Emerson Goes to the Movies

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Emerson and Disney Films

This book attempts to trace the theme of Emersonian individualism in the Disney Company's post-1989 animated films, to reveal that the philosopher's influence extends not only over American literature, but also over American popular culture, in this case Disney cartoons. It is important to note that it is not concerned with direct influence, through some first-hand knowledge of the philosopher's works. Rather, what matters for the purpose of this discussion is Emersonian ideology as it has been preserved in the American intellectual tradition. The expression "Emersonian individualism" is used throughout not as denoting the writer's immediate presence in the discussed films, but referring to a specific type of individualism, which shall be described further on.

The importance of Emerson in the American cultural tradition is hard to overestimate. His writings seem both to express the spirit of his times and to forge the spirit of America's future. The fact that Emerson is today little read in the United States is seen by Stanley Cavell as a form of repression (Cavell 2003, 114), paradoxically proving the philosopher's centrality for American identity. Repression means a constant effort to keep something under the surface, which also ensures that it exists and determines one's actions. If America needs to repress Emerson, it is because he is still alive and yearning to resurface. This is possible because reading a writer is not necessarily indispensable to his influence: Bloom believes that Americans read Emerson only by living in America, "in this place still somehow his, and not our own" (Bloom 1975, 171). American writers have to struggle with a kind of Emerson complex. Their ambitions are defined by the Emersonian heritage: "Each wants to be the universe, to be the whole of which all other poets are only parts" (Bloom 1975, 52). Thus, the American history of literature can be largely seen as moments of either affirmation or negation (or a blend of both) of Emerson (Bloom 1975, 163).

The part of Emerson's legacy this book focuses on is individualism as one of the most prominent features of the philosopher's views, and one of the defining traits of American identity. Emerson's influence was problematized in twentieth-century literature, social conditions making writers less optimistic and less certain about the possibility of individualism in the modern world. The self-reliant individual present in American consciousness since Emerson is still a hero at odds with society, but he is no longer triumphant. If Twain's Huck Finn, in a gesture of rejecting his society, can still "light out for the territory," Salinger's Holden Caulfield must end up in an asylum, as there is no frontier now that could accommodate his self-reliance. Twentieth-century literature becomes aware that the City crushes individuals instead of acknowledging their personal greatness.

However, if twentieth-century writers seem to become more pessimistic about the human being's individual possibilities, the concept of self-reliance keeps its prominence in popular culture. While individualism was present in nineteenth-century popular legends of Davy Crockett or Daniel Boone, in the twentieth century it is enough to look at comic-book heroes such as Superman to find elements of self-reliance. Disney is no exception. The model of the Disney Company's films is strongly Emersonian, with the hero being different (and better) than his/her surroundings, listening to his/her heart and striving at self-realization whatever the cost. As chapter 2 explains, Emerson's self-reliance is one of the key constituents of American identity, which allows one to view the Disney Company as expressing a sort of national myth.

Many other American symbols are traceable in Disney films. In its adaptations, Disney "rewrites the original tales for its particular version of American values" (Ward 2002, 2). Michael Eisner, the Disney Company's CEO until 2005, expresses the same idea: the Company's message is about "diversity of individual opportunity, individual choice and individual expression, [and that] for viewers around the world, America is the place where the individual has a chance to make a better life and to have political and economic freedom" (Eisner 1995, 9). A similar relation to American identity can be seen in Disneyland, which, for Walt Disney, was to be "based upon and dedicated to the ideals, dreams and the hard facts that have created America" (Mosley 1985, 221). Small wonder that for Bell, Haas, and Sells, Disney's position in popular culture means that "U.S. legal institutions, film theorists, cultural critics, and faithful audiences all participate in Disney's self-proclaimed status as metonymic America" (Bell, Haas, and Sells 1995, 4). Both the critics and the

representatives of the Company agree that Disney carries the American myth in a popular form.

That popular culture in general is a carrier of myth has been discussed extensively. It is enough to quote Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* from 1957, the flagship of discussions concerning popular culture products as expressing myth. Especially since for Barthes, myth presents itself as "neutral and innocent" (Barthes 2000, 125), concealing its true intentions, while it "summons me to receive its expansive ambiguity" (Barthes 2000, 124). Both of these characteristics make myth similar to ideology as presented by Louis Althusser: "summoning" the subject would be an equivalent of Althusserian interpellation; the naturalizing function of ideology is stressed by Althusser too, and by Žižek in his articles on Althusser (*Mapping Ideology*). This congruency is important for the present discussion, since this book concerns both the national myth and ideology in Disney films, treating those discourses as related or even equivalent. Finally, Barthes notices that myth works best in "incomplete," simplified discourse: caricature, pastiche, symbol (Barthes 2000, 127). This would explain perhaps the importance of myth in animated film as a form based on simplification.

The connection between myth and popular culture in the case of film has been explained by the philosophers of the Frankfurt School. Siegfried Kracauer, according to Tomasz Majewski, reads "the products of mass culture as an expression of the collective unconscious, the social dream" (Majewski 2011, 291). Such a perception of popular culture, as a repository of the collective unconscious, has its continuation. In the context of Disney's films, Annalee R. Ward claims that mass film has become the main carrier of stories and myths (Ward 2002, 1).

To discuss individualism as a constituent of American identity, it is necessary to define what is in fact understood by "American identity," "American myth," or "American mentality." One possible explanation is provided by William Appleman Williams in his *Empire as a Way of Life*:

> In the classic German word, it is a *Weltanschauung*, a conception of the world and how it works, and a strategy for acting upon that outlook on a routine basis as well as in times of crisis. It you prefer an Anglo-Saxon formulation, consider it this way: each society holds in common certain assumptions about reality, and every day those assumptions guide and set limits upon its members – their awareness and perception, their understanding of cause and consequence, their sense of options, and their range of action. (Williams 1982, 5)

What for Williams is the American way of life, for Slotkin is the national myth, and how it is put into practice:

> The ultimate, archetypal questions of human existence are spoken to by the myth; but the success of the myth in answering these questions for a people depends upon the creation of a distinct cultural tradition in the selection and use of metaphor. It is in their development of traditional metaphors (and the narratives that express them) that the mythologies of particular cultures move from archetypal paradigms to the creation of acculturated, even idiosyncratic myth-metaphors….
>
> The evolution of the American myth was a synthetic process of reconciling the romantic-conventional myths of Europe to American experience ... [an] attempt to destroy ... the conventionalized mythology to get back to the primary source of blood-knowledge of the wilderness. (Slotkin 1979, 14, 17)

Myths form the mentality of a people, and present a set of symbols and stories on which to base feelings of identity. The American myth seems to have been derived from the early experiences of the wilderness, as well as from the moving western frontier and Emersonian individualism.

Thus the relevance of studying Disney relies on seeing the Disney Company as "metonymic America," and the productions as expressing American identity or ideology. As for the purpose of such a study, Slotkin thinks that knowing one's myths sets one free: "A people unaware of its myths is likely to continue living by them, though the world around that people may change and demand changes in their psychology, their world view, their ethics, and their institutions" (Slotkin 1979, 4). He believes that the awareness of myths puts an end to those myths' influence.

Disney is chosen here as an important example, prominent because of the monolithic nature of the Company's productions, and important because of its being aimed at the young viewer. Just like other art works intended for children, Disney films are steeped in ideology and American national myths, and because of their educational role it seems relevant to acknowledge this level and discuss the sources of the Disney worldview. Clearly, the gesture of making Emerson the exemplary author of American individualism for the purpose of this book is a subjective decision, but it is justified by his enormous influence on subsequent American writers, sanctioned by the academic consensus represented by such authors as F.O. Matthiessen or Robert E. Spiller. Emerson himself is often more complex and self-contradictory than the conception of individualism used in this work. However, for the purpose of the present discussion it is not Emerson himself that matters, but rather his reception and influence. If the

philosopher struggled with doubt and skepticism, his heritage seems to be uniformly optimistic; he has been read by other authors as the advocate of a strong, self-reliant individual, of a divine being who listens to his intuition and does not allow society to crush his uniqueness.

The Choice of Films

The films chosen for in-depth analysis with regard to individualism are all post-1989 productions: *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), *Hercules* (1997), *Mulan* (1998), *A Bug's Life* (1998), *Treasure Planet* (2002), and *Atlantis* (2001). 1989 marks the opening of the so-called "new series," when Disney experienced an artistic and financial renaissance under the leadership of its new CEO, Michael Eisner, and Frank Wells as president. Disney's productions are usually divided into three periods: the classical, lasting until Walt Disney's death in 1966; the middle period between 1967 and 1988 in which the Company suffered from a relative diminution of success, struggling with its artistic conception after the master's death; finally, the new series since 1989, after Eisner and Wells were hired in 1984 and gave a new direction to the Company's films.[1]

All films chosen for the discussion are Disney's, not Pixar's 3-D productions, even though Disney is also identified with Pixar movies. Disney's relationship with Pixar has been complicated and varying over time; in some years Disney owned Pixar, in others it only distributed its works, having little creative control over the films (Whitley 2008, 119). Thus, a choice has been made to focus only on Disney's traditional 2-D animations. One exception to this is the 1998 film *A Bug's Life*, discussed in the chapter on class relations. This exception has been made because of the very distinctive subject it deals with (the story of an ant colony is more suitable to focus on class issues than anything else). Also, the film comes from a period when Pixar was closely collaborating with Disney, not only at the level of distribution. *A Bug's Life* was directed by John Lasseter, who worked for Disney, then Pixar, then Disney again as the Principal Creative Advisor for Walt Disney Imagineering. It was written by Lasseter, Stanton and Joe Ranft, who also worked for both Disney and Pixar, writing the stories for films such as *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast, Aladdin,* or *The Lion King*. Also, the story is loosely based on Aesop's fable "The Ant and the Grasshopper," which had been already made into a short film *The Grasshopper and the Ants* by Disney in 1934.

Finally, this discussion does not concern all post-1989 films. To a certain extent, Disney films are based upon one formula, one model plot, which is discussed in chapter 3. Thus it might be argued that the Company's ideology could be analyzed with reference to only one chosen film. However, the range of films has been adapted in such a way as to show their similarities and to reveal the problems in question in the clearest possible way. Apart from the above mentioned issues of race, gender, class, and imperialism, the book discusses the model plot of Disney films and Disney's changes introduced into the literary classics it chooses to adapt.

Methodology

This book's methodology combines cultural studies with the approach of a historian of literature (or, perhaps more properly, of cultural ideas). The lens of the history of literature/culture reveals how Romantic individualism (especially Emersonian individualism) that has been influencing American literature since the 19th century is now present in popular culture, exemplified by the Disney Company's films. American individualism can be accounted for in a variety of ways, referring to the moving western frontier, the influence of Protestantism etc. However, these are all sociological and/or historical interpretations. The scope of the present work remains within the field of culture and how certain cultural ideas are transmitted across time. Thus Emerson is chosen as the representative and founding figure of American individualism. It is important to stress that what is relevant for this projects is not simply Emerson's ideas but the way they have been read over time. Emerson himself is much more complicated than his heritage; in terms of ideology, though, it is his influence that matters.

The principal way of reading particular Disney films discussed in this book is the cultural studies approach. In order to define what cultural studies is, Janet Wasko provides a useful summary of film studies methodologies, based on Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen's *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*:

> Braudy and Cohen discuss four periods in over 100 years of film theory and criticism. The first period was basically formalist….The second… [was] related to race, gender, and language. The third period introduced… cultural anthropology, Marxism, and Freudian psychoanalysis. Most recently, Braudy and Cohen note that film analysis has become more eclectic, with attempts to merge various approaches from history, psychology, and linguistics to draw upon feminism, neo-formalism,

> cognitive psychology, empiricism, and phenomenology. (Wasko 2001, 109)

This last period nicely characterizes the eclecticism of cultural studies, drawing upon all politically and culturally relevant categories. What is perhaps the one common denominator of all methods grouped under this name is "a political orientation rooted variously in Marxist, non-Marxist and post-Marxist leftist intellectual traditions, all critical of aestheticism, formalism, antihistoricism, and apoliticism common among the dominant methods of literary analysis during the middle third of the century" (Leitch 1992, x). Thus this book presents Romantic individualism with reference to such categories as race, gender, class, or imperialism. The idea behind such an approach is to see how various cultural fields intersect with individualism: whether individualism means the same for men and women; whether, as an American ideology, it succeeds at erasing differences when applied to exotic and non-individualist cultures; whether the individual turns out to be stronger than all social divides, and whether individualism can be seen as informing the American mentality on a national scale, and what are its political implications.

The chosen approach does not look at extra-literary influences on the films, i.e., it does not explain their content through current events (this has been a popular methodology, viewing for example *Aladdin* through the perspective of the Gulf War (e.g. Borthaiser 2008, 5)). The reason for this is not anti-historicism or refusing relevance to the way current politics influences Disney productions. To put it briefly, interpreting films through ideological developments and through current events are just two distinct approaches, which might be described as diachronic and synchronic. The latter, the synchronic, is of no interest within the scope of this work. Instead it focuses on the former, the diachronic: how certain ideas are preserved historically through cultural works and how they can be alive in a cultural tradition, from highbrow literature to popular culture. Hence the interest in Emerson's individualism being transferred from literature to Disney films.

What Others Say

The ideology of Disney's post-1989 productions has been discussed in a variety of academic articles and a number of books. Henry A. Giroux's *The Mouse that Roared* (2001) criticizes Disney for the values it teaches its young audiences. The book focuses on Disney's modes of influencing children, and implicitly makes one consider how to protect them. In order

to highlight the Disney Company's power, Giroux enumerates its various media holdings. Also, he analyzes Disney films and Disneyland as expressing a certain vision of American values, presenting a sanitized version of history and revealing an authoritarian obsession with control (Giroux 2001, 49). For Giroux, Disney is racist, patriarchal and antidemocratic (Giroux 2001, 86), and Disneyland is a perfect Baudrillardian simulacrum.

Annalee R. Ward's *Mouse Morality* (2002) joins this critical tendency and analyzes the ethical dimension of Disney's animated films. The author is frustrated with Disney's romantic intuitionism, individualistic relativism and emotivism. Yet again she is interested in Disney's impact, this time at the level of morality. She analyzes in depth the values inherent in *The Lion King, Pocahontas, The Hunchback of Notre Dame, Hercules,* and *Mulan*, revealing how the Disney worldview is racist and patriarchal, but also potentially promoting disobedience through its message of individualism.

Race and gender are the favorite topics of Disney critics. A collection of essays edited by Brenda Ayres, *The Emperor's Old Groove: Decolonizing Disney's Magic Kingdom* (2003) analyzes the films from postcolonial perspectives. Amy M. Davis's *Good Girls and Wicked Witches* (2006) deals with the construction and evolution of femininity in Disney films. She claims that the portrayal of women has changed over the years and that women have been depicted as much more liberated since the release of *Pocahontas*. For Davis, Disney's heroines become more active as a result of the demand for political correctness; the new Disney woman is supposedly interested mostly in realizing herself, though she can express love and attraction (Davis 2006, 185).

Eleanor Byrne and Martin McQuillan's *Deconstructing Disney* (1999) analyzes the post-1989 films from a strictly Marxian, deconstructionist perspective. The book's focus is ideological, ranging from issues of gender, imperialism, race, to the politics of the Clinton administration (Byrne and McQuillan 2000).

Two collections of interdisciplinary essays dealing with Disney are worth mentioning: *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture* (1995) edited by Elizabeth Bell, Linda Haas and Laura Sells, and *Rethinking Disney: Private Control, Public Dimensions* (2005), edited by Mike Budd and Max H. Kirsch. The former again deals with gender, identity politics and cultural pedagogy. The latter ranges from alternative histories, capitalism and globalization through gender, race, class, representation, and urban planning. It includes the article "Monarchs, Monsters, and Multiculturalism: Disney's Menu for Global Hierarchy" by Lee Artz, who often writes about the political dimension of Disney

movies, focusing on what he sees as inequality, alienation and its anti-social messages (Artz 2005, 81, 92). He develops here the ideas from his article "The Righteousness of Self-Centered Royals: The World According to Disney Animation" (Artz 2004, 116-146), in which he focuses on the social order promoted in *The Lion King*.

As far as major articles are concerned, Lauren Dundes is interested in the issues of gender and psychology in Disney: the portrayal of femininity in *Pocahontas* ("Disney's Modern Heroine Pocahontas: Revealing Age-Old Gender Stereotypes and Role Discontinuity under a Façade of Liberation" (Dundes 2001)), and the Electral dimension of *The Little Mermaid* (in the article "The Trident and the Fork: Disney's 'The Little Mermaid' as a Male Construction of an Electral Fantasy" co-authored by Alan Dundes (Dundes and Dundes 2000)).

David Whitley's *Idea of Nature in Disney Animation* (2008) investigates Disney's Romantic influences, but only with regard to the representation of nature. As Slotkin shows, a Romantic understanding of nature as a sign of the Divine and a welcoming space that allows man to find his true self is new and distinctly different from the Puritan/colonial one, when nature used to be perceived as hostile and dangerous (Slotkin 1979, 15). Disney retains this Romantic understanding of nature, of an ideal relationship of man to it, and of nature as a refuge from the corrupt world (Whitley 2008, 9). Rousseau's innocence of man outside society has a special meaning for America:

> This radical innocence [that insists on respect for what is both primitive and primal within the natural world], it is also implied, is a core element in American identity, enshrined within characteristic forms of American experience, the constitution and the nation's founding ideals (Whitley 2008, 11)

because "From the writings of early pioneers and settlers, through Thoreau and Emerson to John Muir and Ansell Adams, 'wilderness' has been invested with a special value that goes right to the heart of American identity" (Whitley 2008, 64). The Romantic understanding of nature is central both to America and to Disney.

In addition, there are books that deal with the more sociological aspect of Disney films and theme parks, like *The Disneyization of Society* (2004) by Alan Bryman, who by Disneyization means "the process by which *the principles* of the Disney theme parks are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world" (Bryman 2004, 1). According to Bryman, its dimensions are: theming (combining an institution with an arbitrary narrative), hybrid consumption

(combining consumption associated with different spheres), merchandising (making products with logos and copyright images) and performative labor (viewing frontline service work as a performance) (Bryman 2004, 2).

Janet Wasko's *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy* (2001) analyzes not only the theme parks and films, but the whole of Disney's empire, including its audiences. Wasko tries to grasp the Disney phenomenon, explaining by what means the Company achieves its enormous success.

Most academics seem to be critical of Disney's ideology, but there are also those who, like Douglas Brode, are devoted apologists for the Company. Brode's book *From Walt to Woodstock: How Disney Created the Counterculture* (2004) acknowledges that there is a stereotype that Disney films are oversentimental and crypto-fascist (Brode 2004, xi) and argues that "Disney firmly [stands] in the tradition of such other iconoclastic (and truly American) artists as Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, and Jack Kerouac," being neither liberal nor conservative, but populist (Brode 2004, xxx). Moreover, he claims that Walt Disney supported feminism and socialism against individualism, implausible as this might sound, since the Disney studio was not really a worker's paradise, and Walt Disney himself opposed unionizing in his company. Still, for Brode, Disney not only "created the counterculture," but is also a perfect example of acknowledging racial, gender and sexual difference, as is evident in the book *Multiculturalism and the Mouse: Race and Sex in Disney Entertainment* (2005). The critic goes as far in his glorification as to title the chapter on gender "Disney's Subversion of the Victorian Ideal." However, such an enthusiastic embrace of Disney's values is not common in literature.

There seems to be a general tendency among critics to focus on Disney's didactic role; those scholars who are interested in Disney's ideology tend to warn against the values that Disney espouses to children thanks to its hegemonic power (Ward 2002, 115), and believe that naming the Company's ideological sins will offer a way of protecting consumers from further indoctrination. Those who mention individualism, like Lee Artz, criticize the crypto-fascist ideology of Disney films that undermines social solidarity. With the exception of Whitley, no authors discuss where Disney's ideology comes from, or notice that it is natively American. Most of them would probably agree with John Taylor, who claims that Disney's ideology "was woven into the very fabric of American culture" (Taylor 1987, viii); "woven" meaning introduced from the outside. This book, instead of focusing on Disney's influence upon its audience, concerns rather what influences Disney, how Disney reflects the American

mentality, and how the idea of individualism is depicted in particular films. The existing gap in the present state of scholarship on Disney which does not link it to American ideology calls perhaps for the view of an outsider. John Dewey notices a similar gap being filled by Europeans in what concerns American civilization in general: "The war and its consequences may not have produced in our own country a consciousness of 'Americanism' as a distinctive mode of civilization, but they have definitely had that effect among the intellectual elite of Europe" (Dewey 1962, 19). Let this then be an attempt at providing another European contribution to American self-understanding.

CHAPTER TWO

INDIVIDUALISM AND THE SPIRIT OF AMERICA

Definition and History of the Term 'Individualism'

At first sight, defining individualism in American history and culture does not seem difficult. Paula Gunn Allen, for example, offers the following synthesis of the American narrative structure as exemplifying Western individualism:

> The white Anglo-Saxon secular-Protestant ethos holds that isolate, self-reliant, and self-motivated individuals formulate and render experience personal, profiting thereby. The ideal hero, a single individual, wreaks his will upon one or more hapless groups (who, one way or another, are generally perceived as in opposition to individualistic goals). He does so by means of engaging in conflict, bringing it to crisis, and resolving that crisis in such a way that individualistic values are affirmed. This classic fictional structure informs most of American culture, not only in its refined and popular aesthetic forms, but in most institutions as well. (Allen 1989, 4)

This is not a definition of individualism *per se*, but rather an example of its cultural realization. However, Allen captures the essence of the American understanding of individualism, referring to it as a "value," which reveals that individualism is thought of as something positive. Allen shows also that it brings into conflict the self-sufficient individual and the group, and that the desired outcome of this conflict for the individualistic hero is to triumph over the group.

These are indeed the basic ingredients of individualism, yet it seems that the term can be further understood on a number of levels. First of all, it can be seen as a form of anti-collectivism, juxtaposing the individual against society, in which individual interests shall supersede those of the group. This is the notion of individualism cherished by Romantic writers in both the European and American traditions. The second dimension could be identified as anti-determinism: a belief that the individual can surmount social determinants and restrictions, being the sole or principal

architect of his/her own fortune. Both these levels refer to the relationship of the self and society. Apart from this social and psychological plane, individualism also has an economic one. Thus, in his *Habits of the Heart*, Robert N. Bellah introduces a distinction between "utilitarian individualism" and "expressive individualism." To illustrate the former, Bellah gives the example of Benjamin Franklin and "those who would argue that in a society where each vigorously pursued his own interest, the social good would automatically emerge" (Bellah 2008, 33). On the other hand, "expressive individualism" would be more typical of the American Renaissance, where people "put aside the search for wealth in favor of a deeper cultivation of the self" (33). This second understanding seems to be more important for the examination of individualism as a constituent of American identity, as the former would be rather referred to in literature as laissez-faire (Lipset 1997, 19).

The way that the word individualism was used in America historically also reveals that its meaning is problematic and calls for further specification. The term "individualism" appeared in English as late as in 1839, while earlier it was used by French writers: Tocqueville and Chevalier (Grabb, Baer, and Curtis 1999, 524). For them, "the term individualism connoted various aspects of modern society which in the opinion of the authors corroded traditional bonds of social, national, and political unity and, by elevating unduly the status of the individual, created social instability and anarchy" (Arieli 1964, 209). It is difficult to decide when exactly after 1839 individualism as a concept became widely acclaimed in America. Grabb, Baer, and Curtis quote S.M. Lipset's idea that, even before the term appeared, the popularity of what was later to be called "individualism" can be traced back to the American Revolution. However, they also show that the majority of historians and sociologists see that period of American history as "far more group-oriented and socially responsible" than Lipset would have it (519), and that individualism had not yet been embraced as a leading ideology (525). It seems that it was much later, around the time of the Civil War, that individualism started to gain supreme importance in the American self-image (527). This view is consistent with the idea that it was the Romantics who prepared the ground for the concept in America, and that only after them did it become a solid constituent of what may be seen as American mentality and self-definition. For Arieli, "Once this concept had captured the public mind it was increasingly accepted as a basic characteristic of American society. By the end of the Civil War the term, with growing frequency, described the unique character of the nation" (Arieli 1964, 192). Associating America with individualism was also an

ideological choice allowing for national identification, needed especially after the crisis of the Civil War (Arieli 1964, 345). According to Arieli, "Through the concept of individualism the Puritan New England elite integrated Jeffersonian ideology into its own outlook and thereby shaped a truly national ideology" (Arieli 1964, 289).

If Grabb, Baer, and Curtis speak of individualism as a value informing American culture, Sacvan Bercovitch points to the fact that when French radicals coined the term "individualism" it signified for them "*the* vice of the age," a menacing and anti-social force which should be resisted (Bercovitch 1993, 309). American writers of that era took from the French both the word and its negative connotations; even Emerson, who attacked collectivism and became the father of American individualism, referred to "the vice of the age," which shows that his understanding of individualism was taken from socialists (310). For Bercovitch, this means that the Romantics believed "individualism" to be a pejorative term[2] and that it would be difficult to use this word for the philosophy they advocated. The concept of self-reliance was in fact created against egotistic "liberal individualism" (314); thus Bercovitch suggests using the term "individuality" instead of "individualism" to denote what Emerson was interested in (315).

Bercovitch's distinction does not seem to have entered general usage in scholarly circles. For the sake of clarity this book assumes that Emersonian self-reliance and individualism are synonymous. It makes an attempt to define further "individualism," taking into consideration the question of whether it came to mean the same thing as egoism for other writers. According to Tocqueville, who up to this day seems to remain the authority on the American concept of individualism, both terms are certainly distinct:

> Egoism is a passionate and exaggerated love of self that impels man to relate everything solely to himself and to prefer himself to everything else. Individualism is a reflective and tranquil sentiment that disposes each citizen to cut himself off from the mass of his fellow men and withdraw into the circle of family and friends, so that, having created a little society for his own use, he gladly leaves the larger society to take care of itself.…Individualism is democratic in origin, and it threatens to develop as conditions equalize. (Tocqueville 2004, 585)

For Tocqueville the problem with individualism does not lie in its being egotistic. It constitutes a danger inherent to democracy, which would be more aptly seen as "loneliness":

> As conditions equalize, one finds more and more individuals no longer rich enough or powerful enough to have much influence on the fate of their fellow men who have nevertheless acquired or retained enough enlightenment and wealth to take care of themselves. These people owe nothing to anyone, and in a sense they expect nothing from anyone. They become accustomed to thinking of themselves always in isolation and are pleased to think that their fate lies entirely in their own hands. Thus, not only does democracy cause each man to forget his forebears, but it makes it difficult for him to see his offspring and cuts him off from his contemporaries. Again and again it leads him back to himself and threatens ultimately to imprison him altogether in the loneliness of his own heart. (586-587)

Individualism has for Tocqueville a detrimental effect upon social life and upon man's feeling of continuity; for him, Americans tend to become lonely islands. This pessimistic picture cannot be simply relegated to the past. In the 20th century, Quentin Anderson diagnosed individualism's impact on economic relations in a similar way:

> Individualism, insofar as it stands for the energy, inventiveness, and adaptability of Americans committed to commercial or industrial enterprise, is a name for those personal qualities which foster impersonality in social and economic relations; the individualist is (again, in the very terms of the myth), the man who subjects others to himself through his shrewdness in gauging their appetites or anticipating their needs. (Anderson 1971, 4)

Thus, for the more socially-minded critics, individualism not only cripples man as it reduces him to being an island, but also disintegrates society. This last doubt shall be further addressed with reference to the Romantic concept of self-reliance.

However, despite the fact that for Tocqueville individualism has some negative connotations, the early American reviews of his *Democracy in America* already reveal that this was not how the Americans viewed it (Arieli 1964, 198). And it is certainly not how they view it today:

> What had indeed changed in the period which had elapsed between Tocqueville and Bryce was that Americans had transformed the concept of individualism from a term of abuse to one of approval, from a remote sociological notion to one which more than any other defined Americanism. (Arieli 1964, 323)

Even though criticized, individualism seems to be seen in America, at least since Romanticism, in terms of a value. It is linked with the belief

that the individual has the right to see him/herself as more important than the mass; that he/she can rise above conditions and decide upon his/her fate; and that self-expression or self-realization is the ultimate goal.

Individualism as Defining American Identity

The importance of individualism stems from the fact that it is widely believed to be one of the main constituents of the American national character. Seymour Martin Lipset, a political sociologist dealing with American mentality, distinguishes five terms which characterize "the American Creed": "liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire" (Lipset 1997, 19). Quite understandably, there seems to be an apparent tension between individualism and egalitarianism, but Lipset further explains that American understanding of egalitarianism involves "equality of opportunity and respect, not of result or condition" (19).[3] The American Creed forms the American identity; for Lipset, it creates America itself. The sociologist stresses the fact that "becoming American was a religious, that is, ideological act. The ex-Soviet Union apart, other countries define themselves by a common history as birthright communities, not by ideology" (18). Being American is not so much a question of birth or roots but of an ideologically-founded decision.

For Lipset, the revolutionary ideology which became the American Creed is liberalism in its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century meanings, as distinct from conservative Toryism, statist communitarism, mercantilism, and the *noblesse oblige* dominant in monarchical, state-church-formed cultures (31). Thus America would be the first nation organized around the ideology of freedom and equality. The contradiction between these two values is central to American intellectual tradition:

> Americans believe strongly in both values, and … the history of American social change reflects a shifting back and forth between these core values, as a period of concern with equality and social reform is typically followed by a period emphasizing individual achievement and upward mobility. (Lipset 1979, xxxiii)

This conflict is partly resolved through the unsatisfactory insistence on the above-cited fact that equality of opportunity does not mean equality of condition, or through distinctions, such as those postulated by Richard M. Merelman, between "economic equality" and "equality in the domain of socialization," the latter being the American ideal (Merelman 1989, 469). Thus, what emerges are subdivisions of equality which are to explain how it can be consistent with individualism. However, the only way to

reconcile truly individualism and equality is in fact to admit that one of those values is more important than the other. If we must resort to concepts such as "equality of opportunity" or "equality of socialization," it becomes clear that egalitarianism is the weaker value, subjugated to individualism and depending on redefinitions in order to be sustained at all. Bellah explicitly states in his *Habits of the Heart*: "It seems to us that it is individualism, and not equality, as Tocqueville thought, that has marched inexorably through our history" (2008, xlviii). For Bellah, "Individualism, the first language in which Americans tend to think about their lives, values independence and self-reliance above all else" (xiv). Understanding individualism as the first language spoken by Americans is a powerful idea, which supports the thesis that it is the center of American identity. What is more, Bellah's understanding of individualism is unequivocally positive, at least in its origin. The often-quoted accusation of individualism, that it is anti-social and destructive on a larger scale, is refuted in the following passage:

> To serve society, one must be able to stand alone, not needing others, not depending on their judgment, and not submitting to their wishes. Yet this individualism is not selfishness. Indeed, it is a kind of heroic selflessness. One accepts the necessity of remaining alone in order to serve the values of the group. And this obligation to aloneness is an important key to the American moral imagination. (146)

The belief that we are speaking of "heroic selflessness" that "serves the values of the group" is popular, but not unanimously supported among scholars; as shall be further seen, the Romantics' writings clearly testify to the problematic nature of individualism's impact upon society.

Bellah is not the only one to believe that individualism is the crucial American national trait. Analyzing media narratives, which are the most contemporary expressions of American imagination, Richard M. Merelman states that

> American political culture may be conceptualized primarily as a culture of mythologized individualism. Individualism refers to the deep structural classification form of these narratives. Mythologized individualism indicates the fact that media narratives of individualism are powerful and recurrent. (Merelman 1989, 485)

He relies also on Bellah's use of Rousseau's concept of the "civil religion" for describing the United States, which in his view "mythologizes individualism" (Merelman 1989, 487). According to the American myth the hero is an individualist who, through an act of will,

journeys from the corrupt society to personal responsibility, to natural justice and to freedom. Most importantly, the idea of "civil religion" means that unless enough Americans make such conscientious choices, the nation as a whole will not triumph (488). Thus, individualism is ascribed a quasi-Messianic mission to redeem America from conformity. It is interesting that Merelman agrees here with Bellah that society in fact profits from individualism. This seems to be a constitutive feature of the American understanding of individualism, that society is believed to be saved by the self-reliance of the individual, and never vice-versa.

In an interview with Oliver Conant, Quentin Anderson also expresses his belief that individualism occupies a central place in American identity, but he is not that optimistic about its implications, calling it "a distinctly American grand refusal of history and social roles" (Conant 1995, 85). Also V.F. Calverton claims that

> it was this petty bourgeois individualism of the frontier which provided the basic psychological determinant in our [i.e. American – J.F.] national ideology. It was the influence of that individualism which accomplished our release from European culture, undermined the force of the colonial complex, and laid the foundation for an indigenous American culture. (Calverton 1973, 244)

Calverton's tracing of individualism back to the experience of the frontier is not new or original; where his interpretation differs from other writers is in his views on Puritanism. If before and after Calverton (as in Sacvan Bercovitch's *Puritan Origins of the American Self,* post-dating Calverton's book by forty-three years) the main historical and critical focus seems to be on the importance of Puritanism for American mentality, Calverton's 1932 work, *Liberation of American Literature,* reveals how this role is generally overrated. He compares American theocracy with the Puritans in England and shows that, for instance, the upper middle class Puritans were far less censorious and hostile towards art than the American colonists. He concludes that the American spirit was not Puritan but bourgeois, and that one of its features was bourgeois individualism, which "in America became a mass phenomenon instead of a class one. It was not confined to one class in this country but extended through and included all classes. Or, to be more precise, it made all of America into one class in its ideology – middle class" (266). Connecting this to the discussion of individualism and equality, it can be seen that in Calverton's interpretation individualism was what made equality possible – of course not equality of condition but equality of spirit, or mentality. Calverton continues:

> The only class divisions that arose, were within that middle class, divisions between the rich bourgeoisie and the poor bourgeoisie. The workers as well as the farmers developed an individualistic outlook, and adopted an unconcealed, petty bourgeois psychology. The whole country became afflicted with the psychology of the entrepreneur. (266)

So, even if individualism is not an outlook applicable to all classes in practical terms (as workers and farmers are usually far less free to attain self-realization than the middle class), in Calverton's view it does define the mentality of the whole of America.

Another explication of the sources of American individualism can be found in Lipset. For him, individualism stems from religious sectarianism, which has predominated in America. Sects, as opposed to denominations that evolved from state churches, stress responsibility for one's actions and reliance on one's conscience above any dogma (Lipset 1979, xxxvi); thus they promote an individualistic approach to life. Quentin Anderson finds the sources of American individualism in other circumstances that differed from those in Europe: first of all, the French Revolution (which was one of the constitutive events of European identity) was based on the idea of "the collective majesty of the people," which did not exist in America (Anderson 1992, 1). Indeed, if we compare Lipset's determinants of the American Creed and the motto of the French Revolution, we can see that out of "liberty, equality, fraternity" America eliminated fraternity and replaced it with individualism, as if the "brothers" of society did not exist. This was partly connected with the fact that American social life was far less structured; "The experience of American individuals was, to a far greater extent than in Europe, framed by expectations of personal gain and loss" (Anderson 1992, 2). But according to Anderson, apart from this organizational weakness of society, American Romanticism contributed something more elusive but very important to the local variety of individualism. The American Romantics (and their successors) saw the world as impersonal, as an "object for the self," whereas in Europe one would have to face others, to find one's way among other people and institutions (117). Americans did not feel conditioned by the society of a less defined structure than Europe's, they did not (and do not) see themselves as part of the world, but viewed (and view) the world as the Other (and that is why, according to Anderson, America responded so keenly to psychoanalysis, which relies upon the distinction of self vs. other – 201). The individual was for the American people much freer from the influences of society, as if floating apart from it; not belonging to the world, but facing it.

Anderson's understanding of individualism as anti-social seems to prevail among critics. Robert H. Woodward focuses specifically on this anti-social aspect. He writes of the "social rebel" motif in American literature: "It is perhaps an ironic feature of American literary history that social protest literature has had a long and respectable past, that society would find acceptable the kinds of criticism which frankly attempt to subvert the values of that society" (Woodward and Clark 1968, 1). He stresses the tradition of dissent, defining it further: "In general these writers or characters may be viewed as social rebels rather than revolutionists; they are members of a society that is ever changing, that, in addition, has in its structure the political and social ingredients to ferment new changes" (1-2). American writers do not call for a revolution; they do not want to change society politically, but rather to bend it to their own needs, to make it accommodate their individualism. On the other hand, in his characterization of Thoreau (which is to be exemplary of America in general) Richard Slotkin sees rebelliousness as more abstract than revolutionary activism, and thus more appealing to the American hero's vague notion of society:

> His reaction to law and his motives for resistance are analogous to those of Leatherstocking in *The Pioneers*. Having no property, no stake in society, he desires no protection of social laws; requiring no protection, he deems himself free of the duty of obedience to those laws. To become a political revolutionary, however, is to exchange solitude for society and accept struggle on society's terms. It is, in effect, to sacrifice the chastity of self-restraint, self-discipline, and self-containment by a passionate involvement in a social rather than a natural wilderness. But like the heroine of the captivity narrative, Thoreau in his act of rebellion remains passive and therefore chaste…. He descends into the social wilderness, but he does not bide with or marry the darkness. (Slotkin 1979, 537)

However, speaking of the very same tradition of self-reliance unspoiled by social conditions, Sacvan Bercovitch exposes how this view of American heroes is mythicized:

> However humble their origins, these heroes were not members of the working class, nor were they, after their success, nouveau-riche, and certainly they never became upper-class. They were rather, every fatherless son of them, aspiring, self-motivated (even when, like Whitman, they were inspired by Emerson), self-reliant (even when, like Alger's Sam Barker, they depended on employers), self-educated (even when, like Thoreau, they were Harvard graduates), mobile (even if they decided, like Hawthorne's Holgrave, to settle down), and independent. And

> independence, of course, signified not so much an economic state as a state of mind and being, an entire system of moral, political, and religious values. (Bercovitch 1993, 47-48)

Some writers believe that what remains of American individualism today is precisely this myth of individualism; and that what really functions as a landmark of American mentality is what Christopher Newfield, in *The Emerson Effect. Individualism and Submission in America,* terms "corporate individualism": a blend of individualism and submission, which allows people to function efficiently within the capitalist system.

The Romantic Notion of Self-Reliance

If the tradition of American individualism can be traced back to America's very beginnings, its full expression is usually associated with the Romantics. Charles E. Mitchell chooses Emerson as "the most articulate and representative expounder of American individualism" (Mitchell 1997, 3), following George Kateb, who "places Emerson, along with Thoreau and Whitman, at the head of a tradition of rights-based individualism that is the *sine qua non* of American democracy" (Mitchell 1997, 3). The Emersonian notion of self-reliance seems to be the strongest and the most influential formulation of American individualism of that period.

Emerson believes that man needs to be reminded of his greatness, as he has shrunk beyond his possibilities: "man is the dwarf of himself," he writes in *Nature* (1983h, 46). Self-reliance means going past this dwarf-state, regaining one's due place in the order of things and "enjoying an original relation to the universe" (Emerson 1983h, 7). At first glance, Emerson's ideas seem to be consistent with his training as a Unitarian minister; however, after a more careful reading one realizes why his writings go beyond all Protestant ideas of an unmediated contact with the Divine and head towards heresy. In *Circles*, Emerson states: "We learn that God *is*; that he is in me; and that all things are shadows of him. The idealism of Berkeley is only a crude statement of the idealism of Jesus" (1983c, 407). Inspired by his readings of Hinduism and Buddhism, Emerson believes that man and God are (or should be) one, and that in fact his "original relation to the universe" means a unification with Nature, or with God. In order to become one with the Divine man must to a certain extent compromise his identity, understood as his separateness. The experience of becoming a "transparent eye-ball" Emerson describes in the famous passage from *Nature* (10), removing the opaqueness of the self in face of the Absolute, is common to the mystical strains of all religions. At