INNOCENCE TO EXPERIENCE (AND BACK AGAIN?):

Uncertain Passages through the Intercontinental Looking-Glass

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Our work begins with a kind of seeing. Wherever on the globe we may call home, practitioners of American Studies seek first and fundamentally to observe. As we bear witness to the life, history, and culture of the United States in all its complexities and contradictions, we seek much more than a surface knowledge. We aspire to penetrate through a resistant surface to another side of reality. Yet when we set forth in hopes of looking at and into the world around us, we are also likely to find our own image mirrored back toward us. Our best efforts at understanding do, I think, tend to double back upon us. The knowledge we seek regarding the Other comes back to us freighted with a new and different understanding of ourselves. From this both penetrating and reflected seeing—and also from the phantasmagoric legacy of Lewis Carroll—comes the metaphor for this essay's title: the intercontinental looking-glass.

As even a skim of the contents of this volume will confirm, however, one might as aptly choose another framing trope of vision: not a mirror, but a kaleidoscope. The chapters herein are transatlantic, transpacific, transnational, and transcendental. They simultaneously translate, transfix, and transform. They represent the best work of a conference that summoned the restless ghosts of Melville, Twain, Nella Larsen, Auden, Conrad and Allende. Containing multitudes in Whitmanesque fashion, the proceedings subsumed Rene Descartes, Arthur Miller, Eleanor Roosevelt, and even Whitman himself. As those who were there

can well attest, the Sixth Congress of the International American Studies Association offered up some rare seeing indeed.

Amid all this seeing, my own first glance was, and is, retrospective. I think back to my first, somewhat inglorious visit to the European continent, which took place in October 1970, when I was all of nine-and-a-half years old. The trip was orchestrated by my late father, a man blessed with a deep sense of adventure—and cursed with a love of Peugeot automobiles and extremely fragrant French cheese. I say that he was cursed, not because of any deficiencies either in the cars or in his beloved fromage, but rather because of the unforgettable woes that the combination of the two inflicted upon his family during that month. His plan was to fly, with my mother, my 16-year-old sister and me, to Paris to purchase a spanking new Peugeot 504, load it with as much cultured French dairy product as he could get his hands on, and embark on an ambitious automotive tour of northwestern Europe, which included a tour of the Loire Valley, a Hannibalesque charge through the Swiss Alps, a rendezvous with family friends in Vienna, and, at last, a steak dinner at Port Van Cleve in Amsterdam. Thereafter, the car would be shipped stateside as the family Matteson flew triumphantly home. Sadly, for reasons known but to God, whose sense of humor is indeed peculiar, my father chose to load his prized comestibles into the back seat, not into the trunk of the car. Perhaps he feared that the cheese would be ruined in the trunk; he apparently had no comparable qualms about what miseries he might be visiting upon his next of kin. My sister, who was never anybody's fool, found out about this arrangement before my mother and I got wind of it, and prudently claimed the front seat for the duration of the trip. That left my mother and me directly in the line of fire, which turned out to be withering.

The Peugeot was the first new car I remember riding in. However, the delicious new-car smell that enraptures so many was never to be ours. From the first hours, the dominant aroma was of warm, steadily ripening Camembert and Brie. It occurs to me that most of you have never had the experience of riding in the back seat of a Peugeot along winding roads toward the summits of the Swiss Alps in the company of gargantuan

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bags of warm, soft French cheese. Permit me to assure you that the experience is never to be forgotten and is zealously to be avoided. Memories from childhood tend to be patchy. However, as the car wound through the Alps, I vividly recall thinking of the scene from *The Sound of Music* in which the Mother Superior counsels Julie Andrews to 'climb every mountain'. I understood why poor Julie looked a trifle sick as she took in the advice. And she didn't have any cheese to contend with.

By the time we arrived in Vienna, both my mother and I were functionally disabled—hapless victims of a host of Gallic creameries. My father and sister waltzed off to sample the radiant night-life of the Austrian capital, while my mother and I attempted to go through Camembert detox. We lay motionless in the dark, praying quietly for death. Whether we thereafter built up an immunity or whether my father finally relented and demoted the cheese to the trunk, I do not recall. But I don't think the air inside the car lost its dusky overtones for months afterwards, and it was decades before I reconciled with soft cheese.

Such was one of the two dominant memories I have of that journey. The other, I think, bears more directly on the subject of American Studies. It has to do with the deep, abiding concern of both my parents that, in the course of our travels, we might ever be perceived by the local population as being typically American. It was evidently their ambition to come as close as possible to being accepted as native-born citizens of whatever country they were passing through—citizens who, evidently, had never managed to absorb their country's own language but who had an extraordinary command of English. They wanted desperately to pass, and I recall their omnipresent horror as they looked at me, the boorish little stranger to culture who threatened every moment to give the game away. They suffered agonies as they realized that the beauties of the Louvre and Chenonceau mattered less to me than how the Baltimore Orioles were doing back home in the World Series. In Paris, my father patiently coached me on how to ask the concierge for the key to our room, as well as a few other phrases. I must have been doing poorly at these impromptu lessons because, as we drew nearer to the German-speaking world, Father became less ambitious.

He taught me to say 'I don't speak German', and left it at that. The funny thing is that he had me say 'Ich spreche nicht Deutsch' instead of 'Ich spreche kein Deutsch'. So even what he taught me was a dead giveaway.

I would point out that my parents' anxiety was in no way prompted by concerns about being identified with the political positions of the United States. They were fiercely patriotic people who subscribed with their whole hearts to the idea that America had been given a divine mission on earth. Had you asked them whether the USA was the greatest nation in the world, they would have immediately said yes, and then looked puzzled to think that you even had to ask. Like most nine-year-olds, I hadn't started thinking very critically about my parents' worldview. And yet I dimly recall thinking that something didn't quite add up. If we really did come from the greatest of all worldly nations, then why act differently abroad from how we would act on vacation in an American city? I could see, of course, that questions of courtesy were at issue, and courtesy and respect for one's hosts mattered unusually in my family (indeed, I have wondered ruefully whether, even in this, we were already somehow not quite 'American'). Yet, as I look back on it, it appears to me that my parents had absorbed two contradictory feelings about national identity that they had chosen not to reconcile. It seems to me that they were entirely confident in America's superiority until they fell directly under the scrutiny of Europe, at which moment their self-assurance promptly teetered. On American soil, American self-regard reigned supreme. Abroad, it promptly felt flimsy and suspect.

Now, I haven't taken a survey of my countrymen, so I don't know how prevalent feelings like those of my parents are among Americans who venture abroad. But I suspect they are fairly common. For me, they call to mind the musings of W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* on the subject of double-consciousness, which I have always greatly respected. However, I think Du Bois may have erred in presuming them to be applicable solely to African Americans. Du Bois famously wrote:

> After the Egyptian and the Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil,

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and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois, 1986: 364–65)

Du Bois described a day-in, day-out suffering of inwardly felt duality. It was a feeling exacerbated by regular experiences of cruel, highly systematized and potentially violent racial prejudice. It was a state of being from which one never got to take a holiday. In daring to compare Du Boisian double-consciousness in all of its profound complexity with the transient existential malaise that a white middle-class American may experience while on vacation, one may court the accusation of not having taken Du Bois's reflections seriously enough. I wish to maintain that I take Du Bois very seriously indeed. Yet it has always seemed to me that the doubly conscious state that Du Bois ascribed to African Americans differed from other experiences of dual awareness not chiefly in terms of quality, but mostly as a matter of degree, though the degree is assuredly vast. I would argue that a species of double-consciousness is likely to exist whenever a person finds himself or herself in a proximate relation to another person, or to a social surrounding, in which a hierarchy is presumed to exist. Double-consciousness can emerge at the moment that one feels the scrutiny of an imagined superior.

The tricky thing about this consciousness is that it may arise unbidden even when neither party to the relation places an ounce of faith in the reality of the supposed distinction. I am more than willing to believe that not a person reading these words believes, at least publicly, in the innate superiority of one group of persons to another. And yet I would also suppose that quite a few of us have felt the unique feelings of dread and inadequacy that can be inspired by a Parisian waiter. The gaze of an Other to whom one either rationally or irrationally ascribes superiority may trigger self-criticism and, as in my parents, a powerful desire to make oneself pleasing to the observer. To the contrary,

however, it may also prompt one to strut all the more arrogantly upon the stage, to carry one's perceived disadvantages more than a little defiantly, perhaps even as a point of pride. When an African American experiences double-consciousness in relation to white America, he experiences it from a standpoint of racial difference. By contrast, when a white American feels inner duality in relation to white Europeans, he feels it in terms of uncanny similarity, like observing oneself in a slightly distorted looking glass. We look, by and large, the same. On most levels, there would seem to be more to unite than divide us. Whence, then, the difference? From what derives the anxiety, the distance that can be so hard effectively to span? The questions are admittedly large, and I approach them uncomfortably aware of the narrowness of my own experience. I can tell you only how these things appear to an American English professor who has grown accustomed to seeing most of life through another distorting window: the lens of the nineteenth century. But what I propose to do is to look at a few American literary experiences of Europe from generations past and offer some suggestions about what they can teach us about nationalized selves and others and the transatlantic looking-glass.

On Saint Patrick's Day 1833, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who had begun a long European tour the previous December, ate dinner at a trattoria in Naples. Emerson was more aware than most of his countrymen of the irksome intrusiveness that American tourists inflicted upon their European hosts. In his journal he had written, 'We steer our ships into your very ports & thrust our inquisitive American eyes into your towns & towers & keeping-rooms. Here we come and mean to be welcome' (Emerson, 1964: 109). But on this evening the tables were turned in a most unwelcome fashion. The serenity of Emerson's meal was disturbed by the sight of a beggar, who stood outside the restaurant's window, 'watching', as Emerson wrote, 'every mouthful' (Emerson, 1964: 145). For any tourist, who travels by definition to look and to see, it can be a disconcerting reversal to be looked *at*, and it seems that more than once Emerson was unsettled by a foreign stare. The journal that he compiled in Italy evinces uneasy self-consciousness and an uncomfortable awareness of being judged. He had come

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to Europe 'to learn what man can, [to know] what is the uttermost that social man has yet done' (Emerson, 1964: 74). And yet he felt his quest to know the people who most interested him was making him an annoyance. He wrote, 'The people at their work, the people whose avocation I interrupt by my letters of introduction, accuse me by their looks for leaving my business to hinder theirs' (Emerson, 1964: 79). In Venice, he felt maladroit and childish: 'I have no skill to live with men […] It seems to me, no boy makes as many blunders or says such awkward, contrary, disagreeable speeches as I do' (Emerson, 1964: 74). He found himself tempted 'to flee out of society and live in the woods' (Emerson, 1964: 74). Exposure to the more mature culture of Europe had made Waldo feel boyish; in the heart of civilization, he yearned suddenly for the primeval. Amid the wonders he had dreamed of, he wrote, 'I am perplexed by my inveterate littleness' (Emerson, 1964: 75). Boyishness, littleness, a wish to flee society: these all feel like the reaction of one who knows his own culture is junior and fears it to be primitive. Embarrassed as he was of his own inadequacy in this new old place, Emerson was even more abashed by the demeanor of his fellow tourists, who, he concluded, were absorbing all the decadence and none of the nobility of the foreign scene. 'Alas', he lamented, 'the young men that come here & walk in Rome without one Roman thought! They unlearn their English & their morals, & violate the sad solitude of the mother of nations' (Emerson, 1964: 157). And yet, when he tried to assert an American superiority over what he witnessed, Emerson found himself falling back on a pride in American savagery. On seeing a papal ceremony at the Sistine Chapel, he observed, 'All this pomp […] is imposing to those who know the customs of courts […] But to the eye of an Indian I am afraid it would be ridiculous' (Emerson, 1964: 153).

Emerson's journal gives us a sense of two cultures gazing at each other from across a divide, in ways we can recognize as familiar, if somewhat stereotypic. The American feels himself being judged for his lack of breeding and somehow accused for what appear to be his easy circumstances. He in turn looks out upon an old world that he finds overly ceremonious, formerly noble but now corrosive to English-speaking morality. It seemed hardly

a basis for open and enlightened understanding. Yet thankfully, Emerson was able to extract a benefit from the cultural impasse by using it as a tool for improved self-knowledge. His excursion had barely begun when he wrote the following reflections:

> Wherever we go, whatever we do, self is the sole subject we study & learn [...] The chemist experiments upon his new salt by trying its affinity to all the various substances he can command arbitrarily selected & thereby discloses the most wonderful properties in his subject & I bring myself to sea, to Malta, to Italy, to find new affinities between me & my fellow-men, to observe narrowly the affections, weaknesses, surprises, hopes, doubts, which new sides of the panorama shall call forth in me. (Emerson, 1964: 67–68)

Emerson stressed that he wrote not from a low, sneaking sense of self, but was speaking rather of 'the Universal Man to whose colossal dimensions each particular bubble can by its birthright expand' (Emerson, 1964: 68). Human beings, then, know themselves by their reactions and interactions, and Emerson proposed to treat his travels as a voyage of inner discovery, borne forward by the faith that the European other would lead him to a new and grander definition, not only as a personal self but as a national self. He would test his truths and those of his country by holding them against the assumptions of other people and places, no matter how violent the 'contrasts of condition & character' (Emerson, 1964: 78). To extend Emerson's metaphor, if all went right, the chemical reactions between American and European would be exothermic, yielding greater energy and warmth and leading toward a higher synthesis of spirits, in combinations never yet foreseen.

Emerson was not the only American traveler of note in the nineteenth century to observe the effects of the cross-cultural gaze, the appraising glance or stare that carried with it a consciousness of difference and a re-envisioning of self. Emerson's fellow New Englander Nathaniel Parker Willis distinguished himself as a poet, an editor, and the most highly paid magazine writer of his time. Nevertheless, a strange sensation overtook him on the streets of Paris. He observed:

> It is a queer feeling to find oneself a *foreigner*. On cannot realize, long at a time, how his face or his manners should have become peculiar;

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and, after looking at a print for five minutes in a shop window, or dipping into an English book, or in any manner throwing off the mental habit of the instant, the curious gaze of the passer-by, or the accent of a strange language, strikes one very singularly. (Willis, 1852: 8)

Paris, Willis observed, was full of foreigners of all descriptions. Still, he stood convinced that the separateness that was felt by an American was unique in its magnitude. However much Europeans might differ from one another, Willis averred:

[…] they differ still more from the American. Our countrymen, as a class, are distinguishable wherever they are met. […] [T]here is something in an American face, of which I was never aware till I met them in Europe, that is altogether peculiar. (Willis, 1852: 8)

Having sensed the difference, Willis tried to interpret it as favorable and complimentary: 'As far as I can analyze it, it is the independent, self-possessed bearing of a man unused to look up to any one as his superior in rank, united to the inquisitive, sensitive, communicative expression which is the index to our national character' (Willis, 1852:8). Willis concluded his musings on the subject by asserting, 'Nothing puzzles a European more than to know how to rate the pretensions of an American' (Willis, 1852: 8).

Willis was making a kind of double discovery—his was the experience not only of a new country but of an adapting self, revising itself in response to the gaze of the native. His consciousness of the singularity of the American face and the inscrutability of American pretensions would never have arisen had it not been for this gaze, which first unsettled and then somehow confirmed his feelings of identity. Although he wrote of the pretensions of an American, what he had in fact found felt to him like a core of authenticity. Without particularly trying, the Americans had achieved a kind of uniqueness. Even if that uniqueness inhered principally in a frank artlessness and a seeming lack of discrimination, it offered a basis for a national character, and one that Willis was happy to own.

Margaret Fuller was less interested in defining a national character than she was in preserving and perfecting her own. If she had to belong to any group at all, she once wrote, she preferred that it be a constellation rather than a human phalanx.

The national character of Americans that Fuller observed abroad was not greatly flattering. As the Roman Revolution of 1849 neared its high-water mark, Fuller encountered a countryman who professed no confidence in the newly founded Roman Republic because he had 'no confidence in the People'. Why? Fuller asked. 'Because they are not like *our* People'. Fuller fumed at the man's chauvinism: 'Ah! Jonathan—excuse me, but I must say the Italian has a decided advantage over you in the power of quickly feeling generous sympathy, as well as some other things which I have not now time to particularize' (Ossoli, 1895: 358). If Fuller's siding with the European party seems almost reflexive, it was hardly anything new for her. From the time Fuller was a child, she imagined herself as a displaced European. She played frequently at being an Old-World monarch and voiced her opinion that she had been born in the wrong country. If, of the people I am to mention today, she was the one on whom actual travel to Europe had the least purely intellectual influence, that was so because she had so thoroughly Europeanized herself before she arrived. By her mid-twenties, Fuller had absorbed the canonical literature of Germany, Spain, France, and Italy. She had seen the great works of art, at least in printed form. She had so deeply immersed her mind in the images and verbal cultures of the western half of the continent that, when she at last arrived there in 1846 at the age of thirty-five, much of what she saw felt already like a twice-told tale. When she was twenty-five, an opportunity to travel had danced briefly before her eyes but then vanished when her father suddenly died, and she was forced to stay at home to help her family. For another eleven years, her Europeanness remained secondhand and telescopic. At twenty-five, she felt, such a trip would have given her genius wings. At thirty-six, she lamented, 'My mind and character are too much formed. I shall not modify them much but only add to my stores of knowledge' (Fuller, 1846: 193).

Her mind was already formed. Her heart, however, was still in metamorphosis. While staying in Paris, she met George Sand. The interview between the French libertine and the virgin Massachusetts bluestocking was electric. Despite her many love affairs, Sand struck Fuller as 'never coarse, never gross',

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and seemed to possess, incredibly a kind of 'purity in her soul' (Fuller, 1875: 197). Fuller used the noun 'goodness' to describe Sand's expression, and she italicized the word. She then went further, calling Sand 'Cybele, the great goddess, the great mother'—a pagan deity of midnight rituals and howling, moonlit orgies—and a lover 'of night and storm, and free raptures' (Fuller, 1875:197). The whisperings of the sensual grew louder when she became friends with Poland's national poet, Adam Mickiewicz, who exhorted her to 'respond to the legitimate needs of [her] organism' and to 'give all for love, but this love must not be that of the shepherds of Florian nor that of schoolboys' (Mickiewicz, 1847: 352). Under such influences, Fuller opened her spirit to the pleasures of Rome, bedded an impoverished marchese, and conceived a child without taking the trouble to marry. When she discovered she was pregnant, Fuller was at first repelled by her own rashness; she eventually accepted that her European awakening had merely teased out a dormant aspect of her existing personality. The looking-glass had shown her something that she at first found alien, but then accepted as her own image. She wrote: 'I could not analyze at all what passed in my mind. I neither rejoice nor grieve. For bad or for good I acted out my character' (Fuller, 1875: 277). Fuller's experiences may be seen, perhaps, as an extreme example of a more typical American reaction: having seldom acknowledged the power of sexuality or, indeed, of womanhood in their own culture, Americans of the nineteenth century were quite readily taken aback at the European regard for the feminine, whether that femininity was that of Cybele or the Blessed Virgin. It was this reaction that, more than a half-century later, received the incisive scrutiny of Henry Adams.

When Adams first set foot on foreign soil, he was a young man of twenty. And yet, as he wanders the gardens of Eaton Hall, he becomes, in his own description, a boy, awestruck at the remarkable discovery that, as he later wrote, 'Aristocracy was real' (Adams, 1983: 786). As Adams confronts the sheer size and 'absolutely self-confident' airs of London, self-consciousness subdues him. He recalls, 'the boys in the streets made such free comments on the American clothes and figures, that the trav-

ellers hurried to put on tall hats and long overcoats to escape criticism' (Adams, 1983: 787). As he and his traveling companions purchase new wardrobes to armor themselves against critique, Adams is aware, as he is so often aware, that his education is falling backward. As his travels lengthen to include Berlin, Dresden, and Rome, Adams finds his American perceptions repeatedly challenged. 'Rome', he writes, 'could not be fitted into an orderly, middle-class, Bostonian, systematic scheme of evolution' (Adams, 1983: 803). And yet he feels an almost inarticulate sense that he is gazing upon America's destiny, and that it is gazing back at him. Cryptically he notes, 'Rome was actual; it was England; it was going to be America'. (Adams, 1983: 803) It is all too much to decode, and Adams dreads the prospect of returning to America, after much time and money lost, and being able to tell his father nothing more than, 'Sir, I am a tourist!' (Adams, 1983: 800).

Yet one senses that Adams was a very special case, one of the most multifariously conscious beings his nation has produced. Too European in his attachment to hereditary entitlement to be fully American, too fascinated with brash mechanical force to renounce America's seductions, Adams achieved an ironic distance in his commentary on his native country that seems to have afforded him a perfect focus, and it was a peerlessly intimate familiarity with European traditions that made his lens so polished. One is not likely to forget the sensation of reading for the first time the *tour de force* that is Adams's chapter on the Dynamo and the Virgin and his frank admission that, 'as he grew accustomed to the great gallery of machines [that surrounded him at an international Exposition], he began to feel the forty-foot dynamos as a moral force, much as the early Christians felt the Cross' (Adams, 1983: 1067). It is a moment of sheer audacity: a man, arguably the most cultured and civilized that his country has to offer, confessing his vulgar worship of the crank and the gear, knowing full well the crassness of the sentiment, but announcing it because it is true. Adams sees in the culture of mechanism an abysmal fracture in the very structure of history, yet one suspects that the structure itself would have been invisible to him had he not learned to look upon

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the surge of events with an eye essentially European. Adams confesses that his New England boyhood had taught him to regard the cultural forces of antiquity as nothing more than curiosities; the most accomplished chemist in Boston had probably never heard of Venus except as a figure of scandal, or of the Virgin as anything but a symbol of idolatry. Yet only through the refractive lenses of Mary and Aphrodite can Adams observe the cult of the dynamo was something both to be admired and to be feared. Europe, in very large part, taught Adams to observe—and, indeed, made him fear that he was only an observer, squinting at life through both sides of the transatlantic looking-glass and rendered all but helpless by what he saw.

Mark Twain took up the subject of the transatlantic gaze with a good deal less melancholy and self-accusation—and a heavy helping of mock superiority. His recollections in *The Innocents Abroad* demand little, if anything, in the way of comment:

> Many and many a simple community in the Eastern hemisphere will remember for years the incursion of the strange horde in the year of our Lord 1867, that called themselves Americans, and seemed to imagine in some unaccountable way that they had a right to be proud of it. […] They looked curiously at the costumes we had brought from the wilds of America. They observed that we talked loudly at table sometimes. They noticed that we looked out for expenses, and got what we conveniently could out of a franc, and wondered where we came from. In Paris they just simply opened their eyes and stared when we spoke to them in French! We never did succeed in making those idiots understand their own language […].
>
> The people stared at us everywhere, and we stared at them. We generally made then feel rather small, too, before we got done with them, because we bore down on them with America's greatness until we crushed them. (Twain, 1984: 516)

As if to refute much of what I have said on the subject, Twain's tourists are defiantly *singly* conscious. The 'we' in Twain's passage evinces a rhinoceros-like boorishness that is very nearly the opposite of Du Bois's divided self and of Adams's hypersensitive self-examination. Twain's Americans blunder forward with a confidence born of naïveté and insolence. True, they are faintly conscious of the astonished gazes of their hosts, but they think nothing of them. The perspectives of the cultural other—even his opinions of how his own language should

be pronounced—evaporate in the face of the sheer blind force of the tourist. Gone is the Emersonian sense of smallness. Triumphant is the notion that, standing next to even the most formidable object, the American must seem and consider himself large. Yet the insouciance of Twain's 'innocents' was only a caricature of an especially unfeeling breed of American visitor, representing neither the best nor the brightest of the upstart nation. More reflective emissaries from the States continued the process of measuring one's American self against European models, and thereby acquiring a revised understanding of one's own individual and national character. That process was to become central to the work of Louisa May Alcott.

Like many Americans who traveled to Europe in the nineteenth century, Louisa May Alcott was, more than anything else, just glad to be there. She first came to England and the Continent in 1865, three years before the publication of *Little Women* made her rich and made traveling affordable. She thus made her first excursion as the paid companion of a peevish New England semi-invalid. But, for all of that, she remained cheerful, delighting in 'farmhouses […] with low, thatched roofs […] and buxom women or rosy children at the doors'. (Alcott, 1987: 111). Still, she felt her strangeness and the strangeness of what surrounded her. In her newly discovered Europe, she observed, 'Every thing was so unyankee'. (Alcott, 1987: 111). Even the livestock had somehow absorbed a different national character:

> Nothing was abrupt, nobody in a hurry, and nowhere did you see the desperately go ahead style of life that we have. The very cows in America look fast, and the hens seem to cackle fiercely over their rights like strong minded old ladies, but here the plump cattle stood up to their knees in clover, with a reposeful air that is very soothing, and the fowls cluck contentedly. (Alcott, 1987: 111)

There was an unreality to this world. In London, Alcott 'felt as if I'd got into a novel' (Alcott, 1989: 141). One cannot quite tell whether it was the surroundings or Alcott herself that felt like the greater fiction.

As Alcott's travels progressed, her sense of illusoriness faded, and she looked at the people of other nationalities whom she encountered as points of reference by which to reaffirm her own

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Americanness. A Russian baron in her hotel in Switzerland seemed turbulent and barbaric. An overfed Frenchman seemed always to be striking Napoleonic poses. An English colonel, bent on pumping his half-dozen children full of information on 'the Spanish Inquisition, the population of Switzerland, the politics of Russia, and other lively topics, equally suited to infant minds', squared perfectly with her preconceptions of a British pedagogue, as formed by her reading of *Dombey and Son* (Matteson, 2007: 315). There is, in her observations of the foreign, an implicitly American standard of judgment: Americans, if rough around the edges, were not Cossacks. Americans, if they sometimes indulged in aristocratic fancies, were not the strutting *poseurs* one encountered among the French. Her observations of European types were subtly confirming: Americans, one deduces from her writings, were a kind of ideal average, avoiding the excesses of their European forbears.

In *Little Women*, Alcott was to use glimpses of foreignness as a system of contrasts against which to define American identity. When she drafted *Little Women,* Alcott wrote the first twelve chapters for the book's eventual publisher, Roberts Brothers, with no promise of a contract. She wrote without relish, hoping, as she later confessed to prove to her editor Thomas Niles, that she had no talent for writing a girls' book so that he would leave her alone. The last of the twelve chapters she wrote on spec is of special interest, though, because, coming at the end of the block of text that, for all Alcott knew, would be all of the project she would ever write, it represents a kind of mini-ending within the completed novel. Just as Part One of *Little Women* functionally ends with the March sisters having passed the moral test that was set for them by their father's being away at the war, Chapter Twelve, the last of the preliminary chapters, is a kind of midterm exam, in which we observe the girls' moral progress to date. It is significant that Alcott couches this examination in an encounter with Europeans; the March sisters have accepted an invitation to go on a picnic with their neighbor Laurie and some well-heeled visitors from England.

Though Alcott never identifies the scene of *Little Women* as her adopted hometown of Concord, Massachusetts, we may presume that the croquet battle takes place a stone's throw

from the field where the Redcoats and the colonists fought one of the first engagements of the American Revolution. The action is set in July 1862, the very moment when Britain's diplomatic machinations in support of the Confederate States of America were teaching Henry Adams some unforgettable lessons in political amorality. Not surprisingly, then the conflicts in the chapter, which is the longest in the novel, are developed along the lines of transatlantic rivalry, shaped by the need of each contingent to demonstrate the superiority of its own country. Especially put to the test in this chapter are the oldest March sister, Meg, who has been vulnerable in the past to criticisms of her family's poverty and her own social accomplishments, and Jo, who struggles to master her unruly temper. The first cross-cultural observation is benign; Meg, who has tried to make herself worthy by putting an extra row of curls in her hair, is grateful to see that her British counterpart Kate Vaughn 'was dressed with a simplicity which American girls would do well to imitate' (Alcott, 2005: 134). Almost immediately, Englishness begins to show to disadvantage: Kate exudes a 'stand-off-don't-touch-me air, which contrasted strongly with the free and easy demeanor of the other girls' (Alcott, 2005: 134). Nevertheless, Alcott uses Kate's appraising gaze as a means of validating American manners; by the end of the next paragraph, 'after putting up her glass to examine' the rambunctious Jo several times, Kate determines 'that she was 'odd, but rather clever', and smiles on her from afar' (Alcott, 2005:135).

However, Jo's approval in the eye of the elder culture is soon threatened when she catches Kate's younger brother Fred cheating at croquet and immediately escalates the infraction into a miniature international crisis:

> 'We don't cheat in America: but *you* can, if you choose', said Jo, angrily.
> 'Yankees are a deal the most tricky, everybody knows. There you go', returned Fred, croqueting her ball far away. (Alcott, 2005: 136)

Jo checks her ready temper and, stroke by stroke, moves back into striking range. As she executes a winning shot, she declares, 'Yankees have a trick of being generous to their enemies [...]

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especially when they beat them' (Alcott, 2005: 136). We are meant to feel that a victory has been won for American virtue.

Meanwhile, Meg faces her own test of virtue, as her vanity is wounded when Kate responds with shock to the revelation that Meg must work to support her family. Meg's future husband, the gallant Mr. Brooke, rescues the situation, first by observing the independence and industry of American women and then in a more surprising fashion; he produces a copy of Schiller's *Mary Stuart* in the original German and proposes that both Meg and the young Englishwoman read aloud. Kate's reading is technically perfect but devoid of emotion. Meg mispronounces a number of words but turns the passage into poetry with her gentle voice and natural feeling for tragedy. For an instant, Meg becomes an improbable noble savage, comparatively unlettered but possessing an innate sensibility that is deemed more valuable than the ability to reproduce a perfect but soulless form. Kate delivers a final verdict at the end of the party: 'In spite of their demonstrative manners, American girls are very nice when one knows them' (Alcott, 2005: 148). In Chapter 12 of *Little Women*, virtue becomes a patriotic enterprise.

A significant tension arises in the chapter from the conflict in the March girls' motivations: they must both compete with the representatives of European culture and win their approval. They need to achieve standing, but that status is to be judged by the very people they hope to surpass. One may question whether Alcott actually intended to make the point, but she struck here upon a fundamental paradox of the American character: we find it important to win (and, parenthetically, it also matters that we be perceived to have won virtuously), but we also want desperately for other people to like us. In the happy world of *Little Women*, these desires do not end up conflicting: almost miraculously, the March sisters emerge from their contest with Britain both triumphant and beloved. In less ideal realms, the dual quest of America for preeminence and love has led to darker complications.

Both in other passages in *Little Women* and beyond, Alcott continually defines American-ness through a system of contrasts with European values, though the intended lessons are not always

perfectly consistent. Frenchness is frequently code for a dangerous frivolity and laxness of morals; Amy March's repeated youthful butchering of phrases like 'comme il faut' is meant to be awkwardly endearing, yet they also stand as a telltale sign of potential corruption. When a child in *An Old-Fashioned Girl* boasts of a wardrobe fit for a Paris doll and a French maid to dress her, we instantly fear for her future. And yet, Amy's first glimpse of a spiritual dimension to existence comes courtesy of a Frenchwoman, Aunt March's maid, Estelle, who explains to the Protestant Amy the significance of the rosary and encourages her to pray and meditate as a way to inner peace. Moreover, when Amy seeks the polish that will prepare her for a position in the upper echelons of society, it is, of course, to France that she travels.

Alcott's responses to cultural difference are seldom deeply revelatory. She was, as she ruefully confessed, turning out 'moral pap for the young' (Matteson, 2007: 420). Extremely subtle moral colorings were not in her line, and her observations of ethnic difference and cultural hierarchy may now strike us as pat and stereotypic. However, her essential perceptions were apt: Europe simultaneously poses a threat to the insularity of American consciousness and offers models for American refinement and reinvention.

The variance between European and American perceptions of the world has been described at times as being conditioned by a difference in faith: a difference not necessarily religious, but rather inhering in one's presumptions about what is possible at our particular phase of human existence. Henry James states the matter well in *The Golden Bowl,* in which the Italian Prince Amerigo compares the influence of the American ingénue Maggie Verver's character on his own spirit to a scattering of exquisite drops of color, colors comprised of 'the extraordinary American good faith' (James, 2010: 462). Imprisoned by history, constrained by a culture whose own faith has long been immersed in formalism and spiraling repetition, Prince Amerigo finds his own lack of vitality thrown into disturbingly sharp relief by Maggie's innocence and imagination 'with which their relation, his and these people's was all suffused' (James, 2010: 462). Lack-

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ing a better word, he tells Maggie, 'You Americans are almost incredibly romantic' (James, 2010: 462). Her response almost miraculously combines knowingness with naïveté: 'Of course we are. That's just what makes everything so nice for us' (James, 2010: 462). She adds a moment later, 'I mean we see so much' (James, 2010: 462).

The remarkable subtlety in this exchange is that both speakers get it ever so slightly wrong. What Amerigo calls romanticism is not precisely romanticism, at least not of a kind that had ever been seen before. For romanticism is a feeling experienced with regard to nature, and normally with an affinity for traditions of the past. What Amerigo perceives as American romanticism is a boisterous enthusiasm for the future, not for the past. It is an attitude, furthermore, that expresses itself in opposition to the natural world, one that has indeed reveled in the subjugation of the natural world. If one stands on one's head, one may, perhaps, find a spirit of triumph in the decimation of America's native peoples, and one may feel a crude glory in the rise of factories and smokestacks, but one is unlikely to call them romantic. A real romantic, looking upon the determined upward thrust of American skylines and the ruthless advance of American industry, would sooner be appalled than enraptured. What Amerigo calls romanticism is perhaps better seen as a want of discrimination; it is the capacity to clothe with a picturesque idealism the headlong pursuit of financial gain and worldly indulgence. If it is a spirit of romance, then the stock exchange and the dynamo have been made romantic. As for Maggie, comfortably persuaded of the 'niceness' of her world, romance consists of her unexamined conviction that niceness comes without a cost, that one can affix a smiling face to whatever wreckage has been created in the making of one's father's fortune and assume that one's good fortune arises from an odorless origin. 'We see so much', she tells Amerigo, but his infatuation does not blind him to the fact that, in truth, she sees so little.

The *faux*-Romanticism I've just described in James is, to return for a moment to Twain, a romanticism à la Tom Sawyer, the same kind of imaginative play that can turn a Sunday-school picnic into a Spanish caravan. It is a capacity to transform the banal

into the heroic, and, it seems that this kind of heroic materialism, which was Sir Kenneth Clark's phrase for it, is the most formidable type of romance that Americans have been able to give the world and to one another. It is surely no accident that American literature is so densely populated with millionaire heroes, and that those protagonists—Christopher Newman, Silas Lapham, and above all the rest Jay Gatsby—tend to be so habitually boyish. When Gatsby sets about the simultaneously idealistic and ruthless task of constructing himself, he invents 'just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen-year-old-boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he [remains] faithful to the end' (Fitzgerald, 2004: 98). This boyishness is recognizable as boyishness in part because we tacitly compare it with places with firmer foundations; though it is evident only in glimpses, the strivers and arrivistes in *The Great Gatsby* are driven by an urge to replicate European models. Gatsby buys his mansion from the children of a man whose fond hope was to persuade the owners of the neighboring cottages to thatch their roofs with straw. Gatsby himself prizes his fleeting association with Oxford and a medal conferred by the King of Montenegro. But it is not the illusion of European sanction that empowers Gatsby and that raises him, if only for a time, above the foul dust that besmirches those around him. It is, instead, the belief that his dream actually does make him exceptional, that his errors, his excesses, and even his crimes might be excused because the vision behind them was sanctifying and pure.

Again, I haven't taken a survey, but I suspect that most Americans continue to hold in their minds a sense of their nation's peculiar sanctity—in its mission to spread democracy throughout the world, to hold itself up as what the Puritan settler John Winthrop called a city on a hill. We may argue, I suppose, about whether that sense is true or whether it ever could be true. But even if we assume that it is an illusion, an interesting argument might be made for the importance of keeping it somehow in place, because unlike Gatsby's vision it can lead to something more affirming than tinsel and glitter and conspicuous consumption. An illusion not all that different from Gatsby's has impelled America to do some remarkably

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good work in the world, some of which might never have been accomplished if the nation did not imagine itself to be rather better than it is. Stripped of his illusion, Gatsby lived only hours. I sometimes fear—and often tell my students—that if America were to lose its image of itself, it, too, would just be floating in the swimming pool, waiting for the bullet.

Two months ago, in connection with another conference, I happened to visit Biloxi on the Gulf Coast of the state of Mississippi. Mississippi, of course, lies at the heart of the American South, and Biloxi is about as far south in it as one can go. The people I met there were tremendously friendly and happy to spend a long time chatting—so happy, it became apparent, because they didn't have much else to do. By some measures, Mississippi is the poorest of the fifty American states, and Biloxi residents get by on a per capita income that is about half the yearly tuition cost at a New York City private high school. Its once robust fishing and shrimping industries blighted by toxic agricultural runoff, the local economy is kept afloat by a host of gaudy, rather depressing casinos, and very little else. Its fortunes were made still worse by a direct hit in 2005 from Hurricane Katrina. I mention my visit there only because of the breakfast I had on my last day in Mississippi, at a pancake house, international in name only, on Father's Day. As I reflected on the condition of the lives of the people around me, who seemed to me to deserve quite a bit better, I saw at a nearby table a boy of about eleven years old, who struck my English professor's eye as the very image of Huckleberry Finn. He was a good-looking little fellow with sandy, reddish hair, bright, slightly mischievous eyes, and a ready smile. He seemed happy, energetic, and eager to embrace all that life might offer him. At the same table as this modern-day Huck, however, sat a man, presumably his father, who was a highly believable updating of Pap. He did not have Pap's long, stringy hair and unkempt beard or his fish-belly white complexion, but he had the modern redneck uniform: a crew cut, a prodigious beer belly, lots of tattoos, and a florid skin tone that only comes from working at a really tough job in the blazing sun. He looked at the world with an angry, suspicious squint, as if he knew

his life so far had been a cheat and a sham and he expected more of the same.

The juxtaposition of father and son made me reflect that the unspoken tragedy of Twain's novel is the man that Huck is likely to turn into, and that poor white America was and remains a paradise of boys and a purgatory of men. The America I knew when I was a boy now seems a much older place: more cynical in its foreign policy, more peevish and recalcitrant in its government, more lethargic in its economy—old, indeed, though not as yet mature. Some Americans in our own time would like to turn away from the transatlantic looking-glass entirely, to stop making the kinds of cross-cultural comparisons I have been suggesting here. Others are still standing on tiptoes, trying to measure up to the image we observe in the somewhat untrustworthy mirror.

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