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## The Fiction of America

In Hannah Arendt's reading of the founding of the American Republic, the Declaration of Independence is a model of how to resolve what she calls the "spiritual perplexities" that accompany the Enlightenment's sense of freedom from the authority of ancient traditions. According to her interpretation, the American revolutionaries faced, with inherited habits of thought, an entirely unprecedented concatenation of events beyond the capacity of that thought to address. The problem bequeathed by their sense of freedom from tradition was that such freedom brought with it the dissolution of the "absolutes" upon which political authority traditionally rested, thus raising the question of how to found a new republic in the absence of any divine or transcendental authority to justify and anchor the regime. The solution—highly unexpected, given the Enlightenment's antipathy to tradition—was to reinvent in modern terms the classical Roman idea that the act of foundation is itself authoritative.<sup>1</sup> According to Arendt, such a problem could not have arisen during the virtually unbroken "continuity of tradition" stretching from the first centuries of Christianity through the development of the European sovereign nation. In this tradition, the law, as command, needed "a divinity, not nature but nature's God, not reason but a divinely informed reason, . . . to bestow validity on it."<sup>2</sup>

The American escape from this tradition, in which the secular must be grounded in and ratified by the transmundane, occurred,

Arendt asserts, not owing to the development in America of a modern, posttraditional mode of thought but rather to the unexpected vagaries of political life in the New World as the early European settlers experienced it:

From the weight and burden of this tradition the settlers of the New World had escaped, not when they crossed the Atlantic but when, under the pressure of circumstances—in fear of the new continent’s uncharted wilderness and frightened by the chartless darkness of the human heart—they had constituted themselves into “civil bodies politic,” mutually bound themselves into an enterprise for which no other bond existed, and thus made a new beginning in the very midst of the history of Western mankind. (P. 194)

In emphasizing the invention of America as the collision of European habits of thought and action with alien and inhospitable shores, Arendt repeats familiar tales of American “exceptionalism”: bereft of traditional European institutions, the colonists could rely only on mutual promises as the basis of political stability, and hence they developed a political culture based more than any other on “promises, covenants, and mutual pledges” (pp. 181–82). European traditions came to grief faced with the sheer unprecedentedness of the demands of American experience.

In Arendt’s account, this response to the New World led to a form of political authority in which the traditionally legitimating reference to absolute principles or transcendental imperatives was replaced by a practice of perpetual political transfiguration driven by the constant reinterpretation of the fundamental, founding, “constitutional” law. “The very authority of the American Constitution,” Arendt writes, “resides in its inherent capacity to be amended and augmented” (p. 202). But delimiting the origins of the phenomenon of an almost infinitely plastic, augmentable, amendable interpretive authority to the experiences of the Europeans *after* crossing the Atlantic—as Arendt does when she insists on the trope of American exceptionalism, in which the raw experience of the New World shatters and relativizes European “absolutes” of long standing—needlessly brackets a whole field of prior American political discourse. The continuing presence of that discourse is, moreover, responsible

for the persistent attachment of a sense of the sacred to an allegedly secular national project.<sup>3</sup> John Winthrop's sermon "A Modell of Christian Charity," delivered not *after* crossing the Atlantic but *during* the voyage of the members of the Massachusetts Bay Company, suggests that the problematics of an interpretive authority show up in many dimensions other than constitutional interpretation, which for Arendt becomes "the true seat of authority in the American Republic" (p. 200).

Winthrop's sermon, as it has come down to us, is paratextually marked as an *event*:

A MODELL OF CHRISTIAN CHARITY.

Written

On Boarde the Arrabella,  
On the Attlantick Ocean.

By the Honorable John Winthrop Esquire.

In his passage, (with the great Company of Religious people, of which Christian Tribes he was the Brave Leader and famous Governor;) from the Island of Great Brittain, to New-England in the North America.

Anno 1630

His discourse is dramatically *located* spatially, geographically, temporally, and authorially: the sermon is uttered by John Winthrop, governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, on board the flagship *Arbella*, in the Atlantic Ocean, during the voyage from England to America in 1630. To emphasize that the text *begins* by alerting us to these facts is, perhaps, to cheat a bit, as the manuscript on which it is based is not in Winthrop's hand. According to the editors of the *Winthrop Papers*, the original was probably copied and circulated for some years after the establishment of the community, by which time its founders were presumably being mythologized.<sup>4</sup> However that may be, it is possible to hear something other than mythologization in the simple emphasis on date, place, time, and occasion, because these are peculiarly *political* markers as well. Political discourses are preeminently concerned with particular times, dates, and places; with circumstances facing particular communities at particular mo-

ments. Dating and locating the speech would then not only signify an attempt to monumentalize the accomplishments of the founders of the community but also indicate the concretely *political* character of this speech. In singling out such facts as who they are, where they are going, and what they are doing, the subtitle of the sermon stands in a certain degree of contrast to the title in so far as it draws attention to the character of its audience as a body politic. As such, that audience is a community concerned less with timeless truths or metaphysical verities than with those truths embedded in histories, places, events; in intentions, actions, consequences.

The place named in the subtitle, however, is ambiguous: Winthrop's sermon is uttered "on the Atlantick Ocean," a geographic rather than a political space, and one situated, moreover, between two worlds: Great Britain and North America, Old England and "New-England." And this fact alone, I want to hazard, embodies and conveys something about the *kind* of political discourse Winthrop's speech is. Anachronistically relying on, and metaphorically extending to the political, Thomas Kuhn's distinction between "normal" and "revolutionary" science, we might distinguish normal and revolutionary political discourse.<sup>5</sup> As normal science involves approaching scientific inquiry guided by a paradigmatic exemplar and integrating puzzling and apparently idiosyncratic facts into the terms of a dominant, uncontroversial theory, so normal political discourse addresses political experiences and problems within the framework of settled practices, institutions, assumptions, concepts, and values. And as revolutionary science involves the invention of a new approach to scientific inquiry and a new theory that displaces the semantic horizon of its predecessor by way of accounting for anomalous facts, so revolutionary political discourse involves the reinvention of conventional terms of appeal, contestation, and adjudication. Normal political discourse relies on agreed-upon names, procedures, expectations; revolutionary political discourse aims to invent these. Of course there need be no simple relationship between revolutionary political discourse and revolutionary political action. Ancient discourses can obscure the birth of the new, and sometimes the old can be preserved only with the most radical transformation of its conceptual articulation. The relationship between political discourse

and political action, as Marx shows brilliantly in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, is always complexly ironic and overdetermined.

One form often taken by revolutionary political discourse, or by discourses that aspire to such an achievement, is the discourse of founding, and Winthrop's sermon conforms to that genre in not assuming the existence of a settled order but, rather, aiming to persuade others to accept the political terms it constructs and offers. The text of the *Modell* mentions its place of utterance, but that place possesses no traditionally sanctioned political significance. Speaking on the *Arbella*, in the Atlantic Ocean, to a literally unsettled group in the midst of a voyage away from one place of habitation and toward another, Winthrop speaks from a site designed for motion, not a fixed location but one whose meaning is wholly informed by its not being where it "should" be, by being on the way to somewhere else. Is it too much to find in the context of this event a dramatic sign of a departure from classical political assumptions?

Classically, political discourse is addressed to communities fixed in space and time; the fate of the polis as a whole is an overriding concern precisely because on it depend the lives of its associated members; it is impossible simply to fabricate a new polity as one makes a vase or a temple. Thus even where political action is thought to be in the service of or guided by the transmundane or transhistorical—bodies politic ideally serving the right growth of souls, as in Plato's or Aristotle's philosophical politics—the classical discourse of the political still remains tied to the concrete particulars and idiosyncratic histories of communities rooted in their own pasts. We see this, for example, in both Plato's and Aristotle's detailed examinations of their own societies and in Socrates' difficulties, in Book 5 of the *Republic*, in explaining how a good regime could be constructed out of the human material available from the less good regimes. Winthrop's gesture, in this context, is new, revolutionary, utopian; for his political discourse is situated in a place that is no *one* place, and it concerns not given, ineradicable features of a concrete society but motions, projects, possibilities, and voyages.

Above all, the forum of Winthrop's discourse signifies that the temporal rather than spatial dimension is central to Puritan under-

standings of what America and politics in America must mean. But while on the one hand Winthrop speaks from an indeterminate, unsettled place of “passage” (as the text puts it), on the other hand, he speaks with authority because he has already invested this passage with a highly specific and dramatically charged ideal meaning—so much so that he can as much as say what America is without the colony’s having yet been truly founded. His subtitle defines “North America” as “New-England.” North America, like everything else in the Puritan imagination, has a double meaning: an uncharted, uncivilized terrain in which new communities might be established without resistance;<sup>6</sup> also, the fulfillment of biblical prophecy, not only a new (and better) England but, more important, a New Jerusalem. Moreover, Winthrop’s authority to define the mission of the Puritan colony as sweepingly as he does in the *Modell* is attributable to the vagaries of the company’s charter, which, in neglecting to specify that its meetings take place in London so that policy would ultimately be governed by the Crown, made it possible for Winthrop to merge the roles of company head and colonial governor, company policy and state legislation.<sup>7</sup>

According to the charter, the owners of the Massachusetts Bay Company were empowered to

make, ordeine, and establishe all manner of wholesome and reasonable orders, lawes, statutes, and ordinances, directions, and instructions, not contrarie to the lawes of this our realm of England, as well for settling of the forms and ceremonies of government and magistracy fitt and necessary for the said plantation, and the inhabitants there, and for nameing and stiling all sortes of officers, both superior and inferior, which they shall finde needful for that government and plantation, and the distinguishing and setting forth of the several duties, powers, and lymytts of every such office and place.<sup>8</sup>

It is difficult to imagine a more sweeping grant of authority than one that allows for the “settling of the *forms* . . . of government”; and the proviso that the colonists do nothing “contrarie to the lawes of . . . England” meant little, considering that the transfer of legislative authority to the colony itself left the colonists alone to determine what that might entail.<sup>9</sup> Because of these circumstances, it is not so much

Winthrop's discourse as his very persona that organizes the quite different (but, as we know, by no means incompatible or uncomplementary) institutional energies of trade, theology, and politics.

For all the powerful Crown and company backing of Winthrop's authority to found a community, however, that authority cannot be reduced to merely its official or statutorial aspects. Along with these we must register what might be called his *interpretative* authority, which consists in his ability to weave, from the elements of Puritan federal theology and the circumstances of the New World, a political discourse that is authoritative because it connects the intentions and prospects of the community's members to fundamental precepts of puritan federal theology. It is authoritative, that is, because Winthrop, as a master reader and interpreter of Scripture, grounds his claims about the nature of the political project upon which the group has embarked in God's Word itself.

The text of Winthrop's discourse begins by linking God's will with one of the politically most striking facts about the human condition, namely, inequality: "God Almightye in his most holy and wise providence hath soe disposed of the Condicion of mankinde, as in all times some must be rich some poore, some high and eminent in power and dignitie; others mean and in subieccion" (p. 282). The series of stark contraries—rich/poor, mighty/lowly, power/powerlessness—is framed and softened, however, by the very grammar of the sentence in which they occur, which articulates them as the outcome of the singular event of God's holy will. The apparently basic fact of inequality, then, is really not so basic as it might appear, given that what is truly fundamental is that all humanity be as God ordains and that all are essentially one as expressions of God's plan. From this perspective, the differences in power and privilege which divide human communities are insignificant in comparison to everyone's shared identity as a child of God and participant in God's plan. Yet at the same time, the way in which such divisions are rendered insignificant also has the effect of establishing them as unalterable givens. No mere artifact of European society and history, inequality of wealth and condition enters into the way in which God has constituted humanity as social beings.

In singling out the problem of inequality by beginning with it,



Winthrop seems to make of inequality *the* political problem, at least from a secular point of view. Human beings differ from one another dramatically, so much so that their relationships with one another might appear to be essentially antagonistic; yet they must live together as God's people. Immediately upon outlining the permanence of inequality, Winthrop offers "THE REASON HEREOF," which is a rational demonstration of the truth of his claim that human inequality is an expression of God's will, and then supports it, soon enough, by paraphrases of specific biblical passages and accurate references to Scripture:

I. Reas: *First*, to hold conformity with the rest of his workes, being delighted to shewe forthe the glory of his wisdome in the variety and differance of the Creatures and the glory of his power, in ordering all these differences for the preservacion and good of the whole, and the glory of his greatnes that as it is the glory of princes to haue many officers, soe this great King will haue many Stewards counting himselfe more honoured in dispenceing his guifts to man by man, than if hee did it by his owne immediate hand. (Pp. 282–83)

In the first place, then, mankind, as God's glorious creation, is more glorious to the extent that humanity manifests itself through a variety of human types and conditions than if all mankind were truly equal. Inequality of condition is simply an expression of the excessive plurality and variety that marks humanity in particular, and creation as a whole, as an artifact of God's pleasure. Winthrop goes on to offer two other ways in which inequality is consistent with God's will: the differences among men provide greater opportunities for God's grace and more varied opportunities for virtuous acts; and—what is politically most interesting—such differences constitute a mechanism whereby communities become more unified such that "every man might haue need of other" and "they might all be knitt more nearly together in the Bond of brotherly affeccion" (p. 283).

Winthrop's way of subordinating social differences to an end-governed whole manifests the familiar orientation of Puritan political theory toward the community (as the Church Visible, which in its turn points ideally toward the Church Invisible) as the ultimate referent of political thought, an orientation articulated by "federal"

covenantal theology and its tenet according to which God enters into contracts with entire communities as such.<sup>10</sup> What I wish to underline here, however, is not Winthrop's substantive political theory so much as his method of deriving that theory and that method's links with persistent metaphysical motifs in Western political thought. In Winthrop's America, government is in large measure a hermeneutic problem, that of orienting oneself toward God's Word but also of bringing the Word to life in the practices and institutions of the community of those who believe the Word. The organization of both church and state, then, ought to be an attempt to mirror Christ's life as closely as possible in his absence, to make over the human world into a holy world as far as possible. The Christian community finds its essence by imitating the essence of Christ—that is, the *essential* meaning of Christ's appearance and life, not its external features.<sup>11</sup> The true meaning is recoverable and reproducible because it is, as Winthrop conventionally terms it, a "pattern" that recurs, a "type": the call of God; the period of doubt, temptation, and testing; the final breakthrough to faith pure and simple. The Christian state too, if it is to be intelligible *as* a Christian community, must vividly rely for its protection on faith in Christ alone.<sup>12</sup> The fundamental marker of fidelity to God's law is the theocratic structure of the community itself, where the final and ultimate authority is the church, in other words, God's laws, rather than the depraved human desires of our "bodye of Corruption."<sup>13</sup>

The Protestant project of recovery, as manifested in Winthrop's foundational discourse, thus obeys the mimetic logic that Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has isolated as the persistent metaphors of the Western tradition of political thought: the fundamental meaning hermeneutically recovered from the biblical text serves as the essential principle around which the Christian community is organized, formed, shaped, and brought to stand.<sup>14</sup> For Lacoue-Labarthe, Western metaphysics has been haunted by "a dream of the City as a work of art," a dream in which "the political (the City) belongs to a form of *plastic art*, formation and information, *fiction* in the strict sense" (p. 66), that is, in the sense of the forming or molding of available and malleable material; and it is in this sense that "an entire tradition . . . will have thought that the political is the sphere of the *fictioning* of

beings and communities” (p. 82).<sup>15</sup> In the Western tradition, that is, the political is metaphysically delimited as the actualization or realization, in “this world,” of values, norms, or commands possessing an absolute status as “otherworldly.” It is a realization effected by means of politics conceived as rulership: the shaping of bodies politic in accordance with an ideal model, whether philosophically derived or religiously revealed. Thus Lacoue-Labarthe cautions against the inference that the “fictional” in this sense determines the political as sheer, unregulated invention: “The fact that the political is a form of plastic art in no way means that the *polis* is an artificial or conventional formation, but that the political belongs to the sphere of *techne* in the highest sense of the term, that is to say in the sense in which *techne* is conceived as the accomplishment and revelation of *physis* itself” (p. 66). The political as traditionally understood is the sphere of art, but in the sense of a making or fabrication controlled by a prefigured model with which subjects are enjoined to identify.<sup>16</sup> Winthrop’s theocracy obeys this logic: members of the colony at Massachusetts Bay *become* a community by entering into a compact with God to ground the success of their endeavor in grace alone, but the community can only be brought into existence because, in some sense, it potentially already exists as a community (God’s elect) as revealed through God’s Word.<sup>17</sup>

In Winthrop’s discourse, too, America is less a territory or place than a goal, a project, a making. The violence involved in such a conception of America—which dismisses as merely incidental or unessential the concrete histories of America and its inhabitants in order to reconfigure America as a *new*, that is, newly authenticated, England—is inescapable and by now, of course, widely acknowledged. As Congregationalists, Winthrop’s Puritans cannot conceive of membership in the church apart from the *work* of faith and the publicly confessed self-scrutiny such work demands. The true church is not the church into which one is born but the one that is *made* when individuals who publicly confess their faith voluntarily join together to follow God’s commands and enjoy his promises.<sup>18</sup> Winthrop’s church is thus radically independent of the particular, local histories of nations, states, and traditions: “Since Christ’s time,” as he writes, “the church is to be considered as universal without dis-

inction of countries.”<sup>19</sup> No longer rooted to the soil, the theocracy is grounded in the terrain of human decisions, discourses, interpretations, and agreements—in art.

After appealing to an interpretation of Scripture to justify why God burdens man with the political problem (that of inequality and difference), Winthrop goes on to sketch the biblical doctrine on the “rules whereby we are to walk, one towards another” and the “law by which we are regulated in our conversation, one towards another.”<sup>20</sup> Thus Winthrop proposes to derive from Scripture the rules regulating how we are to live together, to formulate a biblical political theory. The Bible narrates man’s fall from grace and God’s contrivances with the help of which man may be redeemed. Man, Winthrop points out, has known two “estates”: that of “innocency,” before the fall, and of “regeneracy,” in which man is saved through God’s grace by accepting Jesus Christ as savior. The law of the estate of nature is a conduct of life appropriate to paradise: as man was created in God’s image, “all are to be considered as friends in the estate of innocency” (p. 283). The unity of the state is sundered with the fall and man’s depravity. Because God’s offer of redemption through the acceptance of Christ is not accepted by all, “the law of grace or the gospel . . . teacheth us to put a difference between Christians and others” (p. 284): the Christian community possesses a special privilege among human communities.

There are thus two laws of conduct: one deriving from nature or a state of innocence, another appropriate to man’s current, divided estate, overshadowed by the distinction between the saved and the damned. That distinction means, among other things, that Christians are enjoined to make extraordinary sacrifices to ensure the success of *Christian* communities and their members; Christians can be expected to acknowledge that all of their personal gifts and possessions are rightly subjugated to the task of building and preserving the community of believers (pp. 284–89). Ideally, the work of the Christian community is to elide, as far as humanly possible, the terrible consequences of fallen man’s deprivation of direct government by God by so arranging human artifices and agreements as to enforce God’s law, not man’s.

The true bond tying together the believers is not “force of Argument,” but love, which is “the bond of perfection” that serves to knit the various parts of the body politic together (p. 288). “All true Christians are of one body in Christ,” Winthrop writes, and “all the partes of this body being thus vnited are made soe contiguous in a speciall relacion as they must needes partake of each others strength and infirmity, ioy, and sorrowe, weale and woe.” “This sensiblenes and Sympathy,” he continues, “of each others Condictions will necessarily infuse into each parte a natiue desire and endeavour, to strengthen defend preserue and comfort the other” (p. 289). The history of the church, no less than the lives of Jesus and his apostles, exemplifies this concern for others exercised “not for wages or by Constrainte but out of loue” (pp. 289–90). Christian love is pure and unconditional, then, but it is also *reciprocal* “in a most equal and sweete kinde of Commerce”: “This loue is allwayes vnder reward it never giues, but it allwayes receiues with advantage” (p. 291).

Significantly, the mutuality of Christian love, the glue binding the ligaments of the Puritan body politic, is itself based on a law of identity: “The ground of loue is an apprehension of some resemblance in the things loued to that which affectes it, this is the cause why the Lord loues the Creature, soe farre as it hath any of his Image in it, he loues his elect because they are like himselfe, he beholds them them in his beloued sonne” (p. 290). Christian love, in Winthrop’s understanding, is the expression or manifestation of God’s will to absolute self-identity: God, we are to understand, would remain identical to himself, and love is the force of that will to identity, the desire to make oneself over in God’s image and to merge one’s identity with others so moved. “Of all the graces,” then, “this makes vs nearer to resemble the virtues of our heavenly father.” Winthrop goes on to observe that the peculiarity of the Massachusetts community will consist in the fact that there, the identification of every member of the community with God will be so complete as to overpower the forces that might drive the community apart or divert it from its true mission. The community is founded on its irresistible desire to model itself on “this louely body of the Lord Jesus,” so that “by prayer meditacion continuall exercise at least of the speciall [power] of this grace till Christ be formed in them and they in him all in eache other

knitt together by this bond of loue” (p. 292): the Puritan community is a *work*, a community realizing its essence by modeling itself on an aesthetic image brought to stand as a transcendental absolute.<sup>21</sup>

The Puritan community, then, will imitate God’s love by placing the concerns of a Christian community above all private considerations: “In such cases as this the care of the publique must over-sway all private respects.” But how can such an extraordinary display of God’s power be achieved? Winthrop’s answer to that question is bold: “That which the most in their Churches mainteine as a truth in profession onely, wee must bring into familiar and constant practise” (p. 293). Christian doctrine must be made real in the world; the saints must really act as God commands them; into Winthrop’s mere “Conclusion,” arising from “former Consideracions,” that “loue among Christians is a reall thing not Imaginarie,” life must be breathed (p. 292). Hypocrisy or backsliding is intolerable, however, not only because it is unchristian but because the reliance on God’s love and the project of imitating Christ is the *essence* of this particular community, exhausting its very identity, thereby singling it out for God’s special concern:

When God giues a speciall Commission he lookes to haue it strictly obserued in every Article. . . . Thus stands the cause betweene God and vs, wee are entered into Covenant with him for this worke, wee haue taken out a Commission, the Lord hath giuen vs leaue to drawe our owne Articles wee haue professed to enterprise these Accions vpon these and these ends, wee haue herevpon besought him of fauour and blessing: Now if the Lord shall please to heare vs, and bring vs in peace to the place wee desire, then hath he ratified this Covenant and sealed our Commission, [and] will expect a strickt performance of the Articles contained in it, but if wee shall neglect the obseruation of these Articles which are the ends we haue propounded, and dissembling with our God, shall fall to embrace this present world and prosecute our carnall intencions, seekeing greate things for our selues and our posterity, the Lord will surely breake out in wrathe against vs be revenged of such a periured people and make vs knowe the price of the breache of such a Covenant. (P. 294)

The colony at Massachusetts Bay will not have been just any Christian community, then, but one that will have taken on itself

the special task of manifesting, proving, and displaying to the world, as its explicit contract with God, that Christian love is “a reall thing not Imaginarie.” A force to be admired and above all emulated by all the world, Christian love’s very essence resides in its power, by sheer force of example rather than mere argument, to constitute a model for others to mime. It is for that reason that Winthrop calls on the members of the Massachusetts Bay Colony to make of their community a *model* of Christian charity: a “Citty vpon a Hill” scrutinized by all, it must make manifest that its members rely above all on fidelity to God’s law, not man’s, for ultimate protection. In complex mimetic logic, a circular chain is thus established in which Winthrop’s community mimes God’s law (as revealed in the Bible), and the world, through miming the Puritan community, is brought to God; an endless chain of similitude, resemblance, and identification governs the colony’s theologicopolitical strategy.

America, then, insofar as it *is* still a “place” for Winthrop, is figured above all as the site of a demonstration, a *proof* that life can indeed be shaped in accordance with God’s commandments as opposed to the corrupt ways of the European churches and states. But just to the extent that what is to be proved here is a *timeless* truth, registered *against* the temporalizing corruptions of tradition, history, and power, Winthrop’s project will be intimately tied to such discourses; for it must then be unimaginable except as a hermeneutic project of wresting free the pure Word of God from the corrupt textual body of distorting commentaries, interpretations, and institutions built upon them—a project as endless as it is necessary. To see how this aspect of Winthrop’s America is articulated, we must turn away from the substance of Puritan political theory as well as its metaphysical underpinnings in “the fiction of the political” and toward the problem of *how* Winthrop founds a community by *reading* the Bible.

Winthrop appeals to knowledge of God as revealed in the Bible, to the Word of God and to God’s Scripture.<sup>22</sup> But although the biblical history of sacred events in holy time constitutes a grammar for the interpretation of mundane events in secular time (the time between Christ’s departure and return), this script must be read and interpreted if its meaning is to be apparent. That one must *read* the Bible—that God’s presence is not directly, immediately felt at each



moment—is itself the fall: if he would reestablish direct communication, man must decode the script of the Bible. But God’s script is precisely a revelation that is intelligible to *fallen* man’s understanding; hence, recovering the authenticity of God’s *word* demands a labor of interpretation that isolates the spark of the divine in merely human sentences. Given the idea of a federal covenant, then, there is the most intimate connection between the interpretation of God’s Word as registered in the biblical text and the foundation, by the establishment of a specific contract between God and a people, of a political community. And because God’s *word* must be recovered by *human* acts of interpretation which—just because they are human—are thus eminently contestable, the “America” figured by Winthrop will of necessity have been an interpretive polity that, despite all claims to absolute authority, is always potentially unsettled and dynamic.

How is the meaning of the Word of God recovered from God’s script? Although God himself is irreducibly mysterious, he chooses to make his intentions regarding man intelligible to him, and the whole truth of those intentions is expressed in the biblical record of divinely inspired revelations to human individuals. There is something of an ambiguity in the idea of *God’s* word; for the words we have are humanly constructed transcripts of the divine revelations themselves, which thus call for interpretation to isolate the divine Word in the flawed human script. As Martin Luther puts it, “The Holy Scripture is the Word of God, written and (as I might say) lettered and formed in letters, just as Christ is the eternal Word of God cloaked in human flesh. And just as Christ was embraced and handled by the world, so is the written Word of God too.”<sup>23</sup> This consideration determines the basic textual strategy of Protestant critique: Luther and Calvin insist on returning to the original Word of God in its purest and most singular meaning, freeing it from human additions and misinterpretations by means of commentary that itself is always liable to error and contestation.<sup>24</sup>

Framed as a *return* to the essential meaning of God’s Word, Protestant reformism presents itself not as the creation of new institutions but as a recovery of an earlier, older, more original state of affairs forgotten, lost, or maliciously concealed and corrupted. Just so, Winthrop’s *Modell of Christian Charity* outlines a new commu-



nity, a New England located in the New World, which is presented as a recovery of the most ancient eternal truths: what God truly created, commanded, and promised. The political problem is thus, among other things, a problem of knowledge and interpretation—“Knowledge of God the Creator,” as Calvin entitles the first part of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1556–1559). If God is indeed the *author* of our experience, we must read with an eye to authorial intention, read in a way that allows us to grasp God’s meaning rather than imposing our own and corrupting his text. Calvin’s *Institutes* will thus recover the original authorial intention organizing the biblical script (and creation itself) so that we can know God by grasping how he commands us to live during the period between Christ’s appearance on earth and the Last Judgment. The realization that the script of the Bible demands interpretation is somehow at odds with the presupposition that God’s Word is complete and sufficient in itself, however, which accounts for a curious feature of Luther’s and Calvin’s texts, namely, the prefatory apologies for their having been written. Calvin, for example, asserts that “Holy Scripture contains a perfect doctrine, to which one can add nothing,” and then goes on to produce fifteen hundred pages of commentary.

The Bible’s “last word” is thus endlessly prolonged, but how is this project reconciled with the presupposition of the Bible’s self-sufficiency? Again, by relying on the uneven distribution of natural talents, including that of reading the Bible correctly. As Calvin continues,

A person who has not much practice in it [reading the Bible] has good reason for some guidance and direction, to know what he ought to look for in it, in order not to wander hither and thither, but to hold to a sure path, that he may always be pressing toward the end to which the Holy Spirit calls him. Perhaps the duty of those who have received from God fuller light than others is to help those simple folk at this point, and as it were to lend them a hand, in order to guide them and help them to find the sum of what God meant to teach us in his Word. Now, that cannot be better done through the Scriptures than to treat the chief and weightiest matters comprised in Christian philosophy. For he who knows these things will be prepared to profit more in God’s school in one day than another in three months—particularly as he knows fairly

well to what he must refer each sentence, and has this rule to embrace all that is presented to him.<sup>25</sup>

Publicly offering his “additions” to the biblical text is consequently enjoined on Calvin as his godly duty to those less practiced in “Christian philosophy.” In any case, Calvin’s abilities are due not to him but to God, who will ultimately judge the worth of his work.

Calvin presents his commentary as explicitly “parasitic” and pedagogic; readers are to use it as an aid to their own readings of the Bible, not as a substitute; in shedding light on the Bible by offering its basic teaching whole, God is simply revealing himself once again through Calvin. Indeed, if Calvin’s commentary “supplements” the Bible, the Bible itself is already supplementary to a message God has installed in creation itself: if God is the *creator* or *author* of the universe, the latter’s immediate presence is by itself a sufficient revelation of God to man. Calvin’s act of supplementation is thus done *imitatio Christi* and indeed *imitatio Dei*; for in the wake of man’s fall from divine sponsorship, God has supplemented his original revelation with others (comprised in the Bible) to underscore his plans for mankind. In a word, the persistence of sin requires some to help others read the Bible right.

What form, exactly, will such assistance take? God’s Word is a totality not to be wholly identified with any *particular* sign, passage, or event in the Bible. These latter, rather, are intelligible only in terms of the complete message contained in the Bible as a whole, which is why Calvin states that only one who knows “the chief and weightiest matters comprised in Christian philosophy”—one, that is, who possesses a unified understanding of the central teachings of Christianity—will be able to *read* the Bible in the sense of understanding particular passages and the events they relate. Only a reader who “has this rule to embrace all that is presented to him” will know to “what he must refer each sentence” in the Bible: understanding the details presupposes a sense of the whole. That “sense of the whole” is nothing less than Christian faith: a Christian initiates a reading of the Bible by relying on faith in Christ. That faith supplies, as it were, the terms of hermeneutic engagement: if Christ’s appearance and his promise of redemption is the central event in history,

the Bible will then appear as an archive of figures, meanings, and events that recur endlessly because, in effect, they all say the same thing, either anticipating or remembering the moment and meaning of Christ's appearance. The role of the biblical reader is therefore to articulate the meaning of the whole to readers who might be unable to accomplish this for themselves, to enable them to begin the task of studying the Bible on their own.

Reform, then, is guided by the recovery of the original, pure, singular meaning of the Bible, a meaning generated by a process of interpretation which projects a total meaning from the apprehension of details and discovers in the detail a manifestation of the whole. We know the content of this recovery and reformation: the Protestants discover textual support in the Bible for clerical marriage, for a priesthood of all believers, and above all for the centrality of grace. The consequence, however, is that contestation and political innovation is virtually institutionalized, because of the inevitable contestability of any single formulation of the central teaching of the Bible and because any such hermeneutic formulation is stigmatized in advance as a merely human, partial, necessarily incomplete adumbration of God's Word, awaiting a more precise characterization or an alternative construction—as the dissents of Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson emphatically show. As Luther writes, the Word of God comes to us having always already been “handled” by man; yet we cannot isolate the authentic Word of God except by “handling” it further. The fact that political authority is now oriented toward shaping the community in accordance with a true meaning that keeps changing with the vagaries of hermeneutic reappropriation installs in the concept of theocracy a perpetually renewed necessity to shape and *reshape* the body politic.<sup>26</sup>

At issue in the emergence of America in one of its earliest (European) incarnations—as a New England—is a peculiarly distilled, simplified, and exaggerated political deployment of fundamental tropes of European metaphysics. At bottom, this America is nothing but the practice of political *theory*, metaphysically understood: the hermeneutic isolation of a pure essence to be imitated, yielding a concrete effectuation that may serve as a model for others; an attempt to regulate practices by appealing to an aesthetically projected absolute that

organizes a harmonious, self-identical, enduring unity. At same time, Winthrop's absolute is installed by a hermeneutic practice (the recovery of meaning from confused and humanly corrupted traditions) that contaminates its own purity, constantly deferring the moment at which unity will be achieved, always calling for a more authentic reading, always doubting its own insights. For example, crises the community faces lend themselves to interpretation as God's commentary on the always-ambiguous state of the covenant.<sup>27</sup> Already with Winthrop, America will have been figured as an interpretive polity, wresting true meaning from its corrupt human handling in a project that, of course, would prove ultimately to be of a virtually ungovernable intensity. Americans 150 years later would write a preamble to their Constitution that stands as a virtual refutation of the leader of the Puritan theocracy's warnings against "seekeing greate things for our selues and our posterity." But the break will not have been so absolute that Abraham Lincoln could not affirm, more than 200 years after Winthrop's discourse, that America is a nation dedicated to a timeless theoretical "proposition" and specially committed, moreover, to the project of breathing life into it, making it manifest, and demonstrating its truth. America will not only have "fictioned" the political but have taken up that fictioning as the very essence of its being as a community.