Shock and Awe
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Published by Dartmouth College Press

Spanos, William V.
Shock and Awe: American Exceptionalism and the Imperatives of the Spectacle in Mark Twain’s A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court.
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CHAPTER ONE

American Exceptionalism

A Genealogy

First: faith draws the heart of a Christian to live in some warrantable calling. As soon as ever a man begins to look towards God and the ways of His grace, he will not rest till he find out some warrantable calling and employment. An instance you have in the prodigal son, that after he had received and spent his portion in vanity, and when being pinched, he came home to himself, and coming home to his father, the very next thing after confession and repentance of his sin, the very next petition he makes is: “Make me one of thy servants.” Next after desire of pardon of sin, then “put me into some calling,” though it be but of an hired servant, wherein he may bring in God any service. A Christian would no sooner have his sin pardoned than his estate to be settled in some good calling: though not as a mercenary slave, but he would offer it up to God as a free-will offering; he would have his condition and heart settled in God’s peace, but his life settled in a good calling, though it be but of a day laborer.

—John Cotton, “Christian Calling”

All this is clearly written in what is rightly called the Scriptures. “And it came to pass at that time that God the Lord (Yahweh) spoke to Moses in the cloud. And the Lord cried to Moses, ‘Moses!’ And Moses replied 'It is (really) I! I am Moses thy servant, speak and I shall listen!' And the Lord spoke to Moses and said to him, 'I am that I am.'”

God thus defines himself as the Subject, par excellence he who is through himself and for himself . . . and he who interpellates his subject, the individual subjected to him by his very interpellation, i.e. the individual named Moses. And Moses, interpellated-called by his Name, having recognized that it “really” was he who was called by God, recognizes that he is a subject, a subject of God, a subject subjected to God, a subject through the Subject and subjected to the Subject. The proof: he obeys him, and makes his people obey God’s Commandments.

—Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”

The fact that must constitute the point of departure for any discourse on ethics is that there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize. This is the only reason why something like an ethics can exist, because it is clear that if humans were or had to be this or that substance, this or that destiny, no ethical experience would be possible—there would be only tasks to be done.

—Giorgio Agamben, The Coming Community
The Puritan Jeremiad versus the Frontier Thesis

A superficial explanation for the absence, until quite recently, of the use of the term “American exceptionalism” in readings of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* is that it did not come into being until the period of the Cold War. As Donald Pease has observed of the genealogy of this term in his magisterial critical analysis of its use in that era:

The primal event to which it was connected was the global catastrophe that was imagined as the inevitable result if the cold war between the United States and the Soviet Empire ever went nuclear. That event did not become imaginable until the 1950s, but the term’s relation to that antagonist originated at its coinage.

American exceptionalism has been retroactively assigned to the distant origins of America. But the term did not in fact emerge into common usage until the late 1920s when Joseph Stalin invented it to accuse the Lovestoneite faction of the American Communist Party of a heretical deviation from party orthodoxies. Stalin’s usage of the term as a “heresy” is helpful in explaining why exceptionalism was reappropriated as the core belief within cold war orthodoxy.

Since Stalin had excommunicated the Lovestoneite sect for having described the United States as exempt from the laws of historical motion to which Europe was subject, cold war ideologues transposed American exceptionalism into the revelation of the truth about its nature that explained why the United States was exempt not merely from Marxian incursions but from the historical laws that Marx had codified. As the placeholder of a communist heresy, American exceptionalism named the limit to the political provenance of the Soviet Empire. As the manifestation of economic and political processes that negated communism at its core, the “heresy” constituted the primary means whereby U.S. citizens could imagine the nullification of communism.¹

But this technical origin, however revelatory about American Cold War policy, is inadequate as an explanation of its absence in discussions of Twain’s *Connecticut Yankee*, since it refers to only one specific historical manifestation of a classificatory schema whose origin was simultaneous with the founding of “America” but since then has undergone multiple historical transformations (though, I submit, never a mutation).² To explain its absence in Twain criticism,
it will therefore be necessary, however briefly, not only to retrieve the genealogy of the myth and ethos of American exceptionalism. Since the meaning of the term has become too generalized to mean very much, as the contemporary popular version disseminated by the American political class and the media testifies, especially during the Barack Obama administration, it will also be necessary to articulate its telling, historically accrued specific components.

What, I think, is crucial to an understanding of American exceptionalism that would be adequate to explain its absence until very recently in the scholarship about Mark Twain in general and in particular *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, a text that is saturated by the ethos of, if not explicit reference to, American exceptionalism, is that American exceptionalism *is not simply a political but also an ontological category*. In other words, it refers to an indissolubly related representational continuum from the ontological, through the epistemological, to the political. Twain’s novel was published in 1889, the remarkable year that bore witness to the Spanish–American War, the United States’ extension by violence of its westward expansion, inaugurated by the Puritans’ removal of the Pequots from the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the seventeenth century, into the Pacific—Hawaii and the Philippines—in the wake of the closing of the American frontier, so fundamental to Frederick Jackson Turner’s inordinately influential thesis about the formation of the American national identity and the progress of American history. When this history is remembered, we are also compelled to remember that the American exceptionalist ethos had its origins in the American Puritan’s version of the patristic typological exegesis of the historical relationship between the Old and the New Testaments, which posited the historical events of the Old Testament as prefigurations of the historical events of the New. As Sacvan Bercovitch (following Erich Auerbach) puts this Puritan providential concept of time—or, to emphasize its spatializing imperative implicit in the etymology of “providence,” this promise/fulfillment structure:

> For the seventeenth-century Puritan, *exemplum fidei* denoted a type of Christ; and what [Cotton Mather, who represents Nehemiah as a prefiguration of John Winthrop in *Magnalia Christi Americana*] meant by type pertained equally to biography and to history. In its original form, typology was a hermeneutical mode connecting the Old Testament to the New in terms of the life of Jesus. It interpreted the Israelite saints, individually, and the progress of Israel, collectively, as a foreshadowing of the gospel revelation.
Thus Nehemiah was a personal type of Jesus, and the Israelites’ exodus from Babylon a “national type” of His triumphant *agon*. With the development of hermeneutics, the Church Fathers extended typology to postscriptural persons and events. Sacred history did not end, after all, with the Bible; it became the task of typology to define the course of the church (“spiritual Israel”) and of the exemplary Christian life. In this view Christ, the “antitype,” stood at the center of history, casting His shadow forward to the end of time as well as backward across the Old Testament. Every believer was a *typus* or *figura Christi*, and the church’s peregrination, like that of old Israel, was at once recapitulative and adumbrative. In temporal terms, the perspective changed from anticipation to hindsight. But in the eye of eternity, the Incarnation enclosed everything that preceded and followed it in an everlasting present. Hence Mather’s parallel between Winthrop and Nehemiah: biographically, the New Englander and the Israelites were correlative types of Christ; historically, the struggles of the New England saints at that time, in this place—the deeds Christ was now performing through them in America—were “chronicled before they happened, in the figures and types of the ancient story.”

Interpreting themselves literally as the historical heirs of the Jews of the Old Testament, particularly of the story of the Exodus, these Calvinist Christians viewed their existence in England as a form of captivity. Indeed, they saw it as slavery to a tyrannical and decadent regime of “fleshpots” prefigured by the Israelites’ captivity in Egypt; their status as God’s elect; their sense of community and communal purpose as a mutually binding covenant contracted with a demanding, indeed a ruthlessly judgmental, God, who, as the Exodus story bears witness, will allow nothing (the Canaanites /Indians who roam but do not inhabit the *terra nullius* that is the Promised Land) to be an obstacle in the way of His inexorably preordained *Telos*; their emigration as an exodus from a corrupted Old World; their earthly collective mission in the “New World” as an “errand in the wilderness” (“to build a city on the hill” that would fulfill the promise God announced in the Old Testament); their individual “calling” or “vocation” as laboring not in the profane time of the now but as workers or “servants” to His higher futural cause; and their use of spectacle—“shock and awe” tactics—to fulfill their divinely ordained “errand.” Not least, like the Israelites of the Old Testament, fortified by their faith in the Covenant and the truth of their God’s Promise, they were, despite the resistance they encountered on the way, certain about the promised end and “unswerving”—one could say,
as Ishmael says of Captain Ahab in *Moby-Dick* — monomaniacally “unerring” in their “fiery pursuit” of its accomplishment. This is the way John Winthrop put this exceptionalist Puritan calling on board the flagship *Arabella* in the famous lay sermon he gave during their passage from “the island of England” to “[the threatening wilderness of] New England in North America”:

> Now the only way to avoid shipwreck and to provide for our posterity is to follow the counsel of Micah: to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk with our God. For this end, we must be knit together in this work as one man. We must entertain each other in brotherly affection; we must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others’ necessities; we must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality. We must delight in each other, make others’ condition our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together: always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body. So shall we keep the security of the spirit in the bond of peace, the Lord will be our God and delight will dwell among us, as His own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways, so that we shall see much more of His wisdom, power, goodness, and truth than formerly we have been acquainted with. We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies, when He shall make us a praise and glory, that men shall say of succeeding plantations: “The Lord make it that of New England.” For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world: we shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God and all professors for God’s sake; we shall shame the faces of many of God’s worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us, till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going.\(^5\)

> As the spectacle-oriented tone of warning that saturates Winthrop’s synecdochical sermon resonantly suggests, however, to restrict the meaning of the Puritans’ exceptionalist ethos inscribed in their self-identification as God’s “chosen people” (and their responsibility to His providential [Promise /Fulfilment] historical design) to the alleged radical difference between them and their English persecutors—their benignly youthful, democratic, and progressive
New World perspective and the decadence, despotism, and backwardness of the Old World practice—as has all too frequently been done by American literary critics and historians, is inadequate. What needs to be added to this definition, as Sacvan Bercovitch decisively observed in his inaugural book *The American Jeremiad* (1978), is the original Puritans’ anxious awareness, in the analogy of the “murmurings” of the Israelites during their “march” under Moses’ leadership to the “Promised Land,” of the fundamental threat to their divinely ordained “calling”: backsliding. In other words, the succeeding generations would, with temporal distance from and familiarization with what I will call the energizing and unifying inaugural event, lose not only their sense of covenantal community but also their initial collective intensity of commitment—their fidelity—to their errand. In opposition to Perry Miller’s interpretation of the Puritan jeremiad as “castigation”—the betrayal of the Covenant—Bercovitch identifies it with a paradoxical optimism that understands the very threat to the energy and unity of the community as promise: “But the Puritan clergy were not simply castigating. For all their catalogues of iniquities, the jeremiads attest to an unswerving faith in the errand; and if anything they grow more fervent, more absolute in their commitment from one generation to the next” (my emphasis). For Bercovitch, “the most severe limitation of Miller’s view is that it excluded (or denigrated) this pervasive theme of affirmation and exaltation.” According to his reading, “the essence of the sermon [the jeremiad] that the first native-born American Puritans inherited from their fathers, and then ‘developed, amplified, and standardized,’ is its unshakable optimism. In explicit opposition to the traditional mode, it inverts the doctrine of vengeance into a promise of ultimate success, affirming to the world, and despite the world, the inviolability of the colonial cause.”

In thus retrieving this paradoxical optimism inherent in the Puritan figural version of providential history, Bercovitch was enabled to read the jeremiad not simply as a means of transfiguring any threat, whether external or internal, to the covenantal community’s oneness into a positively productive force, but also of rejuvenating its vital energy. To put Bercovitch’s insight into the paradoxical nature of the jeremiad in a way that illuminates its long and determinant future in America, not least its role in Mark Twain’s *Connecticut Yankee*, Bercovitch demonstrated that its emphasis on spectacular threat became the means of always evading the intrinsic ironic fate of the civilizing process (the fulfillment of the errand in the wilderness): overcivilization, the very condition it would escape. In the ubiquitous metaphorics used by the Puritan Jeremiahs, it would
prevent the choice grain they believed they were in the eyes of God from reverting to the “chaff of England” (Bercovitch, *American Jeremiad*, 2–4)—old and decadent—an Old World of fleshpots:

The American Puritan jeremiad was a ritual of a culture on an errand—which is to say, a culture based on a faith in process. Substituting teleology for hierarchy, it discarded the Old World ideal of stasis for a New World vision of the future. Its function was to create a climate of anxiety that helped release the restless “progressivist” energies required for the success of the venture. The European jeremiad also thrived on anxiety, of course. Like all “traditionalist” forms of ritual, it used fear and trembling to teach acceptance of fixed social norms. But the American Puritan jeremiad went much further. *It made anxiety its end as well as its means*. Crisis was the social norm it sought to inculcate. The very concept of errand, after all, implied a state of unfulfillment. The future, though divinely assured, was never quite there, and New England’s Jeremiahs set out to provide the sense of insecurity that would ensure the outcome. Denouncing or affirming, their vision fed on the distance between promise and fact. (Bercovitch, *American Jeremiad*, 23; my emphasis)

In attending to Bercovitch’s version of the Puritan jeremiad, we realize that the meaning of American exceptionalism cannot be adequately understood as simply America’s radical difference from and superiority over the rest of the world. Rather, Bercovitch enables us to see it as an exceptionalism grounded in a providential (ontological) vision of history but one, like that of the Israelites of the Exodus story, always threatened by crisis: the very errand in the wilderness that renders its participants exceptional. To reinvoke the biblical term from the Old Testament that the Puritans insistently appropriated to characterize this threat of recidivism, I am referring to the “murmuring” or the “backsliding” that eventually manifested itself in the worship of idols (the “Golden Calf”) or, to anticipate my reading of the American historical occasion of Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, the metamorphosis of the original dynamic and creative energy enabled by faith into its simulacrum: a golden age into a “gilded age.” I am referring ultimately to the comfort, the well-being, the sense of repose, of satisfaction, of delight, of ease—leisure, the respite from work—that is the reward of the chosen people’s labor expended in the process of transforming the wilderness into the Lord’s fruitful vineyard, the paradoxical luxury and decadence that is endemic to the Puritan calling and the vocation it entails.
As I have observed, Sacvan Bercovitch’s analysis of American exceptionalism was inaugural, indeed the harbinger, in many ways, of the New Americanist studies that are revolutionizing the received history of the United States. But it remains, nevertheless, inadequate for understanding the American future: the transformation of the Puritan jeremiad into the “American jeremiad.” And this, I think, is because, in characterizing the jeremiad, in opposition to Perry Miller, Bercovitch emphasized the threat to the unity of the covenantal community over the threat to its youthful productive energy posed by the very errand itself. To put it alternatively, he emphasized the Puritan thesis over the frontier thesis concerning the essence of America’s historical itinerary. Bercovitch overdetermined the abstract ontological anxiety instigated by the apparent contingencies of finite existence over the concrete worldly wilderness or frontier. “Methodologically,” he writes, Miller’s reading of the jeremiad “implies the dichotomy of fact and rhetoric. Historically, it posits an end to Puritanism with the collapse of the church-state. From either perspective, in what is surely a remarkable irony in its own right, Miller’s analysis lends support to the dominant anti-Puritan view of national development—that the ‘American character’ was shaped by what he called ‘the fact of the frontier.’”

Bercovitch then goes on to affirm his interpretation of the jeremiad as the more authentic historical origin of the American national identity: “We need not discount the validity of this frontier thesis to see what it does not explain: the persistence of the Puritan jeremiad throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in all forms of literature, including the literature of westward expansion” (Bercovitch, American Jeremiad, 10–11). In minimizing the “fact of the frontier” by forgetting the role that the wilderness plays in rejuvenating the Israelis of the Exodus story, Bercovitch also fails to see that the Puritan jeremiad, above all, called for the staging of a moving frontier between civilization (white Protestants) and barbarism (red Indians)—that is, for a perpetual, crisis-provoking enemy—the encounter with which would always rejuvenate (by violence) the always flagging energy endemic to the civilizing errand of the covenantal community. As I have written elsewhere about Bercovitch’s argument:

In pointing to [his] overdetermination of the unifying potentialities of the American jeremiad at the expense of the rejuvenating effects—the solidarity of community in behalf of the errand at the expense of the renewal that would render its civil life immune to decay—I am not opting for the “frontier”
thesis about the development of the American national identity. Rather, I am suggesting that Bercovitch’s thesis about the role played by the American jeremiad needs to incorporate and emphasize the “fact of the frontier” instead of minimizing it. Bercovitch is right in singling out the jeremiad as that cultural ritual that more than any other explains the development of the American national character and the elect’s domestic and foreign policies. But this cultural ritual—this communal agency for the renewal of the commonweal’s covenant with God—must, I suggest, be understood not simply in domestic terms (the solidarity of civil society), but also and simultaneously in terms of its “foreign” relations (the threatening Other beyond the frontier). In the wake of the demise of the Puritan theocracy and the constitutional separation of church and state, “the fact of the frontier” came to dominate the [exceptionalist] discourse of an ever-westward expanding America, but it is the jeremiad—and the concept of providential optimistic history on which it is founded—not in a purely secular form, as liberals have erroneously assumed, but in a religio-secular—a “natural supernaturalist”—form, that has determined the meaning of its various and fluid historical manifestations. And, as in the case of the Puritans, although increasingly as America rationalized and banalized the “wilderness,” its purpose has been not to close the frontier and terminate the errand, but to keep it perpetually open, even after the farthest western reaches of the continent had been settled and colonized. Its purpose has been to always already produce crisis and the communal anxiety crisis instigates not simply to mobilize the national consensus and a flagging patriotism, but also to inject by violence the American body politic with antibiotics against decay. 

The Relationality of the Puritan and the Frontier Thesis

Once the symbiotic relationship between the Puritan jeremiad and “the fact of the frontier”—civilization and wilderness—is seen, we are also enabled to perceive the indissoluble relationship between (rather than opposition of) the Puritan and the frontier theses about the American national identity sponsored by Frederick Jackson Turner at the end of the nineteenth century (1893) in the wake of the official closing of the American frontier (1890). This was the historical conjuncture that Mark Twain (and Charles Dudley Warner) called “the Gilded Age” and at which, not incidentally, he was writing A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court (ca. 1879–1889). I will return to this resonant
affiliation between Twain and Turner. In opposition to the prevailing view (epitomized, as we shall see, by Henry Nash Smith and Leo Marx, among others) that they are antithetical, here I want to briefly trace the development of the relationship between the Puritan jeremiad and the frontier—westward expansionism, meaning “settlement” and “improvement” (or “betterment”) of a “terra nullius,” Indian removal, and imperial conquest (and, later, the anxiety over the “waning of the frontier”)—from its origins to the present global occasion both to differentiate the various transformations that the myth of American exceptionalism has undergone and to suggest the essential and inexorable continuity of its always forwarding or “westering” (onto)logic. As I have observed, the first and most dramatic transformation occurred when the Puritan theocracy collapsed, or, to put it alternatively, when, with the waning of New England’s cultural power in the wake of westward migration, the original thirteen colonies adopted the Constitution, which separated church and state. With this official “secularization” of the American nation, the promise/fulfillment structure of the divinely sanctioned Puritan figural or providential concept of history lost its juridical authority. Henceforth, historical events, rather than the biblical exegesis, ostensibly determined official law and, to a lesser degree, American public thought and action. This dramatic turn—this separation of church and state—at the time of the founding of the United States as a nation-state has been perennially represented by the official custodians of the American cultural memory, including Mark Twain, as a decisive revolution. In reality, however, it was not—nor has this fiction been challenged since then. By the time of the American Revolution, the Puritan providential concept of history—and the exceptionalism it implied, including the jeremiadic ritual that sustained the covenantal community and rejuvenated its youthful energies—had become secularized, a “naturalized supernaturalism.” Under the aegis of the Enlightenment and the romantic pressures of the opening frontier, the Theologos had become (more or less) the Anthropologos, providential or figural history had become History, promise had become progress, and, as so much American art of the nineteenth century attests, the divinely ordained errand had become the “march of civilization.” That is, the Puritan errand in the wilderness to build a city on the hill had become Manifest Destiny. Warning his early nineteenth-century readers of a national tendency “to imitativeness [of European values], prevailing amongst our professional and literary men, subversive of originality of thought, and wholly unfavorable to progress” because “they are far behind the mind and movement of the age
in which they live: so much so, that the spirit of improvement, as well as of enfranchisement, exists in the great masses,” John L. O’Sullivan, who coined the phrase “Manifest Destiny,” can nevertheless conclude:

Yes, we are the nation of progress, of individual freedom, of universal enfranchisement. Equality of rights is the cynosure of our union of States, the grand exemplar of the correlative equality of individuals; and while truth sheds its effulgence, we cannot retrograde, without dissolving the one and subverting the other. We must onward to the fulfillment of our mission—to the entire development of the principle of our organization—freedom of conscience, freedom and equality. This is our destiny, and in nature’s eternal, inevitable decree of cause and effect we must accomplish it. All this will be our future history, to establish on earth the moral dignity and salvation of man—the immutable truth and beneficence of God. For this blessed mission to the nations of the world, which are shut out from the life-giving light of truth, has America been chosen; and her high example shall smite unto death the tyranny of kings, hierarchs, and oligarchs, and carry the glad tidings of peace and good will where myriads now endure an existence scarcely more enviable than the beast of the field. Who, then, can doubt that our country is destined to be the great nation of futurity? (O’Sullivan, “Great Nation of Futurity,” 420–430)

But it needs emphasizing that the exceptionalism informing the concept of Manifest Destiny that O’Sullivan attributes to mid-nineteenth-century America should not be restricted, as it generally has been, simply to the principle of chosenness, for this optimistic anxiety endemic to the Puritan jeremiad, now “secularized” as the “American jeremiad”—this paradoxical anxiety that, to appropriate Richard Slotkin’s resonant phrase, justifies “rejuvenation through violence”—saturates not only the official but also the cultural (literary and popular) discourses throughout the period of westward expansion and beyond. In the felicitous phrase Edward Said uses to characterize Orientalists’ representation of the Orient, it has become a “textual attitude.” Telling official post-Puritan instances of this anxious exceptionalism, which span the period between the secularization of the Puritan providential concept of history and the official closing of the frontier—and, not incidentally, more or less contemporary with Mark Twain—are Francis Parkman’s *The Conspiracy of Pontiac* (originally published in 1851 but constantly revised until the sixth edition of 1870) and Frederick Jackson Turner’s “The Significance of the Frontier in
American Exceptionalism” (1893). As I have argued elsewhere, both these synecdochical “official” histories are essentially American jeremiads or, rather, deeply inscribed by the jeremiad, not only by the sense of America’s exceptionalist status as such—its vigorous superiority over the decadent Old World (France in Parkman’s case, Europe in Turner’s)—but also, like their Puritan predecessors, by a disturbing awareness that the inexorable westward movement is a civilizing process that threatens the very conditions that justify that superiority and thus by an urgent sense of the need for a perpetual rejuvenating frontier or enemy.

Both the exceptionalism and its jeremiadic import are implicit in Parkman’s “Preface” to the first edition of *The Conspiracy of Pontiac*, which, it should be underscored, summarizes the ideological intent of his later histories of the colonial conquest of the “New World”:

The Conquest of Canada was an event of momentous consequence in American history. It changed the political aspect of the continent, prepared a way for the independence of the British colonies, rescued the vast tracts of the interior from the rule of military despotism [the French, but implicitly the Mexican and also the English armies], and gave them, eventually, to the keeping of an ordered democracy. Yet to the red natives of the soil its results were wholly disastrous. Could the French have maintained their ground, the ruin of the Indian tribes might long have been postponed; but the victory of Quebec was the signal of their swift decline. Thenceforth they were destined to melt and vanish before the advancing waves of Anglo-American power, which now rolled westward unchecked and unopposed. They saw the danger, and, led by a great and daring champion, struggled fiercely to avert it. The history of the epoch, crowded as it is with scenes of tragic interest, with marvels of suffering and vicissitude, of heroism and endurance, has been, as yet unwritten, buried in the archives of governments, or among the obscurer records of private adventure. To rescue it from oblivion is the object of the following work. It aims to portray the American forests and the American Indian at the period when both received their final doom.

The American exceptionalism of this representative passage—its assumption that American history is informed by a preordained (Manifest) destiny; that the Old World (France) is effete and despotoc; that democracy will triumph; that the savage native denizens of the wilderness are destined by History to extinction; and that its errand in the wilderness is a civilizing one—is self-evident. What needs to be remarked as well, however, given the general
tendency of critics to identify these ideas with the frontier thesis despite Parkman’s New England roots,\textsuperscript{22} is, as the last underscored sentence suggests, that Parkman’s histories of the French and Indian War, particularly \textit{The Conspiracy of Pontiac}, are classic American jeremiads. Written in the middle of the nineteenth century, when the now industrializing East was, by way of the westward expansionist momentum, beginning to crowd the agrarian West, they not only prophesy the “doom” of the native Americans and the “forests”; that is, the demise of the very conditions that perennially rejuvenated the American people. In envisioning this destined double doom, they also, as the past tense of the following passage suggests, instigate an anxious awareness of the possible enervation and disintegration of the original and inaugurating—pioneering—exceptionalist/Protestant/Anglo-Saxon core culture and, implicitly, the need for a new frontier:

When the European and the savage are brought in contact, both are gainers, and both are losers. The former loses the refinements of civilization, but he gains, in the rough schooling of the wilderness, a rugged independence, a self-sustaining energy, and powers of action and perception before unthought of. . . . Those rude and hardy men, hunters and traders, scouts and guides, who ranged the woods beyond the English borders, and formed a connecting link between barbarism and civilization, have been touched upon already. They were a distinct, peculiar class, marked with striking contrasts of good and evil. Many, though by no means all, were coarse, audacious, and unscrupulous; yet, even in the worst, one might often have found a vigorous growth of warlike virtues, an iron endurance, an undaunting courage, a wondrous sagacity, and singular fertility or resource. In them was renewed, with all its ancient energy, that wild and daring spirit, that force and hardihood of mind, which marked our barbarous ancestors of Germany and Norway. (Parkman, \textit{Conspiracy of Pontiac}, 465–466)

Despite Frederick Jackson Turner’s deliberate intent to displace the origins of the American national character from New England to the West, his enormously influential American exceptionalist frontier thesis is, as much of his metaphorized biblical rhetoric makes clear, deeply inscribed by the exceptionalist ethos of the Puritan jeremiad. Thus, as David Noble has observed:

Turner’s language was consistently of a civil religion when he described the birth of the national people from the national landscape. Jefferson, he [Turner]
wrote, “was the first prophet of American democracy, and when we analyze the essential features of his gospel, it is clear that the Western influence was the dominant element.” But Jefferson, he continued, was but “the John the Baptist of democracy, not its Moses. Only with the slow settling of the tide of settlement farther and farther toward the interior did the democratic influence grow strong enough to take actual possession of the government.” Andrew Jackson, then, was that Moses figure who led the people into the promised land of the West.  

And, like the Puritan jeremiad, Turner’s frontier thesis has as its fundamental purpose to instigate collective anxiety over the threat to the unity of the American community and its pioneering spirit posed by the closing of the American frontier—the conquest, colonization, “settlement,” and “improvement” of the “wilderness,” the fulfillment of the errand—at the end of the expansionist nineteenth century. This, including his exceptionalist indifference to the horrific fate of the natives under the heels of “the march of American civilization,” is made manifestly clear in the opening paragraph of Turner’s inaugural essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” delivered significantly at the meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago on July 12, 1893, during the Columbian Exposition—a mere five years before the publication of A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court. Symbolized by the technologically perfected “White City” as the model of the American future, this celebration of the four hundredth year since the discovery of the “New World” was intended to proclaim to the (Old) world the fulfillment of the American errand in the planting of the “city upon the hill”.

In a recent bulletin of the Superintendent of the Census for 1890 appear the significant words: “Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line. In the discussion of its extent, its westward movement, etc., it can not, therefore, any longer have a place in the census reports.” This brief official statement marks the closing of a great historic movement. Up to our own day American history has been in large degree the history of colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.
What distinguished the American nation from the nations of the Old World up to this climactic historical moment, Turner goes on to say, is that, whereas in the latter (civilizational) “development” occurred in a limited geographical space, “American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive development for that area. American social development had been continually beginning over and over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating the American character” (Turner, Frontier in American History, 2; my emphasis). With the closing of the frontier and the annulment of the possibility of “perennial rebirth” (through violence) it entails, Turner, not unlike Parkman and his Puritan predecessors, envisages the specter of a “development” in America that would in fact be a regression that threatened to reproduce the static conditions of overcivilization characteristic of the “soft” Old World and thus an American people who were no longer exceptional in their self-reliance or, in Parkman’s significantly similar terms, who were endowed by their frontier conditions with “warlike virtues, an iron endurance, an undaunting courage, a wondrous sagacity, and singular facility of resource.”

Despite the closing of the American frontier, however, Turner’s secularized concept of providential history precludes pessimism. Like that of the Puritan predecessors he would disavow, its teleological structure is capable of accommodating all worldly crises; that is, of sustaining optimism about the American future. By the close of the nineteenth century, the literal frontier, he implies, had become a metaphor or, to invoke a term I will develop later, the ethos it produced had become hegemonic. Its character of “incessant expansion,” and the imperative of rejuvenation by violence, had been internalized as a fundamental attribute of the American national identity. Underscoring the “closed frontier” by way of juxtaposing the celebration of the fourth centennial of Columbus’s discovery of the New World with the spectacle of the triumphant “White City,” Turner brings “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” to its resounding close by way of an anxiety-provoking optimistic opening:

Since the days when the fleet of Columbus sailed into the waters of the New World, America has been another name for opportunity, and the people of the United States have taken their tone from the incessant expansion which had not only been open but has even been forced upon them. He would be a rash prophet who would assert that the expansive character of American life has now
entirely ceased. Movement has been its dominant fact, and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise. But never again will such gifts of free land offer themselves. For a moment, at the frontier, the bonds of custom are broken and unrestraint is triumphant. There is not tabula rasa. The stubborn American environment is there with its imperious summons to accept its conditions; the inherited way of doing things are also there; and yet, in spite of environment, and in spite of custom, each frontier did indeed furnish a new field of opportunity, a gate of escape from the bondage of the past; and freshness, and a confidence, and scorn of older society, impatience of its restraints and its ideas, and indifference to its lessons, have accompanied the frontier. What the Mediterranean Sea was to the Greeks, breaking the bond of custom, and offering new experiences, calling out new institutions and activities, that, and more, the ever retreating frontier has been to the United States directly, and to the nations of Europe more remotely. And now, four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier is gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history. (Turner, Frontier in American History, 37–38; my emphasis)

This, clearly, is no pessimistic lament over the close and demise of a vibrant and expansive era. Fortified by an undeviating belief in America’s chosenness by History, it is, rather, like the Puritan jeremiads of an earlier theological age, a paradoxical optimistic prophecy of a rebirth, now, under the aegis of the secularized Logos enabled by the metaphorization of the new frontier or enemy; that is, by stripping the frontier of its limiting geography and rendering it a naturalized mental (global) attribute—and permanent. At the end of the nineteenth century, Turner’s American exceptionalist gaze does not come to rest at the California coast; rather, it looks, inevitably, further westward to the Pacific Ocean and beyond, thus justifying and encouraging the contemporary American exceptionalist imperial project in Hawaii and the Philippines—and anticipating the announcement, over a half century later, of “the New Frontier” in Vietnam.

American Exceptionalism: From Myth to “Reality”

It is, however, not enough to rely on “official” texts like Parkman’s and Turner’s synecdochical histories to justify the claim that the myth of American exceptionalism lies at the heart of the American national character and that
its accompanying corollary, the American jeremiad, constitutes the paradoxical driving force of American history. Though they go a long way toward supporting this thesis, especially by way of the remarkable rhetorical and structural parallels that encompass the entire span of American history from its founding to the end of the nineteenth century that I have pointed to between these widely separated secular texts and the Puritan theological ones (these cultural productions are, after all, “official” narratives), they remain, despite their secular status, instances of conscious ideology and thus, in themselves, are not entirely reliable as expressions of the character of the “American people.” What is needed to confirm the claim, therefore, is evidence that this exceptionalist/jeremiadic ethos had come to saturate the discourse of the everyday life of the American people (the dominant “Protestant core culture”) from its origins to the end of the nineteenth century (and beyond). Such a project cannot be undertaken in this limited space. But some sense of the pervasiveness of the exceptionalist ethos in the popular discourse of the United States can be suggested by representative examples ranging historically from the beginnings of westward expansion in the immediate aftermath of the decline of the Puritan concept of providential history and the emergence of its secular version to the fin de siècle, when Mark Twain was writing *A Connecticut Yankee*.

The most obvious of the earliest instances of this cultural discourse that inscribes the popular American mind with the exceptionalist ethos, both the rejuvenating frontier and the threat of overcivilization, as a truth, is, of course, the legendary Daniel Boone. Echoing the double imperative of the American jeremiad, and demonstrating the indissoluble relationship between the Puritan and frontier theses, he not only remains always one step ahead of the settlers of the wilderness because of his consciousness of the entropic—softening and corrupting—dynamics inherent in the process of civilizational settlement and improvement, but also, as the famous George Caleb Bingham painting (1851) testifies, blazes the trail across the Alleghany Mountains, opening up the West for the imperial march of American civilization. This same exceptionalism informing the Daniel Boone myth, which indissolubly relates the jeremiadic element with the forwarding dynamics of westward expansion—the Puritan thesis with the frontier thesis—and dooms (blames) its native victim, also informs the concluding turn of James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Pioneers*, published half a century later, and the “Leatherstocking” novels that followed, which track the career of the Boone figure, Natty Bumppo, from his youth
to his death. As Templeton, the post-Revolutionary village at the edge of the frontier, which is the novel’s ostensible protagonist, becomes increasingly domesticated and “civilized” under the aegis of Judge Templeton’s and, especially, his cousin Richard Jones’s relentless commitment to “clearing,” “settling,” and “improving” the wilderness (and removing the nomadic natives). Cooper, conscious of the recidivism of the eastern seaboard states to the ways of the Old World, suddenly realizes that not only the “noble savage” of the American forests (Chingachgook) is doomed to extinction by the progressive ways of an encroaching civilization but also the nature-oriented, manly, self-reliant, naturally sagacious, trail-blazing, and rejuvenating backwoodsman (Natty, now in old age). To forestall that enervating end, as Cooper makes retrospectively clear in setting his following novel, *The Deerslayer*, in an early primal time (the pre-Revolutionary period of the French and Indian War, 1756–1763), when the question of the New World and the Old World was a revolutionary issue in the colonies, and in presenting Natty (and the frontier) in his youthful prime, Cooper resorts to the American exceptionalist narrative, both its westward imperial and its jeremiadic aspects:

Elizabeth raised her face, and saw the old hunter standing, looking back for a moment, on the verge of the wood. As he caught their glances, he drew his hard hand hastily across his eyes again, waved it high for an adieu, and, uttering a forced cry to his dogs, who were crouching at his feet, he entered the forest. This was the last that they ever saw of the Leather- stocking, whose rapid movements preceded the pursuit which Judge Temple both ordered and conducted. He had gone far towards the setting sun,—the foremost in the band of Pioneers, who are opening the way for the march of the nation across the continent.

A generation later, one finds the American exceptionalist/jeremiadic narrative centrally informing not only Francis Parkman’s official histories of the United States, as I have shown, but equally, if not more tellingly, his personal life as a mid-nineteenth-century New Englander of Puritan descent who, conscious of the enervating consequences of civilizational improvement—the transformation of the New World into an Old World—idealized the rawness of the West. Following Turner’s frontier thesis, Henry Nash Smith reads Parkman’s enthusiasm for the “Wild West” as the indulgence of a “young [New England] gentleman of leisure” in a “slightly decadent” Byronic “cult of wildness and savagery”: 
Parkman’s love of the West implied a paradoxical rejection of organized society. He himself was the product of a complex social order formed by two centuries of history. . . . But a young gentleman of leisure could afford better than anyone else to indulge himself in the slightly decadent cult of wildness and savagery which the early nineteenth century took over from Byron. Historians call the mood “primitivism.” Parkman had a severe case. In later life he said that from his early youth “His thoughts were always in the forest, whose features possessed his waking and sleeping dreams, filling him with vague cravings impossible to satisfy.” And in the preface to *The Oregon Trail* written more than twenty years after the first publication of the book he bewailed the advance of humdrum civilization over the wide empty plains of Colorado since the stirring days of 1846. (Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land*, 52)

But this interpretation of Parkman’s psyche as bordering on decadent is the blindness inherent in the frontier thesis, which represents the Puritan tradition as having run its course by the time of the American Revolution. Retrieving this tradition, which Smith and his Myth and Symbol followers obliterate, one is enabled to see that the threat of decadence for Parkman is in fact as it was for his Puritan forebears, that which the western frontier always keeps at bay. Indeed, this American exceptionalist/jeremiadic ethos was so deeply inscribed in Parkman’s psyche that it not only compelled him to simulate the rejuvenating journey westward after he came to realize that that western world was doomed—the experience he recounted in his memoir, *The Oregon Trail*—but also determined his very practice of historiography.

As a historian of the frontier era of American history, Parkman perceives his task in the analogy of the conditions of the wilderness and thus models his scholarly self, without irony, after the by this time long-textualized American frontiersman. Despite his claim to the objectivity that is enabled by “being there,” his “new” (world) kind of historiography will be carried out according to the imperatives of what Edward Said has called “the textual attitude” of the regulative discourse of the frontier: “clearing,” “reclaiming,” “bettering,” “settling,” and, if we see his project in terms of the belongingness of the New World and the Old World, always “renewing”: “The crude and promiscuous mass of [primary] materials presented an aspect by no means inviting. The field of the history was uncultured and unreclaimed, and the labor that awaited me was like that of the border settler, who, before he builds his rugged dwelling,
must fell the forest-trees, burn the undergrowth, clear the ground, and hew the fallen trunks to due proportion” (Parkman, *Oregon Trail*, 348–349).\(^3\)

More instances of this popular manifestation of the American exceptionalist/jeremiadic ethos could be adduced, but I will bring this phase of the synecdochical history to which I am alluding to a close by invoking as a last telling example, appropriately from Mark Twain, the last sentences of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which, though still to be entirely understood by readers, becomes self-evident in the jeremiadic context I have provided: “But I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she’s going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can’t stand it. I been there before.”\(^3\)

**The Self-Destruction of the American Exceptionalist Truth**

In undertaking this all too brief genealogy of American exceptionalism from the Puritans to the time of Twain’s publication of *A Connecticut Yankee*, my point has been not simply to demonstrate the unerring continuity of its rejuvenating vocational logic but also to suggest that, in the long process, the exceptionalist myth/ethos, which, in the beginning, was a conscious ideological structure (a heuristic fiction, as it were), had become, as my example from *Huckleberry Finn* suggests, a deeply inscribed “truth” of the American national psyche: a symbolic expression, felt in the capillaries of the American body politic, of “the way things are.” In Antonio Gramsci’s resonant term, it had become “hegemonic.” I quote Raymond Williams’s definition—which includes the crucial distinction between “conscious ideology” and hegemony—at length to indicate how precisely it reflects the historical itinerary of American exceptionalism I have traced, particularly its jeremiadic aspect, and to suggest the difficulty of combatting its insidious effects:

> This sense of “an ideology” is applied in abstract ways to the actual consciousness of both dominant and subordinate classes. A dominant class “has” this ideology in relatively pure and simple forms. A subordinate class has, in one version, nothing but this ideology as its consciousness (since the production of all ideas is, by axiomatic definition, in the hands of those who control the primary means of production) or, in another version, has this ideology imposed on its otherwise different consciousness, which it must struggle to sustain or develop against “ruling-class ideology.” The concept of
hegemony often, in practice, resembles these definitions [of ideology] but it is distinct in its refusal to equate consciousness with the articulate formal system which can be and ordinarily is abstracted as “ideology.” It of course does not exclude the articulate and formal meanings, values and beliefs which a dominant class develops and propagates. But it does not equate these with consciousness, or rather it does not reduce consciousness to them. Instead it sees the relations of domination and subordination, in their forms as practical consciousness, as in effect a saturation of the whole substance of lived identities and relationships, to such a depth that the pressures and limits of what can ultimately be seen as a specific economic, political, and cultural system seem to most of us the pressures and limits of simple experience and common sense. Hegemony is then not only the articulate upper level of “ideology,” nor are its forms of control only those ordinarily seen as “manipulation” or “indoctrination.” It is a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living: our senses and assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world. It is a lived system of meanings and values—constitutive and constituting—which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society, a sense of absolute because experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for most members of the society to move, in most areas of their lives. It is, that is to say, in the strongest sense a “culture,” but a culture which has also to be seen as the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes.32

The end of the nineteenth century bore witness to westward expansion accompanied by extraordinarily rapid development of the occupied land, which was represented as the manifestation of the miraculous or, to emphasize one of the less resonant aspects of the exceptionalist ethos, the spectacular success of America’s errand in the wilderness. By this time, the myth of American exceptionalism as a conscious ideology had become a hegemonic discourse. And in the following century the United States, under the aegis of this hegemonic truth, became incrementally but inexorably a global imperial power. From World War I, through World War II, to the Cold War era, when, not incidentally, American literature was harnessed both by the American academy and by the U.S. government, to the cultural struggle against Soviet communism, its latest rejuvenating enemy,33 it extended its History-ordained errand in the American “wilderness” into the world’s “wilderness.” But its undeviating pursuit
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of its vocation beyond its frontiers “ended” in its theoretical self-destruction. In pushing the reifying logic of exceptionalism to its limit, it disclosed to those who were attentive (I am referring to the initiative that has come to be called “New Americanist studies”) the disavowed dark side of the American exceptionalist ethos. This liminal moment, which, as we shall see, is both terminal and inaugural and which I will call an “event” (événement) after Alain Badiou, was the Vietnam War, which bore witness to the spectacle of the American juggernaut destroying a nation—its people, its culture, its land—in the name of bringing it the benefits of American-style democracy. But the Vietnam War’s devastating witness was muted by the massive campaign of the dominant culture to reduce that knowledge to the “Vietnam syndrome” and by the implosion of the Soviet Union in the 1990s. In the wake of the al Qaeda bombing of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, however, the George W. Bush administration, finding the necessary new rejuvenating enemy to replace the old Communist one, unleashed the United States’ spectacular “War on [Islamic] Terror” in the overt name of the American exceptionalist calling. In the process, the Bush administration pushed its exceptionalist logic to its liminal extreme by staging its justification for invading Afghanistan and Iraq (that Saddam Hussein was manufacturing atomic weapons), adopting the concepts of “preemptive war” and “regime change,” employing “shock and awe” military tactics, and establishing the state of exception as the norm. In so doing, the Bush administration disclosed the violence that the discourse of American exceptionalism has always disavowed, and its hegemonic status reverted to a conscious ideology that henceforth could be challenged.

Later in this book, I will extend the genealogy of the myth of American exceptionalism, which culminates with the time when Twain was writing *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, to include its cultural and political manifestations from that decisive moment of American history to the present post-9/11 occasion particularly to the period of the Cold War (Vietnam) and the “War on [militant Islamic] Terror” mounted by the George W. Bush administration. Here, I want to return, after a long but necessary genealogical detour, to the point of departure of this introductory chapter. Such a genealogy enables us to understand the real reason for the absence of explicit references to the American exceptionalist myth/ethos, not only in Twain’s writing but also in the long and voluminous history of commentary on and criticism of *A Connecticut Yankee*, a canonical novel in the American literary tradition that,
as I have observed, perhaps more than any other, is saturated right down to its capillaries by the exceptionalist ethos. The end of the nineteenth century, as we have seen, bore witness not only to the closing of the frontier and the emergence of “the Gilded Age” but also to the reopening of the frontier into the “wilderness” of the Pacific Ocean (Twain insistently refers to the Pacific as erroneously named). By that time of global opening, the “relations of domination and subordination” informing the exceptionalist myth had come, to put it in Williams’s resonant language, to be experienced as “in effect a saturation of the whole process of living—not only of political and economic activity, nor only of manifest social activity, but the whole substance of lived identities and relationships, to such a depth that the pressures and limits of what can ultimately be seen as a specific economic, political, and cultural system seem to most of us the pressures and limits of simple experience and common sense.” In short, the myth of American exceptionalism for Twain and the critics and commentators of *A Connecticut Yankee* was by that time so deeply inscribed in their being as *the truth* of the American national identity that it was virtually impossible for them to project it as a conscious concept to be thought about critically. In Louis Althusser’s apt terms, Twain and the early Americanists who read him as the quintessential American writer were “interpellated”—rendered “subjected subjects”—by the call of the American exceptionalist *Logos*:

The duplicate mirror-structure of ideology ensures simultaneously:

1. The interpellation of the individuals as subjects;
2. Their subjection to the Subject;
3. The mutual recognition of subjects and Subject, the subjects’ recognition of each other, and finally the subject’s recognition of himself;
4. The absolute guarantee that everything really is so, and that on condition that the subjects recognize what they are and behave accordingly, everything will be all right: Amen—“So be it.”

Result: caught in this quadruple system of interpellation as subjects, of subjection to the Subject, of universal recognition and of absolute guarantee, the subjects “work,” they “work by themselves” in the vast majority of cases, with the exception of the “bad subjects” who on occasion provoke the intervention of one of the detachments of the (repressive) State apparatuses. But the vast majority of (good) subjects work all right “all by themselves,” i.e. by ideology (whose concrete forms are realized in the Ideological State
Apparatuses. . . . Their concrete, material behavior is simply the inscription in life of the admirable words of the prayer: *Amen*—“So be it.”

This was the case not only of the early critics, like William Dean Howells and Sylvester Baxter, who celebrated the novel as an American masterpiece, but, as we shall see, even much later ones such as Henry Nash Smith and James Cox, who were troubled by the “contradictory” violent ending of the novel, or John Carlos Rowe, who, unable to believe that a true American like Twain could advocate violence, read it from beginning to end as his critique of Hank Morgan’s unrelentingly crass Yankee commitment to technological “progress.” It is for this reason, I submit, that, despite the vast existing archive of criticism and commentary on it, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* still remains to be adequately read.

Seen in the estranging light shed by the thematization of the hegemonic status of the American exceptionalist ethos at the end of the nineteenth century, furthermore, *A Connecticut Yankee*, I suggest, assumes enormous importance as proleptic of the United States’ global future. I am not only referring to the Cold War era, which bore witness to the United States’ destruction of Vietnam in the name of “saving it” for the “free world,” but also, and even more tellingly, to the permanent “War on Terror” inaugurated in the wake of the end of the Cold War—which, from the exceptionalist perspective, meant the loss of a rejuvenating enemy—by the George W. Bush administration (the neoconservative exponents of “the American Century”). Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, despite its patent flaws as a novel, sheds more light on the United States’ contemporary global occasion than any other novel in the American canon, with the exception of Herman Melville’s fiction.

Interpellated by the American calling, the vast majority of American critics and commentators on *A Connecticut Yankee* have been blinded by their American exceptionalist insight to or, more precisely, by their oversight of the dark side of its “benign” progressive surface, a darkness that has in fact in some degree haunted the consciousness of all those American writers, like Mark Twain, who have committed their labor to the accomplishment of the “errand” from the beginning. What, then, is this spectral dark side of the exceptionalist ethos? To put it generally, it is the spectacular violence endemic to an unerring optimistic logic, which, having its origins, as I have shown, in the myth of transcendental election and calling (by and from God or History) and
its vocational end in the fulfillment of this panoptic “higher cause,” justifies the
destruction, indeed the annihilation if necessary, of any obstacle in its “march”
toward its transcendently ordained Telos—and, in the process, enables the
victimizer to blame the victim. Put in a more recent theoretical language, in
relying on an ontologically founded perpetual frontier or enemy—to recall the
Puritan jeremiad, the paradoxically rejuvenating anxiety precipitated by crisis
(the state of emergency)—the unswerving logic of the American exceptionalist
ethos renders the state of exception the norm. In Giorgio Agamben's resonant
terms, to which I will return, it transforms politics into a biopolitics that re-
duces human life (bios) to “bare life” (zoé), homo sacer, the included excluded,
or, in Jacques Rancière's phrase, the part [of a polity] of no-part, which can
then be killed with impunity:

We have already encountered a limit sphere of human action that is only ever
maintained in a relation of exception. This sphere is that of the sovereign
decision, which suspends law in the state of exception and thus implicates bare
life within it. We must therefore ask ourselves if the structure of sovereignty
and the structure of sacratio might be connected and if they might, from this
perspective, be shown to illuminate each other. We may even then advance
a hypothesis: once brought back to his proper place beyond both penal law
and sacrifice, homo sacer presents the originary figure of life taken into the
sovereign ban and preserves the memory of the originary exclusion through
which the political dimension was first constituted. The political sphere of
sovereignty was thus constituted through a double exclusion, as an excrescence
of the profane in the religious and of the religious in the profane, which
takes the form of a zone of indistinction between sacrifice and homicide. The
sovereign sphere is the sphere in which it is permitted to kill without committing
homicide and without celebrating a sacrifice, and sacred life—that is, life that may
be killed but not sacrificed—is the life that has been captured in this sphere.\textsuperscript{37}

To provide an orientating contrast to Twain's exceptionalism and that of
the Americanist criticism and commentary that has dominated Twain studies,
I invoke here a passage from Herman Melville's novel \textit{Moby-Dick} that I take
to be at the heart of this subversive American work: Ishmael's recollection
of the origins of Captain Ahab's monomaniacal desire for vengeance against
the white whale. The passage follows Ishmael's account of Ahab's charismatic
galvanizing of the crew of isolatoes that man the ship of state he commands on
behalf of his “fiery pursuit” of Moby Dick and immediately precedes Ishmael’s antithetical representation of the white whale:

No turbaned Turk, no hired Venetian or Malay, could have smote him with more seeming malice. Small reason was there to doubt, then, that ever since the almost fatal encounter, Ahab had cherished a wild vindictiveness against the whale, all the more fell for that in his frantic morbidness he at last came to identify with him, not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations. The white whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung. That intangible malignity which has been from the beginning; to whose dominion even the modern Christians ascribe one-half of the worlds; which the ancient Ophites of the East reverenced in their statue devil;—Ahab did not fall down and worship like them; but deliriously transferring its idea to the abhorred white whale, he pitted himself, all mutilated, against it. All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lee of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. He piled upon the whale’s white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart’s shell upon it. (Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 184)