

BUSINESS AND SOLITUDE

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Thomas Augst, *The Clerk's Tale: Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003)

Scott A. Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005)

The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, as the historian William Leach has written, is a fairy tale about faith and capitalism in modern America. First published in 1900, L. Frank Baum's long-loved work tells the story of two ordinary Midwesterners in a country where wishes come true: a farm girl named Dorothy and a phoney wizard whose only real power turns out to be that of "making believe." By pretending to bestow brains, heart, and courage upon Dorothy's fellow pilgrims, the "great humbug" turns their faith in him into faith in themselves, in the untapped powers they have held all along. "All you need is confidence in yourself," he says, and his gift makes them rulers in their own lands much as he rules over his. Viewed as a spiritual quest, Dorothy's odyssey is about living in a world with no higher power than oneself. But like Norman Vincent Peale's later bestseller, Baum's sunny story joins the "power of positive thinking" to the Emerald City; the yellow-brick road is also the road to riches, to wondrous works as well as self-fulfilling faith. Like the alternative Americas depicted in Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* and more than a hundred other utopian novels of the late 1880s and 1890s, *Oz* is a promised land where faith supplants politics, less a commonwealth than a common dream.¹

The American dream that our faith in ourselves determines our fate is the theme of two luminous new studies of the ambitious businessmen who made it their creed and cause in the nineteenth century. There is a *Wizard-of-Oz* quality to Thomas Augst and Scott Sandage's parallel depictions of struggling

1 William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York, 1993), 248–60; L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (Chicago, 1900), 184, 189. Jean Pfaelzer, *The Utopian Novel in America, 1886–1896: The Politics of Form* (Pittsburgh, PA, 1984); Kenneth M. Roemer, *The Obsolete Necessity: America in Utopian Writings, 1888–1900* (Kent, OH, 1976).

clerks and capitalists, the rank and file of the rising bourgeoisie. In their diaries and letters, the subjects of these collective biographies strived to exemplify a new model of manhood to which all men increasingly aspired: the “business man,” denoting not a means of livelihood but a way of life. Therein lay these otherwise unremarkable men’s claim to cultural authority in the industrial world they helped bring into being. More anxious to remake themselves than to remake society, Augst and Sandage’s protagonists nevertheless articulated a new relationship between market society and selfhood.

I

The Clerk’s Tale, by Thomas Augst, is a book both intelligent and wise, at once incisive and moving. These dual virtues reflect its nature as a work of moral and intellectual synthesis, an effort to recover the mutual dependence between two elements of modern identity that came together and came apart in the nineteenth-century project of cultivating “character.” Character, Augst writes, represented an essentially *literary* model of selfhood: the “book of life” appeared as a narrative or text, as individuals struggled in new ways to write their own stories, to become “authors of their lives.” At the same time character came to signify an *economic* ideal: moral identity inhered in the “ordinary business of life,” as individuals learned to seek higher meaning and purpose within, instead of beyond, the circle of everyday labor, leisure, and love. Augst examines the bond between these two dimensions of individualism in the lives of young, white-collar clerks, who staked their emerging identity as middle-class men upon their consummate combination of literary and business acumen, or the “capital of character.” Today the symbiotic but also parasitic relationship between learning and earning may be felt most forcefully in the academic world, particularly in the liberal arts. So Augst’s study is finally a work of self-examination not unlike clerks’ diaries, reconstructing our collective professional identity by tracing a principal part of its life history.

Augst reminds us that the notion of life as literature, recently associated with postmodern theory and cultural studies, is as old as modern times. It stems from the Enlightenment understanding of “character,” a term transposed from the process of minting and printing to that of education in John Locke’s model of the mind as a “blank slate” on which experience is inscribed. Benjamin Franklin popularized the metaphor in his *Autobiography*, describing his missteps as printers’ “errata” while demonstrating how writing one’s life offered a means of reforming and perfecting it. Relatively few could follow Franklin’s example in this regard before the nineteenth century, when the practice of writing became widespread thanks to the invention of the reservoir pen and cheap paper goods and especially the rise of composition as an integral part of elementary instruction

in literacy at common schools and academies, alongside reading and recitation. Our contemporary view of the ability to write as a basic attribute of modern selfhood, in evidence everywhere from preschool programs to the insatiable market for memoirs, has its roots in the advent of journals as standard teaching tools and popular commodities. Diaries, Augst writes, were the instruments with which young men gave narrative shape and moral meaning to their lives, culling their fragmentary experiences with the eye of a literary critic, searching for the telltale indicators of character formation much as Puritans once scrutinized their souls for signs of grace. The process of writing itself became a ritual of self-discipline and devotion manifested in painstaking penmanship, a form of prayer not to God but to one's future self, as Augst describes it.

The poignancy of these diaries and letters derives from their authors' deliberate use of common literary conventions in narrating their social encounters, leisure activities, and work routines, expressing their sentiments in formulaic language taken to heart. Like photo albums of birthday parties and family vacations a century later, these personal records press life into well-worn patterns evoking familiar feelings: delight in pleasant company, awe at sublime scenery, nostalgic reveries of childhood, sober anticipations of old age. The very structure of the diary, fitting life between lines marking days and years, imposed a pervasive sense of direction, an arrow pointing from past experiences to future prospects, which fostered a dogged determination to chart a course of self-improvement. "To write," Augst notes (p. 58), "was, in a simple way, to will one's life as a story of progress."

Unlike the Christian pilgrim's progress from this world to the next, the clerks' path led toward establishing a family and becoming established in business, at which point their diaries typically ended. It was a core conceit of middle-class consciousness that social relations basically consisted of "conversations," of writing and reading, talking and listening, or of what academics now call "discourse." Augst shows that this conversational conception of society in general provided the framework within which young men came to understand gender and family roles in particular. As other scholars have argued, the rise of the novel as a literary genre contributed to the development of bourgeois norms of courtship, matrimony, and child-rearing. Augst extends this insight to encompass a broader array of literary practices through which clerks came to articulate their thoughts and feelings in sentimental terms. In love letters and intimate "interviews" they practiced the traits of sincerity, sympathy, and trust believed to form the foundation of home life. They showed their affection by sharing their appreciation for morally uplifting books, public lectures, and what Augst broadly terms "literary leisure." To what extent literacy in love really prepared clerks for their subsequent experiences of marriage and fatherhood, they apparently did not record.

When it comes to their work life, however, Augst finds them struggling to bring their literary character to bear upon their commercial career. Their leading

mentor was Emerson, whose own phenomenal career and electrifying eloquence as a freelance lecturer exemplified his inspiring message that moral philosophy could make its way in the marketplace. Augst focuses on Emerson's later work as a public speaker and author of practical essays on wealth, success, and business, intended to bring philosophical ideals down to earth while finding within market relations the means of self-culture. Despite Augst's efforts, it is hard to say what this meant concretely, partly because Emerson described business in resolutely poetic rather than prosaic terms (that was the point), partly because he wanted individuals to decide what to do for themselves (that was also the point), and partly because what they did, in the end, mattered much less than how they thought about what they did. "[B]usiness is for Emerson a metaphor for how we confront realities that are not within our control," Augst explains (p. 124). The "businessman," likewise, represented less a profession than a "disposition," the potentially universal human capacity to keep one's own counsel without holding oneself aloof from the tumult of "experience," to maintain "composure," "equanimity," "balance," and so on amid the fray. Approached with high purpose, according to Emerson, market society could serve as the crucible of a kind of character that transcended and transformed the pecuniary pursuits from which it arose.

It was a lesson that aspiring capitalists, concerned with their souls as much as with success, proved eager to absorb. In a rich chapter on the New York Mercantile Library, the first of many such libraries for young businessmen, Augst describes its members' zeal for relevant reading that would bring out the greater calling in their careers. The well-read businessman, they believed, joined the street smarts he gained on the job to the "useful knowledge" he learned in the library, together affording him a unique understanding of human nature and modern society. Yet the library served not only to deepen clerks' appreciation for their profession, but also to offset the ways in which business life threatened to undermine their character instead of supporting it. Augst quotes an 1856 report from Boston, in which a clerk writes that commerce tends "to generate a spirit of profound selfishness" among "multitudes of young men" who "grow up without hearts," while the library rightly nurtures a "habit of thinking of something besides the accumulation of lucre" (p. 185). A creative reading of Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853) alongside the diary of a real-life Worcester, Massachusetts clerk anchors Augst's discussion of a related dilemma. As white-collar work grew more mechanical and repetitive, the literacy practices that created character became increasingly distinct from the transcribing and typing for which clerks got paid. More and more their jobs seemed to lack the literary merit that they had learned to look for in their lives.

The result, according to Augst, was a growing breach in his subjects' sense of themselves. As literary value became differentiated from economic value, clerks came to view moral identity and professional identity as mainly separate,

counterbalancing, pursuits. The Emersonian ideal of navigating the waves and currents of market society turned insular and inward-looking, toward private rather than public life. Young men like the Worcester clerk based their literary identity less on their actual office routines and more on the writing process itself, or less on their experience as up-and-coming businessmen and more on their sense of themselves as amateur authors. Moral sensibility came to involve a studied sense of detachment and alienation from clerical work, expressed in the language of world-weary, soul-searching melancholy with which diarists described their occupations and reflected their literary taste and training. The cultivation of character was contracted out, delegated in large part to an educational system that assumed responsibility for the kind of moral apprenticeship earlier identified with the world of business. Literacy became narrowly identified with the silent reading of texts certified by academic experts rather than with the wide range of social practices—writing in diaries, conversing with friends, attending lectures, joining library associations, working in offices—that once made up the “dense landscape of literacy” (p. 2). In the figure of the “solitary reader,” alone with his books and his thoughts, Augst finds a shadow of the nineteenth-century clerk and a symbol of the solitude of his twenty-first-century descendant.

II

A similarly forlorn figure stalks the pages of Scott Sandage’s *Born Losers*. It is the ghost of Henry David Thoreau, of whom Emerson lamented, “I cannot help counting it a great fault in him that he had no ambition” (p. 1). If Emerson embodied for many nineteenth-century Americans the spiritual significance of success, broadly conceived, Thoreau stood for—and against—the moral meaning of failure, voicing the “quiet desperation” that formed the flip side of “self-reliance.” Beginning with the death of Thoreau and ending with *Death of a Salesman* (1949), Sandage describes how upward mobility became a duty as well as a right, the often unbearable burden of ambition that Willy Loman carries in his sample cases. Like *The Clerk’s Tale*, this is a book about the troubled marriage of capitalism and character. In an era when businesses either rose or fell amid mounting competition, men came to see themselves perpetually moving ahead or falling behind, succeeding or failing not only in business, but in life. As the ever-climbing entrepreneur became the dominant model of manhood, “failure” came to name not just a business gone bust, but a kind of person. Not only was it your own fault if you did not strive and thrive; it was, as Emerson said, “a great fault,” prima facie evidence of what Sandage calls “an identity in the red” (p. 2). No wonder the age of enterprise brought so much suicide in its wake, as Sandage notes. For, ultimately, failure became the main successor to slavery as a status signifying “social death,” a primal fear haunting modern American literature and

culture more generally. This is the simple yet crucial insight that drives Sandage's survey, which is written with a bracing sweep, plainspoken clarity, and dazzling style that make it as pleasurable as it is powerful.

Bankruptcy cases, credit reports, letters from the down and out to the rich and famous, and doleful diaries make up the annals of the beleaguered businessmen at the center of this story. More broadly Sandage finds in these and other records of wreckage a neglected annex of the familiar library of rags-to-riches fiction and autobiography, the Victorian literature of what Henry Clay dubbed the "self-made man." The "business man," born around 1830, was another name for this new model American, as Augst also observes. In Sandage's sources, the breed appears far less contemplative and more materialistic, less concerned with composure in the storm and more with making waves: "the man in motion, the driving wheel, never idle, never content" (p. 72), whose unmeditative mantra was "Go Ahead!" As if channeling some of this superhero spirit, Sandage takes the much-studied turn from republican virtue to liberal voraciousness at dizzying speed, barely breaking stride over nineteenth-century distinctions between selling and speculating, Jacksonians and Whigs, or "free labor" and "laissez-faire." By the end of the Civil War, he argues, Americans partook of a common culture that revered gaming and gaining above all other pursuits of happiness. Even for those who lost, freedom meant playing to win.

While Sandage's "business man" is no idle daydreamer, neither is he the coldly calculating Gradgrind or "economic man" caricatured by Romantic writers. He is a man of feeling. Market relations bound people together not only with money and goods, but also with new moral and sentimental ties, as Sandage shows in a fascinating series of chapters on the rise of credit reporting. Founded in 1841 by the New York City merchant and abolitionist Lewis Tappan, the Mercantile Agency began as a network of Tappan's antislavery associates, intended to provide a new basis for trust and integrity in business affairs by systematically tracking, cataloging, and certifying individuals' creditworthiness over the course of their careers. As it grew to employ thousands of agents and soon faced competition, Tappan's firm gave rise to a private bureaucracy of moral surveillance that Sandage calls, with a nod to Michel Foucault, "a panopticon without walls" (p. 148), a forerunner of the awesome databases of personal information now stored by banks and credit card companies. In so doing the Mercantile Agency and its rivals also helped to create a booming market in selfhood. Like the phrenology, photography, and daguerreotype studios that opened nearby, Sandage writes, they essentially surveyed and sold individual identities, portraits of success and failure.

Walt Whitman rambled through the same district in lower Manhattan in these years, gathering material for his own lyrical compendium of humanity in *Leaves of Grass* (1856). "Objects gross and the unseen soul are one," Sandage quotes Whitman. "In other words, in a commercial democracy, commodity

and identity melded” (pp. 118–19). Though Whitman wrote in protest against measuring persons in terms of success and failure, his work shared a common project with credit bureau reports, according to Sandage: the widespread effort to catalog and classify human types as a means of regrounding individual identity in an emerging market society. In the same vein Sandage remarks on Thoreau’s elaborate system of note-taking, indexing, and cross-referencing in his journals, which was implicitly indebted to the rise of “information management” and credit reporting (much as Augst notes that bookkeeping practices, among others, set the standard for clerks’ diaries). So powerful was the ascendant association of personal identity with business that it underlay Romantic dissent no less than Horatio Alger-style apologetic.

The sovereignty of “business man” is likewise demonstrated in the language of Sandage’s “losers” themselves, in hundreds of letters to government and business leaders from mainly middling Americans appealing a life sentence of failure. To be branded a broken man carried moral as well as material consequences, closely entwined: once deemed improvident or untrustworthy, individuals found it difficult to obtain the financial help they needed to prove themselves capable, so failure became a self-fulfilling prophecy. In seeking to reverse this vicious cycle of stigma and struggle, letter-writers delicately balanced sentimental and economic logic, presenting themselves as both needy and deserving, refuting the presumption that they were to blame for their misfortune while asking for another chance to succeed. For a relative few in the nineteenth century, bankruptcy—legal release from previous debts—afforded such a second chance. Sandage builds on excellent recent studies of the short-lived federal bankruptcy acts of 1800 and 1841 in telling the story of the more comprehensive act of 1867, which followed a flood of letters to Congress from insolvent debtors and their families.² Joining the long tradition of describing debt as a form of slavery to the postbellum politics of emancipation, debtors demanded to be freed from the oppressive obligations that barred them from gainful employment. But by invoking “the language of enforced *labor* to describe a condition of enforced *idleness*,” Sandage writes (p. 203; original emphasis), would-be bankrupts cemented the bond between freedom and competitive striving, laying the groundwork for future generations of failure as well as success.

How did those who failed regard those who succeeded? Sandage finds part of the answer in the conventions of so-called “begging letters” requesting assistance from celebrated successes such as P. T. Barnum, Andrew Carnegie,

2 On the 1800 act see Bruce H. Mann, *Republic of Debtors: Bankruptcy in the Age of American Independence* (Cambridge, MA, 2002). On the 1841 act see Edward J. Balleisen, *Navigating Failure: Bankruptcy and Commercial Society in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2001).

Mark Twain, and William Jennings Bryan. Many if not most of the letters came from women, typically describing their husbands' futile efforts to keep their families afloat, highlighting the emotional hardship from such setbacks, and then proposing some kind of financial arrangement—a job, a loan, a chance to set things right. Wives usually noted that they were writing without their husbands' knowledge. In these prescribed ways, letter-writers countered what Sandage calls the “bureaucratic gaze” of bankruptcy cases and credit reports with the “sentimental gaze” of the loving home. They appealed to sentimental notions of domesticity and manhood as a means of making business deals, coupling money and morality as the Mercantile Agency and the Bankruptcy Act did, though with a different aim in view. In explaining their troubles letter-writers commonly deplored the seeming heartlessness of the market, which rewarded their patient industry with disappointment and dispossession. Yet, as Sandage observes, the very genre of the begging letter amounted to a business proposal between strangers linked only by the long-distance market itself. Like Whitman's cataloging of character and Thoreau's systematic note-taking, begging letters occupied the same literary landscape as banknotes and bookkeepers' ledgers, the shared terrain of selfhood and capitalism. So too, like debtors demanding bankruptcy protection, the authors of these letters venerated the ideal of success and those who personified it even as they refused to accept failure as their own fate.

III

Sandage's begging letters presume that the competitive market is neither a monarchy nor a democracy, but a contest of skill and luck. Like the land of Oz, it is a place without politics, governed only by a shared faith. That common creed, namely “self-reliance” or “individualism,” is the overarching topic of these two fine books. They offer complementary critiques, for both focus on the toll that individualism takes upon its early exemplars, nineteenth-century businessmen. Their sources place these businessmen in conversation almost exclusively with each other and with themselves. At bottom Augst and Sandage are chronicling the power of “business man” as an ideal over businessmen and Americans more generally, not the power of businessmen as a class. The two kinds of power are related, but these studies do not attempt to explain how.

More broadly, the self-made man might usefully be seen as a composite of two men, or rather two strands of individualism interwoven in the lives and letters that these books describe. When nineteenth-century businessmen looked in the mirror and wondered “What have I made of myself?”, they confronted two problems at once, though they would not have drawn such a distinction. The first, and older, problem concerned their sense of personal responsibility for who they were and the life they led, or the weight of their own free will

and the importance they placed on what they did with it. The second problem concerned the burgeoning business world in which they made their lives and made themselves, the changing standards of literary and economic value with which they judged their success in addressing the first problem. There may be something to be gained by disentangling these two strands, which Augst and Sandage, like their subjects, largely consider as one. For by examining them separately, even at the risk of creating the kind of artificial dichotomy that scholars usually try to transcend, we might better grasp the nature of the relationship between the personal and the political in modern America.

If there is a politics in these works, it is a politics of self-rule, however draconian or despotic. They reveal the new ways in which businessmen and all who followed their example came to discipline themselves. "Their stories," Sandage writes of his downtrodden businessmen, "show how we turned into what self-help quacks say we are: people who 'beat ourselves up'" (p. 264). Americans collectively learned to be hard on themselves individually, to demand constant self-improvement and to berate themselves when their lives fell short of their dreams. The source of their ceaseless struggle lay in each of them and in all of them: in "I," as in "I am a failure," and in "we," as in "we are too individualistic." In this sense *The Clerk's Tale* and *Born Losers* make valuable contributions to a distinguished tradition dating back to Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* and extending through mid-twentieth-century works such as William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* and David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*. They describe how self-mastery entailed a kind of self-servitude.

Nineteenth-century Americans notoriously tended to view the rise of market society as a political issue of a different sort, one typically explained in terms of "us" versus "them," not "I" and "we." The century-long struggles that they called the "labor question" and the "money question" reflected the prevailing assumption that capitalist development itself was an open question concerning the redistribution of political and economic rights, resources, and rewards. It was the kind of question encapsulated in Edward Bellamy's picture of Gilded Age society as a carriage drawn by the toiling masses while the rich perched precariously on top—a question, as the historians Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene Genovese have memorably put it, of "who rides whom and how."³ From this perspective self-rule, in the sense of individuals' willingness to discipline themselves, helps to answer the problem of *how*, but not that of *who* and *whom*. The latter concern generated a long series of campaigns that drew the lines of battle in various

3 Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (New York, 1960), 26–7; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (New York, 1983), 212.

ways: agriculture versus manufacturing, Hamiltonians versus Jeffersonians, farmers and mechanics versus financiers, slavery versus wage labor, smallholders versus paupers and plutocrats, decentralized development versus corporate consolidation, “producers” versus “nonproducers,” labor versus capital.

Such conflicts appear only on the periphery of Augst and Sandage’s works. In his discussion of what Emerson meant to young white-collar men, Augst refers repeatedly to the “democratic character” and “democratic culture” of the lecture hall, but not to rival contemporary visions of what democracy might mean for market relations—the democratic politics of agrarian radicals, trade unionists, or antimonopoly crusaders, for example, which Emerson and his audience generally disdained. He pits Emerson and the clerks against older, aristocratic notions of culture and character, but not against newer, plebeian ideals. Similarly, Sandage considers the protracted political issue of “speculation”—the practice of buying property solely to sell it at a higher price—only as it illustrates the essentially psychological issue of entrepreneurial selfhood. “In theory,” he writes, “the ‘go ahead (i.e. go-headlong) speculator,’ as one critic put it, was an enemy of the people. In practice, he *was* the people” (p. 89; original emphasis), just as “business man” was a universal identity, not a particular class. One might aptly argue just the opposite: though in theory speculation stood for a cultural model of individualism, in practice it signified an economic dimension of capitalism that generally redistributed property from petty proprietors to banks, railroads, and large absentee landowners.

If politics is not merely a projection of psychic conflict, however, individualism is more than a means of class rule. The problem of self-making for Augst’s clerks and Sandage’s failures goes beyond the rise of business or the bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century. Indeed, it is precisely because the challenge that they confront truly transcends their time and place, reflecting a more universal condition of modern life, that the letters and journals of businessmen could plausibly describe the common experience of many others in their day—and still speak to us in ours. Elizabeth Cady Stanton called that condition “the solitude of self.” “To appreciate the importance of fitting every human soul for independent action, think for a moment of the immeasurable solitude of self,” she wrote in 1892. “We come into the world alone, unlike all who have gone before us, we leave it alone, under circumstances peculiar to ourselves. . . . The great lesson that nature seems to teach at all ages is self-dependence, self-protection, self-support.”⁴ This is Dorothy’s dilemma in Oz, a disenchanting kingdom without a king, a deistic universe without a governing God. To discover that there is no one to save us but

4 Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “The Solitude of Self,” in Ellen Carol Dubois, ed., *Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony: Correspondence, Writings, Speeches* (New York, 1981), 248.

ourselves, no wizard but our own wishes, is to accept a kind of permanent exile from Eden, to give up on going home. Just as classic fairy tales address premodern fears, so Baum's story plays out the quintessential spiritual trial of modernity, namely coming of age as an experience of both liberation and alienation, of accepting the necessity as well as opportunity of making our own way in this life.

The challenge of self-determination in this broad sense considerably predates the emergence of industrial capitalism. Long before most American men were paid for their labor, they were formally freed from the feudal ties to lords, lands, and livelihoods that had fixed families' status from one generation to the next in premodern Europe. Well before the market became the standard measure of men as well as goods, Reformed Christianity removed the protective cover of the church so that individuals stood alone before their Creator, while Enlightenment social science exalted man the maker, creator of his own universe. The pervasive sense of estrangement along with emancipation associated with these defining features of modernity accounts for the unprecedented weight placed upon individuality or selfhood, the unparalleled effort to give social expression to personal feelings and identity. Americans wrestled with this aloneness or apartness in their fearful fascination with solitary confinement and asylums, as the historian Karen Halttunen has shown, but also in their empathy for the deaf and blind like Laura Bridgman and Helen Keller, and in their love of stories such as those of Robinson Crusoe and of Kaspar Hauser, a nineteenth-century German boy supposedly raised in total isolation.⁵ English Romantic poetry is laden with the language of exile and alienation amid mass society, as is contemporary American fiction such as Melville's "Bartleby" and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Man in the Crowd." When Emerson and Thoreau offer instruction in how to find serenity in solitude, they are grappling with the essential loneliness of modernity more than with the essence of capitalism.

In retrospect, the religious and philosophical as well as political and economic upheavals that created such existential individualism appear as elements of the long transition to capitalism culminating between 1820 and 1920. But whereas nineteenth-century Americans widely accepted the modern ideal of self-rule for individuals as well as for society, they vehemently differed over what it meant for the organization of work and wealth, the family and the state. The solitude of self and the development of business posed problems of different sorts associated with two distinct notions of "alienation" described by the sociologist Robert A. Nisbet.⁶ From Tocqueville's critique of individualism comes the spiritual sense of

5 Karen Halttunen, "Gothic Mystery and the Birth of the Asylum," in Karen Halttunen and Lewis Perry, eds., *Moral Problems in American Life: New Perspectives on Cultural History* (Ithaca, NY, 1998), 40–57.

6 Robert A. Nisbet, *The Sociological Tradition* (New York, 1966), 264–91.

alienation from society, from God, from our own full humanity, as a result of the division of labor along with the Cartesian division of spirit and substance—in short, as a product of modern science and industry. From Marx’s critique of capitalism, by contrast, comes the political sense of alienation from the fruits of modern science and industry themselves, as the means of production appear to employ human labor instead of being employed by it. On the one hand humankind’s technological and instrumental relation to the natural world poses the central problem; on the other hand the prodigious wealth made possible by modern technology holds out the unrealized promise of freedom from poverty and the struggle over scarce resources.

These two forms of alienation correspond to historically linked but analytically distinct dilemmas of modern selfhood. One represents the problem and prospect of becoming “authors of our lives,” constructing our individual life stories using materials from our common stock of characters, plots, and experiences, our shared cultural conventions for expressing individuality. The other represents the particular set of cultural conventions associated with industrial capitalism: profit and loss, contract and competition, success and failure. One is what Augst calls “the blank slate of an unwritten future” (p. 24); the other is what Sandage calls “the language of business applied to the soul” (p. 5).

The solitary soul and market man, in other words, are fraternal rather than identical twins. Capitalist ideology conjoins them, portraying the market as a meeting-place of “strangers,” equating profit with progress, and dismissing discontents over wage labor and finance capital as childish fears of the flux and fluidity, autonomy and anonymity, of the modern world. Much of the pathos of Augst and Sandage’s work lies in this kind of conflation, construing character as a form of capital and financial setbacks as moral failings. Such an identification of “business man” with modern selfhood itself enables defenders of the industrial order to label resistance either reactionary or futile, but it also inspires a long line of efforts to reform the system, in two basic ways. Many have followed Emerson’s lead in addressing themselves chiefly to the kind of alienation that Tocqueville described, anticipating that new forms of sociability, spirituality, and individuality would transform the political economy in turn. Conversely, some have looked to the reform of political and economic arrangements as a road to redemption and reunion, or as a means of manufacturing a sense of social and spiritual community, communion, homecoming.

However appealing such visions may be, it is vital to sort out what comes with capitalism in particular and what belongs to modernity in general. An abiding sense of loss and longing seems the necessary accompaniment of assuming responsibility for our own fate, individually and collectively. To take on the burden of determining who we are and what we will be is to feel inescapably alien and adrift in a profound sense. A diary, in its beginning, end, and the

blank pages in between, in its solitary author and subject, intrinsically represents a kind of isolation. “The nature of the dilemma can be stated in a three-word sentence. I am lonely,” as the Jewish theologian Joseph B. Soloveitchik has written. “. . . I meet people, talk, preach, argue, reason; I am surrounded by comrades and acquaintances. And yet, companionship and friendship do not alleviate the passionate experience of loneliness which trails me constantly.”⁷ Such solitude, part of the human condition in all ages, is perhaps most acute in the modern era, as the price of our faith in our own moral and material capacities. But accepting the freedom and responsibility of self-making does not mean accepting the organization of property and power as a given. Market society is not merely the natural economy of the modern soul. Recognizing the difference between solitude and business, individualism and capitalism, self-rule and class rule, can help us to face our spiritual as well as political predicaments more clearly. There may be strength in such separation of church and state.

7 Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (New York, 1965), 3.