

Early Nineteenth Century:

Romantics in Europe and Democratic Nationalists in America

Introduction

Napoleon Bonaparte was finally defeated in 1815. Though he died in exile six years later, his ghost would haunt Europe for decades. On the Isle of Elba he had created a fictitious version of his career that would inspire some and frighten others. Victor Hugo and Stendhal spoke for those who yearned for a return to the imagined glories of what was actually a military dictatorship. Prince Metternich took these yearnings so seriously that he sought to repress all progressive inclinations throughout Europe to prevent a recurrence of revolutionary violence. Our period begins with the end of the empire of Napoleon Bonaparte. It concludes with the elevation of his nephew, Napoleon III as emperor of France. Karl Marx famously, if rather unfairly, observed that history does indeed repeat itself – first as tragedy, then as farce.

European Politics and Society

The Congress of Vienna of 1815 confirmed the restoration of Bourbon rule in France in the person of Louis XVIII. It also pacified Europe so effectively that there would not be another war involving all of the Great Powers for a century. The system of European diplomacy, what might be called “the spirit of Vienna,” finally broke down in 1914 when German militarism triggered the slaughter of the First World War.

Metternich desired to preserve order and stability – and to prevent revolution. As it turned out, this was an age of largely futile revolutions often originating in French domestic politics. Louis XVIII was a moderate royalist. He was thus opposed by radicals who wished to abolish the monarchy altogether and by the ultras, a group headed by the king’s brother and successor, who wished to return to the glorious days when France was ruled by a monarch absolute by the grace of God. Also engaging in the politics of nostalgia were those like Stendhal who had fought under Napoleon, cherished the mythic narrative of his reign and yearned for the lost glory of Napoleonic France. All of these various forces would, in turn, get a chance to govern France.

Louis XVIII was able to provide a moderate administration for the first several years of his reign. However, even before his death in 1824, the

ultras had gained the ascendancy. His brother's accession as Charles X merely solidified and confirmed this trend. When, in 1830, Charles claimed absolute royal power, his actions triggered a revolution in France that culminated in the constitutional monarchy of Louis-Phillippe, the last king of France.

In the French Revolution of 1789, three groups had combined to overthrow the ancien regime: the upper middle class, the peasants, and the workers of Paris. Since their feudal obligations were eliminated, the peasants were now satisfied and politically conservative. The defeat of Charles X extinguished the last gasp of aristocratic privilege in French politics. Louis Phillippe was aptly called the Bourgeois monarch. The middle class was once again ruling France. However, it is important that we not be confused by the term "middle class." In America we now tend to see the vast bulk of the population as "middle class." That is not what it meant in nineteenth century Europe. The "middle class" was the haut-bourgeoisie, a tiny minority of the wealthiest elite who had used the artisan and laboring classes of Paris to defeat the aristocracy by deluding them into believing that they would benefit from a middle class victory. In short, after the Paris mob provided the muscle for the revolutions, the capitalists got the spoils of victory and the workers got the shaft. They had yet to realize that they were allied with the very employers who were exploiting them. When they figured this out in 1848, they would rebel against Bourgeois republican rule .

In that year, the workers, reacting to two years of economic hardships caused by bad harvests, a financial crisis and an economic depression, rebelled against the monarchy and its bourgeois supporters. Radical theorists such as Louis Blanc, Proudhon, as well as Marx and Engels proliferated. When the government attempted to suppress dissent, rebellion broke out and Paris soon became a barricaded city. Louis Phillippe abdicated and fled to England – and the Second Republic was proclaimed with a program of universal male suffrage and unemployment relief through a system of national workshops for the proletariat. However, to finance this urban welfare scheme, taxes were levied on the countryside which had no desire to support Parisian workers. The government, having lost the support of rural France, where a majority of Frenchmen lived, closed the national workshops and the army assaulted the barricades of the Parisian revolutionaries. The working classes had been abandoned by the Republic.

The Parisian radicals had been grandiose in their aims – envisioning the French government as leading an international crusade for democracy and promoting such causes as the independence of Poland. In actuality, the conservative drift in French politics was confirmed by the election of Louis Napoleon and his elevation as Emperor Napoleon III in 1852. He would rule France until the rise of Bismarck and French defeat in the

Franco-Prussian War in 1870.

By 1815, England, France and Spain were well established nation states. This was not at all the case for Austria, Hungary Germany or Italy. Italy and Germany were fragmented while Austria and Hungary were components of the sprawling, and rather disorganized Hapsburg Empire. Thus, “Liberty” – that Romantic watchword throughout nineteenth century Europe – possessed a variety of meanings. In the older nation states, it meant an expansion of suffrage, social justice and constitutional liberty. However, in middle Europe and Italy, it meant the creation of a nation-state as an expression of national patriotism – liberty from foreign domination. The Vienna settlement totally ignored the nationalist aspirations of the peoples of Italy and central Europe. Indeed, Hapsburg Austria and Czarist Russia ruled over many different ethnicities including Poles, Hungarians, Czechs, Italians and Germans. Both Italy and Germany were purely geographic and ethnic expressions, not political ones. Italian territories were under Austrian control while what we think of as Germany was a large collection of principalities and other small political units under a hegemony shared by Austria and Prussia – numerous states in search of a nation. The Hungarians yearned for independence from Austria, but displayed little sympathy for the national aspirations of the Serbs, Croats, and Romanians whom they themselves dominated. The Poles continued their chronic desire for national unity as their lands had been carved up by the Austrians, the Prussians and the Russians.

This was the Eastern Europe that Klemens von Metternich, chief minister of the Austrian Hapsburg Empire, was attempting to stabilize. He can be excused for concluding that he must oppose any liberalizing activity anywhere in Europe for fear of a contagion effect that would topple the entire house of cards that was the Hapsburg Empire. Indeed, the only sentiment that united the various nationalities that composed the empire was a shared hostility to their Hapsburg masters. Of course, by adopting this approach, he repressed not only dangerous radical movements but also the most modest and conservative criticism of the regime and was thus prevented from co-opting the moderates. He fostered a totally repressive police state wherever he had control or even influence. In fairness to his very high intelligence, he recognized that his was, in the long run, a losing strategy – much like the Dutch boy with his finger in the dike. However, he was very sensitive to the vast slaughter that had resulted from the instability wrought by the French Revolution and its aftermath – and thus of the value of stability and order. He hoped to buy time for what might be thought of as a soft landing – and he succeeded in buying three decades before he was finally toppled in the Revolution of 1848. Before that he had put down several insurrections in Italy and elsewhere – and retarded the development of nationalistic aspirations and liberal reform as far as he could reach.

However, one nationalist uprising posed a unique quandary for the status quo powers – the nationalist rebellion of the Greeks against their Ottoman overlords. Here was a clear case of an attempt by an ethnic group to violate the basic principle of the Vienna settlement with the claim of a right of ethnic self-determination. The logical extension of any such claim entailed the very destruction of both the Hapsburg and Czarist empires. Clearly, the Great powers needed to support the Turks and put down this usurpation of legitimate authority. On the other hand, to do so would be to put the European powers in the service of the Islamic Turks against not only a Christian people but against the Greek culture that claimed to be the very foundation of European society. In the end, romantic Hellenism won the day with support for the Greek cause championed by all the right-thinking people of Europe. Writers and scholars including Byron and Shelley sprang to the cause – and it was in this context that Shelley proclaimed that the poet is “the unacknowledged legislator of the world.” In the end, perhaps he was correct as this widespread support of the Greek cause inclined statesmen of the great powers to first destroy the Turkish fleet and then impose a settlement on the Turks that provided Greece with independence. Curiously, in the light of its espousal of nationalism and ethnic self-determination, the new nation would be ruled by a Bavarian prince called Otto I.

Following the overthrow of Charles X in the French Revolution of 1830, liberal and national movements in other countries were greatly encouraged – precisely the contagion effect that Metternich had always feared. Belgium successfully achieved independence from Holland and the Swiss won liberal constitutional reforms. Nationalist sentiment intensified among Poles, Czechs, Hungarians, Romanians and the Irish – as well as among the German middle class. In Poland, a revolt against Russian rule was easily suppressed when Polish hopes of French support proved to be an illusion. Also, uprisings in Italy collapsed both because of military interventions by Austria and because they never really attracted all that much popular support.

In the German states, an important milestone on the path to German unification occurred in 1833 when Prussia took the lead in organizing a German free trade zone that excluded Austria but encompassed much of what would become the German nation. Consequently, the new German nation would be dominated by Prussia, rather than Austria.

Russia was, by far, the most backward place in Europe – a land of illiterate serfs ruled by a despotic autocrat. There was virtually no middle-class and what political opposition existed was confined to the aristocratic intelligentsia. It is hardly surprising that the Russian Tsar was a staunch supporter of Klemens von Metternich and his counter-revolutionary policy. Here, the forces of repression had a rather easy time of it. There was an uprising of liberal military officers in 1825, the so-called

Decembrist Revolt, that was occasioned by the succession crisis following the death of Alexander I. In fact the Czar's older son, Constantine, the Liberal candidate, had secretly renounced the throne in favor of his more reactionary brother, Nicholas I. The Army officers and their loyal troops rose in favor of the older son with the cry of "Constantine and Constitution!" – a plaint that would have been quite moving but for the fact that the illiterate and ignorant soldiery thought that "constitution" was the name of Constantine's wife. In the event, the entire affair was bungled and the regime's loyal troops had no trouble in putting it down.

In Italy in 1848, revolutionaries rose up against the autocratic rule of the Pope in the papal states. As usual, after some encouraging early success, the revolt was suppressed – in this case by French troops who shelled Rome and occupied the city in July, 1849. Earlier that year, an Austrian army under General Radetzky defeated an Italian nationalistic uprising against Austrian rule. To this day, in Vienna, at the stroke of midnight on December 31, the orchestra strikes up the Radetzky march to welcome in the New Year.

By this time, England had already achieved what all but the most radical European reformers were attempting to create – a stable constitutional monarchy dominated by the legislative branch. When Burke attacked the French Revolution, he was not defending absolute monarchy or the suppression of civil liberty, but extolling that government of England that would have been viewed as extremely liberal on the continent. Burke was nothing if not a member of Parliament – and his nation and its government was admired by progressive forces throughout Europe.

It is striking that during this revolutionary period, Britain did *not* experience a political revolution. There was an ongoing pressure for political reform of Parliament and for extension of the electoral franchise to include middle-class voters. In 1832, Parliament passed the Reform Act which did both. What was gained in France by revolution was achieved in Britain through reform.

However in 1838, two skilled workmen prepared a charter that would ultimately be signed by millions of people and then delivered to Parliament. It called for universal manhood suffrage, annual elections, the secret ballot, and salaries for members of Parliament. Parliament summarily rejected Chartist petitions and Britain's constitutional monarchy continued to have a narrow electoral base. The British upper class reformers feared that letting popular demands get out of control might lead to the sort of revolutionary violence that had occurred in France. However, unlike their French counterparts, British workers themselves remained committed to peaceful protest.

In an interesting television series, John Kenneth Galbraith identified three requirements for a successful revolution: (1) determined leaders who

know exactly what they want and realize that they have everything both to lose and to gain; (2) disciplined followers who will obey marching orders without question; and (3) a weak government and ruling class: “All revolutions are the kicking in of a rotten door by determined men charging into a vacuum.” He points out that all of these conditions were present in 1917 in Russia and in China after World War II. However, none obtained in France in 1848. Underlying authority was strong and quickly re-asserted. (John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Age of Uncertainty*; Episode 3) The same could be said for most of Europe both in Britain and on the continent.

Some have said that in 1848, European states reached a turning point and failed to turn. With the notable exception of England, there were uprisings in many of the states of Europe. After some initial indications of success, almost all were ultimately defeated by the reactionary forces of established authority. Considerable blood was shed in a lost cause – an outcome that can be viewed as romantically noble or morally irresponsible as one is so inclined. True, at the age of seventy-nine, Klemens von Metternich was forced by the mob to flee Vienna. He lived in England and Belgium for a few years before returning to Vienna in 1851 where he occasionally advised Emperor Franz Joseph until he died eight years later at the age of eighty-six. It is hard to avoid the impression that the armed revolutions that characterized the period tended to be “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing” – to coin a phrase. However, at the same period, there was a different sort of revolutionary development whose significance it is impossible to exaggerate. We must now turn to the Industrial Revolution that would ultimately transform all of human life – and that began in England only a couple of centuries ago.

The Industrial Revolution

When we think of the year 1789, our mind might travel to Philadelphia and the drafting of the American Constitution. Perhaps, we would conjure up visions of the Parisian mob and the Bastille. We would probably not recall the building of the first steam-driven cotton factory in Manchester, England – just one in a long series of events and inventions that would transform the very nature of human work – substituting for the first time the power of steam (and later electricity) for the brute force of humans and animals. The resulting re-organization of human effort would ultimately enlist the aid of science and technology to the point where, for the first time in human history, we have solved the problem of production. Our capacity to produce goods is limited only by the demand for a sustainable ecology – and our ability to usefully distribute what we produce.

“The Industrial Revolution began in England during the eighteenth century...In 1750, English agricultural yield had increased to the point

that almost 15 percent of what was produced could be exported abroad (although about a third of the population still did not have enough to eat) ...Over two centuries, enclosure acts forced perhaps half of English small land owners from the land, swelling the ranks of agricultural laborers.” (Merriman; *A History of Modern Europe*; p. 366ff). This dramatic increase in farm yields, allowing more people to be fed by fewer farmers, was a pre-condition for industrialization.

During the late eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth centuries two related and interacting tendencies produced an explosion of productive capacity such as the world had never known. These two developments were the organization of the factory system and a series of mechanical inventions for the manufacture and transportation of goods – above all, the steam engine.

At first, the steam engine was just new source of power for pumping water out of mines. Refined by a number of inventors, most famously James Watt, it could drive machinery, and power ships and locomotives. In 1830, the first passenger train connected Liverpool and Manchester. Automated printing presses driven by steam power even underpinned an education program for mass literacy. These and many other inventions, above all the very spirit of invention itself, became the order of the day to the extent that an American corporation in the twentieth century could boast that “Progress is our most important product.”

The effects of the transformation of the means of production can hardly be exaggerated. The production of manufactured goods in Britain doubled during the last half of the eighteenth century making her far and away the wealthiest nation in the world. Along with industrialization came urbanization and widening disparities of wealth and poverty.

During our period, industrialization spread to Belgium, Germany and, to a lesser extent to France – as well as to the United States. However, since we know that this is a movement that would dominate the global economy, we are tempted to view its growth as more rapid than it was. In fact, even in England, factory workers comprised only five percent of the population in 1850 and the average unit of production was the size of a workshop.

With the growth of manufacturing, trade and cities, it became a compliment to say that someone or something reflected ‘urbanity’ and the ideal of the gentleman came replace that of the aristocrat; urbanity rather than honor was the ideal of the gentleman. In Britain, one didn’t become a member of the elite by joining the nobility, but by owning real property. Thus, social status and political influence were based on the ownership of large amounts of land, by noble or non-noble alike. Jane Austen’s Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy is very much one of the elite.

Historians are divided over whether average living conditions for urban laborers were worse than they had been for farm laborers of

previous generations. No one doubts that they were dreadful beyond anything that we can imagine outside of third world societies. Indeed, it is a measure of the ultimate success of the Industrial Revolution that this world seems so alien to us who are its beneficiaries. However, the prosperity that was the fruit of industrialization would be achieved very slowly and only fully realized in the mid-twentieth century in America from which it would spread first to Western Europe and then throughout the globe. It is curious that the factory owners who organized the industrial armies of the early nineteenth century are generally despised while the military leaders responsible for millennia of totally pointless slaughter are glorified. Nevertheless, I find it impossible to view the involuntary sacrifices of factory workers and miners of past ages without feeling intense moral discomfort over their suffering for eventual benefits that they would never enjoy. The misery visited upon the men, women and children during our period is horrible to contemplate.

What is not clear is that conditions of life for the urban proletariat were significantly worse than that experienced by the poor peasant of the previous century. For instance, the average life expectancy in France during the last half of that century was only twenty-nine. In Sweden, a country of relative longevity, you might well last until age thirty-five. Severe starvation as a result of poor harvests were by no means the anomaly we experience them to be – and wouldn't become anomalous until the revolution in global transport made possible by industrialization. People drew warmth from fireplaces during the day and from animals with whom many shared quarters at night. The peasant ate rye bread, porridge, and vegetables. For many people, meat was little more than a distant memory of a wedding feast.

Nevertheless, it is true that urbanization in the nineteenth century occurred too rapidly to accommodate the enlarged population and this resulted in squalid conditions of the most appalling depravity and even starvation. "Buildings in industrial cities, built hurriedly and as cheaply as possible, quickly became dilapidated tenements... Many workers lived among terrible smells from raw sewage, garbage, industrial pollution such as that caused by sulfurous smoke, and putrid rivers and streams. Warm summers brought outbreaks of serious diseases like typhus and dysentery... The causes of death in every city reflected inadequate diet and housing." (Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe*; p. 696ff). For "millions of people, only a thin line stood between having enough to eat and hunger or starvation, occasional employment and begging, prostitution and petty theft, and between good health and sudden illness and death... Meager harvests and bitter winters periodically took terrible tolls of the poor... The urban and rural poor were perpetually undernourished... The consumption of meat by poor people was rare... Water, often not very clean, was the drink of necessity; wine and beer were beyond the budget

of most people.” (Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe*; p. 377ff).

So much for living conditions. What was it like at work in mines and factories where men, women and young children spent most of their waking life? “With industrialization, children came to be employed in factories, where their compact size made them adept at certain tasks, such as mending broken threads, or climbing on machinery to extract something impeding its operations... Factory work was often dangerous <and often children suffered being permanently injured by machinery – an occurrence that the proprietor would blame on the child’s own carelessness.>An eight year old girl who worked as a ‘trapper’ in the mine pits, opening ventilation doors to let coal wagons pass, related, ‘I have to trap without a light, and I’m scared. I go at four <in the morning> ... Sometimes I sing when I have light, but not in the dark. I dare not sing then’ ” Children as young as six years old had to work thirteen to sixteen hours having been woken by their parents before dawn to walk over a mile in the dark to reach the factory. The resulting fatigue would be corrected with a whipping whenever they yielded to the temptation to doze at their work. Indeed, by the end of the shift, the screams from children being strapped to keep them attentive was all but constant. In 1833, in Britain, very young children were not legally allowed to be worked more than eight hours a day – but the law was not enforced as the dominant social philosophy was that of a laissez-faire economics that opposed all social legislation as an improper government interference in the marketplace.

Again, we must remember that most of the population did not work in the large factories. Indeed, while “female labor remained central to large scale industrialization... In Western European nations, domestic service remained the largest category of female occupations at mid-century... Working up to eighteen hours a day, servants slept under staircases and in attics, but ate relatively well... Hundreds of thousands of women worked full or part-time as prostitutes... ranging from confident high-class courtesans to poor girls beckoning clients from dark doorways. Some women, including many who were married, were able to earn much more money selling sexual favors than they could earn in textile mills or in domestic service....” (Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe*; p. 696f).

However, increasingly the human sacrifice began to trouble the morally sensitive members of the intellectual class. The northern industrial cities of England attracted the attention of horrified observers including Frederick Engels. There were reformers, but their efforts did not bear fruit until late in the century. During our period, progressive thought was dominated by what Marx and Engels would dismiss as utopian socialists. Of these, I find Robert Owen to be the most interesting. He would seem to be the model for Shaw’s character of Andrew Undershaft. Very much as described in the final act of *Major Barbara*, Owen had “turned his mill in New Lanark, Scotland, into an experiment <where> he provided sturdy,

clean housing for workers and established schools for their children...<In France, Louis Blanc looked to state action to improve the lot of the workers while Proudhon > looked not to the state but to its abolition.” (Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe*; p. 709ff).

It occurs to me that our period ends with two visions of the future of industrialism – The Communist Manifesto of 1848 and the Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851. Marx and Engels offered the workers a vision of violent struggle with the despairing sales pitch that they had nothing to lose. Despite rather fatuous claims that they were offering a scientific, as opposed to utopian, Socialism; Marx and Engels were really purveying a romantic vision that was very much at odds with the oft quoted viewpoint of James Madison: “If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.” (James Madison Federalist #51.) In its place, Marx and Engels, asserted that there would one day emerge a new sort of creature they called ‘socialist man’ who would not be covetous and selfish, but would be quite contented to contribute all he could to the limit of his abilities while receiving only what he needed from the earthly paradise. By contrast, Prince Albert offered a dream of steady advances through industrial progress – a process that would eventuate in the highest standard of living that humanity has ever known – one so comfortable that we take it for granted and can’t help but be horrified at the conditions of life that mankind had experienced throughout its entire history up to, at least, the end of our period.

The Romantic Response

When we think of poetry, we tend to think of Shelley and Byron after a brief nod to Shakespeare and, if we are a college undergraduate, possibly a smirking reference to Marvel’s coy mistress. If we think of opera, we assume that the soprano will take an unconscionably long time to expire in the final act. In sculpture, aside from Michelangelo, we are likely to think first of Rodin; in fiction of Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Dickens and Hugo. The exceptions to this catalog would seem to be in music where a romanticized Mozart life-story along with incomparable music allows him pre-eminence and in painting where the nineteenth century romantics occupy a deservedly secondary rank – well below the glory of the Italian Renaissance. The point of this enumeration is to illustrate the remarkable extent to which the nineteenth century Romantic movement still dominates cultural assumptions. We tend spontaneously to embrace the idea that artistic masterpieces are created not by disciplined craftsmen but

as the expression of a moment of illumination – a kind of spontaneous ecstasy experienced by a lonely genius. We want to believe, for example, that Picasso painted *Guernica* in a sudden gush of outrage at a Nazi atrocity and are deflated to learn that he had sketched the figures he was to use in the painting long before he had ever heard of the German bombing.

The Romantic Movement was a response to the moral and aesthetic horrors of the Industrial Revolution and its devastation of men, women, children and the countryside – and to the heartless response of such economic Liberals as Malthus and Spencer. Its rejection of the dominion of Reason stems ultimately from Rousseau combined with a skepticism about rationalism fostered by David Hume and Edmund Burke. It was unapologetically emotional in response to a callous Classical Liberalism that could look upon the suffering of others with philosophic equanimity. It originally supported the French Revolution with great enthusiasm (Oh! pleasant exercise of hope and joy!...Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, But to be young was very heaven! – Wordsworth.) However, the excess of the Terror and the autocracy of Bonaparte brought disillusionment and pessimism. In the end, Wordsworth joined the establishment – and even became poet laureate. He was criticized by younger poets for political backsliding. However, in fairness, he never stopped pleading for the victims of the factory system.

In order to begin to appreciate the change in sensibility occasioned by the Romantics in literature, we might remind ourselves of an excerpt from a celebrated poem of the previous century – Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*:

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan
The proper study of Mankind is Man.
Placed on this isthmus of a middle state,
A Being darkly wise, and rudely great:
With too much knowledge for the Sceptic side,
With too much weakness for the Stoic's pride,
He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest;
In doubt to deem himself a God, or Beast;
In doubt his mind or body to prefer;
Born but to die, and reas'ning but to err;
Alike in ignorance, his reason such,
Whether he thinks too little, or too much;
Chaos of Thought and Passion, all confus'd;
Still by himself, abus'd or disabus'd;
Created half to rise and half to fall;
Great Lord of all things, yet a prey to all,
Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurl'd;
The glory, jest and riddle of the world.

Let us now compare this to an effort from William Wordsworth ("Lines

Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798” from the Lyrical Ballads):

Five years have past; five summers, with the length
Of five long winters! and again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
With a soft inland murmur. – Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
That on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.
The day is come when I again repose
Here, under this dark sycamore, and view
These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,
Which at this season, with their unripe fruits,
Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves
'Mid groves and copses. Once again I see
These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
Of sportive wood run wild: these pastoral farms,
Green to the very door; and wreaths of smoke
Sent up, in silence, from among the trees!
With some uncertain notice, as might seem
Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,
Or of some Hermit's cave, where by his fire
The Hermit sits alone.

Perhaps, the first thing that we might notice is that Wordsworth tells us where and when he wrote the poem – expecting us to care. He then tells us about HIS thoughts and feelings. Where Pope’s effort is about man, Wordsworth’s is about Wordsworth. We are already in Oprah territory – what John Keats would censure as “the egotistical sublime” that characterized much of Romantic culture. It is not that I prefer Pope; I don’t. It is only that at times the Romantics confused self-discovery with self-display. As Andre Gide once observed, “Art is a collaboration between God and the artist, and the less the artist does the better.”

The artist as a self-creation – as an alienated, unique being channeling an individual genius of infinite spiritual value – was largely a Romantic invention. Also typical were an emphasis on sensational and exotic situations, an often Gothic emotionality, a near worship of nature especially in its more dramatically threatening aspects – what Edmund Burke termed the sublime as contrasted with the beautiful – and a passionate idealization of the very Medieval culture scorned by the Enlightenment thinkers.

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In moments of cold, sober rationality, I realize that, like all human beings, I am, except to myself and my loved ones, not only mortal, but utterly insignificant. Like Prufrock, “I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be...”

Well, that is one narrative of the human situation. Throughout the Middle Ages, mankind elaborated a very different vision – one that made him a legend in his own mind. In this telling, he was not an insignificant speck in a vast universe, but at the center of a universal struggle for his salvation between Satan and God. He was, himself, created in the very image of the divine. He was an organic part of the mosaic of all that exists in “the great chain of being” in which everything had its divinely appointed place and in which I can not only know that my Redeemer liveth, but that what is required of me in life is simply that I fulfill the demands of my divinely appointed station and its duties. Gosh!

By the eighteenth century, this vision no longer seemed so convincing; the “great Chain” had been broken. The vision of the Enlightenment was rather one of steady human progress through the exercise of human reason and naturalistic exploration of a disenchanted universe in which the smile of reason was more than a little chilly, and in which men had no obvious way of being significant – one in which life tended to be viewed as more prosaic than dramatic – a world of sense rather than sensibility. For many, beginning with Rousseau, this was totally unacceptable. As the Romantic vision came to dominate the nineteenth century, we would bask in the rhetorical warmth of soaring, if somewhat incoherent, aspiration, rather than be chilled by the skeptical calculations of enlightened reason. We would come to value empathy, but disdain restraint. We would discover childhood and its charm, while disparaging maturity. We would be tempted to believe with Rousseau that man is born free – identifying freedom as the spontaneous self-indulgence of the infant while we overlook the fact that such infantile slavery to the passions is only safe because it is necessarily impeded or, at least re-directed, by the ministrations of an adult caregiver.

As the august Alexander Pope was being displaced in poetry by the likes of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Byron and Keats, a parallel transition was displayed in the writing of fiction first in the sensitive, tender and gentle romantic comedies of Jane Austen (where we care more about Darcy’s slighting of Elizabeth Bennett at a ball than we did that Robinson Crusoe was shipwrecked and in mortal danger) to the Romantic tales of Hugo, Dumas, and Scott leavened by the stark realism of Balzac. We begin the century in the company of the cool, ironic skepticism of Elizabeth Bennett all too soon to encounter the mad woman in the Bronte attic. In Opera, the sublimely elegant productions of Mozart, in which sopranos never die, will give way, after the comedy of Rossini, to the bel canto of Donizetti and Bellini – so filled with sopranos going mad – and

then to those of Verdi and Wagner in which dying sopranos litter the stage – except when we are treated to the destruction of the entire universe. In instrumental music, after the deaths of Beethoven and Schubert in the late 1820s, Chopin produced exquisite miniatures while the taste of the time was unequal to a proper appreciation of the great masterpiece of Hector Berlioz – his *Symphony Fantastique*.

In painting, the neo-classicism of Ingres with its focus on restraint and fine drawing was challenged by Delacroix and Gericault – and the strumpet color was employed in exotic settings and dramatic situations. Constable and Turner, in very different ways, enhanced the status of landscape painting.

The early nineteenth century cultural world is inhabited by so many notable contributors that it is difficult in such a limited space to avoid consigning them to a mere catalog. Perhaps, it would be helpful to concentrate briefly on a secondary work that nevertheless incorporates many of the central aspects of the Romantic sensibility.

As Edward Bulwer-Lytton would say: “It was a dark and stormy night; the rain fell in torrents — except at occasional intervals, when it was checked by a violent gust of wind...fiercely agitating the scanty flame of the lamps that struggled against the darkness.” (Paul Clifford). – or so I would like to imagine it. At any rate, an eighteen year old girl was spending an evening with her boy friend and his best friend when, in response to a challenge, she began to write a story about an eighteenth century scientist who succeeded in creating human life in the laboratory. The doctor’s name was, of course, Victor Frankenstein – and the friends were Byron and Shelley. Her creation, probably the best known Gothic novel in history, embodies the flip side of the optimistic Enlightenment rationalist faith in human progress through the ongoing advance of science. Indeed, it portrays what, until Hiroshima’s reality, was the worst human nightmare about the possible danger of scientific discovery. It was also a tale of extreme situation and great emotional theatricality. In short, it was of a piece with the gothic novels of Mrs. Radcliff that Jane Austen made fun of in *Northanger Abbey*, as well as with those of Hugo, the Brontes and Dumas pere, the Operas of Donizetti and Bellini, the paintings of the French Romantics and with English Romantic poetry. The Romantics generally were enraptured with visions of dramatic heroism, with all variety of the politics of nostalgia ranging from dreams of monarchical restoration, a return to Napoleonic glory, and utopian visions of either republican or socialist civic virtue. At the same time, they indulged in a thrilling embrace of the anxiously sublime whether of ghostly tales, exotic times and places (the long ago and far away) and ultimately of madness and early death. Characteristically, Lord Byron’s lover, Carolyn Lamb, described him as “mad, bad and dangerous to know.” In short, the Romantics were determined to dream the impossible

dream while embracing a world of make-believe – and it is entirely appropriate that the nineteenth century was par excellence, the golden age of the novel as a literary form. It is easy, and even fun, to ridicule the excesses of Romanticism. However, “Who is to decide which is the grimmer sight: withered hearts, or empty skulls?” (Honore de Balzac; *Pere Goriot*; p. 7)

While Rousseau’s children were playing with their imaginative dreams, another group of thinkers were furthering the down-to-earth, ongoing program of the enlightenment and attempting to initiate what Asa Briggs would describe as “the age of improvement.” These were the radical British reformers who became known as Utilitarian’s – most notably Jeremy Bentham and James Mill. These thinkers replaced all of the high sounding rhetoric with a radical new standard of value – that of utility – asking not whether a thing was good, but what was it good for. Put differently, their moral standard was that value resides in anything that promotes “the greatest happiness for the greatest number.” They sought not revolutionary change, but gradual and relentless improvement – very much in the spirit of Prince Albert’s Crystal Palace exhibition that ends our period. Their program, not the utopian idealism of the Romantics, would ultimately produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Alas, the temptation of romantic utopianism seems never to be permanently vanquished. It would re-appear in the first half of the twentieth century in various utopian ideologies – and would thus make that period, perhaps the most violent in human history, a truly “dark and stormy night.”

The Rise of American Nationalism

Politics

Those who fought in the American Revolution were patriots – ready to fight and die for their country – not however, for the same country. A native of Philadelphia fought for Pennsylvania; from Boston, for Massachusetts; from Richmond, for Virginia. No one fought for the American nation as no such entity existed. The Articles of Confederation was no more a national government than N.A.T.O. or the United Nations. Even after the Constitution, New England Federalists threatened to secede from the Union in their opposition to the War of 1812. In the following three to four decades, this situation was altered so radically that men were to be prepared to fight a Civil War to prevent the Southern States from leaving the Union.

I will attempt to tell the story of this transformation largely through a discussion of the political careers of five remarkable and exemplary

figures: John Quincy Adams – an elitist in an age of democracy; Andrew Jackson – leader of the democratic movement; John C. Calhoun – spokesman for the Southern Slaveholding Aristocracy; James K. Polk – American expansionist; and Henry Clay – the great compromiser who held the center together for as long as he lived. I have described this story as that of the growth of nationalism – and so it is. However, it is also the tale of an intensification of sectional tensions that would eventuate in that failure of politics known as the American Civil War.

Adams the Elitist

In the elections of 1824 and 1828, Americans were offered a very clear choice. One candidate was a highly educated man who had been the nation's greatest Secretary of State and whose father had been the first Vice President and the second President of the nation, a man who was the real author of what became known as the Monroe Doctrine, one whose thirty years of public service had provided him with a profound understanding of European politics and a personal acquaintance with many of its leaders, a man who had a vision for the nation's future that would define its domestic agenda for the remainder of the century. Alternatively, the electorate could choose an impulsive, temperamental general and successful Indian fighter who was serving in the Senate, whose great appeal was that he was ordinary and that he had won what proved to be an unnecessary battle in a silly war, one whose wife smoked a corn cob, a man so uneducated that he spelled Europe "Urope." One would think that the choice was a no-brainer. However, the American people in their wisdom twice chose Andrew Jackson over John Quincy Adams. You Betcha!

Actually, in 1824, Jackson's plurality in the Electoral College was short of the majority required for election throwing the election to the House of Representatives where both sides engaged in an orgy of deal making. Adams out-politicked Jackson winning the crucial support of Henry Clay. When he subsequently appointed Clay Secretary of State, Jacksonians decried this as a "corrupt bargain" (operationally defined, I guess, as when one's opponents peddle influence more successfully than you do). Adams indignantly denied that there was any impropriety and insisted that he had only appointed Clay because of his undoubted merits. Was Adams sincere? Well, he and Clay had a very long and curious relationship. They were the odd couple of American politics – once described as the puritan and the cardsharp. And yet, Adams and Clay seem to have worked well together while negotiating the Treaty of Ghent – and, years later, when Adams was dying, it was Clay that was summoned to his side. Adams really was a stern puritan and, like all moralistic compulsives, was incapable of conscious duplicity – and thus condemned to neurotic self-deception.

In any event, Adams was a minority one-term President whose legitimacy was not conceded by political opponents determined to defeat him in the next election. Indeed, his presidency is usually regarded as a failure because he was unable to pass his legislative program. However he offered a vision for America that would endure.

In his first annual message, President Adams declared “The great object of the institution of civil government is the improvement of those who are parties to the social contract.” He wished to use federal revenue to increase the navy and establish a naval academy, to “build national roads and canals, send out scientific expeditions, establish institutions of learning and research, and make Washington the national cultural center. All these things were to come; Adams was a true prophet; but he urged them in the midst of a states rights reaction. If, asked the cotton states, we admit federal powers of this scope, will not some future administration claim the power to emancipate slaves?” (Samuel Eliot Morison; *The Oxford History of the American People*; p. 418) Instead, they preferred a know-nothing populist, who evinced a fervent and belligerent nationalism while he vigorously championed states rights against federal power.

Clearly, one of Adams’ finest moments occurred in the Amistad affair in 1841 after he had left the presidency and was serving in Congress. Adams acted as counsel for a group of Negro slaves who, led by a man named Cinque, had mutinied and killed the captain and crew of their slave ship. Adams successfully argued that they should be freed because slave trading was illegal under both Spanish and American law.

The slaves were sent to Africa where their leader, Cinque, was rumored to have set himself up as a slave trader. However politically incorrect, historical accuracy compels that we acknowledge the part played by Africans in the institution of slavery. It is simply mistaken to see white Europeans as having enslaved the black man. Mostly, they purchased their human commodity from a black African chieftain who had enslaved him – and who seemed quite ready to accommodate the growing demand for his product. Indeed, in America in 1830 there were about 450 black masters who owned more than 2,400 black slaves and had to cope with the problems of productivity and discipline just as any other master did. One historian who has recently studied this subject asserted that once free blacks in South Carolina acquired slaves as investments, there “were few differences between them and white owners beyond the color of their skin.” (John C. Calhoun: A Biography; Irving H. Bartlett; p. 220.)

Adams had already been very active as an opponent of the Southern slave holding interests as a member of the House of Representatives. As an aside, I would observe that his long career in public life had involved him in almost all aspects of the political life of the nation. He had served as diplomat, Senator, cabinet member, member of Congress, President and Supreme Court litigator. He had also been offered an appointment as

Associate Justice of the Supreme Court, but turned it down. Anyway, in 1836, the Southern slaveholding interests got Congress to pass the first “gag resolutions” forbidding discussion of any petition relating to slavery. Imagine how this stern and stubborn New England Puritan, son of a president and former president, himself, reacted to being told to shut up. Adams fought the gag rules for eight years, session after session, to the frustrated fury of the Southerners. “Every attempt short of personal violence was made to silence, to censure, or expel Adams; but the tough old Puritan persisted.” During one debate, Adams declared: “I see where the shoe pinches, Mr. Speaker, it will pinch more yet...If before I get through every slaveholder, slave trader and slave breeder on this floor does not get materials for bitter reflection, it shall be no fault of mine.” (Samuel Eliot Morison; *The Oxford History of the American People*; p. 423). In 1844, the Southerners cried uncle and repealed the gag rules – and Adams proceeded to introduce more petitions for the elimination of slavery. Clearly the South had overplayed a weak hand – and proved to many moderates that they were adamant in their refusal to countenance the gradual elimination of their “peculiar institution.” As we know, in the end the center would not hold.

Jackson and the Common Man

In the infancy of our republic, it would have been considered extremely bad form to actually campaign for the presidency. It was assumed that the excellence of anyone worthy of holding such high office would be well known to his contemporaries who would persuade their fellow citizens of his uncommon virtue. Through the first third of the nineteenth century, this approach produced an impressive succession of American Presidents selected by an American elite class from among their own number. Then came the rise of the common man who would begin choosing men like Andrew Jackson portrayed as ordinary folks with a common touch – and the day of political machines, the modern professional politician and of vulgar demagoguery in American presidential politics had begun.

Jackson was a man of the frontier. He was a rugged Indian fighter and a fierce and courageous soldier and capable military commander. He was an untutored man who shared his followers’ contempt for academically trained intelligence. When Harvard granted him an honorary degree, one of its illustrious luminaries, former President John Quincy Adams protested that he was “a barbarian who could not write a sentence of grammar and hardly could spell his own name.”

John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson were both stubbornly inner-directed men who had what we would certainly regard as difficult childhoods. With Adams the hardship was the product of exalted and repressive New England puritanical demands he would thoroughly internalize. By contrast, for Jackson, the hardships were a result of the

brutalities of war, nature and life on the American frontier. John Quincy was very much his father's son; Jackson never knew his father who died before Andrew was born. Both were involved as children in the American Revolution – Adams as a witness to the Battle of Bunker Hill and subsequently as a sometime spy on British troop activity; Jackson “enlisted in the Revolution at thirteen, was captured and mutilated by British troops at fourteen, and lost his entire family in the war when one brother was killed, another succumbed to small pox in prison, and his mother was carried off by ‘prison fever’ while nurturing captured American militiamen. This experience produced in him “a savage and implacable patriotism.” (Richard Hofstadter; *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It*; p. 59f.).

Jackson was a classic example of the self-made man who rose from a log cabin to the White House, and he came to represent the aspirations of the ordinary citizen struggling to achieve wealth and status. As a result of a successful law practice, Jackson had become a very wealthy land owner in Tennessee. His virtues, like his manners, were rough hewn. He inspired and bestowed a fierce loyalty. This was most memorably displayed in a curious incident early in his presidency involving the wife of Secretary of War, John Eaton.

Two months before Jackson's inauguration, Eaton married the daughter of a Washington tavern keeper quite soon after her husband's death. Her husband had been a naval purser who was frequently away from home. While he was away, his charming and attractive wife, Peggy, had behaved in a manner that earned her a reputation. Indeed, her relationship with John Eaton, who boarded at her father's tavern, was a singular source of Washington gossip. Her marriage to Eaton shortly after her husband's death elevated her from questionable to notorious. Cabinet wives snubbed Peggy, insinuating that she had been intimate with Eaton while still married to her late husband – and that her dishonor had resulted in his suicide, and even that she had aborted an illegitimate child conceived with Eaton. Eaton was Jackson's closest friend, and the President immediately saw in Peggy a younger likeness of his own and recently deceased Rachel, who had also been maligned by reckless gossip. For this reason, he made the reinstatement of Peggy O'Neill's virtue a top priority of the new administration. When the President found that important members of his official family, following the example of the Vice-President and his wife, refused to cooperate, the question of etiquette became a critical matter of state. Jackson, rushing to Peggy's defense called a special cabinet meeting to discuss the “crisis” and defended Peggy as “chaste as a virgin.” Later, Henry Clay would quip, echoing Shakespeare, “Age cannot wither nor time stale her infinite virginity.” <See Antony and Cleopatra Act II Scene 2: “Age cannot wither nor time stale her infinite variety.”> The Eaton affair significantly contributed to

the break up of Jackson's cabinet and cemented his enmity to John C. Calhoun. Martin van Buren's support for Jackson and Eaton contributed to his selection as Jackson's anointed successor.

Aside from the western settlers and farmers, the Jackson support came from a new industrial working class that had converted New York City from Federalist to Democratic and had also created solid support for Jacksonian democracy in Philadelphia and Pittsburg. This new generation of recently enfranchised voters believed in equality only for white males. Like most populist movements, it was intolerant of diversity and, unlike its so-called "aristocratic" opponents, it was hostile to the concerns of Indians and Negros. Rather, they wished to emulate their hero, Andrew Jackson who owned slaves and killed Indians. The rise of the common man that characterized American society at this time was the subject of the classic study of *Democracy in America* by Alexis de Tocqueville. Perhaps, "common" was precisely the correct word; "common" in the sense of crude and vulgar.

"Manners were becoming more democratic, less formal and punctilious. Foreign observers were shocked by the general tobacco spitting, the rapid feeding at table, the impertinent curiosity, the widespread bumptiousness and bragging, and the nervous hurry of the Northern cities. American culture was also stamped by recklessness and violence. . . Dueling had become common, and in the South and West, family feuds, marked by free use of the bowie knife and pistol, were frequent." (Nevins and Commager; *A Pocket History of the United States*; p.170). During the celebrations at the Jackson inauguration the behavior at the Executive Mansion was so rowdy that supporters destroyed furnishings and, at one point even seemed to threaten the safety of the President. On the day of the Jackson inauguration, in "keeping with the democratic spirit of the day people were invited to meet the new leader in his residence, and they showed up in force. The White house became so jammed that enterprising citizens found their way in and out through the windows. Chairs and crockery were broken, orange punch sloshed in the corridors, babies cried, ladies fainted, and the President himself almost suffocated in the crush." (John C. Calhoun: *A Biography*; Irving H. Bartlett; p. 158.)

The two vital issues of Jackson's presidency were nullification and the Bank of the United States. The Bank had been created as an integral part of the financial plan of Alexander Hamilton – a plan so successful that it had transformed a bankrupt new nation into one that in less than forty years had better credit than many European countries and a substantial treasury surplus. The Bank had served the nation well by restraining the inflationary tendencies of local banks. Jackson opposed and ultimately destroyed the Bank because he viewed it as an elitist and nationalistic enterprise. His recklessness significantly contributed to the financial chaos

in the panic of 1837. No adequate substitute for Hamilton's central bank was found until 1913, when the Federal Reserve System was adopted.

The Bank of the United States had been headquartered in Philadelphia. With its destruction by the agrarian populist forces in their hostility to "the money power," the bankers of New York City promptly filled the resulting vacuum constructing a vastly more powerful financial dominance reaping the benefits of a policy championed by the poor farmers, mechanics, and frontiersmen who gained nothing. The financial capital of the United States would now move from Philadelphia to New York. Was it merely a coincidence that Martin van Buren was a New Yorker?

The other great issue of the Jackson presidency was that of secession and nullification. In January of 1830, Daniel Webster famously replied to Robert Hayne over the South Carolina assertion of the right of a state to nullify federal legislation it regarded as unconstitutional. In one of the most famous perorations in all of American history, Webster declared "Liberty and Union, now and forever, one and inseparable." "That peroration ... established in the hearts of the Northern and Western people an emotional, almost religious conception of the Union. It became something that men were willing to fight for. One of its earliest readers was a dreamy youth on the Indiana frontier named Abraham Lincoln." (Samuel Eliot Morison; *The Oxford History of the American People*; p. 435)

This is a remarkable example of why ideas often matter. The devastation of the Civil War was objectively avoidable. The Republican refusal to allow the South to secede was not the only, or indeed the most rational choice. If Lincoln had simply let them go, he could then have prevented the expansion of the confederacy by a defensive military alliance with Mexico and a fortification of the western territories – thus actually fulfilling the Republican pledge to prevent the extension of slavery. If the Confederacy refused to accept containment, he could then have blockaded Southern ports, and instigated slave uprisings – simultaneously offering generous terms to states who had second thoughts and wanted to re-join the Union. The important point is that it would then be the South that would have been forced into a counter-insurgency. Lincoln would not have needed to conquer the South, but only to prevent it from a stable possession of any territory into which it attempted to expand. However, to borrow a conception from William James, this was for Lincoln not a "live option" because the religion of nationalism reflected in Webster's peroration made such a course literally unthinkable.

"Time could only reveal the full import of Webster's reply to Hayne; but it went home instantly to the honest old patriot in the White House. Jackson counted himself a states rights man, but he never doubted the sovereignty of the nation. States rights could never justify disobedience to the laws of the Union. Calhoun and the Nullification group, at a dinner on

the anniversary of Jefferson's birthday in 1830, foolishly attempted to trap Jackson into endorsing their cause. The formal toasts were worded to prove a connection between nullification and Republican orthodoxy. Jackson sat silently through them, but when his turn came, the old soldier rose to his full height, fixed his eye on Calhoun, and flung out a challenge: 'Our Federal Union – it must be preserved!' Calhoun may, as Van Buren asserts, have drunk the toast with trembling hand; but he took up the challenge with the another: 'The union – next to our liberty – most dear.' ” (Samuel Eliot Morison; *The Oxford History of the American People*; p. 435f.)

When subsequently, South Carolina actually did nullify a federal tariff bill, Jackson responded that any attempt to forcibly resist federal law enforcement amounted to sedition and treason, threatened military force against the state and declared that he was prepared to hang the leaders of any such action – including Vice President Calhoun. “Some people laughed at the possibility of a President of the United States punishing his Vice President for treason, but having presided over the war department during one of Jackson's earlier hanging fits, Calhoun would have seen the point in Benton's remark that ‘when Jackson begins to talk about hanging, they can begin to look out for ropes.’ ” (John C. Calhoun: *A Biography*; Irving H. Bartlett; p. 192.) Given Jackson's history and personality, this was not a threat to be taken lightly.

Calhoun and Concurrent Majority

On his death bed, Andrew Jackson offered very few regrets about his life. However, one regret that he did express was that he hadn't hanged John C. Calhoun over the nullification controversy. Well, Jackson didn't actually hang his Vice-President. However, he did drop him from the ticket, replacing him with Martin van Buren as his designated successor in the Executive Mansion. Calhoun returned to his political home to lead the Sothern forces in the Senate.

In the early nineteenth century, a leading political thinker espoused “the idea of pervasive exploitation and class struggle in history; a labor theory of value and of surplus appropriated by the capitalists; the concentration of capital under capitalist production; the fall of the working-class conditions to the level of subsistence; the growing revolt of laboring class against the capitalists; the prediction of social revolution.” (Richard Hofstadter; *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It*; p. 106). Yes, these are views that were famously articulated by Karl Marx. However, they were first proposed by John C. Calhoun, whom Richard Hofstadter described as the “Marx of the master class,” in his defense of Southern slavery. Unlike Marx, Calhoun wished not to ferment, but to prevent a social revolution through a coalition of Northern capitalists and Southern planters against their common class enemy – the

slaves of the lash and the slaves of the loom. Ultimately, Calhoun was a nationalist who wished the Union to survive by uniting the interests of the ruling classes in preserving slavery in the South and Laissez-faire in the North so that the inevitable class conflict would be won by the privileged classes – and all workers would continue to be exploited. “The Federal Union, next to OUR liberty, most dear” where by ‘liberty’ he meant the protection of the privileged white male.

As a Southern slaveholder, Calhoun viewed himself as a spokesman for a minority interest in a nation increasingly threatened by the scourge of democratic power – a champion of minority rights against the tyranny of the majority. He fervently believed that the Union could only be preserved if the North desisted in its interference with the operation of the Southern institution of chattel slavery. He evolved a theory of politics that asserted that any polity in which pure majority rule governed was inherently unstable and that the constitution should be amended to provide for rule by what he called concurrent majority – a system by which any section of the country would have an effective veto over any legislation that threatened its vital interest. He proposed that this veto reside in a dual executive with members from both North and South. This plan was to be adopted as a result of the master class coalition discussed above.

Well, Calhoun’s imaginative scheme never really developed any traction in American political circles; such utopian schemes almost never do. However, embedded within it are issues well worthy of serious reflection. Calhoun was essentially re-visiting the problem earlier articulated by Rousseau in his discussion of a general will opposed to the will of all – a problem to which the founding fathers were exquisitely sensitive. Calhoun was asserting that the stability of any political system depends not on majority rule and not on whether anyone received all that he wished from it; but on whether each significant player could feel secure that his vital interests would be protected. The corollary is that for such a system of government by concurrent majority to be viable, it was essential that the minority use its veto very sparingly – only when there was an actual threat to its vital interest. I am suggesting that beneath the somewhat fanciful special pleading by Calhoun, there was some very nourishing food for serious political thought.

Polk and Expansionism

People tend to think of James K. Polk, on those very rare occasions when they do think of Polk, as one of a series of colorless successors to Andrew Jackson – such as Van Buren, Harrison, Tyler, Taylor, Fillmore, Pierce and Buchanan – whose light was easily eclipsed by Congressional leaders like Clay, Webster and Calhoun. Actually, Polk was an important President who acquired more new territory for the United States than any president since Jefferson – extending the American frontier to the Pacific coast. In

the interest of American territorial expansion, he was prepared to go to war with England to acquire Oregon – and actually did provoke a war with Mexico over Texas.

In 1800, America consisted of a handful of agrarian states clinging to the Atlantic coastline of a vast continent. Fifty years later, it threatened to dominate the hemisphere, as a continental nation whose sovereignty stretched from sea to sea and from Canada to the Rio Grande. This is one of the most remarkable feats of imperial expansion in human history. Further, this country offered a unique solution to the problem of integrating a vast empire by incorporating acquired territory into the nation on the basis of absolute equality as newly formed states.

In his play, *Man of Destiny*, Bernard Shaw has Napoleon chide Englishmen as a race of men of principle: “He fights you on patriotic principles; he robs you on business principles; he enslaves you on imperial principles; he bullies you on manly principles; he supports his king on loyal principles and cuts off his king’s head on republican principles. His watchword is always duty; and he never forgets that the nation which lets its duty get on the opposite side of its interest is lost.” Well, in America, we don’t rely on principle. Our functional equivalent is submission to the will of a God who always seems to be conveniently aligned with the wishes of the American ruling class. In the mid-nineteenth century, God himself decreed that we should first conquer all of the lands across a continent, (a decree that was underscored when Providence caused gold to be discovered in California in 1848) and that we should then dominate a hemisphere, before proceeding to establish ourselves as a Pacific power. This manly submission to Divine will we called our manifest destiny – so obvious was the divine intention – to us, yes; to the aborigines of various lands, not so much. After expanding across the continent to the Pacific, we moved on to acquire Hawaii as the re-fueling station that was the stepping stone to military and commercial ventures in the Far East including Commodore Mathew Perry’s opening of Japan in 1853. During our period, America became a significant Pacific power. In 1844, we negotiated a treaty with China that gave us the commercial access that was already enjoyed by European powers. Japan had been closed to most foreign trade until the early fifties when Commodore Perry with a show of naval force “persuaded” the Japanese to end their isolation and permit trade with the Americans.

James K. Polk won the presidency as a rabid expansionist. In 1836, Texas, having rebelled against Mexico after the Mexican government had abolished slavery, became independent and wished to join the Union. This represented a significant expansion of slavery and was thus opposed by the northern states. Indeed Texan admission to the Union was defeated in Congress – a decision that was reversed after Polk became President. In response to a boundary dispute over the Texas/Mexican border in which

Mexican troops had fired on American soldiers, Polk went to war with Mexico. Mexico was easily defeated and agreed in February 1848 to sell to the United States more than a million square miles including the states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah, and Colorado.

Simultaneously, Polk acquired from England the part of the Oregon Territory that had been jointly claimed with England up to the 49th parallel having sanely decided that a war with the English hegemon was not justified to redeem his catchy campaign pledge of “Fifty-four-forty – or fight.” Just as the Northern Whigs were fiercely opposed to the admission of Texas to the Union, they were bitterly opposed to the Mexican War. Indeed, in February, 1848, the House of Representatives was considering a resolution calling for awarding medals to several generals who had fought in that war. “When the speaker called for ayes and noes, John Quincy Adams, now eighty years old, replied with a firm and clear ‘No!’ He sat at his desk for a few minutes when a reporter who was watching him noticed a deep color tingling his temples. He moved his lips, as though trying to call ‘Mr. Speaker,’ but slumped to his left. A member seated near him called out in alarm: ‘Mr. Adams is dying!’ ... Henry Clay hurried to pay his last respects, and left weeping... Two days later... Adams died.” (Jack Shepherd; *The Adams Chronicles*; p.341f.)

In an optimistic and cheerful final State of the Union address at the end of 1848, President Polk helped set off the California gold rush of the following year by declaring that an abundance of gold had been discovered. He took an understandable satisfaction in comparing the prosperous and triumphant state of the American Union with the disorder and devastation of Europe in that year: “Peace, plenty and contentment reign throughout our borders, and our beloved country presents a sublime moral spectacle to the world... We may congratulate ourselves that we are the most favored people on the face of the earth... While enlightened nations of Europe are convulsed and distracted by civil war or intestine strife, we settle our political controversies by the peaceful exercise of the rights of freemen at the ballot box.” (quoted in Whitney and Whitney; *The American Presidents*; p.98.) Since Polk died the following year, he never shared our knowledge that his “beloved country” would be torn asunder in a civil war that would pre-figure the slaughter of the wars of the twentieth century. The heroic effort to avoid such a tragedy dominated the later political career of Henry Clay.

Clay and Compromise

It is not the task of the statesman to resolve irreconcilable conflicts. Rather, he must manage them until the passage of time renders them irrelevant or, in a failure of politics, unmanageable. This was the mission to which Henry Clay devoted the last decades of his life.

“In the early years of the republic, when the Northern states were

providing for immediate or gradual emancipation, many leaders had supposed that slavery would presently die out everywhere... But during the next generation the South was converted into a section which for the most part was grimly united behind slavery... <as the expansion of the cotton, tobacco and sugar plantations made slavery more profitable than it had been before 1790. A national crisis was precipitated when Missouri sought admission to the Union and a Northern congressman attempted to require gradual emancipation as a condition of statehood. Then, in 1820, Henry Clay led the effort to arrange a compromise.> Missouri was admitted as a slave state, but at the same time Maine was cut loose from Massachusetts and came in as a free state; and Congress decreed that slavery should be forever excluded from the territory acquired by the Louisiana Purchase north of the... southern boundary of Missouri.” (Nevins and Commager; *A Pocket History of the United States*; p.161f.) The immediate crisis was assuaged; but over the next decade, as abolitionist movements spread in the North and slave culture became ever more entrenched in the South, the conflict intensified. The sections also clashed over the tariffs favored by Northerners to protect their infant manufacturing enterprises from foreign competition. Southerners blamed high tariffs for enfeebling the Southern economy. In 1833, it was the tariff question that elicited a threat of nullification from John C. Calhoun. Even though Henry Clay favored the protective tariff, he again compromised in order to defuse this volatile issue.

In 1849, when the Senate convened, John C. Calhoun looked beaten and desperately ill. In fact he would be dead in a matter of months. Feeble to the point where he needed vocal assistance in order to address his colleagues, he was fighting to stay alive so he could serve (however weakly) in the defense of his beloved South.

In December 1849, when Henry Clay returned to the Senate for the opening of the same thirty-first Congress, he was a seventy-three year old man who also looked tired and aged. “He coughed a good deal, and his cheeks were shrunken.” (Robert V. Remini; *At the Edge of the Precipice*; p. 49.) The mood of Congress can perhaps be gauged by the turmoil as the House of Representatives attempted with great difficulty to elect a Speaker. “Day and night the members shouted at one another. And at one point a fistfight broke out that degenerated into a melee... Dueling challenges were commonplace” . (Robert V. Remini; *At the Edge of the Precipice*; p53f.) In the Senate, at one point in the extremely extended debate over the Clay Compromise, one Senator ran menacingly to physically attack a colleague who responded by drawing a pistol to defend himself. Then, after the Southern States were already threatening secession, gold was discovered in California and California would be settled so rapidly that it would apply for statehood without even bothering to first become a territory. In the gold rush, the “forty-niners, as they were

called, were northerners for the most part, and California suddenly became a pulsating area whose population zoomed from 6,000 to 85,000 virtually overnight.” (Robert V. Remini; *At the Edge of the Precipice*; p 58.)

In July 1850, Henry Clay delivered an emotional appeal for his compromise so effective that, his “eloquence brought tears to the eyes of both men and women. The walls of the chamber shook with cheers, applause and the stamping of feet... To many present in the room, it seemed as though the omnibus bill would be enacted without further delay... <However, less than two weeks later the compromise went down to defeat over a dispute concerning the Texas/New Mexico border.> The shattered Clay slumped in his seat... Then he slowly rose from his seat and walked out of the chamber... devastated <and>... left Washington. He went off on a vacation to recover from a series of respiratory infections that would eventually kill him... It now seemed hopeless. <as the nation seemed to face the prospect of secession and Civil War.>” (Robert V. Remini; *At the Edge of the Precipice*; p 138ff.) This outcome was avoided by the political astuteness of Stephen A. Douglas who took apart Clay’s omnibus bill and managed to forge coalitions to pass each of its components as individual bills. The Union temporarily stepped back from the edge of the precipice.

When John Quincy Adams was President in the early 1820s, John C. Calhoun was Vice-President, Henry Clay was Secretary of State – and John Marshall was still Chief Justice of the United States. By 1850, Adams had been dead for two years, Calhoun was dying and both Clay and Webster would be dead in two years. Roger Taney had long ago succeeded John Marshall as Chief Justice. In the crucial decade of the fifties, the nation would be led by such mediocrities as Zachary Taylor, Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce, and James Buchanan. This would not bode well for the nation in those perilous times.

American Art and Literature

The early nineteenth century in America was dominated by a growing intensification of the sentiment of American nationalism as well as by threats to national unity. Everyone believed in nationalism even if it meant quite different things to different people: National Unity (Clay, Calhoun, Jackson and finally Lincoln); Nationalism as Expansionism (Adams, Jefferson and Clay); and Nationalism as the shining city on the hill that Lincoln would call the last best hope for mankind (Adams, Emerson and the Transcendentalists).

The powerful New England reform movement of the mid-nineteenth century “was, to an astonishing degree, the product of a philosophy – the philosophy of Transcendentalism... It held that men must acknowledge that a body of moral truths were intuitive, subjective, and a priori...

<These Romantic idealists rejected all authority> unless that authority could be squared with those truths which God had planted in the mind and heart of man...<They believed, above all in> the infinite benevolence of God, the beneficence of Nature, and the divinity of man...<Thus, we must> give freedom to the slave, well-being to the poor and the miserable, learning to the ignorant, health to the sick, <and> peace and justice to society.” (Nevins and Commager; A Pocket History of the United States; p.172f.) The art and literature of America in these years would reflect the idealistic cultural nationalism of the Transcendentalists.

“Transcendentalism...drew heavily on both Puritanism and Unitarianism. From the Puritans the Transcendentalists inherited their concern with morality and the individual’s responsibility to God. From the Unitarians...their rejection of original sin and predestination and their belief in the perfectibility of man...Like the German and English romantics, the American transcendentalists rejected the precepts of the eighteenth century enlightenment and felt that man should be guided by intuition rather than by reason...Finally, the transcendentalists shared the romantics’ concern for the individual and deplored the stultifying effects of the new industrialism on the individual’s efforts to achieve self-realization.” (Carmen and Syrett; A History of the American People; Vol. I; p. 507f.) The foundational documents of Transcendentalism were written by Ralph Waldo Emerson who shared with the European romantics a worship of Nature. This same sensibility would be reflected in the poetry of Emily Dickenson and the painting of the Hudson River School – and, of course in the holy waters of Walden Pond. The individualism of Emerson and Thoreau was embraced most enthusiastically by Walt Whitman while Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville sang Transcendentalism’s hymn to human possibility with a more somber voice. “To Hawthorne man’s ultimate and inevitable failure could be attributed to the defects inherent in man and society; to Melville it could be attributed to the workings of a universe that man could never understand but to which he was invariably compelled to submit...man’s essentially painful relation to his fellow man and to his universe.” (Carmen and Syrett; A History of the American People; Vol. I; p. 512)

While some plays and novels were written in America in earlier decades, none has achieved lasting importance – and so imaginative American literature really begins in 1820 with Washington Irving’s Sketch Book which introduced Rip van Winkle as well as Sleepy Hollow and its legend. A few years later, James Fennimore Cooper wrote The Last of the Mohicans. Edgar Allen Poe wrote several of his most famous stories in the 1840s and by the end of the decade Herman Melville had published Typee, Longfellow “Evangeline,” and Hawthorne The Scarlet Letter. Clearly American letters, particularly in New England, had begun to flower.

The tale of “Rip van Winkle” opens with the observation that

“Whoever has made a voyage up the Hudson must remember the Catskill Mountains...swelling up to a noble height and lording it over the surrounding country.” A few years later, in the work of the Hudson River School, the same mountain range would dominate American landscape painting.

Washington Irving was a very traveled man when he wrote his tongue-in-cheek, folk tale inspired stories in the era of the Grim Brothers and Hans Christian Anderson. The wilderness adventure sagas of James Fennimore Cooper would be at home in the territory of the exhilarating Hudson River School landscapes. By contrast, Edgar Allen Poe was something of a city boy – one who explored not the idealized Nature of the transcendentalists, but the twisted subjectivity of the diseased mind and hostile heart. If Fitzgerald was correct in claiming that in the dark night of the soul, it is always three o’clock in the morning; then in contrast to the “morning in America” optimism of the Transcendentalists (along with Irving, Cooper and the Hudson River School of painters) Edgar Allen Poe was not a morning person, but a night dweller. Indeed, in the opening of “Murders in the Rue Morgue,” he makes a point of observing the preference of M. Dupin for avoiding Paris in daylight preferring only nocturnal rambles. Transcendentalism has been called New England Puritanism cleansed of original sin. Well, in Poe, and Hawthorne and Melville to follow, the vision of original sin is restored and the fall of Adam is given its due. It would seem quite a long road from [Rip van Winkle](#) to [Bartleby the Scrivener](#).

The history of American painting begins before the Revolution with Benjamin West who achieved sufficient renown in England that he succeeded Sir Joshua Reynolds as President of the Royal Academy. His best known work depicting the death of General Wolfe is the property of the Museum of Fine Arts in Ottawa. He subsequently mentored a generation of American artists including John Singleton Copley, Charles Wilson Peale, Gilbert Stuart and John Trumbull. West worked in London and his generation of painters are most remembered for portraits in the rather formal English manner of the time as exemplified by the renditions of George Washington by Gilbert Stuart that so proliferated throughout the United States following independence. “They illustrate the men and women of the day, when pride, decorum, and an elegance, sometimes ungraceful but always impressive, marked the dress and air of the higher classes.” (Tuckerman’s Book of the Artists as cited in *The Story of American Painting* by Charles H. Caffin; p. 16f.)

“In 1837,...Emerson delivered that address entitled, ‘*The American Scholar*,’ hailed by Oliver Wendell Holmes as our ‘intellectual declaration of independence.’ In it, Emerson ... <renounced> our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands.’” (*The Story of American Painting* by Charles H. Caffin; p. 47f.) In “Self Reliance,” (1844), Emerson would

write: “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men – that is genius.”

The spirit of Emerson inspired a group of painters of spectacular scenery led by Thomas Cole and Asher B. Durand who became known as the Hudson River school because they began to capture the untamed natural vistas of the Hudson River Valley. “They were the first of American painters to give expression to the prevailing spirit of nationalism.” (The Story of American Painting by Charles H. Caffin; p. 66) They soon included the Rocky and White mountains, and ultimately South America in Frederic Edwin Church’s great painting *The Heart of the Andes*.

Conclusion

As we have seen, in 1848, President Polk was feeling pretty good about the state of his country and the national expansion to which he had mightily contributed. He took particular note of the contrast between American prosperity and the revolutionary turmoil on the European Continent. Prince Albert was also feeling rather satisfied as his adopted country had achieved unquestioned political, military and, above all, industrial supremacy – a supremacy he intended to celebrate with the opening in London’s Hyde Park of The Great Exhibition of 1851. It was to be a showcase of the fruits of the industrial revolution and thus dominated by the glory of British manufacturing methods. “At the Crystal Palace Exposition in London in 1851, <the inventions and cheap gadgets> exhibited by Americans gave notice that the tide of invention had risen higher in the United States than in the old world.” (Samuel Eliot Morison; The Oxford History of the American People; p. 535). Indeed, in response to the great success of the London exhibition, New York City in 1853 built its own Crystal Palace on what is now Bryant Park. At this Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations, four thousand exhibitors displayed industrial wares, consumer goods, and artworks. The Exhibition attracted over a million visitors.

The creation of the factory system in the late eighteenth century would culminate in the assembly line and create a structural economic crisis with the most profound economic, political and social consequences – first in England and subsequently in Europe, America and, eventually throughout the entire world. The end of the assembly line in the developed economies of the world at the end of the twentieth century is presently causing a structural economic crisis that will also severely impact our living standards, societal organization and political system. The era of liberal democracy roughly coincides with the onset of mass production and the assembly line – and an ever expanding middle-class. It is not clear whether it can survive the collapse of that class.