Columbus's America and Emerson's America

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The idea of two Americas, put forth in Ted Grimsrud's essay, is one that I have thought about a great deal in the last several months in Iraq. Most of my friends here are French, Spanish, and Italian. They go to great lengths to stay as far away from Americans as possible. In fact, one of them has strict regulations about avoiding contact with Americans, and many more refuse any kind of formal partnerships with US organizations. But all of them make exceptions for the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). I have been to dozens of NGO parties where an MCC colleague and I were the only Americans. Often the conversation would turn to complaints about Americans (the way they look, dress, or talk, how much they eat, the way they vote) followed by apologies – 'Oops, sorry, I keep forgetting you are one of them.' At that point I would often note the irony that such conversations were taking place against the backdrop of a very loud stereo playing REM, Beck, Lou Reed, or even Sinatra, all quintessentially American artists.

When I talk about two Americas here I mean Empire America, an empire possible in part because there is no civic nation, and the Artists' America, the wild riot of our novels, films, and music. I will call them by the names of their founders, Columbus's America and Emerson's America. I will get to something more like Grimsrud's distinctions later.

Withdrawal has a long and noble lineage in the mythology of Emerson's America. I don't mean the American mythology of the high school history books, of the politicians' America, or of John Rawls, but the very different American mythology as presented on film and in literature. Thoreau headed for the pond to escape the 'quiet desperation' of his neighbors in Concord. Huck Finn lights out for the territories once he realizes that Missouri is unlivable. Shane rides off into the darkness after his attempt to rejoin civilization is foiled. He is pushed out, reminded that there is nothing for him but withdrawal. Bogart's Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe, one expects, have merely stayed out.[1] But we do not blame them. Their America, which is called 'California,' unlike Shane's, is uninhabitable. Philip Roth's Zuckerman lives alone like a hermit, because, he says, it is the only way 'to keep the shit at bay.'[2]

These are Emerson's compatriots, inhabitants of the city of words he founded, which he called 'this new yet unapproachable America.'[3] Why 'unapproachable'? Why are its inhabitants withdrawn, or withdrawn from? Most obviously because this America, the one founded not by Columbus but by Emerson, a land of myth and dream existing in, and beckoning from, Emerson's prose, is not something you can simply approach. You have to be born into it, 'born again' as Emerson puts it. It is also unapproachable in that you cannot get nearer to it because it is right next to us. It is in our laps. For some reason we cannot take hold of it, perhaps because we are not trying hard enough. But that doesn't seem to quite get at what Emerson thinks. He writes, 'I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch the hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition.'[4] If you read closely, you hear the connection between those clutching fingers and the hand in our 'un*hand*some condition' and you may begin to think, as Stanley Cavell does, that the objects are not slippery in themselves. Our clutching makes them slippery. It is a parable of philosophy's violence.[5]

Emerson feels the burden of this unapproachability as acutely as any thinker I know. In 'Self-Reliance' he says of Americans, 'Every word they say chagrins us and we know not where to begin to set them right.'[6] The 'us' is important. We are chagrined by each other. All of us harbor different visions of America, none of which can be adjudicated – a way of saying we are still not democrats. Furthermore, it confesses Emerson's own weakness and complicity. 'We know not where to begin to set them right': Emerson offers no place where words can be safe – not in church, not among the proletariat, not in a Scottish fishing village. 'Every word they say chagrins us': whether it is the speech of our politicians or the advertisers, or the fact that millions of Americans will, on any birthday, wedding, or death, allow their sentiments to be expressed by Hallmark instead of by themselves.[7]

The problem is that *every* word chagrins us. Cavell suggests Emerson recalls here the opening of Aristotle's *Politics*, where we are told it is language that fits us for political association.[8] Emerson says the same thing, but in a minor key so it sounds like language fates us, condemns us, to political association, as if language is itself a prison, the 'zoo of words' to use Nabokov's terrifying image. Emerson is saying that politics in this country called America

chagrins him. Or, as Cavell puts it, 'America has not yet been discovered.' There is no civic nation, no Democracy Story.[9]

If every word chagrins us, this means there are no words left for Emerson that aren't the same as the chagrining words. The words we share in common are all the words we've got.[10] So the heroes of Emerson's America perform an act of withdrawal. They deny their audience; they write for everyone and no one; they attempt to turn their stammering into irony, paradox, pun. That is, they write like Emerson, Nietzsche, or Wittgenstein. They write like the modernist artist painted and sculpted. They deny their audience in hopes of creating a new one.[11] Cavell wrote of modernist art, 'The loss of a public is in fact the artist's withdrawal from his public, as a consequence of his faithfulness to his art. The public is lost to art because they are readying themselves for war, for life by the gun. They are also lost because of art, because art maintains itself against their assaults, and because, almost against its will, it unsettles the illusions by means of which civilized people conduct themselves.'[12]

Why is this so hard for theology to understand? One way to approach it would be to wonder why theology is so preoccupied with the question of the 'public' and so resistant to the redefinitions that, say, John Howard Yoder tried to give to that term. Instead, I am asking what words we might substitute for 'artist' and 'art' in Cavell's statement. Could we substitute 'theologian' for 'artist'? Why not? Because the proper analogical terms are not theologian and church, but Christian and church? Could we honestly substitute 'church' for 'art'? Are discussions like this one, and the many preceding it, just covers for the anxiety that even if we could withdraw we don't deserve to? That we haven't earned the right, or that we have lost the right, to withdraw? That we are part of the public, participants in Empire, just insofar as we are not yet democrats? What is democracy? Who is a democrat?

Democracy does not name a pre-designed framework of principles, rights, privileges, and institutions presented to the people as a gift from the elites, though some such framework will be indispensable. It names a space in which diverse individuals and groups come together in hopes of discovering how their interests are tangled up with each other's interests. In doing so, they are forged into political beings. They may fear that in this conversation they might have to compromise, but they persist in hoping that they might be

transformed. Democracy encourages the voicing of differences, and welcomes and demands dissent from the most unruly corners of the demos. But it is never difference for the sake of difference or unruliness for its own sake. Democracy is deliberation about how the goals of individuals and groups might be seen as interconnected, and about how those goals may not be able to be formulated, let alone achieved, in isolation. Democracy is deliberation about what constitutes the good and how to achieve it, not about how to achieve a good known in advance through strategies known in advance. Furthermore, that good is never allowed to become a 'common good,' if this means a good that becomes reified in such a way as to overrule emerging conflicts, one that is not allowed to be provisional but instead becomes a possession.

That many so-called democrats too often forget this is one reason Sheldon Wolin, who for many of us has come to define the political and to whom the previous paragraph is indebted, insists that democracy has become fugitive. Now that the spaces of democracy have been colonized by the internal workings of Empire, now that the civic nation has been swallowed up by the megastate – the Economic Polity, governmentality, the society of control, pick your description – the moments of democracy's achievement are fleeting, episodic, and local. But for Wolin this is not a problem. He writes,

> The true question is not whether democracy can govern in the traditional sense, but why it would want to. Governing means manning and accommodating to bureaucratized institutions that, *ipso facto*, are hierarchical in structure and elitist, permanent rather than fugitive – in short, anti-democratic. . . . Accordingly, small scale is the only scale commensurate with the kind and amount of power that democracy is capable of mobilizing, given the prevailing modes of economic organization. The power of a democratic politics lies in the multiplicity of modest sites dispersed among local governments and institutions under local control.'[13]

This is Wolin's version of the Democracy Story and the Empire Story. I am largely persuaded by it, though I want to let Emerson guard against any attempt to read nostalgia into Wolin's account of American history.

I am struck most by the differences between Wolin's version and Grimsrud's, yet I am open to the argument that the latter may have a similar meaning. Such an argument would have to explain the relative priority in Grimsrud's account of democracy of things like 'voting and office-holding' or the repeated insistence on influencing the government. It would also have to explain the near-total lack of attention to the local and the small scale, and be clearer that the validity of democracy is *not* to be understood as dependent upon its influence over our government. Despite Grimsrud's criticisms of the nation-state, his repeated references to 'public policy' suggest he is far less aware than Wolin that democracy is an end in itself that is likely to be squandered when it attempts to find a home in federal institutions. For Grimsrud, instead of containing hierarchical and elitist bureaucracies that are essentially anti-democratic, it is as if the Democracy Story includes a set of institutions that are essentially in good order but are being misused. This difference has to do with his failure to develop a critique of liberal democracy. As it is, his democracy can seem like it is just Rawls plus religious voices. That is a good thing, but the critique of Rawls offered by Stout (not to mention Wolin) goes much deeper and is much more unsettling. It reveals liberalism as 'a program of social control.'[14] For Grimsrud, however, America's violence is almost exclusively identified with foreign policy. The bad America is the one of militarism and imperialism, not the corporatist state at home.

If Wolin is correct, what light does he throw on 'let the church be the church'? What is the difference between that admonition and being part of the multiplicity of modest sites under local control? What if 'let the church be the church' meant being part of that multiplicity? It would not have to mean that Mennonites 'have the responsibility to speak out openly and assertively in contributing to democracy by playing a role in the public conversation by which our society arrives at governmental policies.' It would mean the careful cultivation of a radically democratic church life, what Yoder called 'a free-church ecclesiology,' based on the vision of 1 Corinthians 12-14. It would strive to enact in its own life what has been made impossible by contemporary configurations of power. It would by no means rule out 'openly and assertively . . . contributing to democracy by playing a role in the public conversation by which our society arrives at governmental policies,' but doing so would not be seen as particularly democratic, let alone as a privileged mode of fulfilling the

mandate to work for a more just society. Instead, it would focus on entering into alliances and coalitions with other outposts of the multiplicitous witness for something more humane than the administered society. Not, however, only to promote an agenda but to discern an agenda, and to be transformed in the process. This would not be done in addition to being the church. It would be done out of the recognition that being the church demands vulnerable encounters with others. Only then will our eyes be pried open to the sins we are too blind to notice without the prodding of outsiders, and only then will we have the opportunity for confession, hence forgiveness.

Notes

[1] Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film,* Enlarged ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 56.
[2] *American Pastoral* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 64.
[3] Emerson, 'Experience,' in *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 485.
[4] *Ibid*., 473.
[5] For much of this paragraph, I am indebted to Cavell, 'Finding as Founding,' in *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures After Emerson After Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque, NM: Living Batch Press, 1989).
[6] *Essays and Lectures*, 264.
[7] Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 245.
[8] *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 24.
[9] At least not Grimsrud's version of it. We will get to Sheldon Wolin's version shortly.
[10] To say that Emerson, and we, have no words but all those words we have in common, the current use of which chagrins us, is to deny that Emerson is the conventional individualist of liberal philosophy. For Emerson, the social is everywhere. As Cavell puts it, 'In Emerson, as in Wittgenstein, I encounter the social in every utterance and in each silence. Sometimes this means that I find in myself nothing but social, dictated thoughts (the condition Emerson opposes as "conformity," what philosophy has forever called the unexamined life); sometimes it means that I find in the social nothing but chaos' (*Cities of Words*, 4).
[11] Ted Koontz beautifully modeled this kind of Emersonian self-reliance in his remarks to the Ethics War and Peace conference in Jerusalem, a story he tells in the essay Grimsrud is criticizing (see *MQR* 77.1 [2003]). Grimsrud likes this part of the essay because it is an example of 'first language discourse' but thinks Koontz should decline ever to use 'second-language discourse.' But it is not clear if Grimsrud is saying, 'always use the language of Christian faith and never the language of secular and pragmatic considerations,' or that the distinction too easily breaks down, or that second language use is okay, just so long as it is

Arundhati Roy, Jonathan Schell, and Noam Chomsky and not the 'pragmatic' discourse of the politicians. While preparing these remarks I spent a day in Washington, DC, meeting with Senate staffers and officials at the State Department and National Security Council to talk about Iraq. There I quite freely used the sort of 'second language' Koontz recommends. Not doing so was and is a bit hard for me to imagine. I wonder if first and second languages is the best way to phrase the options. Wittgenstein pictures language as an old city. In that case there is only one language in question. What Koontz calls 'first language' we might then call the part of the city where we grew up. Wittgenstein's image may make it easier to see how the lines between first and second languages are often rather difficult to discern.

[12] *The World Viewed*, 230.

[13] *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, Expanded ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 602-03. See also the introduction to Wolin, *The Presence of the Past* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 5: 'Less than two hundred fifty years ago, "America" was primarily the name for diffused powers represented by thirteen provincial societies and their scattered towns, villages, and settlements. Now it signifies an imperial system struggling to preserve its global influence while simultaneously launching its power into outer space.'

[14] Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 81.