

**MARIA IRENE RAMALHO DE SOUSA SANTOS**

**THE TRANSPARENT EYEBALL  
AND OTHER AMERICAN SPECTACLES**

nº 115  
Maio, 1998

**Oficina do CES**  
Centro de Estudos Sociais  
Coimbra

**Maria Irene Ramalho de Sousa Santos**  
Faculdade de Letras e Centro de Estudos Sociais  
Universidade de Coimbra

## **The Transparent Eyeball and Other American Spectacles\***

The America nation conceived of itself from the very beginning as a spectacle. Or even before what I just called *the very beginning*, for Europeans became Americans long before they set foot on the New World. America was an imagined community of Christian love and election long before Benedict Anderson conceived of imagined communities as a result of print capitalism.<sup>1</sup> The first American community of consequence was imagined by the Pilgrims as the spectacle of God. Borrowing from Toni Morrison writing recently on the O. J. Simpson case, I suggest that, in the seventeenth century, no less than in this our age of media spectacles, spectacle confirms the official story and guarantees its amazing longevity from the start.<sup>2</sup> I quote from the Conclusions of John Winthrop's "A Modell of Christian Charity," ur-founding text of America, first composed and delivered aboard the *Arbella* in 1630, *en route* to the New England shores:

(. . .) wee are a Company professing our selves fellow members of Christ, In which respect onely though wee were absent from each other many miles, and had our employments as farre distant, yet wee ought to account our selves knitt together by this bond of love (. . .) for the worke we have in hand, it is by a mutuall consent through a special overruleing providence, and a more then an ordinary approbation of the Churches of Christ to seeke out a place of Cohabitation and Consorteshipp under a due form of Government

both civill and ecclesiastical (. . . ) Thus stands the cause betweene God and us, wee are entered into Covenant with him for his worke, wee have taken out a Commission (. . . ) Now if the Lord shall please to hear us, and bring us in peace to the place wee desire, then hath hee ratified this Covenant and sealed our Commission (. . . ) wee must be knitt together in this worke as one man, wee must entertaine each other in brotherly Affeccion (. . . ) wee must uphold a familiar Commerce together (. . . ) as members of the same body (. . . )

And, finally, the most famous self-definition at the origin of the American nation, America as the exhibit of God: "for wee must consider that wee shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eies of all people are upon us."<sup>3</sup>

The eyes of "all people" (meaning, the Judeo-Christian tradition of Western civilization in the Old World) had already been on America for quite some time, looking for dream or profit, and have been ever since. Including Portuguese eyes: the sailors of the "discoveries" helped to bring the imperial gaze and the slave trade to the New World, long before the Puritans really invented America. Closer to us, immigrants and poets let themselves be lured or inspired by that promise of a new beginning or that hope which Americans and nonAmericans alike have recurrently believed in: "Let us realize," Ralph Waldo Emerson urges his countrymen in "The Fortunes of the Republic," "that this country, the last found, is the great charity of God to the human race."<sup>4</sup> On the other side of the Atlantic nearly a century later, Fernando Pessoa, in the very first lyric of his Portuguese epic of the modern consciousness, *Mensagem*, obligingly conceives of America as "the future of the past:"<sup>5</sup>

A Europa jaz, posta nos cotovellos:  
De Oriente a Occidente jaz, fitando,  
E toldam-lhe românticos cabelos  
Olhos gregos, lembrando.

O cotovello esquerdo é recuado:  
O direito é em ângulo disposto.  
Aquele diz Itália onde é pousado;  
Este diz Inglaterra onde, afastado,  
A mão sustenta em que se apoia o rosto.

Fita, com olhar esfíngico e fatal,  
O Occidente, futuro do passado.

O rosto com que fita é Portugal.

[On elbows propped Europe lies  
Outstretching and staring.  
Sheltered in romantic hair  
Greek eyes reminiscing.

Left elbow backward cast,  
the right, an open angle.  
One tells where Italia rests,  
The other where Britannia distantly  
Supports the hand that holds the face.

Sphinxish the fatal stare,  
Westerly the future of the past.

The face that stares is Portugal.]

More recently, for good or ill, the "future of the past" keeps invading our public and domestic space in the Old Continent and we can't help but stare.

American literature and culture, whether high or low, American politics and policy, whether foreign or domestic, American laws and court decisions, American crimes, American science and scholarship, American art, American movies, American English (as well as American translations, often retranslated back into the original languages)<sup>6</sup>—are all part of our daily lives. Above all, American scenes of triumph and subjection to be seen by the eyes of all the world on television, the little glass screen lately turned into an omniscient eye itself, CNN showing how it all must be seen, the personal and the political easily and often conflated: from Desert Storm to the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings, the William Kennedy-Smith and O. J. Simpson trials, the Million Man March, the Million Woman March, the Promise Keepers, as well as, of course, Desert Thunder, and, last but not least, Bill Clinton's alleged sexual forays, setting the pace for international politics and exchange rates. Globalization, we are reluctantly led to conclude, is, inescapably, the large, televised American spectacle. On the eve of the great opening of Expo'98, the last world exhibition of the century and the millenium, Ronald Reagan's address to the Portuguese people a few years ago, when the President of the United States visited our country in the eighties, insisting on the common destiny and mission of Portugal and the United States of America, cannot but reverberate with a parodic ring of truth.<sup>7</sup> In their unavoidable staring at each other across the Atlantic ocean, Portugal's traveling eye of early modernity and America's postmodern ubiquitous little screen of supposedly world scenes together trace the full accomplishment of the rondure of the earth, though perhaps not exactly as Whitman had predicted and Pessoa seconded.<sup>8</sup>

America, the spectacle, is spectacle first of all for America herself, from early pillory sermons and auction blocks to baseball games and religious

and political rallies with messages of power to convey, as American literature so abundantly goes on recording as well. Remember Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, the adulteress exposed upon the scaffold in the market place, her partner in sin and pleasure to follow her there many chapters later, of his own volition, to bare his heart naked at last, the formidable red *A* perhaps finally to be read as a subtitle to the show, spelling out *America*. For was not the debasing spectacle of prevarication considered once, as Hawthorne so slyly puts it at the beginning of his novel, an effectual "agent in the promotion of good citizenship?"<sup>9</sup> Other, far more degrading spectacles of the body that annihilate personhood were those which, presumably also on behalf of good citizenry, confirmed and legalized chattel slavery upon the auction block. Perhaps only with the hindsight of what spectacle has done to the society in the long run could Saidiya Hartman argue so forcefully recently how gazing, however sympathetically, upon scenes of subjection reinforces oppression.<sup>10</sup> Think of Whitman's aestheticization of the slave auction in Section 7 of his "I Sing the Body Electric": "A slave at auction! / I help the auctioneer . . . . the sloven does not half know his business. // Gentlemen, look on this curious creature, // (. . .) Examine these limbs, red, black or white . . . . (. . .) // Within there runs his blood . . . "<sup>11</sup> The spectacle is none the less terrible for Whitman's poetic translation of the black body advertised for sale into the universal "human living body" that must never be "defiled." No less than Hester Prynne's display on the scaffold, Whitman's slave at auction evokes cultural scenes of instruction that aim at proper socialization by the education of the eye. In the ocularcentric culture that presides over American literature, you are what you see, you see what you are. But you may see what you do not look at (as Ahab sees the white whale) and not see what you look at, as Hawthorne's scarlet letter so well

demonstrates. "I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look," thrice repeats a derranged Pip enlightened by the darkest experience in the "Doubloon" chapter of Melville's *Moby-Dick*.<sup>12</sup> American literature is rich with scenes that are insistently looked at but hardly seen at all: Melville's Captain Delano aboard the *Dominick* in "Benito Cereno" is a much commented upon wonderful example.<sup>13</sup>

In contemporary American culture, the dialectics of looking or not looking and seeing or not seeing is complicated by the way in which the media manipulate perspective to present the news as an ongoing spectacle. Increasingly America's eyes are being diverted from the most relevant political events on to the sexual lives of their leaders. Jules Lobel has shown how, in 1987, two stories carried by the *Miami Herald* were received in ways that are in total opposite relation to their respective political relevance, and indeed ended up having completely disproportionate impacts on the US and American public opinion. On the one hand, the story of Gary Hart's erotic affairs galvanized the whole country and can be said to have immediately changed its destiny. On the other, the news that Oliver North and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had draft a "contingency plan providing for the suspension of the Constitution, the imposition of martial law, and the appointment of military commanders to head state and local governments and to detain dissidents and Central American refugees in the event of national crisis" disappeared rapidly and had no major impact on the American people. By being made to watch juicy spectacles, remarks Elaine Scarry, the American people very often miss information at key moments when what is at stake is the very form of the American government, and end up unwittingly authorizing policies that may be in total disagreement with the founding texts and principles of the nation.<sup>14</sup> The attempt today to transform

the soap opera of Clinton's sex life into a national epic of tragic proportions may well be a more recent instance of the same phenomenon of political obfuscation.<sup>15</sup> In a recent issue of *The Nation*, columnist Christopher Hitchens reminds us that on the day Monica Lewinsky broke cover, *The New York Times* cited an unidentified "senior Republican" who had told the South Korean dictators to go ahead and execute Kim Dae Jung in 1980. Now, which story, predictably, has since had the most impact on the American public?<sup>16</sup>

We might say, then, that the American nation is a spectacle ever in need of spectacles. As I now turn to another founding text of America, it strikes me that this same insight largely informs American literature as well. In 1836, two centuries after John Winthrop inaugurated the spectacularity of the emergent American nation, Emerson's *Nature* offered the perfect metaphor for the consolidation of the culture: the transparent eyeball. Let me recall here the relevant passage in Emerson's essay:<sup>17</sup>

In the presence of nature a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows . . . Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear. In the woods, too, a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough, and at what period soever of his life is always a child. In the woods is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. In the woods we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life,--no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,--my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,--all mean



egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature.

Commentators of this passage, including myself, have stressed the radical pastoralism of the scene, thereby drawing the inevitable epistemological and social and political consequences: once the capital 'I' of the American-Man-Thinking is transcended into a neutral transparency of vision—the Eye—that totally fuses Self, Nature, and Nation into an All-I, society is available as a natural process for perception only, and not as an entity to be known, interfered with, and changed.<sup>18</sup> As I say *neutral transparency*, however, Eric Cheyfitz's reading of Emerson's transparent eyeball as an inescapably masculine gaze—"the manly contemplation of the whole" that is the aim of instruction in Emerson's essay—comes to mind.<sup>19</sup> It is thus tempting to read Emerson's trans-parent (as of the father, of course) to read Emerson's transparent eyeball as the perfect emblem of the ocularcentric tradition of Western modernity—a kind of epistemological panopticon.<sup>20</sup> In an interesting essay in which he traces the scopic regime of the modern era mainly to Renaissance notions of perspective in the visual arts and Cartesian ideas of subjective rationality in philosophy, Martin Jay, though never once mentioning Emerson, powerfully evokes for this reader the transparent eyeball. In the tradition of Cartesian perspectivalism, the viewing eye is singular, rather than the two eyes of normal binocular vision, and runs the

risk of becoming a disincarnated, absolute eye. The visual order thus becomes de-eroticized, de-narrativized and even de-textualized.<sup>21</sup> In a similar way, in *Nature*, Emerson's eyeball, while claiming total knowledge, offers itself as the spectacle of an ahistorical, disinterested, disembodied subject entirely outside of the world that it allegedly contains in its transparency.

But then why *eyeball*, we might ask, and not simply *eye*? In trying to answer this question, I shall be suggesting that Emerson's eyeball is indeed witness to the ocularcentricism of Western culture, while at the same time rendering uncannily transparent some of the problems of the Cartesian perspectival stance, which, according to Martin Jay, a number of contemporary French intellectuals and artists, notably and devastatingly George Bataille in his *L'histoire de l'oeil*, have been denouncing so eloquently for quite some time. In other words, I argue here that though the transparent eyeball, by claiming to see all and be nothing, seems to escape being seen, like a dazzling sun, instituting rather the totality of vision as a detached absolute, must nonetheless yield to the condition of an instrument of sight, an object like a glass lens, and therefore susceptible to failure in the variability of refraction. This somewhat ambivalent stance towards the primacy of sight, I further argue, can be read as a poetic strategy in many American literary artists, starting with Emerson himself. A few years before he presented, in *Nature*, his unforgettable transparent metaphor for the sense of sight as *the* knowing faculty, Emerson had expressed his own version of the fallibility of vision by acknowledging the existence of fragmentary seeing in two different eyes: one, subjective, which we might identify with the transparent eyeball, he calls the "emigrant eye;" the other, objective and evidently opaque, rather than transparent, he calls "the patriot

eye." Emerson uses these suggestive phrases, which would tend to deabsolutize sight and reengage the subject, in a letter of December 10, 1831, to his brothers Charles and Edward, who were in Puerto Rico at the time, on a health trip: "The great misfortune of travellers is that the expectation & the eye gradually form themselves to the new scene—in the West Indies they become West Indians in a few days—so that they cannot if they would tell the New Englander of this moment what he wants to know. You shd. keep one eye a patriot & the other an emigrant at the same time as the seaman keeps home-time with one watch & apparent with the other."<sup>22</sup> That the transparent eyeball may eventually need correction Emerson's use of lenses, in "Experience," for example, duly confirms.

To the best of my knowledge, the term *eyeball* occurs only once in Emerson's writings, precisely in the passage from *Nature* quoted above. On the other hand you have no need of a concordance to conclude that *eye*, or *eyes*, recur in Emerson's works hundreds of times. "The eye is the first circle," begins the essay titled "Circles" (1842); and then continues, succinctly rounding and summing up Emerson's ocularcentric epistemology: "the horizon which it first forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end. It is the highest emblem in the cipher of the world."<sup>23</sup> But what in "Circles" seems unproblematic in the perfect, round, and repeatable coincidence of eye, world, and knowing (the American scholar being, of course, "the world's eye"),<sup>24</sup> in "Experience" becomes less dependent on clairvoyant eyesight than on the lenses of objective contingency: "Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and as we pass through them they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus."<sup>25</sup> "Experience," we recall, is the essay in which the author makes the astonishing statement

about the Fall of Man as the "discovery" that "we exist." In this essay, as a consequence, the eye becomes, implicitly, an "instrument" not to be entirely trusted. Emerson's ocularcentrism thus gives way to a dialectics of seeing that is a constant hesitation between the naked eye and the lens. You might say that the following passage from "Experience" is part of the commentary on the transparent eyeball which I am here trying to write:<sup>26</sup>

It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery we have made that we exist. That discovery is called the Fall of Man. Ever afterwards we suspect our instruments. We have learned that we do not see directly, but mediately, and that we have no means of correcting these colored and distorted lenses which we are, or of computing the amount of their errors. Perhaps these subject lenses have a creative power; perhaps there are no objects. Once we lived in what we saw; now, the rapaciousness of this new power, which threatens to absorb all things, engages us.

Perhaps *eyeball* in the famous passage was merely a poetic necessity of rhyme and rhythm: *I become a transparent eyeball/I am nothing/I see all*. But the truth of the matter is that the physicality of the image, the disembodied ocular globe projected like an orb in space, sunlike in its luminous transparency, indeed, like a star in the sky impending disaster on earth, no doubt for the same reason that it immediately inspired Christopher Pearse Cranch's grotesque caricature, is far more powerful as a poetic figure than the less conspicuous subjective eye (I) reduced to the faculty of sight (eye).<sup>27</sup> In retrospect, after the Fall of Man, as it were, the suggestiveness of its cosmic (and comic) materiality and visibility as an object in space effectively transforms eyesight into an *instrument* of sight, an objective machine like a microscope or a spy-glass. In other words, Emerson's ocularcentrism is

undermined by his very use of the perfect ocularcentric metaphor: absolute sight as the site of blindness as well. The transparent eyeball as the possibility of vision, no doubt, but also, as the “punctum caecum” of American culture. Recent analyses of the work of African American Emersonians like Zora Neale Hurston and Ralph Ellison have eloquently argued for race as this blind spot. As Karen Jacobs has shown, Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is best critiqued in the light of Emerson's subjective transparency, as are the contradictions of her anthropological theory and practice.<sup>28</sup> As to Ellison, we have only to remember the wilful *invisibility* of the character created by this other Ralph Waldo, in a novel only too rich in visual imagery, from stolen light to dark spectacles and even a glass eye, to read *Invisible Man* as the sharpest indictment of Emerson's inescapably biased conception of the American Scholar, let alone common humanity.<sup>29</sup>

The notion of knowledge as visual perception implicit in Emerson's eye metaphor, and most graphically in the *eyeball* metaphor, which American philosopher Richard Rorty says, in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, again without ever mentioning Emerson, must be eradicated from the culture once and for all, has never stopped being an endless source of anxious inspiration for American creative writers.<sup>30</sup> Whether careful readers of Emerson or not, many American authors continue to this date to rediscover, or interrogate, the meaning of the culture either in the naked eye of unmediated vision or in aiding glasses, or both, or even in disengaged orb-like objects floating in the sky. In John Updike's most recent novel, *Toward the End of Time*, a novel set in the year 2020 and dealing with life, death, America and the universe (or perhaps, rather, the American male subject as the universe), a shining UFO with a mysterious trajectory in the sky, but

apparently no power to communicate, seems like a rerun of Emerson's solipsistic transparent vision of transcendental harmony and wholeness: "The slender torus ( . . . ) shows that somewhere in the universe mind has triumphed over matter, instead of antagonistically coexisting with it as on our planet. But the minds, or giant mind, behind this perfectly circular intrusion into our skies do not, or does not, communicate."<sup>31</sup>

Let me now go back to Emerson's time and consider Edgar Allan Poe's "The Spectacles," published in 1844.<sup>32</sup> Poe evidently had a particular interest in this tale for he published it more than once and tried to get it published in England as well.<sup>33</sup> Written less than a decade after the publication of *Nature*, Poe's short-story can be read as questioning the primacy of sight and indeed as a powerful commentary on the transparent eyeball's immediacy of vision, whether the poet actually had Emerson's essay in mind or not. While for Emerson seeing-all is the ideal prerogative of the knowing subject as the gauge of life and the universe, for Poe the very concept of sight, let alone sight-as-knowing, is problematic. The story is usually described as that of a nearsighted young man, too vain to wear glasses, who for that reason falls in love with a woman who turns out to be his own greatgreatgrandmother. But Poe's story is really not about vanity at all. Like that other one inspired by it, entitled "Glasses" (1896) and published by Henry James at the end of the century, "The Spectacles" is a story about the insufficiency of sight.<sup>34</sup> As the absurdity of the greatgreatgrandmother motif makes clear, Poe's story suggests not so much the consequences of vanity (uncorrected nearsightedness traps the protagonist into a gross

mismatch) as the paradoxical possibility that sight itself may be blinding. The narrator sets out to frame the story as being about "love at first sight." Here is its opening sentence: "Some persons ridicule the idea of 'love at first sight'; but those who think clearly, not less than those who feel deeply, have always advocated its existence." The narrative evolves henceforth as if to demonstrate that there is such a thing as love at first sight. However, Poe's clever use of this phrase, twice repeated in the story, undermines the "demonstration": firstly, only by insistently gazing at the lady, whom he evidently cannot see at all, does the hero fall in love *at first sight*, secondly, as the grotesque *dénouement* suggests, love was not really what followed first sight. The reader cannot but end up wondering what the hero's spectacles will be good for. In 1926, in *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald would for ever canonize Dr. T. J. Eckleburg's huge pair of spectacles as the blind eyes of a nonexisting god staring at the waste land.

Emily Dickinson, close reader of Emerson that she is, does even better than merely translate Emerson's great metaphor of the subjective eye into a pair of objective spectacles. There are eyes aplenty in her poetry but they are frequently "penurious" (#88), "frugal" (#23; #181), "beclouded" (#168) or "finite" (#327).<sup>35</sup> Granted that we have in all these poverty-stricken epithets the notorious Dickinsonian reversal of conventional value (i.e., what is "little" by convention is "best" by her), in any case, the poet's protestations of frugality of sight make Emerson's omnivorous eyeball suddenly almost as obscene as Bataille's *oeil*, none the less because the poet herself does not hesitate to resort to the brutal image of enucleation. The last poem mentioned above begins like this:

Before I got my eye put out  
I liked as well to see—  
As other Creatures, that have Eyes  
And know no other way—

Dickinson's poems allow for many readings, of course, and in the case of the present one, privileging insight to the detriment of visual sight is a common enough interpretation.<sup>36</sup> Sharon Cameron, who reads this poem as having to do with choice also, makes, however, the pertinent observation that "got" in the first line—"Before I got my eye put out"—introduces the complex issue of whether lack of sight is chosen or imposed.<sup>37</sup> Be it as it may, the three middle stanzas of the poem proceed to present the intolerability of a way of looking that implies possession by the gaze in the blinding erasure of distance between subject and object.

But were it told to me—Today—  
That I might have the sky  
For mine—I tell you that my Heart  
Would split, for size of me—

The meadows—mine—  
The Mountains—mine—  
All Forests—Stintless Stars—  
As much of Noon as I could take  
Between my finite eyes—

The Motions of the Dipping Birds—  
The Morning's Amber Road—  
For mine to look at when I liked—  
The news would strike me dead—



Ocularcentrism thus strongly rejected, the poem's concluding stanza, though in a characteristically romantic gesture emphasizing poetic imagination as the way to knowledge ("guess," the poet says), with its two contrasting images of Sun and Window ends up yielding the engulfing totality of sunlight to the instrumental transparent means of the glass pane.

So safer—guess—with just my soul  
Upon the Window pane—  
Where other Creatures put their eyes—  
Incautious of the—Sun—

I have just read "guess" in the above poem as "imagination." Indeed, in another poem (#1018), uncannily resonant of Emerson in the splendid image of a blindness without an eye, to "guess at seeing" is to "guess at loss of the Ability." But "guess" could also be read as "faith." Poetry is the theology of Dickinson-the-poet, for sermons she is contented with Orpheus' song. The poem I have just alluded to (#1545) starts off by stating boldly, "The Bible is an antique Volume--/Written by faded Men/At the suggestion of Holy Specters." No wonder, the poet concludes, religion is not as compelling as poetry is. "Had but the Tale a warbling Teller—," so the poem ends, "All the boys would come—/Orpheus' Sermon captivated—/It did not condemn—." What I would like to suggest is that "faith" may also be Dickinson's way of making problematic the primacy of vision in the culture. In a fairly early little four-line poem, Dickinson masterly deabsolutizes the Emersonian all-seeing eye by invoking the microscope that contingency renders necessary (her word for contingency is "emergency"):

"Faith" is a fine invention  
When Gentleman can *see* —  
But *Microscopes* are prudent  
In an Emergency.

Closely related to this poem by the faith theme (i.e., believing without seeing or perceiving) is the one that begins, "Trust in the Unexpected—" (#555). I once remarked that, if Kenneth Burke is right in saying that in *Nature* Emerson "treats of society in terms of nature," then *Nature* is *about* America.<sup>38</sup> But, as the first part of Burke's title suggests ("I, Eye, Ay"), in its perfect conflation of subject, perception, and affirmation, the essay does not allow for the distance of objective analysis, then *Nature* is not just about America, it *is* America. Though, ostensibly, Dickinson's "Trust in the Unexpected—" doesn't seem to have anything do with Emerson, it does cast a shadow of doubt over the transcendentalist's trusting seeing relationship with the nation in *Nature*. Recuperating eyesight as privileged perception in the illusion of legend and myth in the first two stanzas (Billy the Kidd, Philosopher's Stone), as well as in the allusion to the proverbial scepticism of the apostle Thomas in the last one, the poem's climax is really the penultimate stanza, where Columbus is said to have been "allured" by an "Apparition" "baptized America." In the magnificent condensed manner of her poetry, Dickinson concentrates in these four lines the trajectory of the nation, from visibility of "discovery" to destined sacredness of revelation to untrustworthy phenomenon—or unreliable spectacle.

Spectacle and the illusions of spectacle preside over Wallace Stevens's poetry as well. Stevens's poetry, says Gerald Bruns, is "a poetry of the spectator."<sup>39</sup> The imagery of eyesight plays indeed a crucial role in Stevens's poetry. Walsh's *Concordance* registers over two hundred and fifty "eye"

entries in Stevens's poems, far more, relatively, than what we could ever find in Emerson's whole *corpus*, let alone Dickinson's (of both, as we know, Stevens was a devoted reader).<sup>40</sup> The poet takes advantage of the ocularcentric tradition of Western culture for the construction of some of his most memorable poems, and, as many commentators have emphasized, Stevens's transparency of vision comes directly from Emerson's eyeball.<sup>41</sup> But while, we might say, in Emerson's America, the romantic poet can still conceive of the universe itself as immediately intelligible and credibly long for the perfect coincidence of the axis of things with the axis of vision,<sup>42</sup> for the American modernist poet, though he also often reenacts the imaginative availability of the orb-like totality of sight-as-the-seen and the seeing subject, it is mainly things that are images of the eye, and not the other way around: "Snow sparkles like eyesight falling to earth,/Like seeing fallen brightly away."<sup>43</sup> Rather than being coincident with the sun, the eye must force itself to look at that star-of-stars ignorantly, face noncoincidence, or dis-aster, and be content with its own plain version. The wilful insistence that *it* must be visible or invisible, or both at the same time, that *it* is a seeing and unseeing in the eye, presupposes the reinvention, by the poet-as-spectator, of sight not as knowledge but as fallible observation. "He wanted the eye to see/And not be touched by blue" (241), Stevens writes in "Landscape with Boat," a typical painterly poem of the early forties. In *Notes towards a Supreme Fiction*, a poem of roughly the same period of composition, in a canto of Part II entirely dominated by fables of sound, rather than sight, three unexpected visual images cannot but surprise the reader: "photograph of fate," "bloodless episcopus," and "eye without lid" (394). All three, I suggest, constitute Stevens's brilliant mis-reading of Emerson's transcendentalist vision of totality beautifully conveyed by the transparent eyeball metaphor:

the blind transparency of the lidless eye, the scene registered in the glassy ocular globe, the seer as disincarnated over-seer (Gr. *episkopos*). The major spectacle of sight in Stevens ends up being not the ocular roundness of the sun, total light fully contained in the transparency of the eye, but rather the serpent-like theater of the northern lights "wriggling" through the skies. Not the paradoxical celebration of blindness, as often in Dickinson, but ocular-eccentricity grounds the possibility of Stevens's poetry.

I borrow *possibleness* from "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," where we finally encounter the poet-as-spectator, explicitly so named, and to which I will turn in a minute. But first I wish to mention briefly what is arguably one of the most original of Stevens's earlier poems, "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" (13-18). The poem deals with all the fully acknowledged perplexities of human life that make up Stevens's major themes: time, memory, desire; beauty, love, sex; aging and death; language, poetry writing, high culture and low, and the tradition.<sup>44</sup> Stevens's comic playfulness, of which the title is a provocative instance, is here particularly effective. The avuncular figure with the single eyeglass in the title is plausible as a poetic mask, as readers of Stevens have pointed out.<sup>45</sup> Surely, however, the lens of this most unPrufrockian aging poet, facetiously eccentric in its foreignness, is truly *eccentric* to the poem in the etymological sense of the word: a single eyeglass that is an "eccentric exterior."<sup>46</sup> If both uncle and monocle are thus outside the poem, presumably looking at the spectacle of itself, the monocled uncle's mask is that of a spectator. The poet-as-spectator. But while in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" the spectacle is the poet's self as dark and rose rabbi, or, we might add, *beau linguist*, increasingly after *Harmonium* the spectacle is "reality," that Stevensian slippery concept.

Facing Stevens's "reality" it is hard not to go back to Emerson and his own

slippery concept, "nature." There are clearly conceptual analogies between the two. While Emerson means to distinguish the Me and the Not Me, the Eye from the Scene/Seen, Stevens speaks of Imagination and Reality. But both authors are at odds to keep their distinctions clear. In the essay *Nature*, as I have suggested, Emerson's subject matter is ultimately the American nation (the Me and the Not Me therein indistinguishable, as Whitman was to underscore so vividly in the 1855 Preface). In "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," the poem in which the poet admittedly wanted to get as close to the commonplace as possible,<sup>47</sup> the subject matter is likewise America, the "vulgate of experience" evoked in the synecdoche of an ordinary American city (465). But don't expect to find the city in the poem; it is the exquisitely lyrical poem that clings visibly to the "residuum" (479) of a city, New Haven, maybe, but surely, to paraphrase Stevens about his pineapple, a wholly artificial city.<sup>48</sup> We have to look through the rich language of lyric theory and fable- and myth-making to guess at the urban street wanderings of the bourgeois character fairly at ease with the commodities of capital America. As so often in Stevens, the poem's apparent discursiveness and descriptive title are misleading, as is the mixed imagery of commonplace and phantasmagoria: "(...) a carpenter's iridescences,/Wooden, the model for astral apprentices,/A city slapped up like a chest of tools,/The eccentric exterior of which the clocks talk" (XVIII). The sublime as theater in "The Auroras of Autumn" gives way to a rather pastoralized and sublimated quotidian as comedy of flitting characters and muttering actors: "The commonplace became a rumpling of blazons./What was real turned into something most unreal,/Bare-beggar tree, hung low for fruited red (...)" (483). The poet's credible mask is now that of a spectator; and the spectacle, admittedly half of the poet's own making, is the American poet's sense of

time, place, and circumstance, as well as his adjustment to changing conditions in the American society: "The objects tingle and the spectator moves/With the objects. But the spectator also moves/With lesser things (...)" (470). There is a moment when the poet barely escapes the transparent spectacle of Emerson's eyeball momentarily retrieved as the "pure sphere" of "hypnosis." But sociability, ever so contradictorily presented in Stevens, seems to prevail this once: "He may evade/Even his own will and in his nakedness/Inhabit the hypnosis of that sphere.//But he may not. He may not evade his will/Nor the wills of other men (...)" (480).

A younger poet and a close reader of Emerson and Stevens, A. R. Ammons, engages in chanting further the contradictions in the culture of the Emersonian metaphor of the transparent rondure of being, first in a very long poem titled precisely *Sphere: The Form of a Motion* (1974), twenty years later in an equally long lyric entitled *Garbage* (1993).<sup>49</sup> In both poems, America is the scene, the American poet its privileged spectator. *Sphere* is a *tour the force* in that it per-forms the form of its own motion in a journal-like stream of poetic consciousness, a structure of run-on lines, run-on tercets, and run-on sections, or cantos, as well as what I would call Ammons' aesthetics of the colon. Though the tercets are grouped and numbered by fours, it would be awkward to refer to each one individually, since the four-tercet mock-stanzas do not constitute separable entities. There is only one full stop at the end, and one almost regrets it. Endless, restless, inconclusive interconnectedness of poet, poem, and country would better fit the amassing dis-harmony of this poem about America. The first few movements, highlighting the basics of life and of being human with its sexual, anatomical, biological, genetic, animal, and plant imagery, seem to take off directly from Whitman's "Song of Myself": "To be in any form, what is that?" and "(...) a

compend of compends is the meat of a man or woman."<sup>50</sup> However, not surprisingly, the tone of contemporary America's poet is not as euphorically celebratory as Whitman's: "if nothing in us, under us, or around us/will redeem us, we'd better get used to the miseries" (14); or, "the poet still alive but with//a headache, a toothache, a jawache, and a/backache, forges on" (19). What the poet "forges" is an image of "the United States of America" (explicitly so named in a later section of the poem) in the sixties and early seventies: the core position of the US in the world system, the Cold War, the rising domestic conflicts of a multicultural society that begins to be aware of itself as such, the military industrial complex, political radicalism, the blast of Apollo 16, ecology, the inner city and pastoral America, consensus and dissent, the nation, other nations, and the United Nations—as well as what the poet thinks poetry has to say about all this. Such are Ammons' major topics. Eventually, the poet, who a little over half-way through the poem identified himself, like Whitman, with the nation ("my self, my work, and my country"), declares himself in his characteristic wry manner a "natural disaster area" or, already announcing the poem to be written in the nineties, a "junkyard": the gorgeous spectacle of America-as-trash out of which might yet spring "hope," "a freshning of courage to millions" (68). Sure enough, the very last image of the poem is that of an orb floating through space in freedom, wonder, and Emersonian exhilaration: "we're clear: we're ourselves: we're sailing."

The spectacle of America as a huge pile of waste with redeeming qualities has inspired, besides Ammons' long lyric poem, *Garbage*, which I have already mentioned, Don DeLillo's latest novel, *Underworld* (1997).<sup>51</sup> Both works are satiric in tone, Dantesque in scope, and hilarious in effect. But while garbage in Ammons *is* the poem and comically plays all its roles—

theme, trope, character, and even the principles and focus of poetic theorization—waste in DeLillo is the structuring image of a novel that recounts the history of the United States of America of the past four decades. In both works, I dare to say, Emerson and his promise of total light and sight in the metaphor of the transparent eyeball are still haunting presences, albeit invoked with varying degrees of irony. Towards the end of *Garbage*, after the poet, with sarcasm that seems addressed at Emerson's "trifles" and "disturbances," declares that "the planet is going/to be fine, as soon as the people get off," salvation is announced in the shape of a shining celestial body: "one/solar flare (nova) will recall all to light" (109). *Underworld*, in its turn, begins with a baseball game in October 3, 1951, when the Giants beat the Dodgers. For over four decades, the novel follows the trajectory of the ball, thrown by Ralph Branca and hit by Bobby Thompson for a pennant-winning home run, on the same day that the Soviet Union detonated an atomic bomb (a spectacle imagined by Edgar Hoover, while watching the game, as a "weird peeled eyeball exploding over the desert" [51]). In one of the first reviews of *Underworld* to come out, John Leonard suggested, "semi-seriously," that "the home-run ball is both a Holy Grail *and* the Golden Bough."<sup>52</sup> Let me suggest, seriously enough, that, as the novelist's clear focus, the baseball, desired by all and for ever evasive, is a late capitalist, postmodernist version of Emerson's eyeball, rendered transparent and opaque at the same time: less than a transcendentalist privileged viewpoint, naked eye *and* spyglass, or merely an open window on the Spectacle of America at the end of the century and the millenium. This base-eye-ball, actually a minor piece in the overwhelming display of American trash in the novel, including, prominently, nuclear waste, is of course buyable. "Onde we get the consumer by the eyeballs," says a character in the novel, "we have



complete mastery of the marketing process" (531). Why then does another character wonder what the Masonic eye is doing on the American dollar bill (354)?

Were we to trace the course of American literary history from Emerson's "nature" as transparency of existence, to Stevens's "reality" as enchanted commodity, to Ammons "garbage" and DeLillo's "waste" as surfeit of consumption, we would probably have to come to the conclusion that the spectacle of America does not exist "really," after all. What happens, rather, is that Emily Dickinson's "apparition" keeps being reinvented now and then by Americans and nonAmericans alike. I started out by linking Portugal and the United States in the poetry of Fernando Pessoa. Let me, therefore, conclude by quoting another Portuguese poet, our own contemporary this time. Alberto Pimenta, however satirically, is nonetheless witness to the ongoing widespread love/hate fascination with America as the recurrent dream of a new dazzling first beginning for humanity.<sup>53</sup>

sonhei  
que um fogo vindo do céu  
devastava a América

o homem sonha.  
se deus quiser  
a obra nasce.

[I had a dream  
a fire from heaven  
was razing America

man dreams  
god willing  
the work is born.]

\* Opening lecture of the Conference of the European Association of American Studies. Lisbon, April 1998.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983). For my use of *America* to signify the United States, see my "A aula de Literatura (Norte)-Americana." *Actas do V Encontro da APEAA* (Braga: Universidade do Minho, 1985) 67-80. Cf. Sacvan Bercovitch, "The Rites of Assent: Rhetoric, Ritual, and Ideology of American Consensus." *The American Self: Myth, Ideology, and Popular Culture*. Ed. Sam Girgus (New Mexico: U of New Mexico P, 1981) 5-42.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Toni Morrison, "Introduction." *Birth of a Nation 'Hood: Gaze, Script, and Spectacle in the O. J. Simpson Case*. Ed. Toni Morrison and Claudia Brodsky Lacour (New York: Pantheon, 1997) XVI.

<sup>3</sup>John Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity." *Puritan Political Ideas: 1558-1794*. Ed. Edmund Morgan (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965) 90-93.

<sup>4</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Works*, 14 vols. (Cambridge: Riverside, 1883) XI: 537-40. For a glimpse of the way in which this "charity of God" is seen by contemporary Portuguese immigrants, see Graça Capinha, "Literatura e emigração: Poetas emigrantes nos Estados de Massachusetts e Rhode Island." *Portugal: um retrato singular*. Ed. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (Porto: Afrontamento, 1993) 513-54.

<sup>5</sup>For the translation see Fernando Pessoa, *Message*. Trans. Edwin Honig and Susan Margaret Brown (New York: Ecco, 1986) 161. *Mensagem* was first published in Lisbon by the Parceria António Maria Pereira, in 1934.

<sup>6</sup>On this kind of complicated exchange of languages and ideas, see Immanuel Wallerstein, "Concepts in the Social Sciences. Problems in translation." *Translation Spectrum: Essays in Theory and Practice*. Ed. Marilyn Gaddis Rose (Albany: SUNY, 1981) 88-98.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Maria Irene Ramalho de Sousa Santos, "'The City upon a Hill:' Destino e missão na literatura americana." *O imaginário da cidade: Cidade real/cidade imaginária* (Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian-ACARTE, 1989) 381-99.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Maria Irene Ramalho de Sousa Santos, "Atlantic Poets: Whitman's Discoveries as Metaphor and Ideology." *The Continuing Presence of Walt Whitman: The Life after the Life*. Ed. Robert K. Martin (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1992) 152-66.

<sup>9</sup>Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). Ed. Sculley Bradley et al. (New York: Norton, 1962) 44.

<sup>10</sup>Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford, 1997).

<sup>11</sup>Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855). Ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York. Viking, 1967) 121.

<sup>12</sup>Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick, or The Whale* (1851). Ed. Charles Feidelson (New York. Bobbs-Merrill, 1964) 555-56.

<sup>13</sup>Herman Melville, "Benito Cereno" (1855). *The Piazza Tales* (1856; New York: Hendricks House, 1948). Cp. Morrison's remarks in her Introduction to *Birth of a Nation 'Hood*.

<sup>14</sup>Elaine Scarry, "Watching and Authorizing the Gulf War." *Media Spectacles*. Ed. Marjorie Garber, Jann Matlock, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (New York: Routledge, 1993) 57-73. Lobel cited by Scarry on p. 59.

<sup>15</sup>Confronted recently in an interview with an allusion to *Les liaisons dangereuses* as a way of understanding the Clinton saga, Gore Vidal suggested, rather, that *The Well of Loneliness* might be more appropriate as an analogy. See the *Observer* (25 January 1998). A couple of weeks later, Vidal's interview appeared in translation in the Portuguese weekly *Expresso*.

<sup>16</sup>Christopher Hitchens, "Clinton's Comeuppance." *The Nation* (February 16, 1998) 8.

<sup>17</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (1836), *Works*, I: 1-77 [9-10].

<sup>18</sup>Cp. Maria Irene Ramalho de Sousa Santos, "American Exceptionalism and the Naturalization of 'America'." *Prospects: An Annual of American Cultural Studies*. vol. 19. Ed. Jack Salzman (New York: Cambridge UP, 1994) 1-23.

<sup>19</sup>Eric Cheyfitz, *The Trans-Parent: Sexual Politics in the Language of Emerson* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1981). For the "manly contemplation of the whole" see *Works*, I: 67.

<sup>20</sup>Following Cheyfitz on the masculinist bias of Emerson's vision, which unfolds the education of the child hero for the manly contemplation of the whole also as the womanly hole, and having in mind Martin Jay's recent study of the "tyranny of the eye" and its subversion in Western culture, we might conclude that Emerson's transparent eyeball combines to perfection ocularcentrism and phallogocentrism. I will not pursue this line of thought here. See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley. California UP, 1993) 494.

<sup>21</sup>Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity." *Modernity and Identity*. Ed. Scott Lash and Jonathan Friedman (1992; Oxford: Blackwell, 1996) 178-95.

<sup>22</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Letters*. Ed. Ralph L. Rusk. 6 vols. (New York. Columbia UP, 1939) I: 338.

<sup>23</sup>*Works*, II: 301.

<sup>24</sup>Cp. "The American Scholar," *Works*, I: 101.

<sup>25</sup>*Works*, III: 50.

<sup>26</sup>*Works*, III: 75.

<sup>27</sup>For a reproduction of Cranch's caricature, see *Emerson's Nature: Origin, Growth, Meaning*. Ed. Merton M. Sealts, Jr. & Alfred Ferguson (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1969) 9.

<sup>28</sup>Karen Jacobs, "From 'Spy-Glass' to 'Horizon': Tracking the Anthropological Gaze in Zora Neale Hurston." *Novel* 30.3 (Spring 1997) 329-60.

<sup>29</sup>Cp. Kun Jong Lee, "Ellison's Invisible Man: Emersonianism Revised." *PMLA* 107.2 (March

1992) 331-44. See also Isabel Caldeira's essays on the dilemmas of the African American intellectual, with a special focus on Ellison: "A palavra e o poder: *Invisible Man* de Ralph Ellison." *Biblos* 56 (1980) 521-72; "All colored people sing': Do estereótipo à identidade." *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais*, nº 4/5 (Outubro 1980) 157-84.

<sup>30</sup>Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1979) 371 and *passim*.

<sup>31</sup>John Updike, *Toward the End of Time* (New York: Knopf, 1997) 153.

<sup>32</sup>See Joseph J. Moldenhauer, "Poe's 'The Spectacles': A New Text from Manuscript." Edited, with textual commentary and notes. *Studies in the American Renaissance 1977*. Ed. Joel Meyerson (Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1978) 179-234.

<sup>33</sup>See Burton R. Pollin, "'The Spectacles' of Poe: Sources and Significance." *American Literature* 37.2 (May 1965).

<sup>34</sup>Henry James, "The Glasses." *The Complete Tales*. Ed. Leon Edel. 12 vols. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1964) IX. Cp. Adeline R. Tintner, "Poe's 'The Spectacles' and James' 'Glasses'." *Poe Studies* 9.2 (December 1976) 53-54.

<sup>35</sup>Dickinson's poems quoted from *The Complete Poems*. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson (1958; Boston: Little Brown, 1960).

<sup>36</sup>See, e.g., John Robinson, *Emily Dickinson* (London: Faber, 1986) 65.

<sup>37</sup>Sharon Cameron, *Choosing Not Choosing: Dickinson's Fascicles* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1992) 99.

<sup>38</sup>"American Exceptionalism and the Naturalization of 'America'," p. 10. Cp. Kenneth Burke, "I, Eye, Ay—Emerson Early Essay *Nature: Thoughts on the Machinery of Transcendence*." *Emerson's Nature: Origin, Growth, Meaning*, pp. 150-63 [155].

<sup>39</sup>See Gerald Bruns, "Stevens without Epistemology." *Wallace Stevens. The Poetics of Modernism* (1985; New York: Cambridge UP, 1990) 24-40 26; 35).

<sup>40</sup>Thomas F. Walsh, *Concordance to the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (College Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1963).

<sup>41</sup>See, e.g., Frank Lentricchia, *Ariel and the Police: Michel Foucault, William James, Wallace Stevens* (Madison: the U of Wisconsin P, 1988) 135-244 [226]. A revised version of Lentricchia's essay on Stevens in this book was included in the author's *Modernist Quartet* (New York: Cambridge) 124-179 [165].

<sup>42</sup>Cp. Emerson, *Nature, Works I*: 32-34; 73.

<sup>43</sup>Wallace Stevens, "No Possum, No Sop, No Taters." *Collected Poems* (1954; New York: Knopf, 1968) 293-94. Pages included in the text henceforth.

<sup>44</sup>Though, as will proceed to show next, Helen Vendler may be exaggerating when she says that "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" contains the whole of Stevens, she does have a point.

<sup>45</sup>E.g., Joseph Riddel, *The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1965) 87-92.

<sup>46</sup> The phrase "eccentric exterior" appears in Canto XVIII of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" (478).

<sup>47</sup>Wallace Stevens, *The Letters*. Ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1966) 636.

<sup>48</sup>Cp. "Someone Puts a Pineapple Together." *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1951) 83ff.

<sup>49</sup>A. R. Ammons, *Sphere: The Form of a Motion* (New York: Norton, 1974); *Garbage* (New York: Norton, 1993).

<sup>50</sup>*Leaves of Grass*, 53-54.

<sup>51</sup>Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (New York: Scribner, 1997).

<sup>52</sup>John Leonard, "American Jitters." *The Nation* (November 3, 1997) ff.

<sup>53</sup>Alberto Pimenta, *As moscas de Pégaso* (Lisboa: & Etc., 1998) 49. My translation.