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TWO CHEERS FOR OUR PURITAN ROOTS

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In a recent piece for the Claremont Institute, Sam Goldman, an expert on religious liberty at George Washington University, takes issue with Harry Jaffa and his teacher, Leo Strauss, for their argument that German relativist thinkers left a damaging imprint on the American university. Goldman agrees that relativism influences the American academy, but not so much because of errant German ideologies as because of our own Puritan roots, now secularized. According to Goldman, Strauss and Jaffa should have looked inward for the cause of the derailment:

Consider some key terms in our debates about race and gender: *guilt, debt, responsibility, accuser*. This isn't the language of moral equivalency or indifference. It is a vocabulary of sin that owes more to Christian theology than it does to skeptical (not to say atheist) modern philosophy. The public performance of campus movements of protest and disruption also has a religious quality. Instead of threatening enemies with destruction, it demands their participation in rituals of atonement that almost invariably begin with an apology—that is, a confession of the sinner's unworthiness of forgiveness.

There is, Goldman says, a “vigorously intolerant Puritanism on our campuses,” and he concludes that “the Calvinists of old New England would not have accepted the same view of the

sources of man’s guilt. But I think they would have recognized the impulse.” One could add hashtag public shaming on Twitter to Goldman’s litany, a topic taken up with admirable honesty by Helen Andrews in a recent issue of *First Things*.

However, as useful as I find Goldman’s insight, I think that it points strongly to the need to restore Puritans to a rightful place of honor. Goldman’s remarks show the extent to which our American story—our national myth—has been hollowed out. Over the past century, the word *Puritan* has become shorthand for any doctrinaire position or practice we want to disparage. What I hope to do is to restore gratitude for our earliest pre-founding experience, framing its totality as a “myth”—by which I mean a foundational narrative, not a widely accepted untruth—in order to stir a collective memory that might serve us as a corrective to our own day.

But first, let’s straightforwardly acknowledge some of those anti-Puritan prejudices. The descendants of the Puritans, the New England Transcendentalists, largely shaped our negative opinions today, rejecting both Christianity and their Puritan forebears—an attitude that H.L. Mencken picked up in the 1920s. Mencken humorously defined Puritanism as “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere may be happy.” A few decades later, Arthur Miller, less humorously, identified the Puritans with presumption, judgmentalism, and injustice. In his 1953 play about the Salem witch trials, *The Crucible*, Miller used Puritanism as an allegory for the investigations, led by Sen. Joe McCarthy and the House Committee on Un-American Activities, into subversion of American institutions by closet Communists. Among historians, some of the most famous have argued that our Puritan legacy is the root of our national sense of exceptionalism and manifest destiny, which they consider an unearned inflation of what America means. Still others have accused Puritanism

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of making us intolerant of the “other” and therefore fueling American violence. A contemporary Jesuit writer even points his finger at the Puritans for the prominence of horror films, blaming them for Americans’ fear of Satan and divine vengeance. In short, if there is something wrong with or embarrassing about our mother country—blame the Puritans.

Given the Puritan contempt for Rome and the Papacy, a Catholic like myself would seem to be an odd champion of our Puritan heritage, but we owe them two cheers, even if we refrain from a third—first, because they helped give America the myth that situates us in the central action of the West, and second, because they gave us the foundations of our religious and political liberty.

The best response to the critics of the Puritans is to reawaken an awareness of our national myth, for it is from memory that a people’s identity springs. “Without his myths,” I. A. Richards has said, “man is only a cruel animal without a soul.” He explains that “mythic consciousness is not only a basic need of the human spirit, but a characteristically human mode of thought, like imagination, memory, and reason.” Richards distinguishes mythical thinking from logical reasoning. “Myth takes hold of a thing or a situation intuitively and wholly,” he says, “so that motive and method are perceived simultaneously with the good to be served. It allows a person to grasp entire forms, discern the coherence of their parts, and apprehend the totality of their purpose.” Richards says that myth is “an ancient way of thought, but a profoundly human way. And the modern person is no less in need of it than his or her ancestors.” The question, then, is how we can understand the Puritans, not just as historical scapegoats but as central to the myth of America.

The poets from time immemorial—and I mean “poets” in the large, inclusive sense of those who shape the narrative of a people--are the ones who have given shape to their people’s myths, providing a mimetic form that embraces the whole and often unconscious action of a people, their “shared spiritual

response to a revelation given to [them] at the time of their becoming a people,” as Louise Cowan puts it. Recalling the imaginative framers of our earliest memories, then, is a reclamation act for our collective memory and thus for our identity. Let us turn to one of the bards of our American myth, Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Written in 1835, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story, “The Maypole of Merry Mount,” depicts the “pagan” festivities of mid-summer around a Maypole in the 1620s. Dressed in the garb of “Gothic” carnival—one with antlers of a stag, another with the “visage of a wolf,” a third with the beard and horns of a “venerable he-goat—the dancers could be taken for 12th century English villagers, but they are Protestants in New England. Certain rustic differences do stand out. A stoic Indian is being urged to laugh, a benign bear “taught to dance.” At the center of this semi-Bacchic circle are a comely young man of “dark and glossy” curls and a fair young woman, the Lord and Lady of the May. Shortly, they will declare their nuptial vows before the “canonically dressed” English priest, later called a “priest of Baal” by armed and dour Puritans from neighboring Salem who spy on the gay celebrants. Hawthorne comments that “Jollity and gloom were contending for an empire.” To this vestige of medieval carnival, Hawthorne contrasts the “dismal wretches, who said their prayers before daylight,” and then worked all day “till evening made it prayer-time again.” In conclave, they “never /met/ to keep up the old English mirth, but to hear sermons three hours long.... Their festivals were fast-days, and their chief pastime the singing of psalms.” At first glance, Hawthorne seems to be piling further criticism on the Puritans. “Woe to the youth or maiden who did but dream of a dance! Such a “light-heeled reprobate” would end up “in the stocks; or if he danced, it was the whipping post, which might be termed the Puritan Maypole.”

In contrast, the revelers are carefree except for the Lady of May, Edith, who is “pensive,” sensing that their “mirth is unreal” and that they are “no true Lord and Lady of the May.” She asks her

betrothed, Edgar, “What is the mystery in my heart?” Shortly thereafter, withering rose leaves fall from the Maypole. The Lord and Lady of May feel “a dreary presentiment of inevitable change”—right before their arrest by the invading Puritans. Each newlywed begs to take the full punishment of the other, and, moved by their nobility, the one in charge of the Salem delegation, Endicott, beholds the “fair spectacle of early love” and spares them from whipping. He only orders that their glistening robes be changed for a drab gray. Lord May’s “glossy curls” are shorn and shaped to conform to the “pumpkin-shell fashion,” and Endicott looks upon the maiden as another “mother in our Israel, bringing up babes in better nurture than her own hath been.” He proceeds to seize the wreathed roses from the fallen Maypole and to throw them over the newlyweds’ heads. “As the moral gloom of the world overpowers all systematic gaiety,” Hawthorne comments, “even so was their home of wild mirth made desolate amid the sad forest.”

But why does Hawthorne not lament this turn? Perhaps the phrase “systematic gaiety” is a clue. He concludes his masterpiece of lyric loss, the casting out from the garden, by identifying the young couple with Milton’s Adam and Eve: “They went heavenward, supporting each other along the difficult path which it was their lot to tread, and never wasted one regretful thought on the vanities of Merry Mount.” Loosely based on historical events, this story leads one to ask whether Hawthorne is joining the polemic against Puritan gloom or ironically signaling deeper meanings? The literary allusion to *Paradise Lost* transposes America’s own early beginnings to the beginnings of mankind. Hawthorne mines the richly laden historical past, as problematic as it might be, to reveal the mythic repetition in America of Biblical time. Our identity hinges on remembering man’s fallen nature, not pretending with a “systematic gaiety” that all is well—a healthy departure point for any self-aware people.

In Hawthorne’s story, we not only detect strong allusions to Genesis but also, through the staff, the “mother of Israel,” and

the breaking of the Maypole (which parallels the destruction of the golden calf) to the Exodus myth that underlies the Puritan story. The Puritans saw their election as repeating that of the chosen people, replicating the story of Exodus, both its good elements and its betrayals. Writing in 1702, Cotton Mather claims in *Magnalia Christi Americana* that “The Leader of a People in a Wilderness had need be a Moses; and if a Moses had not led the People of Plymouth-Colony, when this Worthy Person was their Governour, the People had never with so much Unanimity and Importunity still called him to lead them.” He was speaking of William Bradford. In his own *History of Plymouth Colony*, Bradford also speaks of replicating Moses, but a Moses with guarded hope, who, instead of viewing Canaan, was viewing the infinite forests of the American wilderness. This Moses could not, “as it were, go up to the top of Pisgah to view from this wilderness a more goodly country to feed his hopes, for which way so ever they turned their eyes (save upward to the heavens) they could have little solace or content in respect of any outward objects.” The Puritans are epic yet modest in their self-understanding; they energize themselves for their chosen action in the history of salvation on these New England shores.

In *The Scarlet Letter* and throughout his fiction, Hawthorne masterfully executes what the Southern critic, Andrew Lytle, will call “the historic image.” The larger historical action enveloping the action of a novel does more than simply frame it; it permeates its meaning, giving the reader a “post of observation.” Unwilling merely to point an accusing finger at his Puritan forebears, Hawthorne explores Biblical typologies. The garden, the wilderness, the chosen people—the whole Exodus story—reveal the dark bondage of sin beneath virtuous exterior comportment. To the descendants who conceived of themselves as chosen, this uncovering of the doubleness in a fallen world illustrates Hawthorne’s acceptance of the vatic or prophetic role of the poet. He is like an Elijah, a Jeremiah, or even an Isaiah speaking to Americans about atonement; Hawthorne’s works are about a purgatorial journey, not an infernal entrapment in hypocrisy.

Our first of two cheers, then, is for our Puritan forebears giving us a myth, a historic image, upon which our national greatness can grow. Our myth is rooted in a hope that goes forward by looking back at the story of the people of Israel, a story that itself mirrors the spiritual journey of the soul's pilgrimage. This myth informs the American self-understanding as a people destined by God for a special mission in the modern world. And that mission also prompts a second cheer for their great work in laying the foundations of our religious and political liberty, precisely because of their self-understanding as a people chosen by God.

To join one of the Congregational churches in New England, a candidate had to submit to the judgment of a group of elders that he adhered to Calvinist doctrines, was committed to a godly life, and had undergone spiritual conversion. Political participation depended on being one of those deemed among the elect. In other words, just as church membership was only open to the elect, so was political participation; hence, active participation in the township was a serious duty which all "visible saints" were charged to fulfill. What the forty-one men signed before they departed from the *Mayflower* verifies this intent. The Compact to give "glory to God" and advance the Christian faith is also their resolve to "covenant and combine... to form a civil body politick."

In this regard, the great Catholic convert Orestes Brownson (1803-1876), who emerged from the circle of the Transcendentalists in the 19th century, showered the Puritans with surprising praise and defends these forebears against the typical charge of hypocrisy:

Whatever else ... the Puritans were, they were no hypocrites; their manners, their dress, and address, however objectionable we may choose to regard them, were not affected to cloak conscious vice or iniquity, or to deceive their friends or their enemies. Never were men more serious, more deeply in earnest; and it was in obedience to what they held to be the voice of God that

they preached, fasted, sung psalms, prayed.... They would have organized and maintained society, except in not enjoying celibacy, after the mode of a Catholic monastery.

Why should Brownson admire those whose rejection of Catholicism was so thorough? One might be surprised to learn that recusant Catholics shared the same underlying principle that Pilgrims rigorously endorsed in their separation from the Church of England. As Brownson writes, “The Puritan did not separate from the Church of England on the principle of liberty of dissent, or because he wished to establish what liberals now understand by religious liberty. The principle of his separation was the Catholic principle [that] the magistrate has no authority in spiritual matters, and no right to prescribe any forms or ceremonies to be used in worship.” Brownson does not ignore the flaws—“The Puritan abominated toleration, called it the devil’s doctrine, and proved himself little disposed to practice it”—but he sees the deeper affirmation: “in asserting the absolute independence of the church or religion before the civil magistrate, [the Puritan] asserted the true principle of religious liberty, which the Catholic Church always and everywhere asserts, and laid in the American mind the foundation of that religious freedom of which our religion, which they hated, *now* enjoys the benefit.” In other words, the Puritans hated Catholics, but they laid the foundation for the freedom of the Catholic Church in America.

Like Brownson, Alexis de Tocqueville saw the Puritan story as crucial to our nation’s beginnings. Writing after his visit to America in 1835, the young Frenchman claimed that one could read the whole history of America in the first footprints of the first Puritan to land in New England—the twin imprints of the spirit of religion and the spirit of liberty. “Freedom sees in religion the companion of its struggles and its triumphs, the cradle of its infancy, the divine source of its rights. It considers religion as the safeguard of mores; and mores as the guarantee of laws and the pledge of its own duration.”

“Puritanism,” says Tocqueville, “was almost as much a political theory as a religious doctrine.”

And their political understanding was classical. When Mather cites the story of Moses, he also, without missing a beat, calls upon his knowledge of Xenophon, directing his classically educated readers to listen as did the “children” of Cyrus to his dying words: “Learn from the things that have been done already, for this is the best way of learning.” The Puritans’ self-conscious identification not only with Biblical figures but also with ancient heroes is a veritable review of the figures in the curriculum at Wyoming Catholic College. The American Puritans did not reject pagan poetry, philosophy, or Catholic writings, unlike many English Puritans. Mather and others pair the virtue of Puritan leaders with Homer’s heroes. They cite Herodotus, Plato, Xenophon, Cicero, Livy, Pliny, Polybius, Plutarch, and Tacitus as sources for self-understanding. Shortly into Mather’s history, there are over two dozen classical references over and above Renaissance and Biblical references. The Puritans were not intellectual lightweights; Mather himself was “one of the very few Americans elected to the Royal Society prior to 1750.”

Along with this classicism came classical political virtues. Underneath the Puritans’ high regard for marriage and family and township was their understanding of friendship. Puritan presuppositions are not the roots of individualism but of communitarianism, as the researches of Barry Shain and others have shown. Diaries, letters, and poems show that an interest in marital fidelity, the education of children, and harmony in the household were communal concerns. One’s neighbor’s good was of eminent importance. In the town meetings, where they considered schooling, roads, and taxes, they made decisions communally.

In his *Albion’s Seed*, David Hackett Fischer writes that “the number of votes were rarely counted, but merely recorded as

the 'will of the town'" because "the object was not rule by the majority, but by consensus. The purpose of a town meeting was mutual adjustment of differences." Such a politics of consensus now seems almost unthinkable.

But why am I giving two cheers for the Puritans rather than three? To me it is not a contest between jollity and gloom, as Hawthorne wrote in the story of the Maypole, but between reason and choice, on the one hand, and accident and force, on the other, as *Federalist 1* puts it. Mine is neither a moral nor a religious criticism, but a recognition of the fact that the Puritan roots could not grow into a mature political form.

The institutional grounding of the Puritans outlawed those who clung to old English practices in festivals and matrimony rites; it also persecuted those (such as the Quakers) who did not believe in religious institutions as well as those who loved hierarchical magisterial authority with all its traditions. Religion centered in congregationalism, loosely understood, seemed to foment (rather than diminish) a grave threat to our future republic: the problem of faction. Indeed, the history of New England, as early as Bradford's *History of the Plymouth Plantation*, is the history of groups breaking away from the whole.

Despite President George Washington's recognition that religion and morality are "the props" of republican liberty, the architects of our Constitution greatly feared the destructive powers of factions. Yet the tendency to grow apart—to splinter rather than unite—was so endemic to the habits that developed from our nation's Puritan roots and to our commitment to a republican regime that our founding fathers devised a remedy. If both liberty and stability were to be ensured, the architects urged making the nation much larger—"the enlargement of the orbit"—to a scale of popular rule unimaginable in the ancient republics, from the township to the state to the nation. A large and diverse citizenry would dissipate conspiracy before it could grow into a majority, as it would be likely to do in a democracy or a small republic.

The moral nature to be preserved in the American regime was defined over a century and a half earlier by Gov. John Winthrop.

When faction emerged under his leadership, Winthrop made an important distinction: “There is a Liberty of Corrupt Nature, which is affected both by Men and Beasts, to do what they list, and this Liberty is inconsistent with Authority,and all the Ordinances of God are bent against it. But there is a Civil, a Moral, a Federal Liberty, which is the proper End and Object of Authority; it is a Liberty for that only which is just and good; for this Liberty you are to stand with the hazard of your Lives.” A foretaste of the principle behind a just revolution? Quite so. A reminder of what is at stake in preserving our regime today? Most assuredly so!

If we have contrary and hardly compatible notions of liberty, if liberty is construed as the right to secure one’s desires, if identity politics is privileged over duty to the common good, the large unifying vision of the founders might have no other recourse than to return to disparate townships and exclusive communities like those of our Puritan forebears. If that happens, as Hawthorne saw, we will still face the tension between the place of license and the restrictions of the responsible town, of the celebrants around the Maypole and the residents of Salem. Someone’s community will be threatened.

Three cheers for the nation; two for the Puritans; and none for those who would divide us.

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