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978-0-521-38287-8 - A House Undivided: Domesticity and Community in American Literature

Douglas Anderson

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

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I propose to describe a remarkably durable imaginative tradition emerging from the work of some representative American writers between the early seventeenth and the early twentieth centuries. Over such a span of years any vital cultural or literary impetus must be expected to change form repeatedly and offer itself to us in various disguises suited to particular times and particular artists. But to a surprising degree the work in which I am interested maintains a close association with a group of images and ideas that first appears in John Winthrop's "A Modell of Christian Charity" (1630) and that continues to sustain the prose of the revolutionary period and the major artistic products of the nineteenth century.

The outlines of the ideas and images themselves are fairly simple to trace. In his speech to the *Arbella* emigrants, John Winthrop established the central importance, to the colonizing errand, of a communal bond that he understood in both traditional and radical forms. To endure in America the community must be "knit together" as a single body – an idea that was familiar to Winthrop's contemporaries from a number of sources.<sup>1</sup> But the degree of loyalty required was not fundamentally contractual or political in nature; it had to be familial. The guiding analogy, or model, of American life for Winthrop was to be the family, embodied for him most dramatically (and typologically) in the figure of Eve, transported by selfless love for her spouse and children. Winthrop's decision to employ Eve in such a striking role both reverses the inherited notions of sexual hierarchy of his day and transforms her from an agent of the Fall to an emblem of stable, sacramental marriage. Indeed, Winthrop assigns to Eve the paradigmatic founder's role that Genesis reserves for Adam.

The commitment to emigrate to Massachusetts Bay took on, in Winthrop's eyes, the shape of a selfless marriage, diffused as an ideal over

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the entire civil body. He summed up these extraordinary aspirations by offering to his fellow passengers on the *Arbella* a contemporary equivalent of Moses' choice of life or death from the closing chapters of Deuteronomy, affirming that "life" in America meant embracing the familial, sacramental model that he envisioned. Any compromise with such selflessness was "death."

Winthrop's dramatic vision illuminates the literary achievements of his Puritan contemporaries and casts, at the same time, a uniquely informative light on the work of many of the best American literary artists since his day. The three key elements of that vision were not original to Winthrop and are not unfamiliar to twentieth-century students of American culture, but they have seldom been identified as parts of a single, imaginative fabric that joins some of the oldest with some of the newest products of that culture. Those three key elements are the imaginative and moral primacy of marriage as both a subject and a metaphor, the corresponding preeminence of women and of domesticity as a privileged sphere of meaning, and the sense of the ongoing predicament in America of a choice between "life" and "death." My purpose here is to follow the interplay of these elements through a number of texts central to American literature in order to demonstrate the range and the power of the network that they comprise.

In doing so, I have tried to be sensitive, as well, to the range and influence of my historical and critical predecessors. The significance of the family in the Puritan community, as both an institution and an image, received careful attention in Edmund Morgan's pioneering study more than forty years ago.<sup>2</sup> In his account of the Puritan social order, Morgan (quoting Cotton Mather) confirmed that seventeenth-century Americans recognized the family as "the very *First Society*" among human beings, specifically sanctioned by God and used by him as the means and the model for forming all subsequent social institutions among His fallen creatures.<sup>3</sup> Morgan's description of the relations between husband and wife and the education of children in the Puritan household is the forerunner of more detailed, but in important ways less balanced, discussions by Philip J. Greven in *The Protestant Temperament* (1977) and David Leverenz in *The Language of Puritan Feeling* (1980). Both of these more recent books are interesting and valuable, but Greven is deeply committed to a view of what he calls the "evangelical household," in which the parents are "engaged in war with their children," breaking the wills of their offspring to conform to the dictates of an authoritarian piety.<sup>4</sup> Leverenz, however, gives a generous account of the Puritan practice of "household government," stressing the affection as well as the gravity of Puritan family life, but his psychoanalytic focus on the status of male identity as a

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defining condition of Puritan anxieties often leads him to judgments that seem clinical rather than historical or literary.<sup>5</sup>

In certainly the most thorough (and perhaps most controversial) treatment of the history of the family in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, Lawrence Stone appears to endorse both of these opposed positions on the climate of the Puritan household. Stone attributes to evangelical piety a ruthless emphasis on breaking the will, but he also repeatedly acknowledges the central role played by Puritan writers and thinkers in the evolution of what he calls the modern affective family and the companionate marriage. Particularly in the social classes that produced the most influential of the emigrants to New England, the family had become, certainly by the seventeenth century, the central focus of emotional and spiritual life among Puritans. Linda Pollock's recent critique of Stone's work, *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500 to 1900* (1983), significantly reinforces this view of the importance of family bonds in seventeenth-century America. Winthrop's employment of the idea of the family in his speech both reflected and exploited this fundamental locus of human values.<sup>6</sup>

Michael Gilmore and Sacvan Bercovitch have both written books that trace important elements of the Puritan sensibility, and aspects of Puritan literary practice, through some of the major writers of the nineteenth century. In both cases John Winthrop plays a role in characterizing the Puritan example. Gilmore in *The Middle Way: Puritanism and Ideology in American Romantic Fiction* (1977) associates "A Modell of Christian Charity" with Arthur Dimmesdale's election sermon in *The Scarlet Letter*, identifying both speeches as warnings against too deep a commitment to worldly things.<sup>7</sup> The "middle way" of Gilmore's title reflects the devout Puritan's attempt to "live in heaven, while he lived on earth" – to live in the world but not of the world, as Edmund Morgan puts it in his biography of Winthrop – and the Puritan jeremiad (of which Gilmore's book itself is a modern example) grows out of the understandably common and acute sense of having failed to strike that balance. Gilmore finds such jeremiads convincingly reborn in the work of Hawthorne and Melville.

Bercovitch's more focused study, *The American Jeremiad* (1978), identifies Winthrop's speech as one of two prototypic American jeremiads, a genre he finds especially durable precisely because it posits a gap between rhetoric and history and not because it falls into one. Puritan New England, in Bercovitch's view, was "constantly 'betwixt and between,' forever at the brink of some momentous decision," just as Winthrop himself had made clear at the very beginning of the New England experiment in 1630.<sup>8</sup> Neither Bercovitch nor Gilmore, however, gives sufficient attention to the language of Winthrop's speech to permit them to link the key

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feature of the jeremiad tradition – the choice between “life” and “death” – to the accompanying emphases on marriage and domestic life that give Winthrop’s speech its unusual scope and fertility.

Winthrop’s communal vision has made him a central figure for the history of ideas in America at least since Perry Miller’s emphasis on the role of “A Modell of Christian Charity” in forming the contractual theory of the Puritan community.<sup>9</sup> More recently, Loren Baritz and Wilson C. McWilliams have argued for Winthrop’s conception of “organic community” or for the importance of the idea of brotherhood to his view of social obligations.<sup>10</sup> Philip Gura, in *A Glimpse of Zion’s Glory* (1984), regards Winthrop as the definitive orthodox participant in an “emergent synthesis of religious and political ideology” that was “continuously revitalized by the challenge of radical elements.”<sup>11</sup> Winthrop’s “vision of the Kingdom of God in America,” Gura argues, was not identical with New England Puritanism. It simply characterized a major element of New England’s strikingly heterogeneous religious life. Amy Lang has recently examined “A Modell of Christian Charity” in the context of her study of the figure of Anne Hutchinson, *Prophetic Woman* (1987), identifying in Winthrop’s text a “conflation” of election and good citizenship that the antinomians would come to repudiate.<sup>12</sup> What is finally most remarkable about Winthrop’s fairly brief address to his fellow passengers on the *Arbella* is its ability to accommodate and sustain all of these subsequent views and arguments, and to identify a single metaphorical framework for fixing this supple vision in his audience’s memory. The family, after all, is a contract with legal as well as organic elements. It is fraternal, as well as parental, and (like the wider social body) it must be able to withstand the kinds of stresses that arise from the intimate association of people who are, inevitably, of different minds. Winthrop’s accomplishment is as much artistic, then, as it is political or ideological, and it has wide-ranging artistic consequences.

In *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977) Ann Douglas has described a process of sentimentalization in nineteenth-century America that was marked by what she calls the disenfranchisement of women and the clergy, followed by an impoverishment of theological and secular life. “America lost its male-dominated theological tradition,” Douglas writes, “without gaining a comprehensive feminism or an adequately modernized religious sensibility.”<sup>13</sup> From being producers and managers of wealth, women became consumers and articles of consumption. The theological doctrine of atonement evolved from its paternal, authoritarian framework into “maternal and affective” forms. Death was domesticated and trivialized into “a celestial retirement village.”<sup>14</sup> Douglas laments these developments like the speaker of yet another impassioned, American jeremiad, and few readers would be inclined to quarrel with the

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broad outlines of her assessment of America's "Victorian" culture. But Winthrop's example suggests that American spiritual and intellectual life was "feminized" – or at least domesticated – long before the nineteenth century. Moreover, it was a conscious process of domestication, every bit as deliberate as the domestication of the image of Washington that George Forgie has described, or the maternal shawl that Abraham Lincoln appropriated at least partly as a dimension of his wartime image as the mourning national parent.<sup>15</sup>

These are features of American life that are deeply rooted in its history and ideals. They are responsible for some of the most troubling parts of our culture, as Ann Douglas has suggested, but they are also responsible for some of the most admirable. It is much too simple to continue to assume, for example, that Hawthorne, Thoreau, Melville, and Whitman constitute a canonical aesthetic tradition that is opposed in subject and style to the sentimental domestic spirit of their day. In fundamental ways their work is perfectly consistent with that spirit and helps to establish its complexity, value, and durability.<sup>16</sup> At least one benefit of returning to John Winthrop and then following the implications of his vision forward to the early twentieth century may be the restoration of a measure of unity to American writing. Increasingly that body of writing has seemed to break down into at least two antagonistic categories: the work of "serious artists" on the one hand, enshrined in our major anthologies, and what Mary Kelley identifies as the work of the "literary domestics" on the other.<sup>17</sup> Recognizing the common enterprise of these two groups of writers is a critical step toward reforming a single tradition along the lines of excellence rather than of gender.

A few notes on method and on the title I have chosen may help to clarify these purposes still further. It seemed that one way to call attention to the integrative hopes of the following chapters would be to associate them with Lincoln's famous reference to the American household and at the same time to modify his biblical allusion as a way of acknowledging that the cultural house of American writing is neither united nor divided but painfully suspended between those two states. Joyce Warren, for example, has forcefully argued the case that major elements of our literary heritage are callously dismissive of the "other" – women, blacks, Hispanics, Indians – whereas William Spengemann has suggested dividing American literary culture according to the competing appeals of opposed "muses," those of adventure and domesticity.<sup>18</sup> But both Spengemann and Warren readily admit that such a division into camps is far too clear-cut to account for the complex loyalties of the writers they examine. Hawthorne is the source of the most widely quoted dismissal of the efforts of women writers in the nineteenth century, yet he is Warren's

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exceptional case: the male American author who most successfully evades the influence of a sexist individualism. Melville clearly fits Spengemann's profile of the masculine adventurer, but his finest book is a critique of the questing and adventuring soul. Deep divisions may finally separate our canonical writers from one another and from their more popular, frequently female contemporaries, but deep affinities apparently drew them together as well. Some of the scope and nature of those affinities I hope to indicate here.

One obvious means of doing so would be to treat in detail the major work of some representative writers in the domestic tradition – Sedgwick, Child, Southworth, Cummins, Warner, Stowe – along with the more familiar figures of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: Crèvecoeur, Franklin, Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, James. Out of such a joint consideration the picture of an undivided house could clearly emerge. I have not chosen this comparative course primarily because of the richness and variety of the recently emerging body of work by other scholars on the contributions of nineteenth-century women writers to American literature: Mary Kelley's examination of the tradition of woman authorship, Cathy Davidson's treatment of domestic fiction in the context of the early American novel, Nina Baym's descriptive account of the body of material produced by American women writers in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, Jane Tompkins's outline of the tradition of the "sensational" in American fiction and its application to Stowe and Warner.<sup>19</sup> I have comparatively little to add to the contributions made by these books, but I have much more to say concerning the parallel reconstructions of male identity in Franklin and Thoreau, the domestic ethic of Crèvecoeur, the seventeenth-century resonances of *The Portrait of a Lady*, and Emily Dickinson's dialogue with John Milton – all of which bear directly upon the relationship between domesticity and community in American literature and culture. Accordingly I think of these chapters as self-contained and at the same time dependent upon the larger critical (and, one hopes, social) enterprise of which they are a part.

It should be clear, then, that I mean to explore an expressive continuity in American literature that is both more and less adversarial, with respect to mainstream culture, than Melville's proverbial "No! in thunder" has traditionally suggested. Jane Tompkins recently pointed out the surprising degree to which Melville's extraordinary review of *Mosses from an Old Manse* shares the prevailing sentimentalism of its day even as it celebrates Hawthorne's power of blackness.<sup>20</sup> My interest here is in the interplay between such sentimental affirmation and the blackness of darkness, not in choosing between them. Taken together, and in a wider historical context than Tompkins provides, they offer an unusually rich instance of what Michael Kammen has called the biformities of the American mind:

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a sentimental blackness of the imagination, perhaps, or a dark sentimentalism, following the terminology that David Reynolds has recently offered as a characterization of the subversive tradition of “dark reform” in the American renaissance.<sup>21</sup> Nancy Cott isolates a particular version of this biformity in *The Bonds of Womanhood* (1977) when she notes the peculiar and paradoxical conjunction in American history between the appearance of a cult of domesticity and the emergence of an active, indigenous feminism.<sup>22</sup> The two developments should preclude one another, whereas in fact (Cott demonstrates) the emergence of American feminism depended to a significant degree on the ideology of domesticity as a means of developing a sense of the collective importance of women and a sense of their shared destiny.

These scholars take me further into social history than I finally intend to go, but they serve as an important foreground for a discussion of American literature that begins with John Winthrop’s use of domesticity and of a representative woman as figurative versions of the community – metaphors that simultaneously bound the colonists to an exacting contract and sought to free them from older and ultimately destructive models of heroism. This was an experience of liberated identity that John Cotton recognized, and that Cotton Mather endorsed, in the former’s eulogy of Winthrop with which Mather concluded his biography in *Magnalia Christi Americana*, identifying Winthrop not as the wall-builder or the founder or the father of Massachusetts Bay, but as its mother.<sup>23</sup> I do not mean to exonerate Winthrop, or any other established literary figure for that matter, from all charges that he failed to adhere to his finest principles. As I remind the reader in the first chapter, the structure of the jeremiad presupposes failure – and promise as well.

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## 1

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“THIS GREAT HOUSEHOLD  
UPON THE EARTH”

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The Book of Deuteronomy, particularly its closing chapters, had an irresistible appeal for the first generation of New England Puritans because of the parallels they recognized between their own situation and that of the Children of Israel, poised upon the borders of the Promised Land. All of the Old Testament had typological significance, of course, and the New Testament was the source that the leaders of the emigrants would consult for guidance in shaping their communal institutions. But it was to Deuteronomy that John Winthrop turned when he sought a forceful conclusion for the discourse on Christian charity that he delivered at sea as the *Arbella* and her consort ships sailed west toward Massachusetts Bay.

The passage Winthrop chose partly to quote and partly to paraphrase was from Moses’ “last farewell” to his people, after he had at length restored their laws and was preparing to die. This wonderfully dramatic moment was deservedly familiar to readers, playgoers, and congregations long before Winthrop singled it out. The medieval compilers of the *Gesta Romanorum* were influenced by Moses’ words of farewell as they assembled their popular collection of monastic and chivalric tales. The same passage that Winthrop chose, and the chapter or two immediately following it, served as the source for some of the dialogue in the Exodus plays of the English *Corpus Christi* cycle, and William Shakespeare, drawing perhaps on all these sources, had incorporated elements of Moses’ farewell into several scenes from *The Merchant of Venice* – most notably into Portia’s memorable lines on the quality of mercy.<sup>1</sup> But Winthrop’s treatment of his text is much more direct and, in its way, momentous than that of these literary predecessors. He uses it to capture in the form of a single choice the challenge facing the new colonists:



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And to shutt upp this discourse with that exhortation of Moses that faithfull servant of the Lord in his last farewell to Israell Deut. 30. Beloved there is now sett before us life, and good, deathe and evill in that wee are Commaunded this day to love the Lord our God, and to love one another to walke in his wayes and to keepe his Commaundements and his Ordinance, and his lawes, and the Articles of our Covenant with him that wee may live and be multiplyed, and that the Lord our God may blesse us in the land whether wee goe to possesse it: But if our heartes shall turne away soe that wee will not obey, but shall be seduced and worshipping other Gods our pleasures, and proffitts, and serve them; it is propounded unto us this day, wee shall surely perishe out of the good Land whether wee passe over this vast Sea to possesse it:

Therefore lett us choose life,  
that wee, and our Seede,  
may live; by obeyeing his  
voyce, and cleaveing to him,  
for hee is our life, and  
our prosperity.<sup>2</sup>

The images of a city on a hill and of a "speciall Commission" or covenant are the traditional metaphors that modern scholarship has focused on as the heart of Winthrop's speech, but the emphases of Winthrop's text itself suggest that this Mosaic choice was a central part of his message, the condensation of what he believed the Puritan errand signified. The idea of a special covenant was vital to the emigrants' sense of destiny, but in "A Modell of Christian Charity" Winthrop devotes only a paragraph to the implications of this contract, subordinating it (as he does in the passage above) as just one metaphor among others. Even the vision of a "Citty upon a Hill" is, in many respects, only a kind of conspicuous predicament in which, according to Winthrop, the emigrants simply find themselves. "[T]he eies of all people are uppon us," he observes in an interesting modification of the Sermon on the Mount (203), implying that New England will be exposed to considerable scrutiny, like it or not.<sup>3</sup> The choice between life and death, however, is at the center of what it means to be a deliberate participant in this dangerous enterprise. This is the master "modell" of Winthrop's title, and he set out in his discourse to identify the Puritan errand as closely as he could with the powerful appeal of life.

It may seem especially curious, then, that Winthrop chose to begin what he considered to be the "preface" of his speech with an explanation of the reasons why God had ordained that "in all times some must be rich

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some poore, some highe and eminent in power and dignitie; others meane and in subjection" (190). Where, one wonders, is the charity in this? Winthrop undertakes at the outset to explain to us nothing less than the reasons why such social divisions should exist. Perry Miller mistakenly identified this apparently complacent – and from Winthrop's point of view wholly traditional – acceptance of social stratification as Winthrop's main text and thought it called for "incessant brooding" on the part of all students of American history.<sup>4</sup> For Winthrop, however, these opening comments are not so much a bulwark for the rights of property, or a rehearsal of familiar aristocratic platitudes, but the beginnings of an assault upon ordinary notions of worldly ownership and worldly duty. His antagonist, in conformity with a rich tradition of Puritan thought, was the self, and he began "A Modell of Christian Charity" by boldly addressing the chief incitement to selfishness among his economically vulnerable listeners.<sup>5</sup>

God, quite simply, reserves all earthly property to himself. Its uneven distribution among men is no more than another manifestation of the familiar renaissance concept of plenitude. God multiplies his "Stewards counting himself more honored in dispenceing his guifts to man by man, than if hee did it by his owne immediate hand" (190). Winthrop reinforces the implications of this idea by examining the two primary rules that are to guide the lives of the emigrants, justice and mercy, and the two kinds of law to which they are subject, that of nature and that of grace. The import of these principles and laws is that "community of perills calls for extraordinary liberallity" (192). It was quite clear to Winthrop's audience – even before Winthrop himself explicitly confirmed it – that the voyagers in the *Arbella* stood to one another as in a community of perils and that, regardless of the objections of prudent self-interest (with which instinct Winthrop holds a small debate in the text of his speech), they must all conduct their affairs "with more enlargement towards others and lesse respect towards ourselves" (195).

With Levitician scrupulousness, Winthrop is careful to discuss the various contingencies involved in lending, giving outright, and forgiving debts, but it is clear that he does not have in mind as the guiding virtue of his new community simply ordinary generosity:

It is to be observed that both in Scriptures and latter stories of the Churches that such as have beene most bountifull to the poore Saintes especially in these extraordinary times and occasions god hath left them highly Commended to posterity . . . observe againe that the scripture gives noe causion to restraine any from being over liberall this way; but to all men to the liberall and cherefull practise hereof by the sweetest promises as to instance one for many, Isaiah 58.6: Is not this the fast that I have chosen to