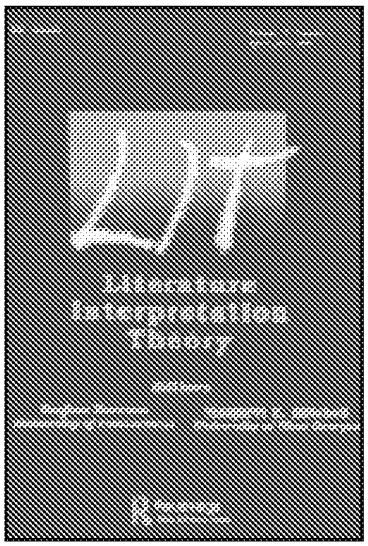

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Redeemer Nation and Apocalypse: Thinking the Exceptionalism of American Exceptionalism

WILLIAM V. SPANOS

> Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord:
> He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
> He hath loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword.
> His truth is marching on.
>
> —Julia Ward Howe, "*The Battle Hymn of the Republic*"

> How can thought collect Debord's inheritance today, in the age of the complete triumph of the spectacle? It is evident, after all, that the spectacle is language, the very communicative and linguistic being of humans. This means that an integrated Marxian analysis should take into consideration the fact that capitalism . . . not only aimed at the expropriation of productive activity, but also, and above all, at the alienation of language itself, of the linguistic and communicative nature of human beings, of the *logos* in which Heraclitus identifies the Common. The extreme form of the expropriation of the Common is the spectacle, in other words, the politics in which we live. But this also means that what we encounter in the spectacle is our very linguistic nature inverted. For this reason (precisely because what is being expropriated is the possibility itself of a common good), the spectacle's violence is so destructive; but for the same reason, the spectacle still contains something like a positive possibility—and it is our task to use this possibility against it.
>
> —Giorgio Agamben, "Marginal Notes on *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle*"

In the wake of the bombing of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2011 by al Qaeda, the George W. Bush administration unleashed its spectacular "War on Terror." Taking its directives from the aggressive policy statement of the neoconservative Project of the New

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American Century (PNAC), misleadingly entitled "Rebuilding America's Defenses," this presidency 1) tacitly established the state of exception as the norm; 2) justified the concept of "preemptive war"; 3) unilaterally determined what constitutes "rogue states" and authorized "regime change"; and 4) employed the tactics of "shock and awe" to achieve these violent ends—and the global *Pax Americana*—in the name of America's exceptionalism, that is, its belief in its manifest destiny as history's *telos*. To rejuvenate and mobilize a recidivist American public, moreover, the Bush administration, invoking the perennial ritual of the American jeremiad, 5) represented its essentially imperialist project as a spectacular threat to the American homeland. It thus rendered the United States' offensive "defense," in the terms of President Bush's State of the Union address on January 29, 2002, as the historical "calling" of a recidivist American people:

> We can't stop short. If we stop now—leaving terror camps intact and terror states unchecked—our sense of security would be false and temporary. History has called America and our allies to action, and it is both our responsibility and our privilege to fight freedom's fight. . . . None of us would ever wish the evil that was done on September 11. Yet after America was attacked, it was as if our entire country looked into a mirror and saw our better selves. We were reminded that we are citizens, with obligations to each other, to our country, and to history. We began to think less of the goods we can accumulate, and more about the good we can do. For too long our culture has said, "If it feels good, do it." Now America is embracing a new ethic and a new creed: "Let's roll." In the sacrifice of soldiers, the fierce brotherhood of firefighters, and the bravery and generosity of ordinary citizens, we have glimpsed what a new culture of responsibility could look like. We want to be a nation that serves goals larger than self. We've been offered a unique opportunity, and we must not let this moment pass.

There is, of course, nothing *radically* different about this modern American exceptionalist initiative. Though President Bush's rhetoric, unlike the resonantly austere prose of his Puritan predecessors, exudes the ideology of "political expertise" rather than religious conviction, it nevertheless reiterates in secular terms, and on a global scale, the essential ontological, cultural, and political principles that were intrinsic to the American Puritans' redemptive narrative of the founding of the "New World." I mean the ritual narrative, epitomized by John Winthrop's sermon to the covenantal people on board the flagship *Arabella* prior to disembarkation in the New World, that, in the course of the following centuries, came to saturate the canonical literary, cultural, and political discourse of the United States:

> Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck and to provide for our posterity is to follow the counsel of Micah: to do justly, to love mercy,

> to walk humbly with our God. For this end, we must be knit together in this world as one man. . . . So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace, the Lord will be our God and delight to dwell among us, as His own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways, so that we shall see much more of His wisdom, power, goodness, and truth than formerly we have been acquainted with. We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies, when He shall make us a praise and glory, that men shall say of succeeding plantations: "The Lord make it like that of New England." For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world: we shall open the mouths of enemies to speak the evil of the ways of God and all professors for God's sake; we shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us, till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going. (83)

Both early and late narratives, to be more specific, represent the people they address as exceptional ("Chosen" and "Covenantal" people), their exodus from the decadent and tyrannical "Old World" as a divinely ordained "errand in the wilderness" of the New World; their vocation (or "calling") as an imperative to "build a [God's] city on the hill"; their "Word"—their spectacular and powerful rationalizing knowledge—as the agency of achieving this civilizational end; and, not least, their "vulnerability" to a brutal and merciless enemy (the jeremiad) as the means of unifying and rejuvenating their covenantal community. What *is* novel—and disclosive—about the Bush administration's narrative, as we shall see, is not a matter of essence, but of degree: Whereas the violence against their others committed by Americans of the past in the process of fulfilling their divinely or historically ordained errand could be overlooked or represented as the (mere) collateral damage justified by the exceptionalist errand's visibly progressive practical achievements, the Bush administration's violence, manifesting itself at the liminal point of the progressive logic of the American exceptionalist ethos, comes to be seen as a contradiction that delegitimizes this exceptionalist logic.

If President Bush's speech to the American Congress in the wake of 9/11 is lacking in specific reference to the Puritan founders and their narrative, this absent specificity is made manifestly visible in a book significantly entitled *Who Are We?: Challenges to the American National Identity*, published in 2004 to revitalize the Bush administration's flagging "New American Century" project by Samuel P. Huntington, one of its most prominent neoconservative intellectual deputies. Indeed, Huntington answers the question he poses rhetorically in the subtitle at the outset of his defense of the Bush administration's preemptive foreign policy against the "outlaw nations" of the Islamic world by

identifying the Puritans as the founders of the American national identity and thus their Anglo-Protestantism as "the core culture" of the United States:

> The settling of America was, of course, a result of economic and other motives, as well as religious ones. Yet religion still was central. . . . Religious intensity was undoubtedly greatest among the Puritans, especially in Massachusetts. They took the lead in defining their settlement based on "a Covenant with God" to create "a city on a hill" as a model for all the world, and people of the Protestant faiths soon also came to see themselves and America in a similar way. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Americans defined their mission in the New World in biblical terms. They were a "chosen people," on "an errand in the wilderness," creating "the new Israel" or the "new Jerusalem" in what was clearly "the promised land." America was the site of a "new Heaven and a new earth, the home of justice," God's country. The settlement of America was vested, as Sacvan Bercovitch put it, "with all the emotional, spiritual, and intellectual appeal of a religious quest." This sense of holy mission was easily expanded into millenarian themes of America as "the redeemer nation" and "the visionary republic." (64)

That this inaugural reference to the Puritan founders is not simply historical description, but also an ideological representation intended to support the Bush administration's "War on [Islamic] Terror" is made fundamentally manifest by Huntington's virtually overt (as opposed to Bush's indirect) appeal to that powerful strategic—usually overlooked—cultural aspect of American exceptionalism that has come to be called "the American jeremiad." By this term, I do not simply mean, with Sacvan Bercovitch, that pervasive discursive national ritual, derived by the Puritans from the Old Testament Israelites, that preempts "backsliding"—the return to the decadence or overcivilization it is the purpose of the covenantal community to always transcend—by way of projecting their errand as *always already* fraught with peril, that is to say, by representing the "wilderness" as a perpetual frontier (or enemy) the function of which is to rejuvenate (by violence) and mobilize the covenantal people. I also mean that exceptionalist principle of national sovereignty that, in representing the present as an *always threatening crisis* (of security), renders the spectacular state of exception the rule, or, to put it alternatively, normalizes the hyperbolic condition that ensues from the annulment of the law in the name of preserving it. Typical of the American jeremiad as it has been articulated in the canonical literature and cultural and political discourse of the United States, Huntington's text thus stages its extended argument on behalf of America's modern errand in the global wilderness in the dramatic context of America's perpetual need for a new frontier or enemy. Following his invocation of the Protestant culture as the "core [covenantal] culture" of America, Huntington names the sudden demise of the Soviet Union, the enemy that had sustained the American covenant throughout the years of

the Cold War (aided and abetted by the emergence of what he calls degradingly "subnational cultures" by way of the "deconstruction of America" during the Vietnam War), as the agent that "challenged" the American national identity prior to the attacks on September 11, 2001. "Democracy," this foreign policy expert writes in a section tellingly entitled "The Search for an Enemy,"

> was left without a significant secular ideological rival, and the United States was left without a peer competitor. Among American foreign policy elites, the results were euphoria, pride, arrogance—and uncertainty. The absence of an ideological threat produced an absence of purpose. "Nations need enemies," Charles Krauthammer, a neoconservative policy expert, commented as the Cold War ended. "Take away one, and they will find another." *The ideal enemy for America would be ideologically hostile, racially and culturally different, and militarily strong enough to pose a credible threat to American security.* The foreign policy debates of the 1990s were already over who might be such an enemy. (262; emphasis added)

It is not the peace following the implosion of the Soviet Union that Huntington celebrates. On the contrary, this peace, according to his exceptionalist narrative, brings "uncertainty": the disturbing absence of a national enemy. Confronted by this resonant absence, Huntington, like all the literary, cultural, and political American Jeremiahs before him faced with a receding frontier, willfully *produces* this reunifying and rejuvenating civilizational enemy by appropriating the al Qaeda attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 to his jeremiadic project. And as in all American jeremiads, it should be noted, it takes the inflated form of a calculated staging for effect: the spectacle that is intended to rob the spectator of speech—and thus of a polity. After dismissing a number of candidates proffered by other anxious policy experts (Russia, Serbia, Iraq, and China) as too "creedal," Huntington focuses in on those global political states and cultural constituencies whose threat is appropriately "civilizational":

> Some Americans came to see Islamic fundamentalist groups, or more broadly political Islam, as the enemy, epitomized in Iraq, Iran, Sudan, Libya, Afghanistan under the Taliban, and to a lesser degree other Muslim states, as well as Islamic terrorist groups such as Hamas, Hezbolah, Islamic Jihad, and the Al Qaeda network. . . . Five of the seven states the United States listed as supporting terrorism are Muslim. Muslim states and organizations threaten Israel, which many Americans see as a close ally. Iran and—until the 2003 war—Iraq pose potential threats to America's and the world's oil supplies. Pakistan acquired nuclear weapons in the 1990s and at various times, Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia have been reported to harbor nuclear weapons stockpiles, intentions, and/or programs. (263)

Having set the stage, Huntington then announces, as if it were the annunciation of history's Gabriel, the spectacular denouement of his jeremiadic narrative, the appearance of Protestant America's new rejuvenating enemy:

> The cultural gap between Islam and America's Christianity and Anglo-Protestantism reinforces Islam's enemy qualifications. And on September 11, 2001, Osama bin Laden ended America's search. The attacks on New York and Washington followed by the wars with Afghanistan and Iraq and the more diffuse "war on terrorism" make militant Islam America's first enemy of the twenty-first century. (264–65)

Earlier, I noted that there was nothing fundamentally new in the discursive structure of President Bush's declaration of the United States' War on Terror, that, as the example of Huntington's modern American jeremiad makes manifestly clear, it follows, in an uncannily analogous way, the polyvalent rhetorical and practical imperatives of the logic of the American exceptionalist ethos as it was inaugurated and practiced by the founding Puritans. What *is* new about the discursive structure of the Bush administration's Project for the New American Century, however, *as the extremeness* of Huntington's contemporary discourse also resonantly testifies, is the *liminality* of its American exceptionalism. By this term I mean something analogous to what Martin Heidegger meant, when, in characterizing the history of the Western (onto-theo-logical) tradition, he wrote that "philosophy has come to its end" in modernity ("End of Philosophy" 373–92). This, according to Heidegger, was the age of *Anthropo logos* and its panoptic eye (thinking "*meta ta physica*": from after or above the things themselves), in which the dynamics of the temporality of being became totally reified; or, as Heidegger puts it to underscore the perceptual agency of this reduction, in which the historical world became a totalized "world picture" (*Weltbild*). At this liminal or threshold point, when its dynamics have been coerced by the spatializing logic of the metaphysical *logos* into world picture—Heidegger also tellingly refers to it as the appearance of "the gigantic" ("Age" 129–30)—the temporality of being becomes an absolute spectacle that strikes the spectator dumb. It is paradoxically at this liminal point, too, that the nothingness of being, which is ontologically prior to its thingness, unconceals itself.[1] In other words, at this threshold point in the itinerary of the "march of Western civilization," "philosophy comes to its *end*" in both senses of the word: its fulfillment and its demise. The nothing (*das Nichts*)—or, what is the same, radical temporality, the difference time always disseminates—is *dis-closed for positive thought*. In the interregnum precipitated by its coming to its completion, to put it alternatively, the truth of the Western tradition self-de-structs: that which it has always disavowed and rendered "invisible" (or "inaudible") by structuration—that specter which, in fact, has always haunted it—manifests itself, *contrapuntally* in Edward Said's term, as the Other that its somethingness has repressed by violence.

As my reference above to counterpoint suggests, however, the liminality that I am stressing by way of characterizing the Bush administration's overdetermination of the discourse of American exceptionalism in the wake of 9/11 is not limited to the sites of ontological representation. It extends indissolubly into the sites of culture and sociopolitics. This can been shown clearly and resonantly by invoking the unlikely but remarkably analogous example of Said's enabling contrapuntal diagnosis of the culminating moment of the Western imperial project—or vocation, to recall his resonant invocation of Disraeli's "the East is a career"—in *Culture and Imperialism*. I quote at length to underscore the indissoluble relationship between the ontological nothing and its cultural and sociopolitical allotropes that disclose themselves when the exceptionalist logic of the West arrives at its liminal end, when, in Said's words, the fulfillment of the imperial project (the "voyage out") precipitates "the voyage in" (to the metropolis):

> For surely it is one of the unhappiest characteristics of the age to have produced more refugees, migrants, displaced persons, and exiles than ever before in history, most of them as an accompaniment to and, ironically enough, as afterthoughts of great post-colonial and imperial conflicts. As the struggle for independence produced new states and new boundaries, it also produced homeless wanderers, nomads, and vagrants, unassimilated to the emerging structures of institutional power, rejected by the established order for their intransigence and obdurate rebelliousness. *And insofar as these peoples exist between the old and the new, between the old empire and the new state, their condition articulates the tensions, irresolutions, and contradictions in the overlapping territories shown on the cultural map of imperialism.*
>
> There is a great difference, however, between the optimistic mobility, the intellectual liveliness, and the "logic of daring" described by the various theoreticians on whose work I have drawn [Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and Paul Virilio], and the massive dislocations, waste, misery, and horrors endured in our century's migrations and mutilated lives. Yet it is no exaggeration to say that liberation as an intellectual mission, born in the resistance and opposition to the confinements and ravages of imperialism, *has now shifted from the settled, established, and domesticated dynamics of culture to its unhoused, decentered, and exilic energies, energies whose incarnation today is the migrant, and whose consciousness is that of the intellectual and artist in exile, the political figure between domains, between forms, between homes, and between languages.* From this perspective then all things are indeed counter, original, spare, strange. From this perspective also, one can see "the complete consort dancing together" contrapuntally. (332)[2]

In the contrapuntal light shed by Said's demonstration of the arrival of the imperial metaphysical logic of the West at its self-destructive limits, American exceptionalism not only comes to be seen as a myth that has concealed the

United States' ultimate identity with the exceptionalist metaphysics (logocentrism) of the Old World (the West). More important, its incremental self-de-structive historical itinerary, from its Puritan origins to the present post-9/11 occasion, becomes manifest. This allegedly benign itinerary, which the discourse of American exceptionalism has perennially represented as the redemption of the condition of America's Others, comes to be seen as a fundamentally continuous, and cumulative, however uneven, history of depredations against America's inferior but threatening Others that in the end, as in the post-9/11 exceptionalist discourse of President Bush's State of the Union speech and Huntington's *Who Are We?*, manifests itself unequivocally *as* violence. To put the paradox more precisely, in the unerring process of fulfilling its redemptive "errand," the American exceptionalist ethos discloses the dark underside that the spectacular rhetoric and practice—the "shock and awe"—of relentless "progress" ("improvement," "betterment," "settlement," in the language of the early settlers) had hitherto enabled Americans to disavow (or represent by the euphemism, "collateral damage") in the pursuit of their errand's "end" (the Promised Land).

In short, at the liminal point of the logic of American exceptionalism, the state of emergency (exception), which, as I have shown by way of underscoring the exceptionalism—the extremeness—of the American exceptionalist ethos, is inherent to the American jeremiadic tradition, becomes the rule. But at the same time, it discloses what Walter Benjamin called the "real state of emergency": the appearance of the radically new (257). To put it alternatively and to anticipate, when the exceptional logic of the spectacle—the visualization of historical being that functions to awe the spectator into speechlessness—arrives at its fulfillment in the age of the shock-and-aweing spectacle, it also paradoxically breaks the spell that strikes us dumb. That is, in disclosing the spectator's dumbness, it precipitates his/her desire to speak, which is to say, to retrieve the political in the here and the now.

In the wake of 9/11, according to Donald Pease, the Bush administration inaugurated a radically "new American exceptionalism" that abandoned that which informed the "myth of the Virgin Land" in favor of establishing the state of exception as the rule:

> With the enemy's violation of the rules of war as rationale, the state suspended the rules to which it was otherwise subject and violated its own rules in the name of protecting them against a force that operated according to different rules. In order to protect the rule of law as such from this illegality, the state declared itself the occupant of a position that was not subject to the rules it must protect. Congress's passage of the Patriot Act into law effected the most dramatic abridgment of civil liberties in the nation's history. The emergency legislation subordinated all concerns of ethics, of human rights, of due process, of constitutional

> hierarchies, and of the division of power to the state's monopoly over the exception.
>
> The Emergency State is marked by absolute independence from any juridical control and any reference to the normal political order. It is empowered to suspend the articles of the Constitution protective of personal liberty, freedom of speech and assembly, the inviolability of the home, and postal and telephone and Internet privacy. In designating Afghanistan and Iraq as endangering the homeland, Operation Infinite Justice and Enduring Freedom simply extended the imperatives of the domestic emergency state across the globe.
>
> Following 9/11 the state effected the transition from a normalized political order to a state of emergency through its spectacular enactments of the violence that the Virgin Land had normatively covered over. Whereas 9/11 dislocated the national people from the mythology productive of their imaginary relation to the state, Bush linked their generalized dislocation with the vulnerability of the Homeland, which thereafter became the target of the security apparatus. Bush endowed the state of emergency that he erected at Ground Zero with the responsibility to defend the Homeland because foreign aggressors had violated Virgin Land.
>
> Bush exiled the people from their normative nationality so as to intensify their need for home. (Pease 167–68)

What Pease says about the post-9/11 United States as a state in which the state of exception has become the norm is undeniable. But in my reading of "Ground Zero," this condition does not constitute a mutation in governmentality. It signals, rather, the *fulfillment* (and demise) of the essential logic of the American exceptionalist ethos.[3] This becomes patently evident, when, as I have done in examining Huntington's post-9/11 rhetoric, one takes into account the inexorable imperative to *excess*, the *hyperbolic*, that has been intrinsic to the binarist logic of American exceptionalism and its practice from its origins. To maintain its exceptional status indefinitely, as the Puritan Jeremiahs knew so well by way of the recidivism inherent in their civilizational progress, a chosen people with a vocation must, by definition, *always already* produce crisis, that is, must always force the ordinary into the extraordinary (exceptional)—render it increasingly *spectacular*. This, in turn, means eventually reducing the witness to the status of a mere spectator alienated from his/her polyvalent humanity. In short, it means enchanting, striking dumb, bereaving one of speech, the *sine qua non*, as Hannah Arendt has remind us, of the political life. This stunning totalization of the spectacle, as I will suggest in the following section by way of telling instances from American literary and cultural production, has been the "end" of the civilizational "march" of the American nation under the aegis of its exceptionalist ethos.

To validate this hypothesis about the apocalyptic end of American exceptionalism, I will invoke five well-known but hitherto unrelated passages from five texts of the American cultural archive produced between the

mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries: Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1850) and *The Confidence-Man* (1857), Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), Stanley Kubrick's film *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), and Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977).[4] Spanning two centuries of American cultural history, centrally addressing the question "what it is to be an American?," and attuned in some essential degree to America's exceptionalist opposition between the New World and the Old World, these resonantly representative texts, I believe, collectively, in synecdochical form, demonstrate the determining presence in American cultural and political history not only of the American exceptional ethos but also of the increasing, however uneven, complicity of this exceptionalist ethos in the staging of the spectacle and, each in its particular way, their uncanny imaginative anticipation of the liminal post-9/11 global American cultural-political occasion.

The first passage from this imaginative cultural archive I want to consider is from chapter 41 of *Moby-Dick,* in which Ishmael, anticipating his own (and Melville's) antithetical (and heretical) understanding of the whiteness of the white whale—its unpresentable sublimity—recalls the origins of the *naming* of the white whale (Moby Dick) and of Captain Ahab's unerring "fiery pursuit" of "him." It comes, significantly, almost immediately after Captain Ahab stages the spectacular oath-taking that galvanizes the Pequod's motley crew of "isolatoes" into a singular weapon aimed at the heart of the white whale:

> His three boats stove around him, and oars and men both whirling in the eddies; one captain, seizing the line-knife from the broken prow had dashed at the whale, as an Arkansas duelist at his foe, blindly seeking with a six inch blade to reach the fathom deep life of the whale. The captain was Ahab. And then it was, that suddenly sweeping his sickle-shaped lower jaw beneath him, Moby Dick had reaped away Ahab's leg, as a mower a blade of grass in the field. No turbaned Turk, no hired Venetian or Malay, could have smote him with more seeming malice. Small reason was there to doubt, then, that ever since that almost fatal encounter, Ahab had cherished a wild vindictiveness against the whale, all the more fell for that in his frantic morbidness he at last came to identify with him, not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations. The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, until they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung. That intangible malignity, which has been from the beginning; to whose dominion even the modern Christians ascribe one-half of the worlds; which the ancient Ophites of the east reverenced in their statue devil;—Ahab did not fall down and worship it like them; but deliriously transferring its idea to the abhorred white whale, he pitted himself, all mutilated, against it. All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, *were visibly*

> *personified and made practically assailable in Moby Dick.* He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it. (184)

Acutely attuned, unlike his contemporaries, to the continuity between the early American Puritans' exceptionalist theological errand in the New World wilderness and the exceptionalism of the more secular America of his own ("Emersonian") age and the violence against the Other this history of expansion perpetrated, Melville, through his narrator Ishmael, as I have argued elsewhere (Spanos, *Errant Art* 114–31), against the American grain, represents the Pequod as the symbol of a diverse America having become a totalitarian state in which the state of exception has become the rule; its captain as the secular heir of the Puritans, an American Adam; and his "fiery pursuit" of the white whale, as the unrelenting imperative of his redemptive exceptionalist Adamic vocation. Whereas Ishmael comes increasingly to distrust the exceptionalist *logos* as enabling a naming of the be-*ing* of being that is also a destructive will to power over its diversity and thus the recuperation of the tyranny that American exceptionalism ostensibly opposes, Captain Ahab unerringly pursues the "benign" (ethical) logic of his Adamic exceptionalism to its spectacular limits. Personifying the white whale (rendering "its" unpresentable and intangible mystery spectacularly visible) and interpreting its reaping away of his leg as a deliberately malicious assault not only on him but on mankind at large, Ahab's "naming" of the mysterious (sublime) whiteness of the whale, which, in its earlier stages, signified the redemption—the benign domestication and fructification of the wilderness—is pursued to its annihilating, apocalyptic limits. In the absolute certainty of its ethical cause, Ahab's Adamic exceptionalism, which in its origins (as in the Puritan interpretation of Adam's naming of the beasts in Genesis) and early manifestations seemed ameliorative of the human condition, becomes, at this imagined liminal point, a monomania—a paranoid will to power over being, which would reduce its discomposing multiplicity to a spectacular oneness that renders "it" "practically assailable" on behalf of all of humanity. Earlier, Ishmael had been converted to Ahab's fiery cause—had been struck dumb as it were by Ahab's spectacular *staging* of the oath-taking of the motley crew. At the liminal point of Ahab's exceptionalist logic, however, Ishmael, now "appalled" by Ahab's spectacular naming, begins to sense—to be affected by—the apocalyptic violence that the unerring (monomaniacal) American exceptional ethos relies on, but must necessarily disavow, to fulfill its redemptive vocation. And this discomposing liminal insight precipitates his *errant* search for an alternative (*errant*) language to the whiteness (sublime be-*ing*) of being.

The second passage I want to invoke on behalf of my argument that the logic of American exceptionalism leads inexorably in the end to the

destructive violence of the spectacle is from Melville's proto-postmodern masterpiece, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, published in 1857 in the wake of the age's cultural custodians' national call to "freeze him into silence" (Peck 446–54).[5] More specifically, it appears in the section of the novel that expounds on "the Metaphysics of Indian-hating," where the author, in a proleptic gesture anticipating Michel Foucault's Nietzschean genealogy in the parodic mode, "allows" the historical narrative of the American exceptionalist historian (in this case Judge James Hall[6]) to self-destruct: to "unrealize" us by way of proffering an "excessive choice of identities" (Foucault, "Nietzsche" 161).[7] The passage, it is important to point out, follows an extended, apparently celebratory account of the American "backwoodsman," which, echoing James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo figure as "pathfinder"—"foremost in the band of pioneers, who are opening the way for the march across the continent" (Cooper 456)—recapitulates the exceptionalist history of American westward expansion. In this liminal and contrapuntal passage, the westerner, who is quoting the Judge to the ironic Cosmopolitan, inadvertently underscores the *essence* of American Indian-hating in general by way of distinguishing the "diluted Indian-hater"—"one whose heart proves not so steely as his brain. Soft enticements of domestic life too often draw him from the ascetic trail"—from the "Indian-hater *par excellence*," the backwoodsman who fulfills the unsentimental (i.e., practical) exceptionalist logic of pioneering at the (liminal) frontier:

> The Indian-hater *par excellence* the judge define to be 'one who, having with his mother's milk drawn in small love for red men, in youth or early manhood, ere the sensibilities become osseous, receives at their hand some signal outrage, or, which in effect is much the same, some of his kin have, or some friend. Now, nature all around him by her solitudes wooing or bidding him muse upon this matter, he accordingly does so, till the thought develops such attraction, that much as straggling vapors troop from all sides to a storm-cloud, so straggling thoughts of other outrages troop to the nucleus thought, assimilate with it, and swell it. At last, taking counsel with the elements, he comes to his resolution. An intenser Hannibal, he makes a vow, the hate of which is as a vortex from whose suction scarce the remotest chip of the guilty race may reasonably feel secure. Next, he declares himself and settles his temporal affairs. With the solemnity of a Spaniard turned monk, he takes leave of his kin; or rather, these leave-takings have something of the still more impressive finality of death-bed adieus. Last, he commits himself to the forest primeval; there, so long as life shall be his, to act upon a calm, cloistered scheme of strategical, implacable, and lonesome vengeance. Ever on the noiseless trail; cool, collected, patient; less seen than felt; snuffing, smelling—a Leatherstocking Nemesis. In the settlements he will not be seen again; in eyes of old companions tears may start at some chance thing that speaks of him; but they never look for him, nor call; he knows he will not come. Suns and

> seasons fleet; the tiger-lily blows and fall; babes are born and leap in their mothers' arms; but the Indian-hater is good as gone to his long home, and "Terror" is his epitaph. (150–51)

The analogy between the Ahab of the previously quoted passage and Judge Hall's Indian-hater *par excellence* is self-evident. In both, the apparently benign exceptionalism of the original errand in the wilderness has become at the liminal point of its development (into its *par excellence*) a paranoidal monomania, in which the self-righteous exceptionalist will to reduce the anxiety-provoking many in the name of the (avenging) "American peace" to the all-encompassing one, takes the shock-and-awing form of imperial annihilation: "an intenser Hannibal," this "Leatherstocking Nemesis" "makes a vow, the hate of which is a vortex from whose suction scarce the remotest chip of the guilty race may reasonably feel secure."[8] But there is a significant tonal difference in the second passage, one signaled by Melville's emphasis on the excess—the hyperbolic—implicit in the distinction the Judge draws between the "diluted Indian-hater," whose vestigial sentiment renders him errant on occasion, and the absolutely unerring "Indian-hater *par excellence*." Despite his critical attitude, Melville portrays Captain Ahab's destructive exceptionalist will to power over being (the white whale) as vestigially tragic. In pointing to the difference between the "diluted Indian-hater" and the "Indian hater *par excellence*," or, to put it more accurately, in underscoring the logical continuity of their difference in this later portrayal of the Adamic exceptionalist figure, Melville represents him as bordering on the comical (self-parodic), a simulacral caricature of its prior manifestation. This is clearly suggested by the hyberbolic reference to the Indian-hater as "an intenser Hannibal" and to the incongruous analogy that identifies him with a "Spaniard turned monk," both of which, not incidentally, seem to allude to the exaggerations of the American Western tall tale. Like Marx, Melville's contemporary, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* vis-à-vis the French history embodied in Napoleon I and Louis Napoleon (III), Melville, no longer willing to attribute dignity to the United States' imperial violent practice in the West (the Mexican War and the genocidal war against the Native Americans), reads the repetition of the American exceptionalist history embodied in the figures of Ahab and the Indian-hater *par excellence* as a repetition of history "first as tragedy, then as farce."

This shift of the affective register of representation—from the awe of the tragic to the critically disengaging comedy of farce—that is precipitated by the arrival of the logic of American exceptionalism to its liminal point is fully enacted (*though not intentionally by the author*) in the third end-of-the-century passage I wish to invoke. I am referring to the celebrated climactic moment of Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, when, so reminiscent of the passages quoted above from Melville's *Moby-Dick* and *The Confidence-Man*, Hank Morgan, whose American exceptionalist "errand"

in the feudal wilderness is resisted by the benighted people he would liberate from superstition and tyranny, exterminates them with the spectacular ("magic") nineteenth-century technological weapons of mass destruction (electric wire that instantly electrocutes on touch and Gatling guns) at his command.

Hank Morgan, it will be recalled, introduces himself decisively at the beginning of this quintessentially American late-nineteenth-century time-travel novel as an "American . . . a Yankee of the Yankees—and practical; yes, and nearly barren of sentiment, I suppose—or poetry, in other words" (8). Remarkably like Melville's Indian-hater *par excellence*, that is, he is not simply a practical Yankee, but a Yankee at the extreme limits of Yankee practicality, its essence. As such an essential American exceptionalist, he, like Captain Ahab and the Indian-hater (and their historical Puritan ancestors) is on an "errand in the wilderness," which is to say, he is committed to a redemptive "humanitarian" vocation to rationalize an untamed world. Having returned to sixth-century England (the "Dark Ages"), where he finds the people acting like lunatics, this modern enlightened American exceptionalist assumes that he has been called by a higher cause to redeem this benighted world. Specifically, he understands his task as a noble struggle against the base tyranny of superstition embodied in the figure of Merlin the magician who undergirds the feudal system. He thus undertakes to transform this superstitious and tyrannical feudal England into an American-style techno-industrial capitalist republic. And the means of achieving this redemptive "humanitarian" vocational end—this "regime change," as it were—will be the "magic" made available to him by his superior modern American scientific knowledge. It is a calculated tactics of "staging for effect" (similar to Captain Ahab's), not incidentally, that was the trademark of his author's fiction. In the process, however, the Yankee finds that the British aristocracy and the Established Church on which its superstition and tyranny is founded, resist his American enlightenment project and that the multitude he would raise up from degradation in his (biopolitical) "freedom factories" are too far gone in their abjectness. Nevertheless, he, like Ahab and the Indian-hater *par excellence*, is so certain of the transcendentally ordained righteousness of his exceptionalist calling that he pursues its spectacular logic to its spectacular limits:

> I sent a current through the third fence, now; and almost immediately through the fourth and fifth, so quickly were the gaps filled up. I believed the time was come, now, for my climax; I believed that the whole army was in our trap. Anyway, it was high time to find out. So I touched a button and set fifty electric suns aflame on the top of our precipice.
>
> Land, what a sight! We were enclosed in three walls of dead men! All the other fences were pretty nearly filled with the living, who were stealthily working their way forward through the wires. The sudden glare paralyzed this host, petrified them, you may say, with astonishment;

> there was just one instant for me to utilize their immobility in, and I didn't lose the chance. You see, in another instant they would have recovered their faculties, then they'd have burst into a cheer and made a rush, and my wires would have gone down before it; but that lost instant lost them their opportunity forever; while even that slight fragment of time was still unspent. I shot the current through all the fences and struck the whole host dead in their tracks! *There* was a groan you could *hear!* It voiced the death-pang of eleven thousand men. It swelled out on the night with awful pathos.
>
> A glance showed that the rest of the enemy—perhaps ten thousand strong—were between us and the encircling ditch, and pressing forward to the assault. Consequently we had them *all!* And had them past help. Time for the last act of the tragedy. I fired the three appointed revolver shots—which meant:
>
> "Turn on the water!"
>
> There was a sudden gush and roar, and in a minute the mountain brook was raging through the big ditch and creating a river a hundred feet wide and twenty-five deep.
>
> "Stand to your guns, men! Open fire!"
>
> The thirteen gatlings began to vomit death into the fated ten thousand. They halted, they stood their ground a moment against that withering deluge of fire, then they broke, faced about and swept toward the ditch like chaff before a gale. A full fourth part of their force never reached the top of the lofty embankment; the three-fourths reached it and plunged over—to death by drowning.
>
> Within ten short minutes after we had opened fire, armed resistance was totally annihilated, the campaign was ended, *we* fifty-four were masters of England! Twenty-five thousand men lay dead around. (254–55)

Just as Captain Ahab and the Indian-hater are driven by their exceptionalist ethos to annihilate their respective "evil" enemies in the name of its redemptive *telos*, so the Yankee is compelled to commit genocide—"infinite justice," as it were—in the name of his redemptive exceptionalist calling. What all three imaginative instances have in common, regardless of their radically different narrative intentions, is an unerring exceptionalist logic that, in fulfilling its ameliorative imperatives—becoming absolute spectacle ("and petrified them, you might say, with astonishment")—self-de-structs. The fulfillment of this logic dis-closes the violence to its Other that this benign end had hitherto concealed by disavowing it. More specifically and to anticipate, these representative fictive passages bring to spectacular visibility an exceptionalist logic that enables its agents to normalize (a rejuvenating) crisis. That is to say, they justify the normalization of the state of emergency (or exception); "preemptive war" against what is deemed to be an "evil" enemy; "regime change"; and the deployment of the spectacular (mind-numbing) tactics of shock and awe to achieve this higher *telos*. What is different from Melville's earlier representation of this end of the American exceptionalist itinerary in

Twain's later version, however, is its affective tone. With the inordinate power the exceptionalist ethos had been endowed by the spectacular advance of scientific knowledge and technology in the late nineteenth century, the incremental slide from tragedy to (unintended) farce, to invoke Marx's distinction, becomes manifestly visible and nearly absolute.

In the end, of course, Hank Morgan fails in his exceptionalist "humanitarian" mission to remake feudal England, under the thrall of "mystical Babylon," into a redeemed (modern) republic. But this failure is not, as most Americanist critics have laboriously affirmed, because Mark Twain, having lost control of his narrative to a dark alter ego (his penchant for techno-science), had to kill him off in the end.[9] Nor was this "failure" because Twain was critical of his protagonist's American exceptionalist project from the outset.[10] The Connecticut Yankee fails in his errand, rather, because he betrays the inexorably practical imperatives of his "Yankee of the Yankees" ethos. In a postscript written by the Yankee's (ventriloquized) English aid, Clarence, after the practical "Yankee of Yankees" (temporary) triumph over British knight errantry and the Established Church, we learn that a vestigial sentiment of the "mistimed sentimentalities" to which he had previously given an ostensible "permanent rest" (251)—manifests itself. Against his better judgment, he leaves his place of security to minister to a wounded knight, who stabs him, thus enabling his symbolic enemy, the black magician Merlin, to recuperate his insidious Old World authority.[11]

The fourth passage I want to invoke as evidence of the hyperbolic excess intrinsic to the logic of American exceptionalism is from Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, written by an American reporter who, as is everywhere evident in his text, knew how deeply backgrounded in American history the American exceptionalist mission in the Vietnam wilderness was. In this series of deliberately fragmented subjective reports from the war zone ("in country"), Herr underscores the unerringly forwarding ("westering") imperatives of the American military mission in Vietnam in an imperial war being fought against a Third World people, who, attuned to its Achilles' heel, refuse to be answerable to that imperial Western structuring strategy. He thus goes far to explain the defeat of an infinitely more powerful United States as having as much to do with the illogical logic of American exceptionalism as with the heroic efforts of the Vietnamese "enemy."

This paradox of the exceptionalist ethos is epitomized by Herr's commentary on the liminal Tet Offensive, when the brutal violence of unerring forwarding tactics was discarded by the US military command in Vietnam for the even more brutal and indiscriminate violence of the body count, what the "Mission" euphemistically called the "war of attrition"[12]:

> We took a huge collective nervous breakdown, it was the compression and heat of heavy contact generated out until every American in Vietnam got a taste. Vietnam was a dark room full of deadly objects, the VC [Viet

> Cong] were everywhere all at once like spider cancer and instead of losing the war in little pieces over the years we lost it fast in under a week. After that, we were like the character in a pop grunt mythology, dead but too dumb to lie down. Our worst dread of yellow peril became realized; we saw them now dying by the thousands all over the country, yet they didn't seem depleted, let alone exhausted, as the Mission was claiming by the fourth day. We took space back quickly, expensively, with total panic and close to maximum brutality. Our machine was devastating. And versatile. It could do everything but stop. As one American major said, in a successful attempt at attaining history, "We had to destroy Ben Tre in order to save it." That's how most of the country came back under what we called control, and how it remained essentially occupied by the Viet Cong and the North until the day years later when there were none of us left there. (71)

Once more, though now at a time in American history late enough to warrant rational restraint, one hears in this self-righteous symbolic voice, singled out by Michael Herr, of the American major who justified the "Mission's" spectacular annihilation of the village Ben Tre and the province of which it was the center in the name of saving them for the free world, this very same excess justified by the redemptive American exceptionalist ethos that informs the spectacle-oriented exceptionalist voice of Twain's imagined late-nineteenth-century Connecticut Yankee. It is a hyperbolic excess that, to any sane mind, comes across as (unintended) self-parody—or lunacy. But, as in the case of the Indian-hater *par excellence* and particularly of the "Yankee of the Yankees," we also bear witness to the horrific consequences of that self-parodic or lunatic voice and thus to the self-de-struction of America's redemptive exceptionalist mission in the wilderness of Vietnam. *When the spectacle becomes absolute, Herr implies, the speech that the spectacle has deprived the spectator of is returned. At the liminal point, the spectators are enabled to retrieve their humanity, that is, to become a polity.*

The fifth and last, but by no means least, instance of this pervasive exceptionalist ethos from the American cultural archive that bears imaginative witness to its self-destruction I take from a subversive film of the hypernationalist Cold War era, Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964).[13] It is a film that, perhaps more than any other representation of the United States' exceptionalist errand in the global wilderness prior to September 11, 2001, visualizes the apocalyptic consequence of its "benign" *telos* in the appropriate form of grotesque farce. Indeed, it is, I suggest, a film that "stages" this grotesque apocalyptic end in a form that deliberately echoes the staged hyperbolic Western humor that, as Constance Rourke's classic *American Humor* testifies, is endemic to popular and canonical American cultural production,[14] not least to Mark Twain's fiction, most famously, the scene in *Connecticut Yankee*, depicting Hank Morgan's spectacular defeat of Sir Sagramour le Desirous. In this scene, it will

be recalled, Morgan decisively confirms his status as "The Boss" of England, won earlier in staging the eclipse of the sun, by staging it as a "Wild West" show in which the Connecticut Yankee, with lasso and Colt revolvers—his "spectacular techno-scientific instruments"—triumphs once again over the "black magic" of Merlin. I am, referring, of course, to the climactic scene of *Dr. Strangelove* in which the B-52 Stratofortress laden with a nuclear warhead—the apogee of shock-and-awe high-tech firepower—unleashed as a preemptive strike against the Soviet Union by a paranoidal American exceptionalist brigadier general, Jack D. Ripper (Sterling Hayden), who believes that the global "Communist conspiracy" entails the contamination by fluoridation of all Americans' "precious bodily fluids," is on its unstoppable forwarding way to annihilate its evil target. This hyper-spectacular scene, not incidentally, parodically echoes the multitude of nineteenth-century Protestant millenarian tracts celebrating America as the ruthless God-chosen redeemer nation.[15]

Accompanied intermittently but relentlessly by the triumphant drumbeat rhythms of "When Johnny Comes Marching Home," the commander of the B-52 bomber, Major T. J. King Kong (Slim Pickens), a Texan, as his pronounced Western drawl underscores, dons his cowboy's garb immediately after receiving and verifying his orders, then after releasing the bomb-bay doors, which have been sealed by a missile strike, mounts and straddles the atomic bomb as if it were a spirited mustang in a rodeo, and, whooping exultantly as he waves his cowboy hat above his head, rushes headlong, redeemer-like, toward his apocalyptic prospect.

In sum, all of the foregoing resonant instances of the operations of the American exceptionalist ethos are imaginative cultural readings taken from American texts that span the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which is to say, the history that has been represented (until recently) by traditional American historians and literary critics (what, following Gramsci, I have elsewhere called, the custodians of the American cultural memory) as a redemptive history. But what is uncanny about these *cultural* texts is that they all are increasingly proleptic of the violent *political practice* of American exceptionalism at the liminal point to which it is pursued by the Bush administration in the aftermath of 9/11 in its spectacular War on Terror. I mean, on the one hand, its bringing what Guy Debord called the "age of the spectacle" in the 1960s to it fulfillment in the twenty-first by way of pursuing the *exceptionalism* of the logic of American exceptionalism to its apocalyptic end: the absolutization of its spectacular essence—the hyper-visualization of being that awes its "inferior and benighted" victims into silence—spellbinds and robs them of speech (and a polity).

This absolutization of the spectacle during the Bush administration, which is remarkably prefigured in the literary instances I have invoked, is borne witness to not only by its representation of history, which consisted of systematically staging reality as spectacle. I think here, for example, not only of such staged gestures as President Bush's appearance, standing in

the smoking ruins of the World Trade Center in the aftermath of al Qaeda's bombing, bullhorn in hand, turning it into "ground zero," and his spectacular appearance on board a US battleship in the Persian Gulf, before a sign announcing "Mission Accomplished" and dressed in military garb, to proclaim to the world (prematurely, not unlike the fictive Hank Morgan's premature proclamation of the republic in England), the decisive, "surgically executed" defeat of Saddam Hussein's army in Iraq.[16] I am also thinking of the Bush administration's systematic staging of its War on Terror in terms of Armageddon ("Operation Infinite Justice"). The absolutization of the spectacle is also borne witness to by the Bush administration's global military practice in his War or Terror, particularly by the spectacular high-tech violence it employed in Afghanistan and Iraq (against the threatening "axis of evil")—what it, drawing on the United States' colonial legacy, called the tactics of shock and awe—to accomplish its global mission, the *Pax Americana*.

In pursuing the logic of American exceptionalism to its fulfillment in practice, on the other hand (in absolutizing the spectacular inhering in its exceptionalism), the Bush administration also betrayed the violence that has always haunted the exceptionalist myth—the apocalyptic violence proleptically disclosed by my five synecdochical historical cultural instances—but that the benign discourse of the "redeemer nation," abetted by the hitherto unfilled status of the exceptionalist logic, has always disavowed. At this liminal point in the practice of American exceptionalism, as I have underscored, the spectacle *self-de-structs*. In becoming *total*, that is, as in the case of Heidegger's account of the fulfillment of the spatializing metaphysical logic of the West in "the age of the world picture," it dis-closes—renders "*visible*" and "*potential*"—that which the spectacle has had to repress or annihilate to maintain its authority as the truth. In Heidegger's pre-Debordian terms, this potential is the nothing (*das Nichts*), or, what is the same thing, the *radical temporality of being*, a temporality that in essence is unpresentable. In the indissolubly related terms of my imaginative instances, what is revealed at the apocalyptic limit (the word, derives from the Greek *apo-kalypsis*, means "to disclose what has been closed off or concealed colonized, as it were) is *speech*, the very characteristic of human life that the spellbinding spectacle would rob it of. All this concerning the effects of the reduction of the unpresentable to spectacle, I suggest, is chillingly audible in the (dis)astonishing response of a "senior advisor" in the Bush administration to the reporter Ron Suskind's question concerning its understanding of historical reality as it pertained to the United States' war against Iraq:

> The aide said that guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore,"

> he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do." (Suskind)

Let me put this analysis of my five synecdochical imaginative instances' anticipation of President Bush's absolutization in practice of the spectacular imperatives of the logic of American exceptionalism in the wake of 9/11 alternatively—in the more recent but indissolubly related theoretical language of such post-poststructuralist theoreticians as Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière, and Slavoj Žižek (among others). One could say that, in staging the War on Terror as a spectacle, Bush pushed the logic of American exceptionalism to the point at which the United States—"the redeemer nation" or "the exceptionalist state"—became a state in which the state of exception (the abrogation of the law [*nomos*] in the irrational name of securing it) became the rule.

Under these "emergency" conditions, mirrored chillingly in the bizarre excess of relief that Huntington expresses in identifying "militant Islam" as America's new enemy of the twenty-first century after the bombing of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon by al Qaeda, President Bush became sovereign. In a way remarkably reminiscent of Captain Ahab, the Indian-hater *par excellence,* and particularly the American major representing the American "Mission" in Vietnam and the Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's court, these emergency conditions enabled him, in the name of "homeland security" and of the American redemptive calling, to unilaterally initiate "preemptive wars" against what he arbitrarily deemed to be "rogue" or "outlaw" states (Afghanistan and Iraq); to compel "regime change" intended to harness such errant states to American geopolitical interests; and, not least, to employ extra-ordinary, that is, illegal—spectacular—methods to achieved these practical ends (shock-and-awe military tactics and the detention and torture of alleged terrorists [Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo, and other extraterritorial sites of "extraordinary rendition"]). Equally important, these normalized emergency conditions also enabled the Bush administration to go far in abrogating the human rights of the domestic population of the United States. Indeed, the normalizaton of the state of exception enabled Bush, in Agamben's appropriately stark terms, to harness the disciplinary apparatuses of biopolitics to aggrandize the latent and increasingly growing tendency of American exceptionalist logic to reduce human life (*bios*) to bare life (*zoë*)—life that can be killed without this killing being named murder—and, in obscuring the boundaries between exclusion and inclusion, to contribute to the rendering of the concentration camp as the end ("the hidden paradigm") of the modern (democratic) state:

> Along with the emergence of biopolitics, we can observe a displacement and gradual expansion beyond the limits of the decision on bare life, in

> the state of exception, in which sovereignty consisted. If there is a line in every modern state marking the point at which the decision on life becomes a decision on death, and biopolitics can turn into thanatopolitics, this line no longer appears today as a stable border dividing two clearly distinct zones. This line is now in motion and gradually moving into areas other than that of political life, areas in which the sovereign is entering into an ever more intimate symbiosis not only with the jurist but also with the doctor, the scientist, the expert, and the priest. . . . certain events that are fundamental for the political history of modernity (such as the declaration of rights), as well as others that seem instead to represent an incomprehensible intrusion of biologico-scientific principles into the political order (such as National Socialist eugenics and its elimination of "life that is unworthy of being lived," or the contemporary debate on the normative determination of death criteria), acquire their true sense only if they are brought back to the common biopolitical (or thanatopolitical) context to which they belong. From this perspective, the camp—as the pure, absolute, and impassable biopolitical space (insofar as it is founded solely on the state of exception)—will appear as the hidden paradigm of the political space of modernity, whose metamorphoses and disguises we will have to learn to recognize. (*Homo Sacer* 122–23)

But, as in the case of the absolutization of the spectacle, the Bush administration's normalization of the state of exception by way of proclaiming the Homeland Security State at the site of "Ground Zero" also brought the exceptionalist logic of American exceptionalism to its end in the sense of its (theoretical) demise or self-de-struction. In fulfilling its policing imperatives—in forcibly enacting in the end (like a *deus ex machina*) its potential as *structure*—this willful practical enactment not only disclosed the imperial violence that the *discourse* of American exceptionalism has always disavowed. In so doing, it also revealed its "Other" as a constructed (and colonized) enemy. Thus freed from its ideological frame, this alien "Other," this refugee from the logic of belonging of the nation-state, has come to be seen/heard as a radical difference, a new and potential possibility—a "means without end" in Agamben's formulation of this aporetic disclosure—that becomes the insubstantial basis, the "whatever being" of an (always) "coming community" (*Coming Community*).

This double disclosure (*apo-kalypsis*) of the violence endemic to the exceptionalist ethos and the political potential its fulfillment renders visible/audible is borne witness to, I suggest, by the historical itinerary of American literary and critical studies from the time of its origins in the Cold War period to the post-9/11 occasion. In the process of determining the "Americanness" of American literature, the founding "Myth and Symbol School" of American Studies (F. O. Matthiessen, Henry Nash Smith, Leo Marx, R. W. B. Lewis, Lionel Trilling, and Richard Chase, among others), deeply inscribed by the exceptionalist ethos, not only produced a nationalistic literary canon ("the American Renaissance," in Matthiessen's formulation) but also harnessed American

literature, particularly that which overdetermined the idea of the United States as redeemer nation, to the United States' global Cold War against Soviet communism.[17] During the decade of the Vietnam War, however, when the United States' spectacular violence inflicted on a Third World people struggling against colonial rule—the brutal, totally dehumanizing, military strategy of "attrition" (the "body count") and the unhoming "pacification" cultural operations ("New Life Hamlets")—came to be seen as patently excessive and contradictory, American literary studies fell into a state of crisis. It was at this juncture that the term *American exceptionalism*, which was not current at the time of the hegemony of the Myth and Symbol School, emerged into conscious use, but now as an *aporia*, an ideological problem. This was the moment, too, of the emergence of the critical initiative that has come to be called the "New Americanist Studies," a counter-memory initiative dedicated at the outset to the interrogation of the American exceptionalist ethos that has silently reigned since the Puritans.

But it was the United States' annunciation of its universal exceptionalist War on Terror in the aftermath of 9/11 that has instigated the New Americanists to go beyond the interrogation of American exceptionalism and its nationalist imperatives. In its radically contradictory unilateral rendering of the state of exception the global rule and its tacit reduction of human life to "disposable reserve" or "bare life" in the name of the universal "peace" of the exceptionalist state, this spectacular American annunciation compelled these New Americanists to think America's Others contrapuntally. That is to say, it compelled them to address America not simply from inside (as was the case of the old Americanists), but also from the outside, that is, from the point of view of the exilic consciousness, or, to put it alternatively, from a "postnationalist" or "transnationalist" perspective. To invoke a recent New Americanist text that is symptomatic of this latest estranging initiative (Castronovo and Gilman),[18] the normalization of the emergency state has precipitated, against itself, the possibility of the emergence of what Walter Benjamin called the "real state of emergency," the "time of the now" that thinks the emergence not in terms of an end, but as a means without end, that is, as sheer potentiality.

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Following his "triumph" over Merlin by way of the "magic" of his modern American scientific knowledge and the immediate spectacular civilizational improvements he has been able to accomplish as "The Boss" of feudal England, the practical Connecticut Yankee, anticipating the enlightened future English history he will make, writes, almost casually, "Unlimited power *is* the ideal thing when it is in safe hands" (51). And Morgan will adhere unerringly to this deeply inscribed American assumption as the determining principle of his "ameliorative" errand to the end. What the five genealogical literary/cultural

texts I have invoked from the history of American cultural production have collectively suggested in a resonant way, however, is that behind the Yankee's apparently innocuous statement, indeed, this American "truism," lies the spectacle-oriented *ideology* of the American exceptionalist ethos. I not only mean the extremist belief that the American people, as opposed to the peoples of the decadent Old World and elsewhere, are a chosen people engaged in the redemptive work of a higher cause (God, originally; History, later), but also the belief that, as such an elect responsible for the transformation of chaos into order (or evil into good), they are morally justified in using all ("unlimited") means—even apocalyptic violence in the last instance—to accomplish this "benign," transcendentally sanctioned universal *telos*. In other words, these five imaginative texts collectively reveal not only that the "truth" of American exceptionalism is a fiction that has all too often concealed an imperial will to power over what threatens the United States' authority, but also that the moral claim deriving from this truth—that the "unlimited [spectacular] power" wielded by democratic America thanks to its advanced scientific knowledge—"*is*" in "safe hands"—is a grotesque life-destroying hypocrisy. In so doing, this genealogy also proleptically exposes the hollowness of what Jacques Rancière, in the wake of 9/11 and the Bush administration's War on Terror, has aptly called the United States' (illegitimate) "right to humanitarian interference," an intervention that annuls the political (international law) in the name of the exalted ethical: "infinite justice" (74).[19] I am referring to the United States' perennial presumption, increasingly avowed since its spectacular firebombing of Dresden and its exploding of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in World War II, that it alone among nations is morally qualified to globally police the production of weapons of mass destruction or to unilaterally intervene in crisis situations where, it always alleges, the victims who have human rights cannot effectively invoke them and thus must rely on "America's" avenging ethical integrity: its "safe hands." In thus estranging the terrain mapped by the American exceptionalist ethos, these genealogical texts (Twain's against itself), not only bear historical witness to the apocalyptic violence that American exceptionalism has always disavowed (or represented as collateral damage) in the name of progress. In so doing, they also proleptically point to the urgent need, made manifest in the period between the Cold War and the War on Terror, for an American studies that has as its "end" the revocation of the traditionalist Americanist vocation: the interrogation of the redeemer nation's "safe hands." And beyond that, of course, the retrieval of speech (the political) from the shock-and-awing spectacle.

NOTES

1. In invoking the notion of the spectacle, I am distinguishing it from the sublime (the nothingness of being). In the pre-Socratic Greek era, the sublime (*hupsous*) instigated wonder, the impulse to ask the question of being. The spectacle, on the other hand, produces awe, and, as such, has as its purpose

the petrifaction of questioning. It is, as Guy Debord has shown in *The Society of the Spectacle*, the means by which the West has domesticated and consumerized the sublime.

2. As I have shown in *Exiles in the City,* the liminality of the post-imperial occasion Said diagnoses in *Culture and Imperialism* is paralleled in a remarkably similar way by Hannah Arendt in the chapter of *Imperialism* (the second part of *The Origins of Totalitarianism)* entitled "The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man" (267–302); and by Agamben in "Beyond Human Rights."

3. I use "ethos" here and throughout this essay in the sense that Jacques Rancière gives to the word in his critique of the "consensus" politics of democratic capitalism:

> political dissensus over partaking in the common of the community [which is to say, authentic politics] gets reduced to a distribution in which each part of the social body supposedly obtains the share to which it is entitled. According to this logic, positive laws and rights are increasingly finely molded to fit the diversity of social groups and to match the speed of changes of social life and individual ways of being. The aim of consensual practice is to produce an identity between law and fact, such that the former becomes identical with the natural life of society. In other words, consensus consists in the reduction of democracy to the way of life or *ethos* of a society—the dwelling and lifestyle of a specific group. (72).

4. Parts of this book were previously published in *Esquire, Rolling Stone*, and *North American Review* between 1968 and 1970.

5. Outraged by the "repulsive, unnatural, and indecent plot" in Melville's *Pierre; or The Ambiguities*, Peck wrote: "We can afford Mr. Melville full license to do what he likes with 'Omoo' and its ["savage"] inhabitants; it is only when he presumes to thrust his tragic *Fantoccini* upon us, as representatives of our own race, that we feel compelled to turn our critical Aegis upon him, and freeze him into silence."

6. See Hall.

7. Foucault writes,

> The new historian, the genealogist, will know what to make of this masquerade [the traditional historian giving "alternate identities, more individualized and substantial" than those of modern European humanity]. He will not be too serious to enjoy it; on the contrary, he will push the masquerade to its limit and prepare the great carnival of time where masks are constantly reappearing. No longer the identification of our faint individuality with the solid identities of the past, but our "unrealization" through the excessive choice of identities—Frederick Hohenstaufen, Caesar, Jesus, Dionysus, and possibly Zarathustra. (160–61)

8. For a powerful reading of the "paranoid" aspect of American exceptionalist policy in the post-9/11 era, which is instigated by what, echoing the American jeremiad, she calls "enemy deficit," see McClintock.

9. See, for example, Cox; and Smith, *Mark Twain's Fable*. Twain's penchant for techno-science at the time of writing *Connecticut Yankee* is epitomized by his famous addiction to the Paige typesetting machine.

10. See, for example, Rowe; and Sewell.

11. For an extended version of this argument that Twain is basically sympathetic with his Yankee protagonist, see Spanos, *Shock and Awe*.

12. The euphemism "attrition" also points to the paradoxical banalization of the spectacular violence of the referent. It achieved its apogee in Robert Komer, head of CORDS (Civilian Operations and Revolutionary Development Support) and mastermind of the "Phoenix," or "pacification" program: the systematic American effort to gain control of the villages of South Vietnam that took the form of the indiscriminate calculus of the "kill ratio" or "body count": "if we attrit the population base of the Viet Cong, it will accelerate the process of degrading the V.C." (qtd. in Tram xiii). For an extended analysis of the United States' banalization of spectacular violence in Vietnam, see Spanos, *Exiles*.

13. The screen play of *Dr. Strangelove* was co-written by Stanley Kubrick and Terry Southern, who adapted it from Peter George's Cold War thriller novel *Red Alert* (1958). Aware of the exorbitant excessiveness of the United States' exceptionalist Cold War policy, Kubrick and Southern, his co-writer, not unlike Melville vis-à-vis American Ahabism and Indian-hating, immediately re-envisioned George's thriller as a black—indeed, absurdist—comedy, the only authentic way of representing the lunatic reality of the nuclear arms race.

14. See, for example, Rourke.

15. See Tuveson. In the appendix, "A Connecticut Yankee in the Mystical Babylon," Tuveson not only reads Twain's novel as an important instance of this nineteenth-century American Protestant millennialism but also, in identifying Morgan's project with America as a "redeemer nation," harnesses the novel to the United States' Cold War policy against Soviet totalitarianism.

16. The extreme degree to which the Bush administration staged history as spectacle in the aftermath of 9/11—and to which the American media and public mimicked its silencing imperatives—is persuasively shown by Susan Faludi in *The Terror Dream*.

17. F. O. Matthiessen's democratic American canon was directed against Nazi totalitarianism during World War II, not Soviet communism. But his exceptionalist canonization of American literature was instrumental in the Myth and Symbol School's harnessing of his reading to the Cold War against the Soviet Union.

18. See also Pease and Fluck, *Re-Framing*.

19. Rancière writes,

> The "right to humanitarian interference" . . . is like the return of the disused rights sent to the rightless back to their senders. This movement is not a null transaction. In being returned, the "disused" rights acquire a new use, one which effects on the world stage what consensus achieves on the national stages: an erasure of the boundary between law and fact, law and lawlessness. The human rights that are "returned" are the rights of the absolute victim, so-called because he is the victim of an absolute evil. The rights that are returned to the sender—and avenger—are akin to a power of infinite justice against the Axis of Evil. (74)

The expression "infinite justice" was the term the Bush administration used to refer to the shock-and-awe War on Terror in the wake of 9/11.

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