White Liberal Identity, Literary Pedagogy, and Classic Realism

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“A Good Fellow Wronged”:
CHRISTOPHER NEWMAN AND THE FEELING OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

Scholars agree that “American exceptionalism” has been a remarkably persistent dimension of U.S. culture and identity, even though the term tends to be used somewhat differently within different disciplines. For scholars of American literature, American exceptionalism usually refers to a set of presumptions and desires concerning the unique status, unique character, and, above all, unique mission of America. Originating even before the birth of the United States, American exceptionalism in the latter sense initially took shape as the Puritans’ vision of founding “a city upon a hill,” a community elevated by God with the mission of modeling Christian charity and virtue to the rest of the world. This exceptionalism subsequently evolved beyond its early religious manifestations to appear in various secular and quasi-secular versions. During and after the Revolutionary period, for instance, there was a widespread, almost millennial conviction among many influential Americans that the United States was destined to model democratic self-governance for the rest of the world, which would soon follow in our footsteps. In the nineteenth century, Catherine Beecher contended that “the Disposer of events” designed that America should “go forth as the cynosure of nations.” Hence, “to American women . . . is committed the exalted privilege of extending over the world those blessed influences, which are to renovate degraded man.”

Ironically, scholars first adopted the actual term “American exceptionalism” from the Communist Party, which introduced it during the 1930s in an attempt to theorize why the Party’s attempts to build a large-scale socialist movement in the United States kept failing, unlike in most European countries. For frustrated Party theorists, American exceptionalism referred to a prevalent ideological belief among Americans that their nation was different from other industrialized societies because it lacked social classes. Today, considerations of American exceptionalism in such fields as political science, economics, and sociology continue to investigate
the truth-value of specific exceptionalist notions—for example, that reli-
gion plays a decisively different role for Americans than for Europeans and
Canadians—as well as the social and political implications of Americans’
beliefs about their nation’s exceptional nature, regardless of whether those
beliefs are accurate or not. Although social-scientific interrogations of
American exceptionalism often overlap with questions literary scholars ask,
the latter tend to concentrate on exceptionalism’s cultural expressions.
Literary scholars have been especially interested in analyzing literary and
cultural artifacts that manifest, whether blatantly or subtly, Americans’
 messianic sense that their nation has a unique role to play in the world.

In what follows, I juxtapose a work of classic American realism, Henry
James’s novel *The American* (1877), with a recent nonliterary articulation
of American exceptionalism, as expressed in an address then-Senator Jesse
aim in this brief chapter is not merely to draw parallels between the
stances of American exceptionalism assumed by Helms and by James’s pro-
tagontist Christopher Newman (although the parallels are striking—and to
a degree amusing). Rather, by reading James’s novel and Helms’s speech
together, I seek to sketch key elements of a constellation of American polit-
cal identity that is today markedly prominent in international contexts.
Adopting a phrase employed by James’s text, I call this constellation of
identity the “good fellow wronged.” It is an identity grounded in an
unyielding presumption of American innocence and of the United States’
purity of motive, transparency of character, and absolute forbearance from
morally unjustifiable actions. For the good fellow wronged, American
exceptionalism operates less as a collection of discrete, potentially falsifi-
able beliefs about the United States and its actions than as feeling and
form: a mode of functioning emotionally, psychically, and interpersonally.
Exceptionalism here is a stance, a posture—a template—for positioning
and presenting oneself, simultaneously for one’s own gaze and for the gazes
of “foreign” others.

The feeling that oneself as an American—or the United States as a
nation—has been wronged, taken advantage of, or misunderstood by for-
egn others is by no means uncommon among those who would locate
themselves on the liberal side of the U.S. political spectrum. As a consis-
tently inhabited mode of being, however, the good fellow wronged is an
identity that tends to be based farther to the Right than the various liber-
al and leftist identities explored in other sections of this book. Under the
George W. Bush administration, the position of good fellow wronged
(which, as we will see, is a stance that authorizes various forms of violent
response) has become the predominant character that the United States
images for itself in the “war on terror.” Despite its not being a specifically
liberal or leftist style of identity, I devote this chapter to investigating the
good fellow wronged as a structuring disposition because that figure’s
defining insistence on the essential innocence of America and Americans
serves as a provocative counterpoint to the topic of chapter 6, which
returns to a focus on leftist modes of political subjectivity. Chapter 6 con-
cludes our study of liberal identity by using critically presentist reading to
explore the problem of liberal guilt. As will become plain, liberal guilt is
generated and regenerated by its continual practice of demystifying
American “innocence.” Using the lens of Edith Wharton’s The Age of
Innocence, chapter 6 enunciates an alternative relation to American inno-
cence, one perhaps more productive than the simplistic “good fellow
wronged” innocence insisted on by American exceptionalism, which is
both opposed and complemented by liberal guilt.

I choose to work with Helms’s year 2000 speech to the United Nations
instead of post–9/11 interactions between the U.N. and such high-rank-
ing U.S. officials as President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Colin
Powell, which focus on such topics as the “war on terror,” and the inva-
sion of Iraq, because these more recent interactions have been dominated
by the rhetoric of immediate life-and-death crisis. Helms’s speech fore-
shadows many of the same postures and presumptions that appear espe-
Helms’s earlier performance of exceptionalist feeling, while not exactly
calm, is more everyday, less self-conscious than later performances by
Bush. What I find most interesting is how Helms’s speech and James’s
novel together help illuminate the American “good fellow wronged” as a
quotidian, habitual mode of subjectivity.

A speech by Jesse Helms and a novel by Henry James may seem an
especially odd couple to link through critically presentist reading. James,
after all, was a richly gifted, cosmopolitan, multilingual American writer,
who early on decided he did not wish to reside in the United States.
Helms retired from the U.S. Senate at the beginning of 2003, but remains
a political force, in part through his involvement with the Jesse Helms
Center, located in his home state of North Carolina. Helms is a populist
politician who, in vivid contrast to James, has always presented himself as
exemplifying America’s “common” people. He has been a prominent
opponent of public support for the arts and humanities, both of which he
approaches with hostility and fear. James possessed a subtle and complex
literary imagination; Helms often seems to take pride in a certain crude
reductionism. In chapter 1, the social, psychological, and temporal intric-
cacies of Edith Wharton’s “Autre Temps . . .”helped give figure to difficult
aspects of Hopwood v. Texas: for instance, the paradoxical possibility that
racial exclusion at the University of Texas might be more powerful for hav-
ing lost whatever rationale or coherence it may once, at least on its own terms, have possessed. In the current chapter, James’s portrayal of Christopher Newman in *The American* helps provide interpretative leverage on Helms’s version of American exceptionalism. But the lens of critical presentism is also, so to speak, turned around, as we reread a canonical realist text with the new perspective created by setting it next to a recent political event. Indeed, in this case, the purposeful, almost ostentatious avoidance of subtlety in Helms’s words means that his speech serves as a magnifying glass that aids in the deciphering of underlying fantasies, structuring formulations, and political implications inherent in James’s literary imagining of the American as a good fellow wronged.

**Quadrupeds and Foreigners**

Near the beginning of his U.N. speech, Jesse Helms announces, “I am not a diplomat, and as such, I am not fully conversant with the elegant and rarefied language of the diplomatic trade. I am an elected official, with something of a reputation for saying what I mean and meaning what I say. So I trust you will forgive me if I come across as a bit more blunt than those you are accustomed to hearing in this chamber.” Helms’s self-presentation as an uncomplicated good fellow requires him, not merely to avoid, but to make a visible point of avoiding “elegant and rarefied language.” His insistence here on the strict identity between his saying and his meaning (he means what he says and he says what he means) fits squarely within American pragmatist accounts of language. Similarly, the narrator of *The American* insists that, for Christopher Newman, “words were acts and acts were steps in life, and that in this matter of taking steps curveting and prancing were exclusively reserved for quadrupeds and foreigners.” Newman’s canonically pragmatist view of language as itself a form of effective action (a view developed by William James, among others) is, for the American businessman, explicitly posed against “foreigners” and implicitly posed against effeminacy.

Indeed, those who practice verbal “curveting and prancing” may become, in a familiar homophobic paradox, so “overcivilized” as to be excluded from the normatively human, figuring instead as artificially-trained “quadrupeds” performing in a show ring. The body of the Frenchman Urbain de Bellegarde, as the name “Urbain” might suggest, epitomizes this overcultivation, which constitutes the hollow opposite of Newman’s active and substantive American masculinity: “Here was a man towards whom he was irresistibly in opposition; a man of forms and phrases and postures.” By contrast to the straightforward transparency of Newman’s language, consider “the conscious, ironical smile of his host.
What the deuce M. de Bellegarde was smiling at he was at a loss to divine. M. de Bellegarde’s smile may be supposed to have been, for himself, a compromise between a great many emotions” (139).

For both James’s and Helms’s versions of the American good fellow, the eschewal of language’s diplomatic potential for ambiguity and for compromises of meaning sets up the good fellow’s own direct, one-to-one correspondence with “America” as such. Matching his pragmatist claim to eliminate any gap between his saying and his meaning, between his signifiers and what he intends as their signifieds, Helms posits himself as perfectly representative of, even perfectly coincident with, “the American people.” Integral to the figure of the good fellow wronged is an identity that, transcending its individual bearer, instantiates the literal essence of America as a nation and of American-ness as a quality.

Helms begins his speech with the unmistakable implication that he represents the American people more perfectly even than do the U.S. president or the president’s appointees—more perfectly, in fact, than other U.N. diplomats represent their own countries: “Distinguished Ambassadors, Ladies and Gentlemen. . . . You are distinguished world leaders and it is my hope that there can begin, this day, a pattern of understanding and friendship between you who serve your respective countries in the United Nations and, those of us who serve not only in the United States Government but also the millions of Americans whom we represent and serve.” There is a reason that Helms’s syntax here is so strained. His not quite tautological phrasing strives to establish a difference between “serve” and “represent.” A distinguished ambassador serves a government and a “country.” By contrast, an “elected representative” such as Helms not only serves but also stands in for, without any gap or mediation, the real-life individuals who together comprise a unitary “people.” When referring to America’s people, Helms always uses the direct article: “Let me share with you what the American people tell me.” James’s Christopher Newman fills out “the national mould.” His body perfectly reflects “the American type” (again, use of the direct article is important) with “almost ideal completeness” (18; my emphasis). When asked if he is American, Newman responds “don’t you see it?” To wound an American good fellow such as Newman or Helms would be, in the very same act, to wound “America”—not only as a nation and a people, but also as an idea.

“Trustful, Generous, Liberal, Patient, Easy”

Henry James’s The American depicts the attempts of self-made western American millionaire Christopher Newman to marry Claire de Cintré,
beautiful widowed daughter of one of France's oldest, most aristocratic, and most politically and socially conservative families, the Bellegardes, albeit a family whose economic fortunes have ebbed. For many centuries, the Bellegardes had married only within a restricted circle of high-ranking European nobility. Despite the pernicious prejudices of the Bellegarde elders against him as a vulgar commoner, the wealthy American does manage to win Madame de Cintré's love and the family's apparent consent to their marriage. The Bellegardes even take the unusual step of hosting a party to announce the engagement among their distinguished friends, many of whom have never even seen an American before. (One elderly duchess does remember meeting Benjamin Franklin, however, when that famously representative American lived in Paris [146].) At the party, the large and international audience to Christopher Newman's seeming acceptance amplifies the American's “cheerful sense of success, of attainment, of victory” (191). When the marriage itself draws near, however, Claire's mother and brother finally find themselves unable to “swallow” such a close family connection with Newman and his tainted “commercial” “antecedents.” They call off the match. Unable to defy her mother's “command” and marry Newman anyway, Claire withdraws to a convent, one which forbids her ever to exchange human words again (221, 245, 112, 217).

Newman is both infuriated and heartsick, partly on Claire's behalf but mostly on his own: “His sense of outrage was deep, rancorous, and ever-present.” Throughout his dealings with the Bellegardes, Newman sees himself as having been “trustful, generous, liberal, patient, easy, pocketing frequent irritation and furnishing unlimited modesty” (245). Now, however, Newman is consumed by “the feeling that after all and above all he was a good fellow wronged,” a phrase that is repeated three times in the text of The American (245, 303). James's 1907 preface confirms that the “essence” of Newman's experience in Paris is that he has been “wronged,” “cruelly wronged,” and “ill-used” (3, 2, 11).

It is crucial that the “wrong” Newman suffers in the novel is not merely the loss of his fiancée, Claire de Cintré. Worse, for Newman, is the wound of having been judged “not good enough” by Claire's family (284). “To lose Madame de Cintré after he had taken such jubilant and triumphant possession of her was as great an affront to his pride as it was an injury to his happiness” (220). Worst of all, Newman has been judged and rejected in public, on an international stage. Newman repeatedly insists that his humiliation has occurred “before the world—convened for the express purpose” (284). James's preface envisions the wrong done to Newman as occurring “on a high and lighted stage. . . . [H]e would be wronged with just that conspicuity, with his felicity at just that pitch and with the highest aggravation of the general effect of misery mocked at”
Newman’s overwhelming sense of his rejection as occurring on a lighted stage begins even in the first “startled and pained” moment when he hears the bad news: “He was amazed, bewildered, and the presence of the old marquise and her son seemed to smite his eyes like the glare of a watchman’s lantern” or, we might add, a spotlight (214). He later describes his experience to the Bellegardes’ former servant, Mrs. Bread. “They [the Bellegardes] took me up into a high place and made me stand there for all the world to see me, and then they stole behind me and pushed me into this bottomless pit, where I lie howling and gnashing my teeth” (257).

Eric Haralson has recently argued that Sigmund Freud’s famous essay about masochistic fantasy, “A Child Is Being Beaten,” helps explain Newman’s response to his rejection. Haralson shows that, intermingled with Newman’s obvious anger and pain at the Bellegardes’ successful interference with his marriage, the American also experiences a “strange satisfaction,” even “pleasure” in his own loss and humiliation. Haralson quotes James’s description of the “singular sensation” Newman feels, that “of his sense of injury almost brimming over into jocularity.” Haralson observes, moreover, that Newman seems extravagantly invested in his “ordeal as one of extreme, and extremely public, humiliation.” Especially in light of James’s own emphasis on the “lighted stage,” Newman’s description of his humiliating rejection as having occurred “before the world—convened for the express purpose” seems the same sort of imagined masochistic “scenario that would do credit to the most inventive of Freud’s fantasists.”

Although Haralson has arrived at a valuable insight in recognizing the ways in which Newman’s experience with the Bellegardes resembles masochistic fantasy, I would emphasize that, unlike the classic masochist, Newman never imagines that he deserves punishment, or that he has done anything bad. For Newman himself, envisioning his rejection as a painfully public humiliation primarily serves to motivate and authorize his rancorous outrage. People he conceives of as foreign judges using foreign standards have delivered the negative judgment of him, and this is the “sensation” Newman finds “intolerable” (220). The mode of American political subjectivity we are exploring here—that of the good fellow wronged—emphasizes, even draws out, the sensation of woundedness consequent upon public humiliation inflicted by foreign judges. But the pain of having been so misjudged above all serves the good fellow as an occasion and justification for aiming at aggressive domination over those who have cast judgment upon him. The overweening agents and witnesses of his wrongdoing must be forced to recognize and confirm his American moral, political, economic, and even, as we have already witnessed through the examples of both Newman and Helms, his linguistic exceptionalism.

Helms’s speech to the U.N. Security Council shares Newman’s vivid
sense of having been demeaned before an international audience. Helms enumerates several offenses both of behavior and of attitude that the United Nations has committed against the United States and “the American people.” He dwells on specific scenes in which the American people are made a spectacle, as they receive humiliating abuse directed at them by the other U.N. countries. Helms emphasizes, for example, that the American people “see the majority of the U.N. members routinely voting against America in the General Assembly. They have read the reports of the raucous cheering of the U.N. delegates in Rome, when U.S. efforts to amend the International Criminal Court treaty . . . were defeated. . . .” Six sequential clauses or complete sentences begin with Americans’ sensory or cognitive taking in of humiliation: “They have heard,” “they see,” “they have read,” “they read,” “The American people hear.” In these sentences, Helms positions the American people simultaneously as victim and spectator to the abuse almost ritualistically meted out to them by “U.N. members.”

Most important again, however, is that, unlike in the masochist’s classically preferred scene, in Helms’s construction, the American people do not claim to have been “bad” or to deserve punishment. The American people, Helms tells the Security Council, “know instinctively that the U.N. lives and breathes on the hard-earned money of the American taxpayers.” In 1999 alone, “the American people have furnished precisely TEN BILLION, ONE HUNDRED AND SEVENTY-NINE MILLION DOLLARS to support the work of the United Nations” (capital letters in original). (Christopher Newman also enjoys the “magnificent sound that large aggregations of dollars put on . . .” especially when that magnificent sound serves to underline his own exceptional generosity [128].) “No other nation on earth comes even close to matching that singular investment,” Helms adds. “And yet,” he continues, the American people “have heard comments here in New York constantly calling the United States a ‘deadbeat.’ They have heard U.N. officials declaring absurdly that countries like Fiji and Bangladesh are carrying America’s burden in peacekeeping.” Helms is determined to impress upon his audience of U.N. diplomats that “The American people hear all this; they resent it, and they have grown increasingly frustrated with what they feel is a lack of gratitude.”

James’s “international theme” includes as a key component the abuse by foreigners of our American good nature. This same motif plays a structuring role in Helms’s imaginary, as well as in the stance subsequently projected by the Bush administration both within the United States and around the world. Moreover, as for the Bush administration and a significant portion of the American population since September 11, so too in both Helms’s speech and James’s novel there exists an almost voluptuous sense
of having been outrageously and publicly *wronged*. This outrage becomes the occasion for a reverberating assertion of American wealth and power, as well as a reassertion of America’s status as unique and superior. Henry James through Christopher Newman and Jesse Helms in his speech both dwell in the sensation of having been publicly wronged, but at almost the same time they also loudly and derisively repudiate what Helms calls “foreign judges.” Foreigners cannot judge the American (people), Helms and Newman insist, because the latter are always already superior to their would-be judges. The American people, Helms asserts, do not want or “need . . . the approval of an international body, some of whose members are totalitarian dictatorships.” He is astonished that “a U.N. ‘Special Rapporteur’ decided his most pressing task was to investigate human rights violations in the U.S.—and found our human rights record wanting.” Experiencing his rejection by them as “preposterous,” Newman angrily informs the Bellegardes, “I mean to show the world that, however bad I may be, you are not quite the people to say it” (220, 284).

Because of their shared conviction of America’s essential innocence, both Jesse Helms and James’s Christopher Newman experience any criticism of America or American-ness by “insolent foreigner[s]” (James’s phrase for the Bellegardes in a letter to William Dean Howells) as an undeserved, outrageous, even exceptional wrong. In an international context, the good fellow’s feeling of American exceptionalism paradoxically requires outside confirmation of the nation’s unique virtues, confirmation even from “enemies” who must be given no grounds for criticizing or dismissing the American experiment. The Puritans’ sense of their special mission and status in God’s eyes occasioned feelings of intense pressure and anxiety, not only from the fear of disappointing God but also from the fear of licensing “the world” to regard God’s chosen people as having failed. If the Puritans were “made a story and by-word through the world” as failures, not only would they themselves be “consumed” but the world itself also would be given over to evil. Becoming a negative example, a story and a byword, is intolerable. The separateness often implied by American exceptionalist thinking should thus be recognized as only *pseudo*-isolationist because it requires the approving gaze of others to maintain its sense of its own identity.

**America’s Clear Intention to Help**

Christopher Newman and Jesse Helms both give expression to a sure conviction that, despite what might temporarily appear as morally suspect behavior in others’ eyes, America is essentially, unchangingly good.
Despite their possessing great power, and despite their sometimes having exerted it on morally ambiguous terrain, “the” American people, for Helms, or “the American,” for Newman, have never crossed the line separating right from wrong. “I may be dangerous,” Newman tells his friend Mrs. Tristram, “but I am not wicked. No, I am not wicked” (305). Thinking back on his “old efforts, old exploits . . . examples of ‘smartness’ and sharpness,” Newman feels “decidedly proud” of some of them. Of others, “it would be going too far to say that he was ashamed of them. . . . Newman knew the crooked from the straight at a glance” and he “had never had a stomach for dirty work” (74). He is pleased to reflect “with sober placidity that at least there were no monuments to his meanness scattered about the world” (301). Helms argues that every occasion on which the United States has involved itself in the affairs of another country, and every method that it has used, including what he lists as “moral, financial, and covert forms of support” (in Newman’s rhetoric, “examples of ‘smartness’ and sharpness”) has been designed to produce an “expansion of freedom.”

Indeed, the good fellow wronged constellation of identity we have been sketching professes an overriding devotion to freedom, not only for Americans themselves but also for foreign others. This devotion to freedom underlies an investment in fantasized scenarios of rescue both in The American and in Helms’s U.N. speech. Within these imagined scenarios, the masculine heroic mission of the good fellow (America) is to save victimized foreigners from their bondage to totalitarian dictators. On the ticklish question of respecting other nations’ integrity, Helms has no choice but at some level to recognize the possibility of provoking irony in a speech that insists on the absolute inviolability of American sovereignty, given the United States’ lengthy past of intervening in the internal affairs of foreign countries (what Newman might refer to as its “old efforts, old exploits”). Thus Helms several times emphasizes what he calls “the American people[s] long history of coming to the aid of those struggling for freedom.” He insists that helping others who are “struggling to break the chains of tyranny” is an “inherently legitimate” form of action. “During the 1980s,” Helms adds, “we called this policy the ‘Reagan Doctrine.’”

Some twenty years prior to America’s embrace of an analogous structure of justification for its war to “free” Cuba from Spanish tyranny, Christopher Newman asserts that he wishes to take Claire de Cintré out of her family’s orbit so as to make her “perfectly free.” “Your family exert a pressure upon you, interfere with you, annoy you,” Newman exclaims in an early discussion with Claire (115). Later, he insists, “they have bullied you, I say; they have tortured you” (241). “Let me come in and put an end
to it,” he virtually demands of her when proposing marriage (113). To Newman, the Bellegardes have locked Claire into an ideology of family conformity that is, as Claire herself says, “like a religion” (242). Speaking of the multiple interventions launched under the “Reagan Doctrine,” Helms asserts, “in each case . . . it was America’s clear intention to help bring down Communist regimes that were oppressing their peoples—and thereby replace dictators with democratic governments.”

In the eyes of the American good fellow (whether Newman, Helms, or, most recently, George W. Bush), for foreigners to judge such actions—as when, as Helms puts it, “the U.S. effort to overthrow Nicaragua’s Communist dictatorship by supporting Nicaragua’s freedom fighters and mining Nicaragua’s harbors was declared by the World Court as a violation of international law”—is itself almost literally profane. Such judgments, Helms declares, threaten “the God-given freedoms of the American people” to rescue and protect others who wish to exercise their own “inalienable, God-given rights” to freedom. Newman is convinced that for the Bellegardes to block his project of making Claire “perfectly free” (by marrying her) is to contravene both nature and the God-given privileges of white heterosexual American masculinity: “To see a woman made for him and for motherhood to his children juggled away in this tragic travesty—it was a thing to rub one’s eyes over, a nightmare, an illusion, a hoax” (246). “A man can’t be used in this fashion,” he proclaims. “You have got no right. You have got no power” (217).

Although Helms’s “American people” are not as overtly masculine as Christopher Newman, the United States of Helms’s Reagan-era rescue scenario is implicitly male. It deserves emphasizing, moreover, that the vision of America as a good fellow wronged conceives the good fellow as unambiguously white. Although the Bellegardes seek to assume the position of “ethnologist” in regard to Newman as American specimen, he deftly parries by taking for granted that they could not possibly mean to render white Americans as objects of ethnography: “An ethnologist?” Newman responds, “Ah, you collect negroes’ skulls, and that sort of thing” (124).

In Helms’s U.N. address, the status of “the American people” as white emerges most clearly in the senator’s insistence that intervening “when the oppressed peoples of the world cry out for help” is “not a new concept for the United States [because] the American people have a long history of coming to the aid of those struggling for freedom.” Implying that an essential aspect of American identity has always been the rescue of “peoples” from “widespread oppression and massive human rights abuses,” Helms erases America’s own history of slavery, genocide, chauvinism, and convict labor. In asserting America’s long history of support for “nations
struggling to break the chains of tyranny and claim their inalienable, God-given rights” (my italics), Helms elides the historic contradiction that is at the heart of the Declaration of Independence’s assertion that “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” are “unalienable rights”: a contradiction African Americans have pointed out ever since the Declaration’s signing. For the Helmsian, Newman-esque American exceptionalist, un-freedom is always out there, on terrain clearly distinct from the land of the free.

Ever hovering above the American good fellow’s melodramatic fantasy of rescuing the un-free is the threat of anger and retribution if either the victim supposed to require rescue or the melodrama’s audience does not decisively enough recognize the hero’s impeccable intentions. Part of Newman’s American good-fellowness throughout James’s novel has been his seeming willingness to “pocket . . . frequent irritation,” to accept small slights. When the Marquis and Marquise de Bellegarde publicly reject him, however, Newman finds himself possessed by a “sense of outrage [that] was deep, rancorous, and ever present” (245). He now feels more than justified in releasing his “deep” rage. No longer “easy,” he still claims the moral high ground—after all, he remains “a good fellow wronged”—even while he unleashes a desire for violent mastery. “I want to bring them down—down, down, down!” he exclaims to Mrs. Bread, the repetition of the word “down” evoking the severity of the ringing mortification he wishes to inflict (257). Newman immediately develops a plan of “vengeance” by locating evidence of a scandalous crime committed by Madame de Bellegarde, the mere publicizing of which would forever disgrace the proud Bellegarde name. By letting the Bellegardes know what he has discovered, Newman succeeds in frightening them. Ultimately, they flee Paris for an isolated country home.

Before finally loosing his “thunder-bolt,” however, Newman relents (269). He burns up the evidence against the Bellegardes simply “out of his good nature,” as James puts it in his letter to Howells. Having repocketed his irritation, and thereby reclaimed his status as “generous, liberal . . . easy,” Newman returns to America. James’s preface describes Newman as having “let them go, in short, his haughty contemners, even while feeling them, with joy, in his power” (2). Although the novel’s narrative voice not infrequently takes an ironic tone regarding Newman (when describing his opinions on art, for example), Henry James clearly admires what he describes as this act of “practical, but quite unappreciated, magnanimity” (which thus already is not “unappreciated”). Newman’s gesture is, James writes in the preface, one of “the large and easy impulses generally characteristic of his type” (James’s emphasis)—his “type” being that of a New World man. Newman’s admirable move has been “to simply turn, at the supreme moment, away” from his vengeance, having “sacrifice[d] it in
disgust” at the Bellegardes and the unworthy conflict in which he had almost become entangled.

Note, however, that if the “very force of his aversion” for the foreign family and their foreign values drives Newman to his isolationist “turn . . . away” from them, this is still an isolationism that must explicitly be viewed in order for the American’s exceptional generosity, ease, self-sufficiency, and strength to be rendered iconic in the figure of the “good fellow wronged.” As if through the fourth wall of a stage or on a movie screen, Newman’s turning away becomes a spectacle in need of an audience, even though Newman must at the same time appear not to know (or care) that an audience watches: “One’s last view of him would be that of a strong man indifferent to his strength and too wrapped in fine, too wrapped above all in other and intenser reflexions for the assertion of his ‘rights’” (2–3).

After detailing the public injuries “the American people” have suffered at the hands of the U.N., Jesse Helms first imagines himself, like Newman, as a punishing agent, one who will inflict a degrading physical fall upon the U.N.’s “insolent” foreigners. Helms threatens that if the demands of the American people are not met, the U.N. can expect “retaliatory measures,” which will ultimately force the international organization to “collapse under its own weight” (“down—down, down, down!” as Newman might put it). If Newman is repeatedly characterized as a good fellow wronged, a phrase that, by extension, I have suggested, also describes the constellation of identity that Helms both inhabits himself and claims for “the American people” as such, then the anachronistic pun suggested by Martin Scorsese’s film Goodfellas can help emphasize the menacing possibilities of violence summoned up when American “good fellows” are wronged.14

Like Newman, Jesse Helms chooses to ease back from his threat. He will not try to make the U.N. collapse under its own weight, and, more important, he will allow the U.N. to receive over $500 million, money that he has been blocking and that the organization desperately needs. Helms relents, however, only after he believes he has forced the U.N. to accept “the American people” on their own terms. One year after his unprecedented Security Council speech, Helms announced in the Senate that, after months of “cajoling, and maybe even a little browbeating, some of our friends at the United Nations,” the United States had succeeded in pushing through most of the specific changes that Helms had demanded. These included changes in the U.N.’s overall dues structure and in the organization of its peacekeeping missions.15
Romance and the Real

In his 1907 New York Edition preface to *The American*, Henry James famously admits that, although he had assumed when writing the book thirty years earlier that it was a realist novel, he now discovers that he had all along “been plotting arch-romance without knowing it” (4). For James, *The American* becomes romance instead of realism when the “cable is cut” that had connected events and characters in the book to “our general sense of ‘the way things happen’” (11). Specifically, James now realizes that Newman’s marriage would indeed have gone forward. Real-life Bellegardes, attracted by his money, “would positively have jumped . . . at my rich and easy American,” “taking with alacrity everything he could give them, only asking for more and more, and then adjusting their pretensions and their pride to it with all the comfort in life” (12).

To James, the genre of “romance” connoted fantasies of remaining untouched, pure, separate: disconnected from the contaminations and enmeshments of real life. In romance, not only the individual but also experience itself is “liberated, so to speak.” Human experience, whether that of characters or of readers, is “disengaged, disembroiled, disencumbered, exempt from the conditions that we usually know to attach to it and . . . drag upon it.” Romance defines itself, above all, through breaking with “the inconvenience of a related, a measurable state, a state subject to all our vulgar communities” (10). James’s notion of the romance correlates with an important dimension of American exceptionalism that insists on and presumes American innocence: the United States’ continuing status as a New World, free from the moral compromises and entangled corruptions of older civilizations, guilty of nothing in relation to others save “practical, but quite unappreciated, magnanimity.”

As we will see in chapter 6, liberal guilt arises from precisely the opposite feeling. As Julie Ellison asserts, liberal guilt stems from our “complicated awareness of the human costs of national and imperial economies”: it blossoms from our awareness that there is no way to cut the “cable,” so to speak, that ties our material, social, and political privileges at home to other peoples’ experiences of suffering and deprivation. In the vocabulary of literary genre, liberal guilt would be a “realist” formation.