Catholic Church. The Puritans were English Protestants who extended that act of revolt to include the Protestant establishment itself. They quarreled vehemently among themselves, forming a variety of sects: Baptists, Quakers, Shakers, Ranters, and many others, one of which comprised the New England Puritans. But all sects agreed that the official Protestant Church of England had grown lax and corrupt. They, the Puritans, would purify it and set it right.

The other concept is typology, an ancient mode of biblical interpretation. Typology asserts that all events, persons, and places in the Hebrew Bible are foreshadowings of the life of Jesus Christ, as told in the New Testament. Thus when, according to Hebrew scripture, Moses leads the Hebrews to freedom, from Egypt to Canaan, the Promised Land, his action is said to look forward to the time when Christ would show believers the way to heaven. That was the deeper, spiritual meaning of the Hebrew Exodus. And it held another, equally profound prophetic meaning. For the revelation of Christ did not end with His life and crucifixion. Typologically understood, His mission at that time was a foreshowing of His Second Coming at the end of time. Then, in those “latter days,” He would transform the entire world into Paradise, into which all Christian believers would enter into as a New Israel. That Second Paradise, the New Promised Land, was not heaven, but a kingdom of God on earth. Christians spoke of it as the millennium, the thousand-year reign of the saints in a worldwide New Jerusalem.

This was the story instated by the early Church Fathers and inherited by the Protestants. As part of their rebellion against the Catholic Church, they added a crucial element to the role of New Israel. According to biblical promise, they claimed, a nation would arise in

the last days to usher in the millennium: a nation of Protestants led by a New Christian Moses. and directed towards a New Christian Canaan. For a time their leader, Martin Luther, believed that Germany might be that new chosen people. Later, in 1640, the English Puritans under Oliver Cromwell, inspired by the same vision, gathered as a self-proclaimed Army of Saints against the Church of England, to establish a Holy Commonwealth – as the poet William Blake put it, to “bring [the New] Jerusalem to England’s green and pleasant land.” By 1660 this Puritan Revolution had failed and England returned, like Germany, to its status as simply another nation among the nations of the earth.

Meanwhile, a small group of Puritans had conceived what seemed to everyone else a fantastic new version of the story. They discovered the New World in the prophecies of the Bible. Those prophecies did not name America directly, of course, but this was only (these Puritans argued) because the time had not yet come for the continent to be discovered by Christianity. The prophecies spoke of a place to which, in the last phase of history, God’s chosen would gather “from the ends of the earth”; they described a “wilderness” which would be made to “blossom as the rose.” What was intended by those metaphors was kept secret, according to God’s plan, until the Protestant Reformation; and they, the New England Puritans, had been especially called to proclaim its meaning. America was the key. God had kept the continent “in darkness” so that “in due time” His New Israel could reclaim it as the New Promised Land. In short, they had a divine summons to make manifest the destiny of America.

Thus it was that what they meant by New England reversed the traditional relation between colony and empire. England, said these Puritans, was to follow the lead of their venture. Not the empire but the colony was the true center of the world. New England’s first governor, John Winthrop, defined the settlement in 1630 as a city set upon a hill (like a New World Jerusalem) to light the way for mankind. Forty years later, a second generation heard itself called to continue a world-redemptive “errand into the wilderness.” By the end of the century, a third generation spoke of the millennial “mighty deeds of Christ in America,” meaning the past and future history of New England.

New England did not remain Puritan, in any strict religious sense, for very long. The actual history of the colony is one of increasing secularization, and well before 1700 its character had shifted from Puritan to Yankee. The population was increasingly heterogeneous. The emphasis was increasingly on material abundance. The colony’s main spokespersons were politicians rather than clergymen. But the symbolic identity which the Puritans elaborated remained a mainstay of colonial self-definition: communal identity, economic gain, and political rhetoric remained grounded in the old metaphors and images. Political leaders such as John Adams demanded national independence as representatives of another Israel in flight from the bondage of an “English Pharaoh.” Religious leaders such as Jonathan Edwards rallied their followers to a future of material as well as spiritual abundance. In the myth that both preachers and politicians adapted, sacred and secular progress were entwined in the promise of America, a promise that now belonged not just to New England but to all Americans.

The nation thus formed was an anomaly among modern nations. It claimed neither a specific language (English is after all the language of England), nor a special culture (America is the country of immigrants from many cultures), nor even a specific territory: the emphasis on the future made the symbol of America a kind of movable feast; it allowed the United States to expand continentally (and in our time as far as Alaska, Hawaii, and perhaps Puerto Rico). In other words, none of the standard definitions of nationhood applied. Instead, “America” was a certain set of beliefs, encompassed by a grand sacred-secular symbol. What that symbol implied as a definition of community has already been noted. First, voluntarism: citizenship in this new promised land was open (rhetorically, if not for a long time in fact) to all people who covenanted to keep the American faith. Second, universalism: this was the country of the future; its ideals pointed to the America that was to be, as the promised end of a global American Way. Third, continual progress: by the mid-nineteenth century, the concept of the errand into the wilderness had become the vision of manifest destiny. And fourth, the interdependence of secular and spiritual matters: in America as nowhere else, went the argument, “piety and prosperity jumped together.”

This last point is worth elaboration. The symbol of America posits a community which, while being entirely worldly – pragmatic, contractual, practical, dedicated to the principles of hard work and upward social mobility—was also, at the same time, deeply religious. People have often marveled at the power of religion in the United States. This is after all a country, that legislates the separation of church and state; a country, moreover, that can be said to have no special religious ties (unlike, say, Protestant England, Hindu India, Mohammedan Iran, Catholic Spain) since its immigrants span the full gamut of religions. And yet the United States is now and has always been the most religious country in the world. More Americans believe in God, in heaven and hell, and in sacred scripture than any other people. The Bible (Old and New Testaments) is a foundational text for American identity, co-equal with the foundational texts of 1776, the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. And the religious system based on the Bible is fundamentally Protestant. It posits the absence of a centralized church and encourages in its place a variety of sects or religious groupings. One way of seeing this system is as expression of liberal pluralism, the religious counterpart to the institutions of open market and free trade. Another way is to see it as an expansion of Protestant pluralism. As part of the American way, Catholicism, Hinduism, Judaism, etc. are various sects of a multi-denominational national religion. Both these views are accurate: they coalesce in the well-documented reciprocity between capitalism and Protestantism. It is appropriate that the great theorist of that reciprocity, Max Weber, should have chosen as his main example of the “Protestant work-ethic” the “model American,” Benjamin Franklin. It is appropriate, too, that the cornerstones of the American literary tradition – Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter, Melville’s Moby-Dick, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” the poetry of Emily Dickinson – should all have in common, despite their remarkable diversity in form and content, a basic Protestant-liberal outlook.

What I am describing, then, is more than an aesthetic achievement; it is a mode of cultural cohesion. That is why, in analyzing its development, I have had to resort to

terms like ritual and ideology. The symbol of America has served to link the nation's habits of thought and imagining with its civic institutions and ways of life. As such, it also joins myth and ideology. The myth is the narrative I outlined of the imagined America. What I mean by ideology concerns the concepts and values implicit in that narrative. Ideology as I understand the term is the belief-structure through which a society guides the perceptions and expectations of its members. It teaches them how to interpret and what to desire. This is an anthropological, as distinct from the Marxist, notion of ideology. Marx labeled ideology "false consciousness"; he considered it a tool by which the dominant class kept the populace from seeing reality as it truly is. As I use the term, ideology is the particular conceptual forms by which a culture, any culture, coheres and persists. Ideology is neither good nor evil in itself, though of course it may be used for either good or evil. Abraham Lincoln said of the Civil War that "both sides read the same Bible and prayed to the same God." He might have added that both sides appealed to the myth of America. To speak in this sense of ideology is to acknowledge that the professed truths of any culture are limited and limiting. Even as they claim to transcend the present – offering absolutes and universals – those truths are the product of time and place. They are made manifest in rituals and rites through which a society establishes the consensus that is necessary if that society is to function effectively.

That was Lincoln's intent in asserting the common grounds of both North and South. And indeed the consolidation of the country after the Civil War proved his point. In retrospect it seems clear that the American ideology not only survived the most turbulent national crises, but actually flourished through crisis. It was not that the country succeeded because an elite managed to impose a certain ideology upon successive generations of Americans. It succeeded because successive generations of Americans assented to a certain ideology – which is to say, because they participated voluntarily, even enthusiastically, in a series of adaptations and re-adaptations of the symbol of America. My subtitle, "transformations in the symbolic construction of America" is intended to suggest this process of adaptation. As for my title, it is intended as a multi-leveled pun that suggests the form and substance of symbolic transformation: (1) Rites as social ritual; rights as the culture's capacity to empower and inspire (as well as to restrain and circumscribe); and writes as textuality, the published declarations, legal documents, histories, political decrees, poems, and novels that directly and indirectly forged the American Way. And (2) assent in this connection as consent, implying self-reliance; conformity, implying a self shaped by its culture; and ascent, implying the belief in upward mobility and national progress. It was from all these perspectives simultaneously that, almost a decade after this book was published, in a millennial New Year's address to the nation, George W. Bush announced as his chief goal he was "committed to making his presidency 'The Age of Assent'."¹

The essays in this book form what I hope the reader will find to be a composite whole. They proceed from a general overview of the American scene (chapters one and two) to a description of how the Puritans invented a rhetoric suited to their aims (chapter 3) and a

¹ The Onion (<http://www.theonion.com>), vol. 36, Issue 46, Dec. 20, 2000, p. 1. All other quotations in this Introduction are cited in the course of the book.

detailed analysis of the life and work of Cotton Mather, author of the first American epic (chapter four). The next two chapters deal with the transformations of Puritan rhetoric from the mid-eighteenth century through the Revolution to the Jacksonian era. The major figures here are Jonathan Edwards, leader of the Great Awakening, and George Bancroft, the national historian, whose work provided the main source of myth-making during the formative decades of the new republic. I then turn to more complex issues of the literary treatment of the myth. In Hawthorne's Scarlet Letter (chapter 7) I read the classic formulation of the symbolic methods of American consensus. In Melville's Pierre (chapter 8) I see the most probing critique we have of that symbology. And in Emerson's essays (chapter 9) I explore the development of the most influential aspect of the American Way, the doctrine of individualism. I call these issues more complex because they are represented in works of art. Ritual and ideology may readily be understood in tandem. But the literary imagination adds another dimension to the analysis. These writers' very concern with America reminds us that the imagination is never free of culture, that it is as much enabled as it is limited by ideology. Literary works do not transcend; they are nourished by their time and place; they draw their images and visions not out of the empty air but from a common social store of language and belief. At the same time there is a distinctive quality to the work when its language and vision achieve a certain intensity. The same symbol that is ideologically affirmative can then become a literary site of resistance or critique. The same images that make for ritual consensus can provide the basis of visionary dissent. I have tried to be faithful to these differences in treating Hawthorne, Melville, and Emerson. Indeed, I selected them precisely because they seem to me to illustrate three different directions embedded in the American literary tradition.

In my last chapter I survey the critical debates among Americanist scholars and critics – about consensus and diversity, containment and subversion – as these debates register the cultural and intellectual moment of the past few decades. My own work has been part of those debates, and accordingly my language is that of a certain academic discourse. I have tried to be as clear as possible, but to some extent readers will find that they must bear with unfamiliar terms. I believe the result will be rewarding. What's at issue here is not jargon, not a string of esoteric words designed to exclude the mass of readers. Rather, it is rather a number of concepts specific to current literary criticism, along with the kind of specialized terms that are inevitable to the workings of any discipline. The development of literary studies in the 1940s brought with it a set of then-strange terms such as “ambiguity” and “archetype,” “vehicle” and “tenor.” The current shift to cultural and historical context involves a new set of terms, designed to deepen our understanding of the text by introducing new perspectives, larger frames of reference. In time these terms will become as familiar as “ambiguity” and “archetype” are now. Hopefully, there will then be another set of strange terms for the critic to absorb and learn from. As for terms which may be unfamiliar to Chinese readers in particular -- terms like typology or transcendentalism, the “jargon” of Puritanism or of the Romantics — I would urge that to understand the language is to grasp the inner workings of American literature and culture. Journalism's valuable function is to make complex matters accessible to a wide audience. The more fundamental work of scholarship and criticism is to explore the complexities of the human condition, in this case the condition of becoming American.

I myself had to learn many of those complex terms when I began my study of America. I was an immigrant then from Canada, amazed that the word "American" did not apply to Canada or Mexico or any other North or South American country. What captivated me at first was the fact of a diverse, diffuse, and conflicted culture (or multi-culture) that was held together by an intricate system of myths and beliefs, centered on the symbol of America. What next captured my attention was a series of canonical texts by very different, often marginal writers, ranging from the Federalist through the Modernist periods, that kept returning compulsively (as it seemed) to the question of the meaning of that symbol. I was fascinated by the way these writers were consumed with the anxiety of being American, and by their persistent criticism of the American present in light of the country's potential. That was the time before the study of American literature had opened to accommodate the works of women, immigrants, and "minority groups," but I don't think that it would have changed my mind to have read their texts as well. By and large it is the same symbology that links them all, just as it is basically the same vision of the "American" that links the many hyphenated ethnic groups (Jewish-American, African-American, Chinese-American) in the United States.

I believe that outsiders have a privileged perspective on this literary-cultural scene. They can see the artifice of what seems natural to persons within the culture. They can get an overview of what persons within the culture see as a mass of conflicting details. This was true of the French aristocrat Alexis De Tocqueville when he set out in the 1830s to report on Democracy in America. It was true of the English writer D. H. Lawrence when in 1917 he illuminated the works of Classic American Literature. I would like to think of my book as belonging to that great tradition. And in this sense I would also like to think that I share a common ground with Chinese students of American literature and culture. My deepest wish is that this book will not just instruct, but will encourage new avenues of research and provoke different answers to the question of America.