

THE AMERICAN JEREMIAD

Sacvan Bercovitch

We need not discount the validity of this frontier thesis to see what it does *not* explain: the persistence of the Puritan jeremiad throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in all forms of the literature, including the literature of westward expansion. Indeed, what first attracted me to the study of the jeremiad was my astonishment, as a Canadian immigrant, at learning about the prophetic history of America. Not of North America, for the prophecies stopped short at the Canadian and Mexican borders, but of a country that, despite its arbitrary territorial limits, could read its destiny in its landscape, and a population that, despite its bewildering mixture of race and creed, could believe in something called an American mission, and could invest that patent fiction with all the emotional, spiritual, and intellectual appeal of a religious quest. I felt then like Sancho Panza in a land of Don Quixotes. Here was the anarchist Thoreau condemning his backsliding neighbors by reference to the Westward errand; here, the solitary singer Walt Whitman, claiming to be the American Way; here, the civil rights leader Martin Luther King, descendant of slaves, denouncing segregation as a violation of the American dream; here, an endless debate about national identity, full of rage and faith, Jeffersonians claiming that they, and not the priggish heirs of Calvin, really represented the errand, conservative politicians hunting out socialists as conspirators against the dream, left-wing polemics proving that capitalism was a betrayal of the country's sacred origins. The question in these latter-day jeremiads, as in their

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seventeenth-century precursors, was never 'Who are we?' but, almost in deliberate evasion of that question, the old prophetic refrain: 'When is our errand to be fulfilled? How long, O Lord, how long?' And the answers, again as in the Puritan jeremiads, invariably joined lament and celebration in reaffirming America's mission.

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The newness of New England becomes both literal and eschatological, and (in what was surely the most far-reaching of these rhetorical effects) the American *wilderness* takes on the double significance of secular and sacred place. If for the individual believer it remained part of the wilderness of the world, for God's 'peculiar people' it was a territory endowed with special symbolic import, like the wilderness through which the Israelites passed to the promised land. In one sense it was historical, in another sense prophetic; and as Nicholas Noyes explained, in a sermon on the errand three decades after Danforth's, '*Prophesie is Historie antedated; and Historie is Postdated Prophesie: the same thing is told in both.*'¹ For these American Jeremiahs, and all their second- and third-generation colleagues, the ambiguity confirmed the founders' design. They dwelt on it, dissected it, elaborated upon it, because it opened for them into a triumphant assertion of their destiny, migration and pilgrimage entwined in the progress of New England's holy commonwealth.

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Danforth's strategy is characteristic of the American jeremiad throughout the seventeenth century: first, a precedent from Scripture that sets out the communal norms; then, a series of condemnations that details the actual state of the community (at the same time insinuating the covenantal promises that ensure success); and finally a prophetic vision that unveils the promises, announces the good things to come, and explains away the gap between fact and ideal. Perry Miller seems to have understood this form as a triptych, a static three-part configuration in which the centerpiece, considered merely as lament, conveys the meaning of the whole. So interpreted, the New England sermons embody a cyclical view of history: the futile, recurrent rise and fall of nations that sustained the traditional jeremiad. But the rhetoric itself suggests something different. It posits a movement from promise to experience – from the ideal of community to the shortcomings of community life – and thence forward, with prophetic assurance, toward a resolution that incorporates (as it transforms) both the promise and the condemnation. The dynamic of the errand, that is, involves a use of ambiguity which is not divisive but progressive – or more accurately, progressive because it denies divisiveness – and which is therefore impervious to the reversals of history, since the very meaning of progress is inherent in the rhetoric itself.

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I am suggesting that 'the process of Americanization' began not with the decline of Puritanism but with the Great Migration, and that the jeremiad, accordingly, played a significant role in the development of what was to become modern middle-class American culture. I hope that in suggesting this I do not seem to be over-straining the worn links between Puritanism and the rise of capitalism. My point is simply that certain elements in Puritanism lent themselves powerfully to that conjunction, and precisely those elements came to the fore when the Bay emigrants severed their ties with the feudal forms of Old England and set up a relatively fluid society on the American strand – a society that devalued aristocracy, denounced beggary, and opened up political, educational, and commercial opportunities to a relatively broad spectrum of the population.

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These and many similar quantitative differences between Old and New England are symptomatic, I believe, of a sweeping qualitative distinction between America and all other modern countries. In England (and the Old World generally), capitalism was an economic system that evolved dialectically, through conflict with earlier and persistent ways of life and belief. Basically New England bypassed the conflict. This is by no means to say that conflict was avoided altogether. On the contrary: the first century of New England history is a remarkable instance of rapid social change, involving widespread moral, psychic, and political tensions. The emergent structures of a free-enterprise economy did not all at once transform the guild and craft mentality; for a time mercantile capitalism actually helped maintain aristocratic privilege; for an even longer time pre-modern modes of social and familial relationship resisted the commercial revolution underway in the Northern Anglo-American colonies. But by and large the resistance was as ineffectual as it was anachronistic. It signified not a contest between an established and an evolving system, but a troubled period of maturation. The emigrant leaders did not give up their class prerogatives when they landed at Massachusetts Bay, and yet the forms they instituted tended to erode traditional forms of deference. They restricted opportunity in commerce and property ownership, yet social power in the colony increasingly shifted to the commercial and property-owning classes. In all fundamental ideological aspects, New England was from the start an outpost of the modern world. It evolved from its own origins, as it were, into a middle-class culture – a commercially oriented economy buttressed by the decline of European feudalism, unhampered by lingering traditions of aristocracy and crown, and sustained by the prospect (if not always the fact) of personal advancement – a relatively homogeneous society whose enterprise was consecrated, according to its civic and clerical leadership, by a divine plan of progress.

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The European jeremiad developed within a static hierarchical order; the lessons it taught, about historical recurrence and the vanity of human wishes, amounted to a massive ritual reinforcement of tradition. Its function was to make social practice conform to a completed and perfected social ideal. The American Puritan jeremiad was the ritual of a culture on an errand – which is to say, a culture based on a faith in process. Substituting teleology for hierarchy, it discarded the Old World ideal of stasis for a New World vision of the future. Its function was to create a climate of anxiety that helped release the restless 'progressivist' energies required for the success of the venture. The European jeremiad also thrived on anxiety, of course. Like all 'traditionalist' forms of ritual, it used fear and trembling to teach acceptance of fixed social norms. But the American Puritan jeremiad went much further. It made anxiety its end as well as its means. Crisis was the social norm it sought to inculcate. The very concept of errand, after all, implied a state of *unfulfillment*. The future, though divinely assured, was never quite there, and New England's Jeremiahs set out to provide the sense of insecurity that would ensure the outcome. Denouncing or affirming their vision fed on the distance between promise and fact.

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The Puritan jeremiad set out the sacred history of the New World; the eighteenth-century jeremiad established the typology of America's mission. That outlook, to be sure, had become almost explicit by the last decades of the seventeenth century. But the Puritans were careful to make Scripture the basis of their figuralism. They always rooted their exegeses (however strained) in biblical texts, and they appealed to (even as they departed from) a common tradition of Reformed hermeneutics. Because they believed the Reformation was reaching its fulfillment in America, and because they identified themselves primarily in religious terms, they found it necessary to include all the standard landmarks of Protestant historiography. Their Yankee heirs felt relatively free of such constraints. During the eighteenth century, the meaning of Protestant identity became increasingly vague; typology took on the hazy significance of metaphor, image, and symbol; what passed for the divine plan lost its strict grounding in Scripture; 'providence' itself was shaken loose from its religious framework to become part of the belief in human progress. The Yankee Jeremiahs took advantage of this movement 'from sacred to profane' to shift the focus of figural authority. In effect they incorporated Bible history into the American experience – they substituted a regional for a biblical past, consecrated the American present as a movement from promise to fulfillment, and translated fulfillment from its meaning within the closed system of sacred history into a metaphor for limitless secular improvement.

All this was a matter of extension and adaptation, not of transformation. The Puritan clergy had set out to blur traditional distinctions between the world and the kingdom. Their rhetoric issued in a unique mode of ambiguity that

precluded the heaven's time and man's. 'Canaan' was a spiritual state for them, as it was for other Christians; but it was also (in another, but not conflicting sense) their country. They spoke of the mutuality (rather than the coexistence) of fact and ideal. By 'church-state' they meant a separation of powers in the belief that in the American Canaan, and there only, the ecclesiastical and the civic order were not really distinct. *By their own contradictions they were made to correspond.*

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One important reason for the success of the American Revolution was that its advocates had inherited a figural mode of consensus that could endorse Lockean universalism and yet exclude from it whatever then hindered the progress of the republic. The *American* was not (like the French *citoyen* or the Latin American *ciudadano*) a member of 'the people'. He stood for an errand that was limitless in effect, because it was limited in fact to a 'peculiar' nation. Thus (in the notorious paradox of the Declaration of Independence) he could denounce servitude, oppression, and inadequate representation while concerning himself least (if at all) with the most enslaved, oppressed and inadequately represented groups in the land. Those groups were part of 'the people', perhaps, but not the chosen people; part of America, but not the America of the Revolution. Through the ritual of the jeremiad, the leading patriots recast the Declaration to read 'all propertied Anglo-Saxon Protestant males are created equal'. Through that ritual, they *bound* and *tamed* the potential excesses of the early republic – on the one hand, the social demands of groups outside their middle-class consensus; on the other hand, the anarchy of unfettered self-interest. In short, they used the jeremiad to confine the concept of revolution to American progress, American progress to God's New Israel, and God's New Israel to people of their own kind. It is no accident that the debate at the turn of the nineteenth century between the Federalists and the Jeffersonians turned on which party was the legitimate heir to the title of the American Israel.² Nor is it by accident that under Jefferson's administration the Revolution issued in an increasing violation – for blacks and Indians – of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Nor is it accidental, finally, that while France and Latin America degenerated into factional pandemoniums, the American republic generated a conformist spirit that foreign observers termed a 'tyranny of the majority'.

Middle-class majority would have been more precise. Nationalism has served elsewhere to unify modern communities, but always by recourse to secular continuities from the past. Even when the national ideal makes universal claims, its basis remains local, historical, and complex. European national heroes, for all their representative qualities, are circumscribed by class and genealogy; the messianic dreams of German and Russian nationalism are rooted in atavistic distinctions of race, religion, and geography. The 'American' community, on the contrary, defines itself by its relation to the Revolution and the promised

future; or, more accurately, by a continuing revolution based on '*a conception of the future as the present*'. Especially when its adherents invoke the legend of the fathers, as William Arthur does in his July Fourth oration, 'American' identity obviates the usual distinctions of national history – divisions of class, complexities of time and place – because the very meaning of 'American' involves a *cultural*, not a national, myth of consensus.³ It is a testament to the power of this myth that our major nineteenth-century writers through Henry James could complain about the lack of history and diversity in the land. 'I have never seen a nation so much alike in my life, as the people of the United States,' wrote Cooper in *Notions of the Americans* (1828). He knew well enough about Indians and blacks, about differences between the urban rich, emigrant laborers, and rural gentry, about the variety of customs in the North, South, and West. So, too, did Hawthorne when in 1860 he described the United States as 'a country where there is no . . . antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a commonplace prosperity, in broad and simple daylight.' It was not ignorance or insensitivity that led to these wry complaints. It was merely, astonishingly, that in terms of the myth which Cooper and Hawthorne shared, such differences did not count. *Nation* meant *Americans* for them, *Americans* meant *the people*, and *the people* meant those who, thanks to the Revolution, enjoyed a *commonplace prosperity*: the simple, sunny rewards of American middle-class culture.

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Indeed, the very proliferation of dissidents and reformers – the endless debate during the Middle Period about the true meaning of America – served to confirm the norms of the culture. What higher defense could one offer for middle-class society than an American Way that *sui generis* evoked the free competition of ideas? – and what could make this freedom safer for society than to define it in terms of the American Way? For by the logic of continuing revolution, any term blessed by the adjective American was a positive good; but by the same logic not everything in America was so blessed. Margaret Fuller could represent the American spirit to her supporters insofar as they denied that spirit to her no less representative antagonists. Both Henry Thoreau and William Arthur defined themselves as revolutionary Americans, but for each the definition entailed a rejection of the other. The state of tension that ensued proved an inexhaustible (because self-generating) source of exultation through lament. Under the slogan of continuing revolution, the ritual of the jeremiad spawned an astonishing variety of official or self-appointed committees on un-American activities: 'progressivist societies' for eradicating the Indians, 'benevolent societies' for deporting the blacks, 'Young Americans' for banning European culture, 'populists' obsessed with the spectre of foreign conspiracy, voluntary associations for safeguarding the Revolutionary tradition, male and female 'reform societies' for social regeneration through sexual purification.

In all cases, the ideal of *American* revolution ruled out any basic challenge to the system. In Europe and Latin America, the summons to 'the people', precisely because it was generalized and unbounded, exposed the pretense of unity; there, revolution bared the dialectics of historical change. In the United States, the summons to dissent, because it was grounded in a prescribed ritual form, preempted the threat of radical alternatives. Conflict itself was rendered a mode of control: a means of facilitating process through which process became an aid to socialization. Again, the plight of the mid-nineteenth-century feminists is instructive. On the one hand, it reminds us that the jeremiad has always restricted the ritual of consensus to a certain group within the culture. When William Arthur spoke of 'the American', he was not thinking of people like Margaret Fuller – or for that matter, of Frederick Douglass, Black Hawk, Rabbi Issac Meyer Wise, or John England, the Catholic Bishop of Charleston, South Carolina. But on the other hand, the feminist struggle reminds us that such restrictions were largely a matter of what Plotinus Plinlimmon called 'virtuous expediency'. For the fact is that the American consensus could also absorb feminism, so long as that would lead into the middle-class American Way. Blacks and Indians too could learn to be True Americans, when in the fullness of time they would adopt the tenets of black and red capitalism. John Brown could join Adams, Franklin, and Jefferson in the pantheon of Revolutionary heroes when it was understood that he wanted to fulfill (rather than undermine) the American dream. On that provision, Jews and even Catholics could eventually become sons and daughters of the American Revolution. On those grounds, even such unlikely candidates for perfection as Alaska, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico could become America.

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The ritual of the jeremiad bespeaks an ideological consensus – in moral, religious, economic, social, and intellectual matters – unmatched in any other modern culture. And the power of consensus is nowhere more evident than in the symbolic meaning that the jeremiads infused into the term America. Only in the United States has nationalism carried with it the Christian meaning of the sacred. Only America, of all national designations, has assumed the combined force of eschatology and chauvinism. Many other societies have defended the *status quo* by reference to religious values; many forms of nationalism have laid claim to a world-redeeming promise; many Christian sects have sought, in secret or open heresy, to find the sacred in the profane, and many European defenders of middle-class democracy have tried to link order and progress. But only the American Way, of all modern ideologies, has managed to circumvent the paradoxes inherent in these approaches. Of all symbols of identity, only *America* has united nationality and universality, civic and spiritual selfhood, secular and redemptive history, the country's past and paradise to be, in a single synthetic ideal.

The symbol of America is the triumphant issue of early New England rhetoric and a long-ripened ritual of socialization.

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The symbol took on an entirely different function from that of the religious symbols in which it was rooted. The revelation of the sacred serves to diminish, and ultimately to deny, the values of secular society. The revelation of America serves to blight, and ultimately to preclude, the possibility of fundamental social change. To condemn the profane is to commit oneself to a spiritual ideal. To condemn 'false Americans' as profane is to express one's faith in a national ideology. In effect, it is to transform what might have been a search for moral or social alternatives into a call for cultural revitalization. This had been the purpose of the New England Puritan Jeremiahs as well; but in their case the symbolic mode drew its authority from figural exegesis. Despite the secular-sacred correspondences they asserted, some conflict remained in their rhetoric (if only by sheer force of the tradition they invoked) between *Christian* on the one hand and *New Englander* or *American* on the other. And despite their insistent progressivism, the future they appealed to was necessarily limited, by the very prophecies they vaunted, to the ideals of the past. The American experience for them was a new, last book of Scripture, but Scripture itself was the Book of God, not 'the Bible of the Free'. As I noted earlier, New England Puritan symbology, like the theocracy itself, was a transitional mode, geared toward new forms of thought but trailing what Melville scornfully called the 'maxims of the Past'. For Melville, and all the major writers of the American Renaissance, America as symbol was its own reality, a totalistic bipolar system, sufficient to itself.

I do not mean to blur the differences between these writers, much less to reduce their works to ideology. On the contrary, I invoke them precisely because of their well-known divergence from 'popular culture', in order to indicate the pervasive impact of the American jeremiad. Let me say at once, to avoid all misunderstanding, that all our classic writers (to varying degrees) labored against the myth as well as within it. All of them felt, privately at least, as oppressed by Americanism as liberated by it. And all of them, however captivated by the national dream, also *used* the dream to reach beyond the categories of their culture. To speak of their cultural limitations may be no more than to speak of Chaucer's debt to the medieval world picture. Still, their case seems to me somewhat special. For one thing, critics of American literature have tended to ignore cultural limitations, or else to translate these into quasi-mystical terms, as though the American Renaissance were the embodiment of some New World spirit. Clearly, such terms have their source in the symbol of America – but in this case they seem to derive directly from the great works of our literary tradition. This points to the second, more important reason for insisting that that tradition was the expression of a particular society. Chaucer wrote openly from within his culture. American writers have tended to see themselves as outcasts and isolates, prophets crying in the wilderness. So they have been, as a rule: *American* Jeremiahs, simultaneously lamenting a declension and celebrating a national dream. Their major works are the most striking testimony we have to the power and reach of the American jeremiad.

NOTES

1. Nicholas Noyes, *New-Englands Duty* (Boston, 1698), p. 43.
2. The Federalists, wrote Nathaniel Howe in a typical Jeffersonian attack, were modern 'Pharaohs', seeking to return God's Country to an Old World bondage (*An Oration* [Portland, ME, 1805], p. 6). The characteristic Federalist response was that the Jeffersonians were, like Absalom, rebels in 'the land of promise' (James Sloan, *An Oration Delivered* [Trenton, NJ, 1802], p. 22).
3. This mode of filiopietism, Arthur's oration makes clear, also carries in it a marked ambivalence. The examples of the past do not resolve problems, as in other national or tribal rituals. Instead, they heighten the anxiety of process. Sometimes this leads to a fear of betrayal: the past may prove an outmoded guidebook to the future, as Melville suggests in *Redburn* and other works. Arthur would not agree with Melville that, according to America's 'express dispensation', it is 'the part of wisdom to pay homage to the prospective precedents of the Future in preference to those of the Past' (*White-Jacket; or, The World in a Man-of-War*, Hennig Cohen (ed.) [New York, 1967], pp. 149-50); but this view was latent in the outlook both men inherited from the New England Puritans, with its overriding emphasis on emulation as fulfillment. Charles Sprague's July Fourth dictum, 'In place of the fathers shall be the children' (*Oration* [Boston, 1825], p. 25), may be traced back to Cotton Mather and forward through Emerson into our own time.

 PROTESTANT – CATHOLIC – JEW

Will Herberg

Americans believe in religion in a way that perhaps no other people do. It may indeed be said that the primary religious affirmation of the American people, in harmony with the American Way of Life, is that religion is a 'good thing', a supremely 'good thing', for the individual and the community. And 'religion' here means not so much any particular religion, but religion as such. 'Our government makes no sense,' President Eisenhower recently declared, 'unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith-and I don't care what it is' (emphasis added).¹ In saying this, the President was saying something that almost any American could understand and approve, but which must seem like a deplorable heresy to the European churchman. Every American could understand, first, that Mr. Eisenhower's apparent indifferentism ('and I don't care what it is') was not indifferentism at all, but the expression of the conviction that at bottom the 'three great faiths' were really 'saying the same thing' in affirming the 'spiritual ideals' and 'moral values' of the American Way of Life. Every American, moreover, could understand that what Mr Eisenhower was emphasizing so vehemently was the indispensability of religion as the foundation of society. This is one aspect of what Americans mean when they say that they 'believe in religion'. The object of devotion of this kind of religion, however, is 'not God but "religion" ... The faith is not in God but in faith; we worship not God but our own worshipping.'² When Americans think of themselves as a profoundly religious people, whose 'first allegiance' is 'reserved ... to the

From: Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1955).