

INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

TRANSIENCY AND AMELIORATION—
AN AMERICAN BEQUEST FOR
THE NEW MILLENIUM

by John J. McDermott

I

The stark and startling residual wisdom of our collective past tells us that for the most part, by far, all great movements of the past have been on behalf of a definite goal—in short, an eschatology. Further, conversely rare has it been for the multitude to devote themselves to a cause whose message was the celebrating of the finite, the generational, and especially, sheer transiency.

I take as my head text lines from the poet Adrienne Rich:

I have to cast my lot with those who age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary power reconstitute the world.

Dream of a Common Language

Given the contemporary American scene, the call to reconstitute the world rings with the cadence of a faded antiquity. Seemingly bereft of both imagination and energy, the American political center gropes about, alternating between nostalgia for the previous decade and cynicism about the future. A diagnostic map of the last twenty years leads us from possibility to enervation; from Camelot to Watergate; from Selma to Sun Myung Moon and the political innocence that surrounds being “born again”; from involvement and social concern to anomie and hands-off; from innovation to the bottom line and the bludgeon of accountability; from the febrile and the intense to the flaccid; from Marx with an *x* to

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Marks with a *ks*; from imagination and personal energy to fixed roles and second-handedness, from hope to cynicism.

Some among us¹ hold that our present situation is representative of the inevitable phase in the inexorable workings of an historical and cultural cycle. According to this belief, the benighted achievements of our past will be repeated, however different may be the rubric or the historical setting. I do not so believe, and I offer two reasons for my skepticism on this matter. First, the doctrine of history as cyclical focuses only on identities or similarities, thereby downplaying or missing the radical novelties that constitute the distinctively human character of historical development.² Second, and more germane to the present discussion, something different is at work in contemporary American culture. America is undergoing a change in its most important and profound commitment. America is experiencing a pervasive erosion in its belief in the myth of progress. This subtle jeopardy is no longer the mark of a Luddite fringe, but rather now makes itself felt across religious, racial, ethnic, social, and economic lines. For what it is worth, although I am as committed to the American myth of progress as anyone has ever been, I too experience an ontological twilight, a brownout of my consciousness, in the America of the recent seventies. Put directly, the religious and metaphysical originality of America is strapped to its belief in the sacredness of time, its celebration of journey and transiency, and its aversion to ideology, eschatology, and final solutions. The inversion of this order of priorities will sink us as a culture. We shall move either in the direction of emptiness, self-satisfaction, and narcissism³ or toward self-righteousness and ideological certitude. Both of these tendencies have lurked at the extremes in our culture, but they have been held at bay by a vibrant, pluralistic center that, however unwittingly, invoked the maxims of C. S. Peirce, always fallibilism, always tychasm, and those of Emerson and Dewey, always possibility, always a new day.

Now before deepening the analysis of this contemporary cultural situation, allow me to allay some potential misapprehensions about my view of America and the myth of progress. I am not a cultural chauvinist nor a jingoist. The history of America is pockmarked with first-rate offenses. Need we repeat the litany: the devastation of the American Indian; the slavery of black Americans; the repression of religious, racial, and ethnic minorities; the vulgarity of American corporate capitalism, with its inequities generation after generation. I do not speak of America as a superior culture. I do speak of America as an originating culture, indeed, as one of the handful of genuinely novel cultures in the history of the world, for better and for worse. As for the meaning of the word *progress*, it is, like so many important American words, bumptious, homely, and subject to cliché versions.⁴ Nonetheless, it masks a profound cultural at-

itude. From a classical point of view, the American use of the word *progress* seemingly harbors a contradiction, for it affirms growth while denying the existence of an ultimate goal, or the redemption of human death. In fact, we have no contradiction here, for despite Jessica Mitford and the Rotarians of the academic death and dying industry, America does understand death, and thus rarely speaks of it. Death is the context for human life and like Dylan Thomas, as a people, we most often exhort:

Do not go gentle into that good night
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Or idiomatically, ignore death—grow. The upshot of this is that contrary to most commentators, the American myth of progress is not a yahoo, Pollyanna doctrine. Rather, it is an ameliorative response to the irreducible sadness of being human. Witness, for example, the version of Josiah Royce on our fundamental situation:

Contemplate a battle field the first night after the struggle, contemplate here a vast company the equal of the population of a great town, writhing in agony, their groans sounding at a great distance like the roar of the ocean, their pain un eased for many hours, even death, so lavish of his favors all day, now refusing to comfort; contemplate this and then remember that as this pain to the agony of the world, so is an electric spark drawn from the back of a kitten to the devastating lightning of many great storms; and now estimate if you can the worth of all but a few exceptional human lives, such as that of Caius.

Briefly and imperfectly I state the case for pessimism, not even touching the economical and social argument, drawn from a more special consideration of the conditions of human life. Such then, is our individual human life. What shall we call it and whereunto shall it be likened? A vapor vanishing in the sun? No, that is not insignificant enough. A wave, broken on the beach? No, that is not unhappy enough. A soap bubble bursting into thin air? No, even that has rainbow hues. What then? Nothing but itself. Call it human life. You could not find a comparison more thoroughly condemning it.⁵

II

I return now to the discussion of our present cultural situation. Historically, when in trouble, the American tradition was to issue a jeremiad, a lamentation over the fall from grace. As early as the third generation of the New England Puritans, Increase Mather issued such a warning on behalf of the Boston Synod of 1679. Perry Miller writes of Mather's pronouncement, "The Necessity of Reformation," as the first in a long history "of investigations into the civic health of Americans." "The land was afflicted, it said, because corruption had preceded grace; assuredly if the people did not quickly reform, the last blow would fall and nothing but desolation be left."⁶ Mather's version of the jeremiad articulates one of

the two types of warning, namely, that doom befalls those who abandon previously held beliefs and values. American cultural history harbors a second version of the jeremiad, that is, the prophecy of doom resulting from inability or reluctance to convert the novelties of our experience into a transformation of our beliefs, assumptions, and expectations.⁷ The classic statement of the second form of lamentation is found in the writings of Emerson, who in 1836 asked of Americans, "Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?"⁸ Chastising Americans for their dependence on the whited sepulchers of the past, Emerson writes in "The American Scholar" that "perhaps the time is already come when it ought to be, and will be, something else; when the sluggard intellect of this continent will look from under its iron lids and fulfill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than the exertions of mechanical skill."⁹ Closer to our own time, Alfred Kazin notes that our modern writers "have had to discover and rediscover and chart the country in every generation, rewriting Emerson's 'The American Scholar' in every generation" and yet "still cry America! America! as if we had never known America. As perhaps we have not."¹⁰

After Emerson, the first to rewrite "The American Scholar" was Whitman. And he was also the most explicit in combining the two strands of the jeremiad. In his *Democratic Vistas*, of 1871, he echoes the sentiments of Increase Mather and the Boston Synod.

For my part, I would alarm and caution even the political and business reader, and to the utmost extent, against the prevailing delusion that the establishment of free political institutions, and plentiful intellectual smartness, with general good order, physical plenty, industry, etc. (desirable and precious advantages as they all are), do, of themselves, determine and yield to our experiment of democracy the fruition of success. With such advantages at present fully, or almost fully, possessed—the Union just issued, victorious, from the struggle with the only foes it need ever fear (namely, those within itself, the interior ones), and with unprecedented materialistic advancement—society, in these States, is cankered, crude, superstitious and rotten. Political, or law-made society is, and private, or voluntary society, is also. In any vigor, the element of the moral conscience, the most important, the vertebra to State or man, seems to me either entirely lacking, or seriously enfeebled or ungrown.

I say we had best look our times and lands searchingly in the face, like a physician diagnosing some deep disease. Never was there, perhaps, more hollowness at heart than at present, and here in the United States. Genuine belief seems to have left us.¹¹

Yet it is also in *Democratic Vistas* that Whitman assumes that America embodies a "New World metaphysics."¹² And it is the same Whitman who earlier had written to Emerson, "Each age needs architects. America is not finished, perhaps never will be; now America is a true divine sketch."¹³ And again, "Always, America will be agitated and

turbulent. This day it is taking shape, not to be less so, but to be more so, stormily, capriciously, on native principles, with such vast proportions of parts."¹⁴

Now just as Emerson differed from Mather and Whitman from Emerson, so too must our jeremiad, *mutatis mutandis*, differ in turn from all three. Our present situation is distinctively different, for we are now far enough along to have a "usable past" of our own. The paradox of this "usable past," however, is that it is not made up of fixed values. Rather, it is characterized by an assumption about the experimental nature of the human quest. In Dewey's phrasing, we have learned to accrue wisdom, warrant assertions, and fund experiences, always within the context of the exigencies of history and the transformation of expectations. The irony here is that this native wisdom is exactly parallel to the speculative breakthroughs of the century at large. As a culture, we have anticipated much of what we have since been taught by modern art, modern physics, contemporary theology, social psychology, and process philosophy. The deeper irony, by far, is that no sooner has the creative thought of this century moved in the direction of the American angle of vision, than we have chosen to abandon our native assumptions. The thrust of our own jeremiad is clear. America is guilty of a failure of nerve and has lost sight of the specific meaning for itself, of the religious maxim, "to thy own self be true." To say it another way, now that America is faced with the need for spiritual rehabilitation without the luxury of physical relocation, it has begun to ape the manners of old world civilizations without having access to the advantages of their long historical lineage. America has begun to backfill. In desultory fashion, we seem to await a paradisiacal *deus ex machina*, as if there were available forces other than our own. In turn, we lose confidence in the myth of the journey as its own meaning, thereby leaving ourselves open to the acceptance of the dehumanizing implications of an eschatology. This approach is not only counter to the deepest commitments of our traditions, but if I read this century right, it is also out of step with the best of contemporary thought. At this point, a comparison of the philosophical underpinnings of the American tradition with some of the contentions of the last century should assist us in our cultural diagnosis.

III

Although distinctively a child of America, I am also a stepchild of Auschwitz and Hiroshima. And my generation came to consciousness under the spell of Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Camus, and Sartre. We inherit as well the claims and versions of Albert Einstein, Werner

Heisenberg, Franz Kafka, Marcel Duchamp, and Louise Nevelson, to mention only a few who symbolize the revolution in the parameters and possibilities of our consciousness.

(Like so many of my peers, I knew virtually nothing of American culture, let alone American Philosophy. Yet significantly, I believe, I found the import of the intellectual revolution of the European thinkers to be obvious if dramatic. Further, their attack on the classical assumptions of western culture interested me historically but did not threaten my own experience, which, albeit unreflective, was American. Of particular importance here was that I felt no loss in accepting the biting continental critique of social and religious hierarchy and of epistemological certitude.)

It is beyond the scope of this paper to detail the major implications of European speculative thought of the last one hundred years, nor could I guarantee the agreement of others on those implications. Nonetheless, in my judgment at least, certain themes emerge not only as important but as directly relevant to an understanding of the reflective American tradition.

The first is that of place, as in having no natural place. More directly, the deepest contemporary ontological problem is that of *Unheimlichkeit* or homelessness. Copernicanism, born in the sixteenth century, finally arrives in the twentieth century. The macro-coziness of Newtonian physics can be sustained only as an earth construct. The human abode becomes a jerry-built neighborhood in the vast reaches of cosmic unintelligibility. Our sky is a diaphanous roof to nowhere. "Seize the time" is now joined by "seize the place," for neither is given to us. Human life is home-made. The literature and art of the century provide their own versions of this revolution in physics. Can one ever forget a first reading of Kafka? To be human is to be put on trial for no cause. The castle of salvation is out of reach, or perhaps even an illusion. The labyrinth of streets in Prague, back and forth across the Ulna, from the courthouse to the Castle, symbolizes the human journey, without an exodus. For Gabriel Marcel, we are *homo viator*, people of the journey. He writes:

Perhaps a stable order can only be established if man is acutely aware of his condition as a traveller, that is to say, if he perpetually reminds himself that he is required to cut himself a dangerous path across the unsteady blocks of a universe which has collapsed and seems to be crumbling in every direction.¹⁵

The most trenchant statement of the experience of deracination and the ensuing confrontation with temporality as the human way is to be found in the work of Karl Jaspers, "The Spiritual Crisis of our Times."

As compared with man in those eras, man to-day has been uprooted, having become aware that he exists in what is but a historically determined and changing situation. It is as if the foundations of being had been shattered. How self-evident to the man of old seemed the unity of life and knowledge has become plain to us now that we realise that the life of our fellows in the past was spent under conditions in which reality was, as it were, veiled. We, on the other hand, have become able to see things as they really are, and that is why the foundations of life quake beneath our feet; for, now that the identity of thought and being (hitherto unchallenged) has ceased to exist for us, we see only, on the one hand, life, and, on the other, our own and our companions' awareness of that life. We do not, as did our forefathers, think merely of the world. We ponder how it is to be comprehended, doubting the validity of every interpretation; and behind every apparent unity of life and the consciousness of life there looms the distinction between the real world and the world as we know it. That is why we live in a movement, a flux, a process, in virtue of which changing knowledge enforces a change in life; and, in turn, changing life enforces a change in the consciousness of the knower. This movement, this flux, this process, sweeps us into the whirlpool of unceasing conquest and creation, of loss and gain, in which we painfully circle, subject in the main to the power of the current, but able now and then to exert ourselves within a restricted sphere of influence. For we do not only live in a situation proper to mankind at large, but we experience this situation as it presents itself in specific historical circumstances, issuing out of a previous situation and progressing towards a subsequent one.¹⁶

Texts similar to the one above abound in the writings of twentieth-century thinkers. In my view, the fallout reads something like this: If the world as known is in some way a function of the knower, then introspection, sociology, and cosmology are of a piece. Further, if self-deception is an irreducible presence in human judgment, the test for meaning is communal and processive. Reality is not ultimately intelligible, for it cannot be understood from a single point of view, in that every point of view is a viewpoint. Existential philosophy, modern physics, and modern art join in common rejection of a world found or inherited. Making, relating, formulating, constituting, journeying become the strategies for survival and the source of intelligibility.

Returning to the parallel mentioned above, this revolution in European thought is anticipated experientially by the American tradition. Philosophically, it is also anticipated by the metaphysics of James and Dewey, although we did not understand that until after the advent of recent continental thought. A further parallel can be drawn, although its width necessarily houses exceptions. I do not think that European life has absorbed the significance of its own thought during the twentieth century. Conversely, I do not think that thought in America, especially in philosophy, has absorbed the insights of American life. I grant that this schizophrenia on both sides of the modern *mare nostrum* is not new. What is new, however, is that American culture now seems ready to abandon its own "form of life." That would be tragic for two reasons.

First, the American "form of life" strikes me as the paradigm for the twenty-first century. Second, the American "form of life" has not been sufficiently articulated in a philosophical way, so that should America falter, its bequest could be re-enacted. Let us look further into the American angle of vision.

IV

To speak straight out, America never did believe in a doctrine of natural place. Nor did it abide inherited hierarchies. As early as the seventeenth century, we expressed a loathing for royalty, Anglican bishops, popery, and the Dutch feudal settlements of that century. And when pressed by authority or inherited doctrine, more often than not, we moved. Known in our literature as trekking or wending, it is described by de Tocqueville in the following way:

Thus the European leaves his cottage for the transatlantic shores, and the American, who is born on that very coast, plunges in his turn into the wilds of central America. This double emigration is incessant! It begins in the middle of Europe, it crosses the Atlantic Ocean, and it advances over the solitudes of the New World. Millions of men are marching at once towards the same horizon; their language, their religion, their manners differ; their object is the same. Fortune has been promised to them somewhere in the West, and to the West they go to find it.¹⁷

Or again, witness this ambiguous text of Santayana. He deplores American transience and yet affirms that such a "form of life" generates remarkable and creative human possibilities.

Consider now the great emptiness of America: not merely the primitive physical emptiness, surviving in some regions, and the continental spacing of the chief natural features, but also the moral emptiness of a settlement where men and even houses are easily moved about, and no one, almost, lives where he was born or believes what he has been taught. Not that the American has jettisoned these impedimenta in anger; they have simply slipped from him as he moves. Great empty spaces bring a sort of freedom to both soul and body. You may pitch your tent where you will; or if ever you decide to build anything, it can be in a style of your own devising. You have room, fresh materials, few models, and no critics. You trust your own experience, not only because you must, but because you find you may do so safely and prosperously; the forces that determine fortune are not yet too complicated for one man to explore. Your detachable condition makes you lavish with money and cheerfully experimental; you lose little if you lose all, since you remain completely yourself. At the same time your absolute initiative gives you practice in coping with novel situations, and in being original; it teaches you shrewd management. Your life and mind will become dry and direct, with few decorative flourishes. In your works everything will be stark and pragmatic; you will not understand why anybody should make those little sacrifices to instinct or custom which we call grace.¹⁸

The shift from the vertical social, political, and religious organization of the European West to the horizontal wanderings of Americans is of great significance. We must not forget that America was founded and given a theme early by the dissenting, covenanting Calvinists. For them the invisible, paradisiacal church of the Catholic tradition was anathema. They were of the visible church, in time and on the land. In American life, the covenant was sacred and pluralistic. Calvinist theology was, after all, known as Federalist theology. Secularization of the covenant changed the rhetoric but not the fundamental assumption. As early as the banishment of Anne Hutchinson, the die was cast in favor of a covenant of works, that is, what and how we do, here, is who we are. The line is straight from Winthrop to Edwards, Adams, Jefferson, Emerson, Royce, and Dewey. For them, the religious question is a temporal question, one of geopolitics and of the human transaction with the environment.¹⁹ In American history, philosophers and theologians of the eternal are second-rate thinkers. Rather, covenanting takes place in the bowels of time, replete with the exigencies, possibilities, and ever lurking disasters that lace our journey. It is noteworthy as a generalization that our social and political thinkers and our classical philosophers have stressed the needs and possibilities of experience, whereas our writers and poets have focused on the disasters. In that vein, a contrast of the philosophy of William James with Melville's trenchant critique of the American philosophy of experience, in *The Confidence Man*, proves illuminating.

Contrary to common received wisdom, American thought is not Pollyannaish. If your philosophy of history is that history has no ultimate meaning and that time is meaningful by its own means, then, *sub specie aeternitatis*, the human situation is necessarily tragic. Yet, it is precisely and only for that reason that time becomes sacred. Our activities take on meaning not because they are endowed by the eternal but because they are not endowed by the eternal.²⁰ It is for this reason that the motif of the journey, so central to American life, turns up our most important metaphor, frontier, along with a host of allied and culturally significant terms: *experiment*, *chance*, *edge*, and *novelty*.

V

The trek "west" has been at the center of modern culture at least since the explorations of the late Renaissance. Inadvertently, America turned out to be the great discovery of that journey west. In our time, however, it has turned out to be the end. The Thoreau who wrote that when he walks, he walks west so as to be free, for to walk east is to be trapped, is now out of date. The Whitman who offered us a song of the open road must now be put against the poem of Louis Simpson, "At the End of the Open Road."²¹

California is the end of the trek and the end of the American physical journey. California is America turned back on itself, introverted and bewildered, for open space, horizontal and accessible, no longer stretches before us. Visually, California announces China and reflectively, it forces us back onto our own intellectual traditions, beginning with John Winthrop, and in turn, back further to the wisdom of antiquity. In a word, California announces a new world, a global world, a world in which the trek has doubled back on itself. And that shattering event of our own time makes of America an old world.

From the perspective of a philosophy of culture, the burning question has to do with our bequest to the new world of global culture. What are we to offer a new world? Are we to repeat, inversely, our earlier burden and pose now as a parent? Is not there little difference in the term *colony* from the more recent one, *undeveloped nation*? Does not the phrase *third world* connote an increased maturity in global consciousness, dispensing as it does with the simplistic distinction between old and new as well as with the invidious comparisons attendant on that distinction? Some of us worry that despite changes in language, we have appropriated for our own use a masked version of the older form of arrogant mercantilism, be it economic or ideological. Do we, in fact, have anything to offer a new world?

One way to respond to these difficult questions is to monitor the role of America in matters of economic and political responsibility, asserting the need over and over for integrity, understanding, and compassion, and for a genuine sense of global rather than simply national consciousness. Without gainsaying these irreducibly necessary political and diplomatic approaches to world culture, we point to still another response, this a philosophical bequest from the American angle of vision.

The question confronting us is not so much the prospect of philosophy in the new world, nor is it the prospect of America in the new world. Rather we should focus on those philosophical dimensions of American culture that deserve to become operative factors in the formulation of a new world culture. Worthy of detailed analysis, these warranted assumptions of our cultural history are presented here on behalf of further scrutiny so as to assess their future viability. Taking them *seriatim*, I would single out the following commitments:

1. *Pluralism* as a positive and non-lamentable characteristic of the human condition. Pluralism is not a fall from grace or a style bidding time for a future unity. Ethnic, religious, racial, social, and aesthetic pluralism is a fundamental and fecund characteristic of the human condition. Patterns of unity, however intellectually desirable, are inevitably imposed, usually in a procrustean manner. Pluralism lacks neatness, but unity lacks compassion, and, being stingy, often misses the potentialities of loose ends.

2. *Provincialism* has a positive side. Surely we know in our time that to think only in terms of ourselves, our race, our nation, is to be cut off from insight and nutrition. Yet if we do not feel and think deeply about our intimate experiences, what chance do we have of global experience? As twentieth-century America has learned, to its chagrin, bigger is not better. Put simply, neighborhoods are sacred and so too are all the provincial experiences of all the people in global culture.
3. *Interrelatedness* is unavoidable. For every step forward, there is one sideways, if not backward. Life is lived not in lineal jumps, but rather in a complex of relations. Modern America, devoted as it is to science and technology, is slowly learning that even majestic breakthroughs often hide time bombs, set to go off generations hence. The miracle drug of one decade is the uterine cancer of a subsequent decade. One generation's pesticidal success is another's silent spring. As the Greeks knew long ago, mythologically, and Americans now discover scientifically, time extracts a price. The wisdom yielded is that we should think not simply in terms of objects and goals, so much as in terms of implications and relations.
4. *Transience* as the "form of life" can be celebrated. As an anticipation of contemporary cosmology, the local journey mirrors the entire human odyssey, which is intense but transient. As a bequest, America offers a dramatically egalitarian evaluation of culture, one in which the quality of experience is not hierarchized by *a priori* judgments or the prepossessions of the past. For us, novelty is crucial and even failure and mishap are to be integrated into the pedagogy of history. At our best, we set our sights on amelioration rather than salvation.
5. *Anti-eschatology* can be constructive. The most important operative contention of American cultural history has to do with the ultimate meaning of history, or rather, with the absence of such finality. American culture is chary of ideology, particularly that of an eschatological cast. Calvinist in origin and, therefore, indebted more to the Hebrew than to the Christian scriptures, America has more interest in saving experiences than in salvation outside of time. We are a people deeply skeptical of final solutions and philosophies of history that provide principles of total accountability. Although we tarry and dally with salvation cults of every kind, none seems able ever to get the upper hand. Indeed, in keeping with our pluralism, we have set one nostrum against another, in effect, trimming the claim of each by the indulgence of many. We believe in healing and amelioration, while persistently doubting the pres-

ence of any ultimate resolution. It may very well be that we have stumbled on the only viable philosophy of history for a pluralistic world culture.

To come full circle, the land is one but the people are many. What is the new world to make of itself? A self-conscious planet in an infinite abyss, we alternate between self-preening centrality and cosmic triviality. Perhaps our best strategy, prospect, if you will, is to trim our sails and think in earth terms, albeit with cosmic horizons. The American, Thoreau, prophesied our collective future.

All things invite this earth's inhabitants
To rear their lives to an unheard of height
And meet the expectation of the land.²²

In so meeting the expectation of the land, however, we should not forget the American experience and expect too much. Even the world-renowned poet, T. S. Eliot, while searching for English origins, reflects rather his childhood in a border-state, Missouri—smack in the middle of America. The new world should listen carefully to these American lines of Eliot.

There is only the fight to recover
what has been lost
And found and lost again and again;
and now, under conditions
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps
neither gain nor loss.
For us there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.²³

NOTES

1. The most dramatic recent defense of the Cycle as a principle of historical explanation is to be found in N. O. Brown, *Closing Time* (New York: Random House, 1973).

2. For support of this judgment see Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 43. "However, even if I am wrong (as, admittedly, many anthropologists would hold) in claiming that the *consensus gentium* approach can produce neither substantial universals nor specific connections between cultural and non-cultural phenomena to explain them, the question still remains whether such universals should be taken as the central elements in the definition of man, whether a lowest-common-denominator view of humanity is what we want anyway. This is, of course, now a philosophical question, not as such a scientific one; but the notion that the essence of what it means to be human is most clearly revealed in those features of human culture that are universal rather than in those that are distinctive to this people or that is a prejudice we are not necessarily obliged to share. Is it in grasping such general facts—that man has everywhere some sort of 'religion'—or in grasping the richness of this religious

phenomenon or that—Balinese trance or Indian ritualism, Aztec human sacrifice or Zuni rain-dancing—that we grasp him? Is the fact that ‘marriage’ is universal (if it is) as penetrating a comment on what we are as the facts concerning Himalayan polyandry, or those fantastic Australian marriage rules, or the elaborate bride-price systems of Bantu Africa? The comment that Cromwell was the most typical Englishman of his time precisely in that he was the oddest may be relevant in this connection, too: it may be in the cultural particularities of people—in their oddities—that some of the most instructive revelations of what it is to be generically human are to be found; and the main contribution of the science of anthropology to the construction—or reconstruction—of a concept of man may then lie in showing us how to find them.”

3. The emergence of narcissism in America has already been catalogued by Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism—American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1978). Lasch writes, “Liberalism, the political theory of the ascendant bourgeoisie, long ago lost the capacity to explain events in the world of the welfare state and the multinational corporation; nothing has taken its place. Politically bankrupt, liberalism is intellectually bankrupt as well. The sciences it has fostered, once confident of their ability to dispel the darkness of the ages, no longer provide satisfactory explanations of the phenomena they profess to elucidate. Neoclassical economic theory cannot explain the coexistence of unemployment and inflation; sociology retreats from the attempt to outline a general theory of modern society; academic psychology retreats from the challenge of Freud into the measurement of trivia. The natural sciences, having made exaggerated claims for themselves, now hasten to announce that science offers no miracle cures for social problems.

“In the humanities, demoralization has reached the point of a general admission that humanistic study has nothing to contribute to an understanding of the modern world. Philosophers no longer explain the nature of things or pretend to tell us how to live. Students of literature treat the text not as a representation of the real world but as a reflection of the artist’s inner state or mind. Historians admit to a ‘sense of the irrelevance of history,’ in David Donald’s words, ‘and of the bleakness of the new era we are entering’” (pp. XIII-XIV).

4. On behalf of an extensive literature, see David W. Marcell, *Progress and Pragmatism—James, Dewey, Beard and the American Idea of Progress* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1974).

5. Jacob Loewenberg, ed., “The Practical Significance of Pessimism,” *Fugitive Essays of Josiah Royce* (Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, Inc., 1968), p. 152. (1920)

6. Perry Miller, *Errand Into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), p. 7.

7. Sacvan Bercovitch holds that this second form of the jeremiad possesses the pervasive theme of affirmation and exultation. See *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), p. 6.

8. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” *Works* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1903), vol. I, p. 3.

9. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” *Works*, vol. I, p. 81.

10. Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds* (New York: Anchor Books, 1956), pp. ix-x.

11. Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas* (New York: Library of Liberal Arts, 1949), p. 9.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

13. See Edmund Wilson, ed., *The Shock of Recognition* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1955), p. 259.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 262.

15. Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1951), p. 153.

16. Karl Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age* (New York: Anchor Books, 1957), pp. 2-3. (1931)

17. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), vol. I, p. 303. (1835)

18. George Santayana, *Character and Opinion in the United States* (New York: Anchor Books, 1956), pp. 106-107. (1920)

19. As symbolic sustenance of this judgment, witness the attitude of John Cotton before and after his journey to New England:

a) In his farewell sermon to John Winthrop's company, then leaving for the new world, John Cotton took as his text 2 Samuel 7:10: "Moreover I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and I will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their owne, and move no more." See John Cotton, "God's Promise to His Plantation" (London, 1630), *Old South Leaflets*, No. 3.

b) Once in the New World, Cotton could write in "A Reply" to Roger Williams that "The Jurisdiction (whence a man is banished) is but small, and the Countrey round about it, large and fruitful: where a man may make his choice of variety of more pleasant, and profitable seats, than he leaveth behinde him. In which respect, Banishment in this countrye, is not counted so much a confinement, as an enlargement." Cited in Sidney Mead, "The American People: Their Space, Time and Religion," *The Lively Experiment* (New York, 1964), p. 13.

20. Even Josiah Royce came to this position. In 1885, he wrote that "we go to seek the Eternal, not in experience, but in the thought that thinks experience." *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1885), p. 289. By 1913, Royce had fully absorbed the thrust of America in his own life and thought to such an extent that he wrote: "In brief, then, the real world is the Community of Interpretation which is constituted by the two antithetic ideas, and their mediator or interpreter, whatever or whoever that interpreter may be. If the interpretation is a reality, and if it truly interprets the whole of reality, then the community reaches its goal, and the real world includes its own interpreter. Unless both the interpreter and the community are real, there is no real world." *The Problem of Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 339.

21. See Louis Simpson, "In California," *At the End of the Open Road* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1963), p. 11:

Lie back, Walt Whitman.
There, on the fabulous raft with the King and the Duke!
For the white row of the Marina
Faces the Rock. Turn round the wagons here.

22. Carl Bode, ed., *The Collected Poems of Henry David Thoreau* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1964), p. 135.

23. T. S. Eliot, "East Coker," *Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1949), p. 31.