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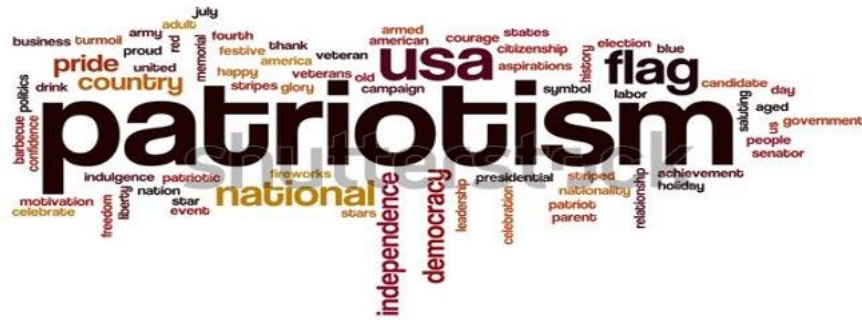
EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Book Notes #106

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1968/2022: The Seeds of Our Discontents (Part Five) *Patriotic American Poetry*



Patriotism, what is it?

How does patriotism resonate in our current cultural disputes?

Who is a patriot, and who is not?

What have the poets, those “unacknowledged legislators of the world,” had to say about it?

For the past several weeks we have been exploring “The Seeds of Our Discontents,” a spin-off from my *The American Tapestry Project*. Seeking understanding, “The Seeds of Our Discontents” probes the roots of our current culture wars, tribal disagreements perilously warming to a civil danger point. But as I write this on June 30 and you read it on July 7, July Fourth – Independence Day – that most patriotic of holidays will have fallen almost perfectly in between.

In a kind of “betwixt-moment,” I ask myself, “What is the argument about?” It’s about whose story is the American story. Is the American story a story of exclusion reserved only for a select subset of Americans, or is it an inclusionary story embracing all of America’s many peoples?

Regardless of which story they support, adherents of either will tell you they are patriots. Disconcertingly, the argument reminds me of a line in Lincoln’s “Second Inaugural,” when he said of the 19th century’s civil war adversaries, “Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other.” [1]

While in our current discontents some on either side do invoke the Bible, most, either right or left, make a more secular appeal. On a tangible level, they appeal to the U.S. Constitution and the rights it grants (or doesn’t); on a more intangible, almost ethereal level, they appeal to “America,” the idea of America embedded in the American Creed, “We hold these truths to be self-evident. ...”

Right or left, they make patriotic claims.

Samuel Johnson famously said that “patriotism was the last refuge of a scoundrel” by which he meant false patriotism used to disguise self-aggrandizing behavior.

Sound familiar?

More to our interests, patriotism’s simplest, most direct definition means “love for or devotion to one’s country.” [2] It can easily slide into a synonym for nationalism, but they actually mean subtly different things. One, patriotism, is an open-eyed love of country; nationalism, in contrast, asserts the value of one’s nation over any other. [3] A malleable word, just like some people’s patriotism, delving deeper, one discovers that the meaning of patriotism splinters into multiple meanings.

Rather than venture down that treacherous philosophical thicket of tangling words, recognizing that our current disputants, some closed-eyed, others open-

eyed, are both in their own fashion patriotic. So, in a patriotic vein, I ask what have the poets said about an “open-eyed love of country”?



A complicated woman both ahead of her time and rooted in it, Sarah Josepha Hale, one of the most influential women of the 19th century, who frequent readers of these **Notes** met in **Book Notes #92**, which can be found [here](#), labored for decades to build an American culture binding Americans together in a common love of liberty. An opponent of slavery, she sought to heal the divide after the Civil War.

from My Country

America! my own dear land-
O, 'tis a lovely land to me;
I thank my God that I was born
Where man (*sic*) is free!

Our land - it is a glorious land -
And wide it spreads from sea to sea -
And sister States in Union join
And all are free...

We're brothers all from South to North,
One bond will draw us to agree -
We love this country of our birth -
We love the free ...

My Land, my own dear native Land,
Thou art a lovely land to me;
I bless my God that I was born
Where man (*sic*) is free! [4]



Perhaps more open-eyed, working more than a half-century after Hale, Claude McKay, a Jamaican-American poet and a major figure in the Harlem Renaissance, that flowering of African American art and culture in the 1920s and 1930s, also sang of his patriotic love of America. Evoking Shelley's “Ozymandias,” McKay sings:

America

Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,
And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth,

Stealing my breath of life, I will confess
I love this cultured hell that tests my youth.
Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,
Giving me strength erect against her hate,
Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood.
Yet, as a rebel fronts a king in state,
I stand within her walls with not a shred
Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer.
Darkly I gaze into the days ahead,
And see her might and granite wonders there,
Beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand,
Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand. [5]

Hale, a very sophisticated woman, sings a simple, unsophisticated song of love of country; McKay, well, no one would have ever called him simple or unsophisticated, sings a complex song of love for a land that "seems" not to love him. Speaking of love, on a major north-south Millcreek artery lies a lawn festooned with flags and bunting and a sign exhorting "America: Love It or Leave It."



Speaking of "love it or leave it," how is our patriotic landscaper more American than Langston Hughes? He sang:

I, Too

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.
Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare

Say to me,
“Eat in the kitchen,”
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed —

I, too, am America. [6]



Rooted in America, leaving not an option (where would they go and why should they?), many poets sing of their native land with great tenderness and open-eyed love, as Carl Sandburg did in:

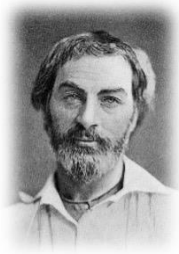
Good Night

Many ways to spell good night.

Fireworks at a pier on the Fourth of July
spell it with red wheels and yellow spokes.
They fizz in the air, touch the water and quit.
Rockets make a trajectory of gold-and-blue
and then go out.

Railroad trains at night spell with a smokestack
mushrooming a white pillar.
Steamboats turn a curve in the Mississippi crying
in a baritone that crosses lowland cottonfields
to a razorback hill.

It is easy to spell good night.
Many ways to spell good night. [7]



And singing of America as a real place, who greater than Walt Whitman? With the Civil War ended, in “By Blue Ontario’s Shore.” Whitman sang of peace and hope for a national future:

from By Blue Ontario’s Shore

By blue Ontario’s shore,
As I mused of these warlike days and of peace return’d, and
 the dead that return no more,
A Phantom gigantic superb, with stern visage accosted me,
*Chant me the poem, it said, that comes from the soul of
 America, chant me the carol of victory,
And strike up the marches of Libertad, marches more powerful yet,
And sing me before you go the song of the throes of Democracy.*

(Democracy, the destin’d conqueror, yet treacherous lip-smiles everywhere,
And death and infidelity at every step) ...

These States are the amplest poem,
Here is not merely a nation but a teeming Nation of nations,
Here the doings of men correspond with the broadcast doings of day and night,
Here is what moves in magnificent masses careless of particulars,
Here are the roughs, beards, friendliness, combativeness, the soul loves,
Here the flowing trains, here the crowds, equality, diversity, the soul loves ... [8]

Some poems, while rooted in place, speak of the “idea of America.” While America is clearly a place, it is also an idea – the idea of liberty, freedom, equality, and opportunity in a democratic society governed by the people for the people. Whitman clearly sings of that American patriotism; who else did?



Ralph Waldo Emerson did in several poems, most famously in his “Concord Hymn.” Written in 1837 and first sung on July Fourth that year, the poem celebrates the completion of a monument honoring the battles of Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts in 1775, which began the American Revolution. It sings of a place, it sings of bravery, but most of all it sings of an idea.

from Concord Hymn

By the rude bridge that arched the flood,
Their flag to April's breeze unfurled,
Here once the embattled farmers stood
And fired the shot heard round the world ...

Spirit that made those heroes dare
To die, and leave their children free,
Bid Time and Nature gently spare
The shaft we raise to them and thee. [9]



If Emerson sang of the heroic vein in American patriotism present at the creation, then no one sang it better than Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Once America's most popular poet and a staple of middle-school and high-school English classes, Longfellow has fallen out of fashion. Perhaps undeservedly, for among his shorter poems are many fine meditations on the human condition, a sampling of which can be found [here](#).

But no one was more important in building American culture and its sense of heroic origins than Longfellow in a series of poems lines from which almost every American knows the echoes but not the source. Poems such as "The Courtship of Miles Standish," "Paul Revere's Ride," "Evangeline, A Tale of Acadie," "The Building of the Ship," and "The Village Blacksmith."

Although its historical accuracy is now suspect, who does not remember the opening of "Paul Revere's Ride":

from Paul Revere's Ride

Listen, my children, and you shall hear
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere,
On the eighteenth of April, in Seventy-Five:
Hardly a man is now alive
Who remembers that famous day and year.

He said to his friend, "If the British march
By land or sea from the town to-night,
Hang a lantern aloft in the belfry-arch
Of the North-Church-tower, as a signal-light,—
One if by land, and two if by sea;
And I on the opposite shore will be,
Ready to ride and spread the alarm
Through every Middlesex village and farm,

For the country-folk to be up and to arm.” [10]

Or Longfellow’s celebration of the stoic labor that undergirds society, as in the opening of “The Village Blacksmith”:

from The Village Blacksmith

Under the spreading chestnut-tree
 The village smithy stands;
The smith, a mighty man is he,
 With large and sinewy hands;
And the muscles of his brawny arms
 Are strong as iron bands. [11]

Or Longfellow’s great celebration of the Union of the United States, “The Building of the Ship,” in which using the metaphor of building a ship he sang of the power of union over confederacy and the great hope the United States shone to the world:

from The Building of the Ship

Thou, too, sail on, O Ship of State!
Sail on, O Union, strong and great!
Humanity with all its fears,
With all the hopes of future years,
Is hanging breathless on thy fate!
We know what Master laid thy keel,
What Workmen wrought thy ribs of steel,
Who made each mast, and sail, and rope,
What anvils rang, what hammers beat,
In what a forge and what a heat
Were shaped the anchors of thy hope!
Fear not each sudden sound and shock,
‘T is of the wave and not the rock;
‘T is but the flapping of the sail,
And not a rent made by the gale!
In spite of rock and tempest’s roar,
In spite of false lights on the shore,
Sail on, nor fear to breast the sea!
Our hearts, our hopes, are all with thee,
Our hearts, our hopes, our prayers, our tears,
Our faith triumphant o’er our fears,
Are all with thee, — are all with thee! [12]

American poetry enjoys a rich trove of patriotic poems celebrating America's many virtues. Ranging from the simple spirit of Hale's "My Country" to the more nuanced tones of McKay singing of his sometimes-unrequited love for a land that remains his home to Sandburg's earthier embrace to Emerson and Longfellow extolling American freedom and the patriots who won it.

But in the context of *The American Tapestry Project's* "The Fusion Thread's" celebration of the inclusionary American Story, that story of America's experiment in self-government while all the while redefining in a more and more inclusive manner who Americans are, several reign supreme.



If one wants to "Make America Great Again," then one could scarcely do better than listen to Langston Hughes' exhortations in "Let America Be America Again." Originally published in *Esquire* magazine in July 1936, Hughes sings of his love of country, although that country frequently denied him the rights it promised others – "America never was America to me ... There's never been equality for me ...":

from Let America Be America Again

Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.
(America never was America to me.)
Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
That any man be crushed by one above.
(It never was America to me.)
O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe ...
O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath —
America will be!
Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,
We, the people, must redeem
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.

The mountains and the endless plain —
All, all the stretch of these great green states —
And make America again! [13]



No one sang of love country better than Katharine Lee Bates, who doubtless would be chagrined to know that 130-plus years later her status as a gay woman would still be problematic. Yet it was she who sang “America the Beautiful.” The poem had several iterations as Bates tamed some of the oblique criticism of American values in her first version, but its final iteration sings a better song of America than our official anthem (an opinion, by the way, that finds support at all points on the political spectrum, even in these divisive times). In these conflicted times, the healing balm of Bates’ lines merit reading it in their entirety.

America the Beautiful

O beautiful for spacious skies,
For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties
Above the fruited plain!

America! America!
God shed His grace on thee,
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea!

O beautiful for pilgrim feet
Whose stern impassion’d stress
A thoroughfare for freedom beat
Across the wilderness

America! America!
God mend thine ev’ry flaw,
Confirm thy soul in self-control,
Thy liberty in law.

O beautiful for heroes prov’d
In liberating strife,
Who more than self their country lov’d,
And mercy more than life.

America! America!
May God thy gold refine

Till all success be nobleness,
And ev'ry gain divine.

O beautiful for patriot dream
That sees beyond the years
Thine alabaster cities gleam
Undimmed by human tears.

America! America!
God shed His grace on thee,
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea. [14]



If Bates sang of America's physical beauty and its flaws redeemed by liberty, then Emma Lazarus sang of the American promise – that beacon of liberty welcoming all the world's people to enjoy the benefits of liberty, equality, and opportunity. Lazarus composed it as a donation to an art auction to raise funds for a pedestal for the Statue of Liberty. Twenty years later in 1903, engraved on a bronze plaque, it was installed on one of the pedestal's inner walls. It welcomes

all to the land of the free. Although in our time some, like former presidential assistant Stephen Miller, ironically the grandson of immigrants, want it erased, [15] Lazarus's poem speaks of the spirit that makes America great.

The New Colossus

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" [16]



But no patriot sang of the glory of that all-inclusive people in “We the People” better than Walt Whitman, who heard America singing its promise in the daily lives of ordinary people.

I Hear America Singing

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deckhand singing on
the steamboat deck,
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing as he stands,
The wood-cutter’s song, the ploughboy’s on his way in the morning, or at noon
intermission or at sundown,
The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of the girl
sewing or washing,
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
The day what belongs to the day — at night the party of young fellows, robust,
friendly,
Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs. [17]

So, yes, there are great patriotic poems that aren’t simple doggerel demonstrating that no one, regardless of how many flags they wrap themselves in, has a lock on patriotism. Love of country is nonpartisan sometimes sung best by those challenging America to be all it can be by singing of an open-eyed love for America and its inclusionary story welcoming the world’s people to share in the blessings of liberty, equality, and opportunity for all.

I hope you had a happy Fourth of July – next week Part Six of “The Seeds of Our Discontents” – The Counterculture.



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