# A Complex Parade:
# Problems and Prospects for Picturing the Nation

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"Picturing the Nation"

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I'm delighted to be here, and be a part of this gathering. I greatly appreciate Chairman Cole's invitation to be present.

My disciplinary background means that I offer a slightly different perspective on this subject. I am a historian of the United States, but not in any manner a historian of American art. I have no claim to expertise in that arena. My work deals primarily with written texts, especially social and political thought. I have used art pedagogically, but incidentally, adventitiously, and probably not to optimal effect. Yet I have come to appreciate some of the unique virtues of imagery and the visual arts in promoting a vivid and expansive sense of the American past.

And, although I was in no way involved in the preparation of the NEH "Picturing America" (PA) project, I think I have a sense of the problems and prospects involved in making any kind of selection of images such as was done in PA. That's part of the purpose of this meeting, to see what is transferrable in that experience to the UK's otherwise very different situation.

There is a particular problem in doing this in the present era, when the very conception of the nation-state is under question---questions of states being defined by the internal hegemony of certain groups, questions of the privileging of the national association, as opposite to global or local/tribal/ethnic/religious, and other competing affiliations.

There are some elements peculiar to the American way of handling these things, in which much of the patronage of the arts and humanities has always come from private sources. NEH is not a ministry of culture (although serves as a certifier of quality). These images in PA not meant to be canonical. They should be seen less as the Ten Commandments than as the Forty Suggestions. And yet the point was to draw together a collection of

images that are common and familiar, but also rich and complex. They are meant to be illustrative of American life in important ways, but also worth knowing in their own right. These Forty Suggestions are meant to be…..suggestive. This reflects in a very vivid way the unique role that the NEH plays in American national life.

The goal of a project like PA can be defined in various and multiple ways. Partly it is a matter of "cultural literacy" (E.D. Hirsch's term), of images and referents that "everyone should know." But it is also a matter of providing "mental furniture," i.e., furnishing the essential preconditions for other kinds of cultural reflection, conversation, citizenship, and shared memory. These works of art are civilizational markers, points of general reference, tools for cultural orientation. Such images also are often polyvalent in meaning—i.e., rich, full, and many-faceted, incapable of being contained or controlled by any interpreter or community of interpretation.

It is useful to think of the role of public buildings and public spaces by analogy. To carry around in one's head the knowledge of a familiar public building is to carry a widely shared experience, and gain entrée into a cultural meaning that helps us transcend our petty individuality. Think of the vast web of associations we have with Pennsylvania Avenue, stretching just outside the windows in which we are meeting; or the Chrysler Building, one of our PA images; or the Brooklyn Bridge, which PA shows in two different ways. That is why even the ruins of a city can be important, as is vividly shown in the famous Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church of Berlin, whose ruined structure was preserved as a haunting remembrance of war and a symbol of peace.

But we are not only talking about the places that are seen as consciously memorializing the past. We are talking potentially about *everything*, down to the names of streets and buildings and bridges and airports and neighborhood landmarks. These mark the places where many thousands of people who came before us have walked, and fallen in love, and grieved, and died, and gone about the ordinary and pluriform business of life. It is one of the public uses of art to connect us with the lives of those others, to usher us out of the caves of our limited experience into a shared, public world by providing a number of shared and worthy objects of contemplation.

To put it in a word: this collection is about *commonality*, not about canonicity.

Our memories play tricks on us, and they are full of idiosyncrasy. That is why we so profoundly need landmarks, the tangible and visible things that we measure ourselves against, for their permanence. Not that we measure all aspects of our lives against such public landmarks; that would be both ghastly and inappropriate. (In this connection, I think of W. H. Auden's famous words: "private faces in public places are wiser and nicer than public faces in private places.") In our private lives we have other and better ways to remember, ones more suitable to the untranslatable particularities and intimacies of our own worlds.

And yet there is confluence. The best and least conflict-ridden of all secular American holidays, Thanksgiving, is a remarkable moment in which all our private and

idiosyncratic markers receive a rare kind of public visibility and endorsement. Small wonder that Norman Rockwell (one of our PA artists) made it the subject of some of his most memorable work.

Public landmarks serve to unite the experience of all of us. They lift us out of our idiosyncrasy and individuality into a world of common experience. It would be a mistake to see a program such as "Picturing America" as a *national* project only, though it surely is that. But it is also a project that provides Americans with visible tokens of how individual experience can be woven into the larger fabric of social reality itself.

I urge that this very great good be kept in mind, even as we think about the difficulties attendant upon creating a representative gallery of national images, some of which I'll talk about in greater detail as we proceed.

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The title "Picturing America" contains two terms, one referring to the expressive means being used and the other to the thing being expressed. Let me talk about each of these in greater detail, as I think it can be essential to our general search for understanding.

First let me talk for a minute or two, in an admittedly untutored and unspecialized historian's way, about what I see as the special virtue, the genius if you will, of the image as opposed to the text, the image as a way of conveying historical knowledge or historical consciousness, and national identity.

I recall hearing the late Hugh Kenner lecture at the premier of the movie version of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, at the Baltimore Museum of Art. His lecture was on precisely this point. Kenner admired the movie greatly, but, as a literary scholar, wanted to point out the things that words could do but images could not—and vice versa. Each had its characteristic realm of precision, and realm of imprecision.

The cinematic version of the story related in Joyce's text brought a crisp precision to the depiction of characters, the sound of their voices, the arc of their gestures, and the full lineaments of the world they move in. But it had a characteristic imprecision in being unable to tell us exactly what we are supposed to be looking at, at any given time.

That is both the virtue and the trouble with images---you need to have something like the art instructor there, with the slide and the pointer in a darkened room, saying, "Look HERE and not THERE. Attend to THIS and not THAT." You need him or her to differentiate and arrange the visual field in hierarchies of meaning, direct us to home in on X to the exclusion of Y and Z. A picture may need at LEAST a thousand words to be made intelligible.

Of course, the visually skilled and acute know how to pick up on a thousand clues and conventions that help them find their way through the clutter and pitfalls, and nudge them toward seeing the picture aright. But the fact remains that there are many more potential

meanings lingering there, including some the artist may not even be aware of having placed there, but that may well become blazingly clear to those who contemplate the same picture a hundred years later, or that may become imputed to the image by years of cultural usage and historical experience (think, a little sadly, of the Mona Lisa). The image has the capacity to hold gracefully this potential infinitude of meanings, even contradictory ones, and yet sustain its integrity. As we grow in cognitive capacity, we grow in visual acuity. Great images, like great texts, read us, and gauge the progress of our inner capacity, and not the other way around.

The written text, however, while it can only hint at panorama, and becomes too clotted when too lushly detailed, can zero in with laser-like precision and selectivity on the phenomenon to be considered, in a way that a visual cannot. The word is precisely *about* the business of differentiating and extracting experience, even forming propositional statements about it.

The example Kenner gave, as I recall, was the bed-wetting incident described fleetingly at the very beginning of Joyce's book. It is impossible for a visual depiction of this moment to zero in on the specific experience being there described. It is very difficult for any image to convey that level of subjectivity. It is impossible for an image to trigger a chain reaction of one's own idiosyncratic associations, as the relatively spare and minimal medium of words can do. You can't show it, you must tell it.

Now I don't want to make this distinction between words and images too hard and fast. Caricature can do what words do, of course, at least to some extent, by calling attention to outstanding features in the physiognomy of others. And literary texts too can be notoriously opaque or ambiguous or polysemic. Far from focusing our focused attention, they can disperse and divert and defeat it.

But there is a difference of degree that is ultimately a difference of kind between the two expressive means. And this has implications for the particular ways of using images both to teach history and to foster a broader historical consciousness. My point is that we need to make full use of the image's ability to hold multiple meanings, to contain multitudes, in Whitman's grand phrase. This makes it potentially an unmatched vehicle for introducing students to the variousness of history and historical interpretation. And to the ways that the past inheres in the present.

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Now let me talk for a minute about the problem of the nation. Much scholarly energy in the twentieth century, and now ours, has been devoted to questioning and deconstructing and problematizing the very conception of the nation-state. Much energy has been devoted to proclaiming the nation-state's obsolescence in a global, interconnected, interdependent, culturally porous world. Scholars have sought to disclose the ways in which national histories and traditions were consciously created as mean of displacing or dissolving local and tribal loyalties, and creating in their place the ersatz homogeneity of invented or imagined communities. This kind of inquiry has both reflected and stimulated

the rise of a multiculturalist ideal and a postcolonial sensibility, especially in the former imperial powers of Europe.

Some of this rethinking is commendable, and entirely inevitable, even necessary. But it presents problems for a project like PA.

There is to begin with the problem of *representativeness*, including varied faces, ethnic groups, classes, vocational groups, etc. But there is the even deeper problem of whether it is appropriate to represent the Nation as such *at all*. Does this act necessarily privilege some social groups over others? Does it establish a hegemonic national narrative that excludes or marginalizes too much of human experience?

But the inquiry should not stop with those questions. There are others to be asked. For example: absent a consideration of the nation, what plausible rallying-point is there for a consideration of larger and more public meanings? For all of the faults and liabilities of the nation-state, is there anything that can plausibly take its place?

We need to face these kinds of profound questioning head-on, rather than evade them. Such discourse raises questions that need to be answered, and that I think *can* be answered. But the questions are real, and should not be shrugged off, even if they could be.

I would daresay that the problem under discussion is even more pronounced for the UK than for the US, since the US has had the relative advantage a long tradition of pluralism as a defining strain in its history, and since at least one of its longest lasting national self-definitions is as a nation of nations, or an asylum to the world. Consider the national motto: "E Pluribus Unum" It is much easier to cast American self-definition as, in part, the unfolding of an idea. And Americans have a *written* Constitution, which eases the burden on culture to define the nation.

It would be a bad idea to take on yourselves the task of clarifying the national identity at a time when it is undergoing so much tension and flux. We found this out in America with the ordeal of our unsuccessful effort to establish National History Standards. It is far better to find ways to express cultural unities that are already conscious and largely accepted than to seek to articulate ones that are only nascent or half-developed or controversial. A cultural hegemony imposed by trained professional historians, no matter how scrupulous, is a cultural hegemony all the same.

But there is one irreducible fact that must be admitted: the very idea of "Picturing the Nation" presupposes the Nation. It presupposes the Nation as a given entity that can be studied and experienced, presupposes a coherence in it, presupposes something like a national character that can be depicted or illuminated or exemplified. Or at the very least, it presupposes some basis of commonality, some canopy that overarches the experience of those who share the life of the nation. A canopy that either was, is, or could be. A canopy of memory, or of aspiration, or more likely some combination of the two.

The Nation is inescapable, then, and there is no reason to seek to escape it entirely. As I have already suggested, one of the keys to a vibrant public life is the existence of common landmarks of experience—not as finished icons but as *presences* that serve as a basis for common reflection, and are themselves constantly subject to reinterpretation and reappropriation. The act of choosing and promulgating a set of national images, properly understood and carried out, is an act not of exclusion but *inclusion*—the beginning, and not the end, of discussion.

That such an act should also be somewhat controversial is neither surprising nor bad. We speak often in this country of "The Western Tradition." Sometimes reverently, sometimes dismissively, even scornfully. But the Western tradition itself, rightly understood, is one of constant self-criticism and reexamination. That is a central aspect of its essential character. It would be inappropriate for a modern Western liberal-democratic nation to depict itself in any other way.

But to say that elements of national identity are frequently and even bitterly contested is not the same thing as saying that there is no such thing as national identity, that it is nothing more than a mystification and a consciously imposed legend. The project of "Picturing the Nation" can be a way of jump-starting the process of both recovering and reconsidering the national identity. It can do both of those things at the same time, if it is modest about the way it goes about them.

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Reflecting on an image that might itself contain the ideas I am trying to express here, it seemed to me that the image of a parade, albeit a complex one, was a good way to give a shape to this undertaking.

A parade is a powerful symbol of group identity, and national cohesion. It is the quintessential national pageant or celebration. It is a display of the society's various aspects, in a moment of active and vigorous contemplation. Classically, it is a matter of armies, a fact that captures the very real connection between war and the making of nations. It's worth nothing here, since we are in Washington, that one cannot tour this city's landmarks without coming to understand the central importance of our Civil War in establishing the American national identity, both through the war's waging and its memorializing. Much of the greatest public architecture of Washington, notably the Lincoln Memorial, serves to memorialize that conflict, as a touchstone of national identity.

But the very connection with war and armies suggests why this is has to be a *complex* parade, and ideally a parade subject to a multitude of meanings.

I have always regretted that we do not have a compelling image in the American art tradition of one of the most important parades in American history, the Grand Review at the conclusion of the Civil War, during which the combined victorious Union armies marched for two full days through the streets of Washington. It is a stunningly important

symbolic event, a perfect expression of the newly established consolidated American nation-state. Hence it is a perfect example of an event that is *potentially* rich with polysemic qualities. Here is one description:

Early each morning the seemingly interminable lines of men, stretching backward as far as twenty-five miles, began to move; all day long a steady stream of marching blue wound its way through the heart of the Federal city like a tremendous python. It was as if all the accumulated power that had won the war were being gathered, concentrated, and placed on display for the edification of the citizenry.[1]

Or consider this one:

The sight was simply magnificent. The column was compact, and the glittering muskets looked like a solid mass of steel, moving with the regularity of a pendulum….It was, in my judgment, the most magnificent army in existence—sixty-five thousand men, in splendid physique, who had just completed a march of nearly two thousand miles in a hostile country, in good drill, and who realized that they were being closely scrutinized by thousands of their fellow-countrymen and by foreigners.[2]

Or this view:

I read last night of the grand review
In Washington's chiefest avenue,--
Two hundred thousand men in blue,
I think they said was the number,

Till I seemed to hear their trampling feet,
The bugle blast and the drum's quick beat,
The clatter of hoofs in the stony street,
The cheers of people who came to greet,….

And I saw a phantom army come,
With never a sound of fife or drum,
But keeping time to a throbbing hum
Of wailing and lamentation:
The martyred heroes of Malvern Hill,
Of Gettysburg and Chancellorsville,
The men whose wasted figures fill
The patriot graves of the nation.

So all night marched the nation's dead,
With never a banner above them spread,
Nor a badge, nor a motto brandished;

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[1] Wilfred M. McClay, *The Masterless: Self and Society in Modern America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 11.
[2] Ibid., 15, quoting General William T. Sherman.

No mark—save the bare uncovered head
Of the silent Bronze Reviewer
With never an arch save the vaulted sky,
With never a flower save those that lie
On the distant graves—for love could buy
No gift that was purer or truer.[3]

There are yet other views of the same event. Stuart McConnell, in his study *Glorious Contentment*, emphasizes the elements of slippage and incongruity in the event, the ways in which events refused the metanarrative of triumphal and unified progress. Thomas Fleming has emphasized the internal conflicts within the Union ranks that the Grand Review had to finesse and thereby "solve." As I have said, it is a shame we do not have an image of the Grand Review that manages to capture some of these conflicting meanings. There may in fact be significance in that fact, and more generally in the omissions that one finds in the record of a nation's art.

The point of this comparison, however, is that the event itself meant such different things to participants. It was a show of the Nation, but that show meant different things to different observers. Its meaning was complex.

The "Picturing America" complement can be considered similarly, a kind of complex parade of America through the medium of American art. And one can add to the complexity of the idea of "parade" is that there is a second parade going on—or we hope that there will be. And that is the parade of *viewers* for the spectacle of the art works, a succession of generations of Americans (and people of all lands) who will see these works, and by seeing them in their own way, will make a fresh interpretation of the phenomena the works present or represent.

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Finally, let me say a word about the *ways* of using art for extra-aesthetic purposes, particularly historical ones.

Art can be merely descriptive and illustrative---for example, when it tells us about the nature of early American industrialization by depicting for us certain scenes along the Erie Canal.

But PA sought to do more. It sought to include images that had aesthetic value *independent of their historicity* or illustrative value. This is another very important consideration, for it reminds us that there are historical meanings that stand apart from sheer material facts of history.

Emanuel Leutze's painting of George Washington crossing the Delaware is one example (and one of our chief PA images). Everyone knows that the painting has numerous historical inaccuracies, and probably depicts the icy waters of the winter Rhine more

[3] Ibid., 37-8, quoting from Bret Harte, "A Second Review of the Grand Army."

accurately than it does those of the Delaware. But these considerations don't really matter, for Leutze has sought to give us something else: an idealized image of freedom, and of the idea of America as the vanguard of freedom.

In this connection, it is interesting to consider the questions raised by John Updike in his 2008 Jefferson Lecture, "The Clarity of Things":

What is American about American art? What do the aesthetic properties of American art, including choices of subject, tell us about American art, and by extension, American cultural sensibilities?

Updike sees in the long record of American art a particular theme: an aversion to abstraction, and a preference for "things"—no ideas but in things, in the words of William Carlos Williams. This led American painters to a preference for "liney" clarity, like that of illustration, as opposed to a "painterly" willingness to plunge into the elements and dissolve or penetrate their surfaces. He sees this tendency, founded in Puritanism, continuing into the present, as an act of defense, expressive of a need to "map the visible in a New World that feels surrounded by chaos and emptiness."

Stated this baldly, and wrenched out of context, his thesis it seems a wildly overschematic and implausible argument. But it is also the kind of generalization that stimulates further reflection, and that inevitably ought to inform any inquiry into a collection of "representative" national art. And this will be peculiar to the nation involved one size does not fit all. How much are American thought and aesthetics conditioned by material or political or social circumstances, and how much by intellectual and religious traditions that have a logic of their own, and in some sense stand apart from the material and other more general influences? Is the thing we call "culture" a seamless web of interrelated parts in America? Or is it a crazy quilt of disparate pieces? What is the relationship in America between "culture" in the high prescriptive sense—museums and symphonies and high literature—and "culture" in the everyday, descriptive, anthropological sense, of culture as lived experience? How much can we, or should we, strive to have in common as a people—and how much should be left for the diversity of private life and pluralism?

These are, it seems to me, precisely the questions to be asked of the nation-state at this juncture in history. And works of art are a great way to ask them, in a manner accessible to all citizens. That is quite a lot to ask our Forty Suggestions to do, but we see early signs that the endeavour has been successful, and hope that our experiences can be useful to the admittedly even *more* complex parades that our UK colleagues are at the outset of organizing. May you fare well in this difficult but vital work, friends.