Capitalism and Culture:  
John and John and Scripture;  
Andy and Adam, Herb, Matt, and Waldo  

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If history does repeat itself, we might learn a good deal by thinking about those two archetypical figures of American capitalism, John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie and the cultural forces that shaped them and that they helped shape. The cast of characters in this study includes, in addition to Rockefeller and Carnegie, John D., Jr., Adam Verver (from *The Golden Bowl*), Herbert Spencer, Matthew Arnold, and Ralph Waldo Emerson.  

**John D., the Calvinist Capitalist**  

John D. Rockefeller remained throughout his life true to the faith of his father and mother: the Baptist church. Other tycoons of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries built summer cottages at Newport and upgraded their religious affiliations from the populist to the proper: they became Episcopalians. Throughout his life, Rockefeller tithed religiously, his contributions to the church in 1882 equaling $65,000 and a decade later rising to $1.5 million. “God gave me my money,” he said in 1905:  

I believe the power to make money is a gift from God . . . to be developed and used to the best of our ability for the good of mankind. Having been endowed with the gift I possess, I believe it is my duty to make money and still more money and to use the money I make for the good of my fellow man according to the dictates of my conscience. (qtd. in Collier and Horowitz 47)

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This God-given ability to make money included both dubious and utterly dishonest practices, such as to make Rockefeller the symbol of all that was wrong with the American capitalist system. By the turn of the century, Rockefeller might well have been the most hated person in America.

Having accumulated his fortune and, apparently, troubled by the almost universal perception of him as the embodiment of evil rapacity, Rockefeller changed the direction of his life: he would use his fortune to rehabilitate the family name and to assure his son, John Davison Rockefeller, Jr., a place of honor among public figures in America. By 1910, Rockefeller’s giving was in full swing, his donations totaling $134,271,000 (as compared with Andrew Carnegie’s $179,300,000) (Collier and Horowitz 48).

John Junior, of course, provided the inspiration and means for the mighty Rockefeller Foundation, and he and wife Abby were the patrons who brought about the reconstruction and preservation of Colonial Williamsburg.

In 1909, John Junior agreed to chair a grand jury panel investigating prostitution and the white slave trade in New York City. This was just the sort of crusade to engage a Christian, and John Junior said, “I never worked harder in my life. I was on the job morning noon and night” (qtd. in Collier and Horowitz 104). His work on the grand jury led him to found the Bureau of Social Hygiene, with an endowment of $5 million and the goal of eliminating prostitution. However, the Rockefeller commitment to morality (and, one must say uncynically, to improving the human condition) did not carry over into business relations with workers.

The response of both John D. Junior and John D. Senior to the infamous Ludlow Massacre is a perfect instance of the morality that allowed American tycoons to separate what might be called their church morality or, if they are not communicants, their conventional morality from the values of business.

The Ludlow story in brief. The Rockefellers held controlling interest in Colorado Fuel and Iron, a mining enterprise and money-machine. The miners, working for $1.68 a day and living in company towns, were paid in scrip that they were required to redeem at company stores, which
charged exorbitant prices for the necessities of life. When the men descended into the shafts, their lives and limbs were significantly at risk, for the accident rate was horrendous: for example, in 1914, 25 people had been killed or maimed in Colorado Fuel and Iron operations. In 1913, the miners struck for higher wages, among other demands, and moved out of the company towns to tent cities set up by the United Mine Workers. Governor Ammons of Colorado sent in the militia to maintain order and, actually, to help break the strike, and the company hired goons from the Baldwin-Felts detective agency. Violence had characterized the strike, at one point the Baldwin-Felts men driving an armored car through the tent cities and raking the area with machine-gun fire.

John Junior's response to a congressional investigation of the Colorado Fuel and Iron mess was firmly aloof (Collier and Horowitz 112–13). The chairman of the committee remarks, "I believe that you are concerned with sociological and uplift movements and that you were recently the foreman of a Grand Jury which reported upon White Slave Traffic. Do you think you might have paid some attention to these bloody strike conditions out in Colorado, where you have one thousand employees in whose welfare you seem not to have taken any deep personal interest?"

John Junior replies: "I have done what I regard as the very best thing in the interest of those employees and the large investment I represent. In fact, John Junior seems to be standing up for that great American principle, Freedom. "As part owners of the property, our interest in the laboring man in this country is so immense, so deep, so profound, that we stand ready to lose every cent we put in that company rather than see the men we have employed thrown out of work and have imposed on them [by unions] conditions which are not of their seeking and which neither they nor we can see are in our interests."

To which, the chairman of the committee: "You are willing to let these killings take place rather than to go there and do something to settle conditions?"

John Junior: "There is just one thing that can be done to settle this strike and that is to unionize the camp and our interest in labor is so profound and we believe so sincerely that the interest demands that the camps be open camps, that we expect to stand by the officers [of the company] at any cost."
The chairman: “And you will do that if it costs all your property and kills all your employees?”

“It is a great principle,” Junior replies.

And in the Rockefellers, Senior and Junior, we have it: the dichotomy between Christian (or conventional) morality and the Divine Right to earn millions and billions. As John Lawson, legendary leader of the United Mine Workers, put it in testimony before the Industrial Relations Commission,

It is not their money that these lords of commercialized virtue are spending, but the withheld wages of the American working class. . . . Health for China, a refuge for birds . . . pensions for New York widows, and never a thought of a dollar for the thousands who starved in Colorado. (Collier and Horowitz 121)

Max Weber on Christian Capitalism

Understanding the paradox of Christianity in the American capitalist system must begin with Max Weber’s classic *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber contends that the movement in history has been from indulgent Catholicism to tyrannical Puritanism. The Church punished the heretic, but was indulgent to the sinner (36–37).

Calvinism was a dilemma for the faithful. On the one hand, glory or damnation was predestined, but, on the other hand, “it is held to be an absolute duty to consider oneself chosen, and to combat all doubts as temptations of the devil,” for any doubt is evidence of imperfect grace (111). The best way to build that self-confidence, that faith in one’s salvation, is through “intense worldly activity. It and it alone disperses religious doubts and gives the certainty of grace” (112). “Thus, the Calvinist, as it is sometimes put, creates his own salvation, or, as would be more correct, the conviction of it” (115).

It follows that a “calling” is an absolute necessity. A man without a calling lacks the systematic, methodical character that is, as we have seen, demanded by worldly asceticism.

The Quaker ethic also holds that a man’s life in his calling is an exercise in ascetic virtue, a proof of his state of grace through his
conscientiousness, which is expressed in the care and method with which he pursues his calling (161).

The rationale for a calling is, primarily, moral, but if God chooses to reward the faithful toiler with wealth, He must have some reason, and it is not for the capitalist to question the ways of the Deity (162). After all, would not the bestowal of wealth be evidence of grace? And were not God’s chosen (e.g., Abraham, David, Job) finally rewarded with things of this earth?

The Lutherans, according to Weber, strove for the *unio mystica* with God, a doctrine that led, among other directions, to Pietism and withdrawal from worldly concerns. This Lutheran mysticism, like other sorts, was paradoxically compatible with empiricism while antithetical to rationalism (113). That is, one reaches the higher truth through inspiration, not through dialectic or the hair-splitting of the theologians, but the “facts” of the real world are neutral in that they play no part in the system of belief. Thus, one can be a religious mystic and at the same time a secular empiricist.

The Protestant reformers, Luther and Calvin, changed the balance in spiritual life from the rapt contemplation of God or a heavenly city in which spirit-bodies would enjoy a rarefied, carefree eternity, the city being adjacent to a perfect garden in which the elect could stroll. With Luther and Calvin, “The world and its activities assumed a new respectability” (McDannell and Lang 151). These reformers rejected the distinction between the worldly and the religiously ascetic. Activity in the here and now had value equal to that, perhaps exceeding that, of the monk or priest who gave up the sublunary world for the glories of the world to come.

Luther’s values were essentially those of a small-town family, but Calvin was an urban creature. “He based his social ethics on a recognition of capital, credit, banking, large-scale commerce, finance, and the other practical necessities of urban business life” (McDannell and Lang 151). Work became almost holy, sanctified.

Blessed with success, people “receive already some fruit of their integrity,” which they read as signs of election for a blessed eternity. Conversely, the poor and those with no luck in their economic efforts appeared damned by God and therefore unworthy of alms. Unperturbed
by remorse or generosity, the rich continued to accumulate and invest capital. The incentive to succeed and the devaluation of poverty—once the hallmarks of Christian perfection—fostered worldly optimism. (McDannell and Lang 152)

The Rockefellers, senior and junior, are Weber's theories in action.

**Andy and Adam**

In *The Golden Bowl*, Henry James' last completed novel, Adam Verver has conquered the American world of commerce and, like other titans of capitalism, has amassed a fortune. Tellingly, he has read Keats' sonnet "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer" and, making the same error as the poet, envisions "stout Cortez," rather than Balboa, gazing upon the Pacific from a peak in Darien. In characterizing Verver's cultural attainments, James is typically deft:

Verver has read the poem, but fails to realize the poet's error. Nonetheless, Cortez upon a peak in Darien becomes a symbol for Adam Verver. His "peak in Darien" was the sudden hour that had transformed his life, the hour of his perceiving with a mute inward gasp akin to the low moan of apprehensive passion, that a world was left for him to conquer and that he might conquer it if he tried. (98)

Verver will build a museum, "a house from whose open doors and windows, open to grateful, to thirsty millions, the highest knowledge would shine out to bless the land" (102). The edifice was to be "a monument to the religion he wished to propagate, the exemplary passion, the passion for perfection at any price" (102).

Adam Verver symbolizes and Andrew Carnegie represents one facet of American capitalism: the tycoon who in the name of beneficence and culture erects monuments to himself. However, Carnegie apparently did not seek James out, as he did Herbert Spencer and Matthew Arnold. James and Carnegie met at a dinner party in 1881 (Edel 32), but they seem otherwise to have been remote from one another. One can imagine that a tycoon who valued Robert Burns above all other poets would have little patience for the tremendous trifles of James' tales.
If the Rockefeller ethic can be essentialized as Calvinism applied to capitalism, the Carnegie ethic is more complex, embodying Carnegie’s interpretation of Herbert Spencer’s theory of evolution, a secularization of Calvin’s determinism; a vision of culture close to that of Matthew Arnold, transforming the tycoon into a minister of sweetness and light; and a large admixture of Emersonian individualism, allowing Carnegie to look within himself for moral guidance.

Carnegie’s most famous treatise, “The Gospel of Wealth,” argues, in effect, that millionaires are inevitable and that the process whereby they create great wealth is good:

The problem of our age is the proper administration of wealth, that the ties of brotherhood may still bind together the rich and poor in harmonious relationship. The conditions of human life have not only been changed, but revolutionized, within the past few hundred years. In former days there was little difference between the dwelling, dress, food, and environment of the chief and those of his retainers. The Indians are today where civilized man then was. . . . The contrast between the palace of the millionaire and the cottage of the laborer with us today measures the change which has come with civilization. This change, however, is not to be deplored, but welcomed as highly beneficial. It is well, nay, essential, for the progress of the race that the houses of some should be homes for all that is highest and best in literature and the arts, and for all the refinements of civilization, rather than that none should be so. Much better this great irregularity than universal squalor. Without wealth there can be no Maecenas. The “good old times” were not good old times. Neither master nor servant was as well situated then as today. A relapse to old conditions would be disastrous to both—not the least so to him who serves—and would sweep away civilization with it. But whether the change be for good or ill, it is upon us, beyond our power to alter, and, therefore, to be accepted and made the best of. It is a waste of time to criticize the inevitable. (“Gospel” 130–31)

The “law” that determines the wealth of nations is as inexorable as gravity, and while it “may be sometimes hard for the individual, it is best for the race, because it ensures the survival of the fittest in every department” (“Gospel” 132).
The man of wealth, the “fittest” in the industrial “department” of America, has the obligation to set an example by living modestly, not squandering money on ostentatious luxuries (“Gospel” 138). On the other hand, this tycoon must avoid indiscriminate charity, bestowing his largesse only on “those who will help themselves. . . . Neither the individual nor the race is improved by almsgiving” (139).

The millionaire is but a trustee, through the process of free enterprise accumulating wealth and then distributing it for the good of the community. “The man who dies thus rich dies disgraced” (140).

Carnegie then lists the seven best uses of fortunes (143–54). First, “standing apart by itself” (143) is founding a university, but that takes enormous wealth, such as that of Leland Stanford. Second, as might be expected, free public libraries, where the worthy poor can find both the education and the wisdom that the “inert, lazy, and hopelessly poor” (146) will never seek. Third, hospitals, medical colleges, laboratories and such. Fourth, public parks, “always provided that the community undertakes to maintain, beautify, and preserve them inviolate” (148). Fifth, halls suitable for meetings and concerts. Sixth, swimming baths. And seventh, churches, “where the little cheap, uncomfortable, and altogether unworthy wooden structure stands at the crossroads, in which the whole neighborhood gathers on Sunday, and which, independently of the form of the doctrines taught, is the center of social life and source of neighborly feeling” (151).

How do Herbert Spencer, Matthew Arnold, and Ralph Waldo Emerson fit into Carnegie’s Weltanschauung?

Andy and Herb

Carnegie had been an ardent reader (or misreader) of Spencer when, in 1882, the two of them were booked on the same steamer from England to America; the result of the voyage, a lifelong friendship. In Spencer’s theories, Carnegie found a rationalization both for his own empire and for democracy in the United States. Spencer applied Lamarckian, not Darwinian, evolutionary theory to society, the vast difference between Lamarck and Darwin being just this: Lamarck believed that animals
acquire their characteristics through adaptation to environment (thus, the
giraffe's neck comes about because of its stretching for food, this
characteristic then passed on, generation after generation) whereas Dar­
win believed that chance mutations were either favorable for survival or
unfavorable. Darwin (1809–82) and Spencer (1820–1903) were contem­
poraries, but Darwin's momentous Origin of Species appeared in 1859,
the first volume of Spencer's A System of Synthetic Philosophy appeared
in 1862, and apparently the twain did not meet.

"Evolution," Spencer wrote, "is an integration of matter and con­comitant dissipation of motion, during which the matter passes from an
indefinite incoherent homogeneity to a definite coherent heterogeneity" (qtd. in Wall 394), which William James parodied thus: "Evolution is
change from a nohowish untalkaboutable not-all-alikeness by continuous
sticktogetherations and something elseifications" (Wall 394). Spencer
illustrates his theory thus:

How the combined actions of mutually-dependent parts constitute
life of the whole, and how there hence results a parallelism between
social life and animal life, we see still more clearly on learning that
the life of every visible organism is constituted by the lives of units
too minute to be seen by the unaided eye.

An undeniable illustration is furnished by the strange order
Myxomycetes. The spores or germs produced by one of these
forms, become ciliated monads, which, after a time of active
locomotion, change into shapes like those of amœbae, move about,
take in nutriment, grow, multiply by fission. Then these amœba-
form individuals swarm together, begin to coalesce into groups,
and these groups coalesce with one sometimes as big as the hand.
This plasmodium, irregular, mostly reticulated, and in substance
gelatinous, itself exhibits movements of its parts like those of a
gigantic rhizopod creeping slowly over surfaces of decaying mat­
ters, and even up the stems of plants. Here, then, union of many
minute living individuals to form a relatively vast aggregate in
which their individualities are apparently lost, but the life of which
results from the combination of their lives, is demonstrable. (Prin­
ciples 12–13)

Carnegie, however, simply reversed the order of evolution. In Spencer's
theory, the movement was from "indefinite incoherent homogeneity to a
definite coherent heterogeneity.” But in Carnegie’s misreading, the concentration of capital “is an evolution from the heterogeneous to the homogeneous, and is clearly another step in the upward path of development” (qtd. in Wall 395). Spencer, of course, was thinking of an organism in which the components (liver, heart) had separate functions, each of which nonetheless was essential to the whole. One suspects that Carnegie had an industrial plant in mind, where individuals lose their identity and in their repetitive work become one homogeneous mass.

Yet, much of Spencer’s Principles of Sociology might well have been written by Carnegie. Spencer argues that society advanced from its primitive beginnings not by design, but by chance, “through modifications made unawares”:

Men never entered into any social contract, as Hobbes and Rousseau supposed. Subordination began when some warrior of superior prowess, growing conspicuous in battle, gathered around him the less capable; and when, in subsequent battles he again, as a matter of course, took the lead. Though during intervals between wars he was not at first acknowledged as head, yet inevitably he exercised special influence—influence which grew into chieftainship. And if the primary social institutions arose in this undesigned way, we may be sure that secondary institutions also were undesigned. (705, 706)

In his essay on “Wealth” (Problems of To-Day 1–39) Carnegie develops the parable of the five brothers, which echoes Spencers’ theory of history. The first brother settles in New York City, astutely buys shares of railroad stock, and becomes a millionaire. “In the work and its profits the nation was an essential partner, and is equally entitled with the individual to share in the dividends” (“Wealth” 18) because the profits came about through the growth of population. The second son sees the promise of steel making in Pittsburgh and settles there. He and his partners succeed in their endeavor. “The increasing population was always the important factor in their success” (19). The third goes to Chicago and makes his fortune in the meat packing business, and the fourth son become a mining tycoon in Montana. The fifth son tragically plays the stock market and, after initial success, loses all. He commits suicide. The times and the
society were with the four "good" sons. In the case of the first son, the railroad magnate, for instance, while

he must be credited with remarkable ability and with having done the state some service in his day and generation, it cannot be denied that the chief creators of his wealth were the increasing communities along the railroads, which gave the traffic that lifted these lines into dividend-payers upon a capital far beyond the actual cost. (18)

In attributing success to scene (i.e., time and place), Carnegie is following Spencer closely, as in this apposite summary statement from *The Study of Sociology*:

Look where we will at the genesis of social phenomena, we shall . . . find that while the particular ends contemplated and arranged for have commonly not been more than temporarily attained if attained at all, the changes actually brought about have arisen from causes of which the very existence was unknown. (14)

Nonetheless, Carnegie holds, it is men of particular vision and ability who are able to take advantage of situations.

It is not denied that the great administrator, whether as railroad builder, steamship-owner, manufacturer, merchant, or banker, is an exceptional man, or that millions honestly made in any useful occupation give evidence of ability, foresight, and assiduity above the common, and prove the man who has made them a very valuable member of society. In no wise, therefore, should such men be unduly hampered. ("Wealth" 23)

Without doubt, Carnegie viewed Spencer as the greatest mind of his generation, the apostle of this modern age and the prophet of what was to be. As Wall puts it,

[I]t was a destiny that Carnegie was only too impatient to see fulfilled: a new industrial world, without war and physical violence, in which, through the genius of invention and the miracle of mass production, the fruits of industry would become so abundant that they could be made available to all. It would be a new
Garden of Eden without the snake of discontent, and with no fruit forbidden man to eat, least of all the fruit of knowledge. (390)

**Andy and Matt**

Quite a different person from either of the John D. Rockefellers, Carnegie viewed himself as an intellectual and developed friendships with not only Spencer, but also with Matthew Arnold, certainly the most important cultural critic of nineteenth-century England. Never changing his view of America as dismally uncultured, Arnold nonetheless found Carnegie both congenial and interesting, and for Carnegie, Arnold was a trophy of sorts. In October of 1883, Arnold, at Carnegie’s urging, came to America for a lecture tour. Carnegie met Arnold, Mrs. Arnold, and their daughter at the dock in New York and escorted them to the elegant Windsor Hotel, where the American and his mother had been residing, and there domiciled them in a suite and subsequently feted the visitors at a reception attended by American notables, among whom was Ulysses S. Grant.

The Arnold lectures, it turned out, were initially a disaster, for Arnold mumbled so softly that none of the audience could understand the words coming from the head bowed over the manuscript—that is, until Carnegie arranged for a Professor Churchill to give Arnold elocution lessons, which, it seems, were successful.

In light of Arnold’s philosophy of culture, the friendship between Carnegie and Arnold is something of a paradox. However, there is a perfectly clear explanation, which bears on the conception of wealth and hence religion in America.

In a speech, William Gladstone had seconded Carnegie’s social Darwinistic (or Lamarckian) notions about wealth, and “Culture and Anarchy” responds both to Gladstone and to Carnegie. As Gladstone pointed out, says Arnold, the movement toward wealth and industrialism is necessary for laying the foundation for material well being: hence, tycoons are also necessary. This justification, however, provides the worst of the new capitalists with an excuse for their greed:

Now culture admits the necessity of the movement towards fortune-making and exaggerated industrialism, readily allows that the
future may derive benefit from it; but insists, at the same time, that the passing generations of industrialists—forming for the most part, the stout main body of Philistinism—are sacrificed to it. ("Culture" 208–09)

For Arnold, the working class lacked what "Mr. Frederic Harrison calls those 'bright powers of sympathy and ready powers of action'" ("Culture 241). The middle class were simply Philistines, and the upper class were barbarians (242–43). In short, "[O]ur upper class is materialised, our middle class vulgarised, and our lower class brutalised" ("Wordsworth" 281); materialists, vulgarians, and brutes populate modern society, from which one must have a retreat, if not an escape. And that escape is into the world of art, where the anarchy of that other world becomes ordered.

Strangely enough, Arnold and Carnegie were in many respects alike, or perhaps mirror images of one another. Carnegie was the man-of-the-world, the industrialist, committed deeply to culture; Arnold was the poet whose career was very much in the world.

In December of 1868, Carnegie had written this memo to himself:

Thirty three and an income of 50,000$ per annum. By this time two years I can so arrange all my business as to secure at least 50,000 per annum. Beyond this never earn—make no effort to increase fortune, but spend the surplus each year for benovelent [sic] purposes. Cast aside business forever except for others.

Settle in Oxford & get a thorough education making the acquaintance of literary men—this will take three years active work—pay special attention to speaking in public.

Settle then in London & purchase a controlling interest in some newspaper or live review & give the general management of it attention, taking a part in public matters especially those connected with education & improvement of the poorer classes.

Man must have an idol—The amassing of wealth is one of the worst species of idolitary [sic]. No idol more debasing than the worship of money. Whatever I engage in I must push inordinately therefor should I be careful to choose that life which will be most elevating in its character. To continue much longer overwhelmed by business cares and with most of my thoughts wholly upon the way to make more money in the shortest time, must degrade me beyond hope of permanent recover.

I will resign business at Thirty five, but during the ensuing two
years, I wish to spend the afternoons in securing instruction, and in reading systematically. (*The Andrew Carnegie Reader* 41)

In 1852, Arnold was named inspector of schools, and he held that position until 1886; in 1857, he was elected Professor of Poetry at Oxford for a five-year term and was re-elected in 1862. In 1859, as foreign assistant commissioner on the Duke of Newcastle's Commission, Arnold surveyed schools in France, Holland, and Switzerland; in 1865, he surveyed schools throughout Europe. And year after year, he published critical essays and poetry. Envision the U.S. secretary of education holding a chair in poetry at Harvard, frequently publishing his own verse, and contributing regularly to *The New York Review* and *TLS*, and you have an idea of how extraordinary Arnold's career was.

In a sense, Arnold was as utilitarian as Carnegie. If industry brought material well-being, then poetry must have its counterpart usefulness in bringing spiritual riches, unifying the inner man and bringing him peace and wisdom.

Culture is then properly described not as having its origin in curiosity, but as having its origin in love of perfection; it is a *study of perfection*. It moves by the force, not merely or primarily of the scientific passion for pure knowledge, but also of the moral and social passion for doing good. As, in the first view of it, we took for its motto Montesquieu's words, "To render an intelligent being yet more intelligent!" so, in the second view of it, there is no better motto which I can have than these words of Bishop Wilson: "To make reason and the will of God prevail!" ("Culture" 194–95)

The cultured man is, then, a good person more than a social maven, but holy and special; above all, he has taste, "the capacity for refined pursuits" ("Modern" 124), and this is the innate ability to discern that which is good from that which is bad in culture.

The thirty-three-year-old Carnegie who wrote the memo stating that "The amassing of wealth is one of the worst species of idolatory [sic]" must have been a spiritual brother to the man who wrote

[S]ociety at last acquires repose, confidence, and free activity. An important inward characteristic, again, is the growth of a tolerant spirit; that spirit which is the offspring of enlarged knowledge; a
spirit patient of the diversities of habits and opinions. Other characteristics are the multiplication of conveniences of life, the formation of taste, the capacity for refined pursuits. And this leads us to the supreme characteristic of all: the intellectual maturity of man himself; the tendency to observe facts with a critical spirit; to search for their law, not to wander among them at random; to judge by the rule of reason, not by the impulse of prejudice or caprice. ("Modern" 123–24)

Andy and Waldo

Harold Bloom says, “The mind of Emerson is the mind of America, for worse and for glory, and the central concern of that mind was the American religion, which most memorably was named ‘self-reliance’” ("Emerson" 97).

Surely, Emerson as much as Darwin prepared the way for nineteenth-century American tycoons. **Representative Men** is Emerson’s version of Carlyle’s *On Heroes and Hero Worship and the Heroic in History*. Carlyle lays out the anatomy of heroism: loneliness; dwelling “the True, Divine and Eternal” (204); the ability to hold one’s peace “till the time come for speaking and acting” (242). Greatness is not a specific quality, but a general gift; the specific manifestation of the hero’s prowess—as poet, prophet, general—depends on the circumstances of time and place (102–03).

Democratically, Emerson’s men are not heroes, but representative: Plato the philosopher, Swedenborg the mystic, Montaigne the skeptic, Shakespeare the poet, Napoleon the materialist, and Goethe the writer. As Richardson says in his magnificent biography of Emerson, “*Representative Men* is Emerson’s major effort to reconcile the reality of the unequal distribution of talent with a democratic belief in the fundamental equality of all persons” (414).

In the last half of the eighteenth century, an epistemological shift of gigantic proportions was taking place. Because of faculty psychology and emerging Romanticism, the search for truth was changing its venue, from the world “out there” to the mind of the seeker. This internalization, the solipsizing of knowledge, is a complex story that doesn’t need telling here, but that can handily be illustrated. In his “Enquiry Concerning
Human Understanding” of 1750, the great Scotch rationalist David Hume said that the mind is in effect boundless, able to conceive anything, “nor is anything beyond the Power of Thought, except what implies an absolute Contradiction” (22):

But tho’ Thought seems to possess this unbounded Liberty, we shall find, upon a nearer Examination, that it is really confin’d within very narrow Limits, and that all this creative Power of the Mind amounts to no more than compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing of the Materials afforded us by the Senses and Experience. (22–23; emphasis added)

Compare Hume’s rationalistic viewpoint with William Wordsworth’s and Ralph Waldo Emerson’s Romantic epistemology.

When he began to plan an epic, the beginning of which was The Prelude, Wordsworth asked himself what resources he could bring to the massive task he had resolved to undertake and concluded that he had what was needed: “that first great gift, the vital soul”; “general truths”; and “Forms, images” (I, lines 150–55). In the vital soul, nothing is wasted, nothing can go awry, for all intuitively becomes wisdom. In Book III of The Prelude, Wordsworth avows that “Of genius, power, / Creation, and divinity itself / I have been speaking, for my theme has been / What has passed within me” (III, lines 170–73; emphasis added). This represents a monumental shift in the poet’s vision and task, and it is symptomatic of a change in the view of what humans know and what they can know.

The refocusing from the world “out there” to the landscape within the mind and soul of the seeker is nowhere more vivid than in Emerson, who defines philosophy as “the account which the human mind gives to itself of the constitution of the world” (“Plato” 475). The mind talking to itself: the ultimate act of ego, which leads to what is perhaps Emerson’s most telling and widely quoted statement:

To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men—that is genius. Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense; for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost, and our first thought is rendered back to us by the trumpets of the last judgment. Familiar as the
voice of the mind is to each, the highest merit we ascribe to Moses, Plato and Milton is that they set at naught books and traditions, and spoke not what men but what they thought [sic]. (145)

Everyone who interprets Emerson recognizes this movement inward, this radical individualism. The American Critic F.O. Matthiessen says it is "how a single man contains within himself, through his intuition, the whole range of human nature" (7). Harold Bloom speaks of "God in oneself" and quotes an entry of October 27, 1831 from Emerson’s journals: “It is God in you that responds to God without, and indeed is God in oneself” (“Introduction” 5). And Jack Miles emphasizes the force of individualism in end-of-millennium America, a self-reliance which produces “an institutionalized anti-institutionalism” (56).

Carnegie is the American paradox—the Emersonian American entrepreneur. He advocated keeping wages low so that individualistic millionaires could give more. After all, if workers made more money, they would simply piddle it away (“Gospel” 137). Yet, the real individualists might spend their leisure time, after their twelve-hour shifts, improving themselves through reading in free public libraries.

In 1901, Carnegie had granted United States Steel Corporation bonds with a par value of $10,000,000 to the four Scottish universities: St. Andrews, Aberdeen, Edinburgh, and Glasgow, and in 1902 he was named rector of St. Andrews. In 1902, delivering his inaugural address, “The Industrial Ascendency of the World,” he might as well have been Emerson, telling the students and faculty,

You are responsible only for action in obedience to the judge within. What your conscience tells you to be right, your only standard; action contrary thereto, your only wrong. All revelations through books written thousands of years ago with their inevitable mistranslations, omissions, admissions and errors, are useful only as they may lead you to the good and the true. The court in which the lawgiver speaks today directly to the conscience of man is the Kingdom of God within man. Therefore, if you receive a verdict of disapproval from the judge within, you have no other judge to fear either here or hereafter; if this condemns, there is no other judge to absolve. (Miscellaneous 81)
The Homestead Massacre: Principle and Principal in Conflict

As the fortunes of John D. Rockefeller Senior and Junior led, with the fatality of a Greek tragedy, to the Ludlow Massacre, so the fortunes of Andrew Carnegie led to the massacre at Homestead, Pennsylvania.

The two principals in the Homestead tragedy were Andrew Carnegie and Henry Clay Frick, who formed an alliance in 1881. In brief, Frick had developed a large operation for coking coal (by 1880, nearly 1,000 ovens and some 3,000 acres of coal land [Wall 482]), and, of course, coke was essential for steel-making; thus, Carnegie, anxious to assure his supply of this vital material, bought into Frick's operation, and by December of 1883, Carnegie and his partners owned more than fifty percent of the stock in Frick Coke Company, which Frick himself continued to manage. In December of 1887, Carnegie took the step that would bring Frick into the Carnegie organization and provide the lead actor in the Homestead drama. Frick bought two percent of the Carnegie stock, with a book value of $184,000, for $100,000, and Carnegie had found a manager for his steel interests, a man who was implacably anti-organized labor. In 1889, Frick's interest in the Carnegie enterprise increased to eleven percent, and he became chairman of Carnegie Bros. & Company.

In 1892, the Carnegie Steel Company came into being, "the largest steel company in the world, capable of producing steel equal in amount to over half the total production of steel in all of Great Britain" (Wall 537), but the bad news was a strike at the mighty Homestead plant, where six lodges of the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers were opposing changes in the sliding scale of wages that the company proposed.

On April 4, 1892, Carnegie drafted a notice to be posted at the Homestead plant, announcing in part, "As the vast majority of [the] employees [of Carnegie Steel] are Non-Union, the firm has decided that the minority must give way to the majority. These works will therefore necessarily be Non-Union after the expiration of the present agreement" (qtd. in Wall 541). Wall summarizes the Carnegie's position in regard to the Homestead troubles:

Carnegie's tactics were clear: an open disavowal of the union at all plants within the Carnegie companies; a continuation of the sliding
scale of wages, as established at Homestead in 1889; and the reduction of existing tonnage rates for those few skilled workers who were paid by tonnage production rather than by hourly rates. If the workmen refused to accept this policy decision, then Carnegie's private instructions to Frick were to close the plant and to wait the men out. (542)

And Carnegie departed for Great Britain, leaving Frick, adamantly anti-union and ruthless, to cope with the strike. Details of the workers' demands and the company's offer need not concern us; the "war" that ensued and Carnegie's account of that "war" are important to our understanding of Carnegie as an archetypical American, Emersonian capitalist.

In any case, Frick's first move was to construct a stockade around the entire Homestead plant: heavy planks, with holes for rifle barrels; his second move was to hire a defensive army of 300 Pinkerton guards for the plant. Having completed the fortress and having recruited his army, Frick gave the unions a proposal that was clearly intended to be unacceptable, and the confrontation was under way.

On July 6, the Pinkertons came on barges down the Monongahela to the Homestead plant, but the striking workers were prepared, and a pitched battle ensued. The Pinkertons, unable to disembark, crouched in the barges for twelve hours before they finally raised a white flag. A union man came aboard the barges and promised the Pinkertons safe conduct. However, when the 300 landed, they found themselves in a gauntlet of furious men and women. Though only one Pinkerton had been killed during the battle, three were beaten to death as they passed through the town, and all of the 300 suffered some injuries.

The war was over. Homestead reopened with 700 imported strike-breakers. As winter approached, even the steadfast strikers, who refused the offer to return to their jobs after the "war," would be forced to capitulate.

Though not as bloody as Ludlow, Homestead has become one of the great legends of the American labor movement, and Carnegie's self-exculpatory account of the event is a classic.

The affair was a blow to Carnegie, whose schizophrenic ethic bedeviled him: he was the hard-driving, practical businessman who
longed to be viewed as a humanitarian concerned above all with the moral and spiritual welfare of his workers. In his autobiographical account of Homestead, Carnegie the industrialist is absent, and Carnegie the humanitarian prevails. In his rationalization, we see clear strains of Spencer's evolutionary theory, of Arnold's cultural ideals, and of Emerson's individualistic solipsism.

Why had Carnegie not been on the spot when negotiations that led to the strike were under way? His partners, he said, had urged him not to return from Scotland, where he was vacationing, because "I was always disposed to yield to the demands of the men, however unreasonable" (Andrew 116). The offer that the firm made to the workers "was not only fair and liberal, it was generous, and under ordinary circumstances would have been accepted by the men with thanks" (116). However, says Carnegie, since the firm had contracts for making armor for the government and for providing steel for the Chicago Exhibition, the workers believed that the firm would be compelled to meet their terms:

The firm could not agree, nor should it have agreed to such an attempt as this to take it by the throat and say, "Stand and deliver."

Had I been at home nothing would have induced me to yield to this unfair attempt to extort. (117)

This firmness—the hard-driving businessman pursuing the interests of his firm and its stockholders—is tempered by the humanitarian, looking to the welfare of those who depend on him for their livings:

I quote what I once laid down in writing as our rule: "My idea is that the Company should be known as determined to let the men at any works stop work; that it will confer freely with them and wait patiently until they decide to return to work, never thinking of trying new men—never." The best men as men, and the best workmen, are not walking the streets looking for work. Only the inferior class as a rule is idle. The kind of men we desired are rarely allowed to lose their jobs, even in dull times. It is impossible to get new men to run successfully the complicated machinery of a modern steel plant. The attempt to put in new men converted the thousands of old men who desired to work, into lukewarm supporters of our policy, for workmen can always be relied upon to resent the employment of new men. Who can blame them? (117–18)
The men at Homestead were "outrageously wrong," and "No pangs remain of any wound received in my business career save that of Homestead" (118). While he was in Scotland, Carnegie received the following telegram (in my view a hardly credible message) from one of the union officers: "Kind master, tell us what you wish us to do and we shall do it for you" (118). If Carnegie did receive such a message, he must have completely missed the irony of the salutation, for one cannot conceive of even a favorably disposed union leader addressing his employer as "kind master." Carnegie no doubt longed to be viewed as the "kind master."

The rest of Carnegie's history of the Homestead war is cloyingly self-congratulatory. As evidence of the respect and affection that union leaders had for him, Carnegie was asked to chair the National Civic Federation, "a body composed of capitalists and workmen which exerted benign influence over employers and employed" (118), and though he declined the chairmanship, he was unanimously elected to the board of directors.

The tale of one Mr. McLuckie is even more touching evidence of Carnegie's humanitarianism and of the depth of workers' affection for him. Professor John C. Van Dyke of Rutgers College was in Guaymas, Mexico, for a week of shooting (of what creatures he does not say), where he met McLuckie, who had been a participant in the Homestead strike, had been indicted for murder, and had fled to Mexico and was very much down on his luck. Speaking with Van Dyke about the strike, McLuckie "'was rather careful not to blame Mr. Carnegie, saying to me several times that if 'Andy' had been there the trouble would never have arisen'" (121). In a letter to Carnegie, Van Dyke mentioned McLuckie, and Carnegie offered to give McLuckie all the money he might want, but anonymously so that McLuckie would not know the benefactor. McLuckie declined the monetary help, but Van Dyke arranged a job for him with the Sonora Railway, and he thrived.

At last, Van Dyke told him where the offer of help had come from. "McLuckie was fairly stunned, and all he could say was: 'Well, that was damned white of Andy, wasn't it?"' (122). Carnegie's reaction: "I would rather risk that verdict of McLuckie's as a passport to Paradise than all the theological dogmas invented by man" (122).
The Moral of My Story

Just as the ghost of Freud hovers in our bedrooms and haunts our dreams, and just as the diabolical spirit of Marx shapes political stances on issues such as socialized medicine, so Calvinist rationalization, social Lamarckianism (not Darwinism), Arnoldian sweetness and light, and Emersonian individualist solipsism, in varying degrees and mixes, pervade American enterprises. The four motifs, as they emerge from a study of Rockefeller and Carnegie, give us a way to understand the American reinvention of stock characters from history: the amalgamation of piety and politics as in the Borgia family (whence emerged two popes) and their American version, the Bush dynasty; the ruthless pursuit of wealth and power as in Agostino Chigi (1465–1520), the merchant prince, and Jack Green of General Electric fame, who advocated moving businesses around the globe in the search for the cheapest labor; the Arnoldian quest for sweetness and light as in Maecenas, the patron of Virgil and Horace, and J. Paul Getty; and the staunch individualism of entrepreneurs throughout history and Donald Trump.

If nothing else, these perspectives on what is now the American dilemma of capitalism are a productive heuristic for understanding the mess we are in and thus, perhaps, devising a way out.

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Works Cited


