

LITERATURE

DUBIOUS AMERICAN LICENSE: THE FIRST IN FLIGHT

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ABSTRACT

The symbols, colours and slogans on vehicle registration plates are part and parcel of the United States iconography. While not everybody relates readily to Ohio's license plate motto "Birthplace of Aviation", everybody seems to know North Carolina's motto "First in Flight". (Although the Wright brothers came from Ohio they chose North Carolina as the site for their 1903 ground-breaking experiment.) With the open horizon as the obligatory conceit of the U.S. landscape, North Carolina's license plate projects a homonymic mis-association with the dominant motif of American popular cultural discourse recognized emblematically by Leslie Fiedler (1960: 318) as the razzle-dazzle of escape.¹

[S]trange! That she who arm'd the breast
for fight, / Was now observed to be the
first in flight.

([Anonymous] 1846: 234)

Inasmuch as human beings are brought into the world without their consent, are put in circumstances not of their choosing and are unceasingly driven by the desire to improve their lot, all men may be legitimately expected to be dissatisfied with their station in life, current state of affairs and their particular society. Consequently, there has been migration and quest from the beginning of human history. The American tendency, however – both in the exploring (positive, vocal) and the diffusive (negative, mute) guises, motivated respectively by attracting or by repellent forces, both as a heroic and an antiheroic stance – looms so pervasively as to appear endemic, as though constantly energized by the spirit of the so-called New World.

¹ This paper is an extension of a pivotal argument presented in Semrau (2010: 21-28).

A popular contemporary U.S. author (Ford 1996: 154) offers that the single most distinctive aspect about his country is the “innumerable multitudes” of individuals who strive to break away from their “original condition”. Bayley (2010: 174) posits that the American imagination “dwell[s] perpetually in the possibility of leaving”. Billington (1993: 181) argues that if students of the United States of America were to agree about any one thing it would most likely be that the country has created “a nation of restless wanderers unlike any other in the world”. This appreciation seems to draw on the germinal definition of the gist of Americanness as constituted by the willful abandoning of all established ways and manners. Begetting the New out of a vigorous defiance to the Old is a thesis borne out for instance by the famous “why should we grope among the dry bones of the past” (Emerson [1836] 1983a: 7)²; or the nearly equally well-known “forward then and now and forever” (Whitman [1855] 1982a: 218). In the prelude to his narrative poem *Western star*, Stephen Vincent Benét (1943: 5) sees the story of America commencing at a congenial juncture of the place and the people, even before the mind may have actually become critically aware of itself: “And, if you ask me just what made them go, / ... I think it must be something in the blood. / Perhaps it’s only something in the air”. While Benét’s is an extended poetic meditation, Beard (1879: 722) was in all seriousness prepared to attribute the New World restlessness to the alternations of extreme heat–cold and to the peculiar quality of the air: “Our habits and institutions, so far as they are distinctively American,—rapid eating, eager quest for gold, exciting revivals and elections,—are the product of a dry atmosphere and extremes of temperature combined with the needs of a new country and a pioneer life”. In *Beyond the horizon* ([1920] 1924: 24), Eugene O’Neill offers: “It’s more an instinctive longing that won’t stand dissection. Either you feel it, or you don’t. The cause of it all is in the blood and the bone, I guess, not in the brain”. Nelson Algren ([1951] 2001: 11) seems to have the last word when he observes with a broad sweep: “Yankee and *voyageur*, the Irish and the Dutch ... halfbreed and quarterbreed and no breed at all, in the final counting they were all of a single breed”. It is a proposition consonant with Constance Rourke’s corrective definition of *homo Americanus* (quoted in Murray 1990: 16) as a peculiar vernacular adaptation and mix: part Yankee, part backwoodsman, part Indian, part Negro, each of whom – in a fashion of their own – “had broken bonds”.

According to de Tocqueville ([1835-1840] 1966: 508), the American is too restless to tie himself to anything and effectively lives in a state of perpetual tran-

2 According to Tanner (2000: 184): “[The American] repudiation of the authority, prescriptive and proscriptive, of fathers, biological or Founding – range[s] from the practical (slough off your immigrant identity) to the ideological (throw off the coercive, restrictive, predetermining weight of the past)”.

science: “[He] will build a house in which to pass his old age and sell it before the roof is on; he will plant a garden and rent it just as the trees are coming into bearing; he will clear a field and leave others to reap the harvest; he will take up a profession and leave it, settle in one place and soon go off elsewhere with his changing desires”.³ As E. L. Doctorow (1989: 132) transcribes the American history: “Nothing fixes in this damned country, people blow around at the whiff of the wind”. Certainly the original historical frontiersmen were characteristically uneasy, with everything about them becoming more often than not, as well as sooner rather than later, unbearably disagreeable: “The house was too warm. The featherbed too soft” (Hartley 1865: 242). As promulgated by Thoreau ([1854] 1975a: 266), the most obvious menace consists in the fact that “our houses are such unwieldy property that we are often imprisoned rather than housed in them”. A sharp contrast to the classic appreciation of the human dwelling as a special estate of intrinsic value, perpetuating itself through the very transmission of its near-sacred name, at the outset of the suggestively titled bestseller of 1868 *The gates ajar* the heroine posits bluntly: “The house feels like a prison” (Phelps 2000: 3). As Reiner Maria Rilke (1939: 129) would diagnose the American predicament: “A house in the American understanding ... has nothing in common with the house ... into which the hope and meditation of our forefathers had entered” – “for our grandparents a ‘House’, a ‘Well’, a familiar tower, their very dress, their cloak, was infinitely more intimate: almost everything a vessel in which they found and stored humanity”. The feverish apotheosis of freedom voiced by Nathaniel Hawthorne at the end of *The house of the seven gables* ([1851] 1983a: 576) goes so far as to denounce the material substance of domesticity: “[T]he greatest possible stumbling-blocks in the path of human happiness and improvement, are these heaps of bricks, and stones, consolidated with mortar, or hewn timber, fastened together with spike-nails, which men painfully contrive for their own torment, and call them house and home!”. This is how D. H. Lawrence ([1924] 1965: 164) spells out as the radical New World message: “Keep out of mansions. A mansion may be heaven on earth, but you might as well be dead. Strictly avoid mansions”.

³ In 1798, writing to a friend in Europe, Benjamin Rush (quoted in Clough 1964: 32) made a similar observation: “To see men turn their backs upon the houses in which they drew their first breath— ... upon the graves of their ancestors—upon their friends and companions of their youth—and upon all the pleasures of cultivated society ... must strike a philosopher on your side of the water as a picture of human nature that runs counter to the usual habits and principles of action in man”. Cf. Sherwood Anderson (1924: 309): “The American is still a wanderer, a migrating bird not yet ready to build a nest. All our cities are built temporarily as are the houses in which we live. We are on the way—toward what?”. This appreciation is still considered valid today: “Having found their land after incredible toil, many of the seekers almost at once became dissatisfied and sought for something else farther on. The restlessness, so bone deep it seemed like a new human instinct ... still leaves its imprint on the American character” (Lavender 2000: 10).

When after the absence of several years Henry James revisited America at the end of the nineteenth-century he got rather uncharacteristically unnerved, most specifically by the intolerable “interruptions in the *morning*”, and more generally by the lack of social cohesion he had grown accustomed to in England – “Besides, ... I have been three weeks in New York, and all my time has slipped away in mere movement” (James 1955: 33). It may have been de Tocqueville (1966: 223) who first accredited the so-called m-factor to American studies (motion-movement-mobility-migration become nearly a theory of everything since) by noting that as soon as one sets foot in the New World one finds that all around everything appears to be “on the move” – “in a sort of tumult” to boot. It is believed that to move but once in the New World is to taste and inescapably embrace this prevailing modality. In *Character and opinion in the United States*, George Santayana ([1920] 1937: 97) reflects on how everything gets “easily moved about, and no one, almost, lives where he was born or believes what he has been taught”. In “The gradual making of *The making of Americans*”, Gertrude Stein ([1935] 1990: 258) offers: “Think of anything, of cowboys, of movies, of detective stories, of anybody ... who is an American and you will realize that it is something strictly American to conceive a space that is filled with moving”. Unequivocally, Charles Olson (1947: 114) attests: “We must go over space, or we wither”. Americans seem to be satisfied that they have “a God-given right to go where, when, and *how* they wish” (Rockland 1990: 63). They tend to see journeying as a private or outright solitary activity.⁴ This stance is given irresistible immediate rationale by Thoreau (1975a: 292): “[T]he man who goes alone can start today; but he who travels with another must wait till that other is ready”.

In a larger sense, according to Wright Morris (1978: 42), the prevailing tendency of Americans has been *flight*: “Flight, not from what they had found, but from what they had created”.⁵ It has been observed more than once that although the theme of escape is traceable in other cultures as well, it is only in American literature, particularly in the American novel, that the preoccupation with flight – more precisely, “the fugitive in flight” (Cox 2002: 17) – represents what is believed to be most characteristically American. John Steinbeck (1962:

⁴ In his time, T. S. Eliot would note: “Familiar with the roads and settled nowhere. / Nor does the family even move about together, / But every son would have his motor cycle, / And daughters ride away on casual pillions” ([1934] 1969a: 152-153). Trying to synchronize with the bustle of New York Pennsylvania station, Thomas Wolfe’s protagonist discovers that everybody was “full of his own journey ... [f]or each it was *his* journey, and he cared nothing about the journeys of the others” (1963: 63).

⁵ Macpherson (2000: 10) extends this appreciation from a feminist perspective by pointing out that “not only do women take flight from their creations – their children – but they also take flight from a society built up around them by men”.

10) sees his countrymen as a restless and dissatisfied people who devote a lot of time to seeking security, and then seem to hate it once they appear to have found it: “I was to see over and over in every part of the nation—a burning desire to go, to move, to get under way, ... not toward something but away from something”.⁶ Kate Chopin’s protagonist ([1897] 2002a: 468) one day “could think of nothing better to do than to mount his horse and ride away—anywhere”. Mary Wilkins Freeman’s hero ([1904] 1992a: 95) is over forty when – having planned his escape “well” – he severs ties with all that had hitherto held him, responding to the call “outside the good or bad”, embracing freedom from all the “cords and weighs”. Sherwood Anderson ([1919] 1960: 47) articulates the urge matter-of-factly: “‘I’m going to get out of here,’ he said. ‘I don’t know where I shall go or what I shall do but I am going away’”. It is a formula to which Edna St. Vincent Millay ([1921] 1998a: 99) subscribes with her poetic resolution: “[T]here isn’t a train I wouldn’t take, / No matter where it’s going”. Jack London’s dramatization of the rail-riding hobo (quoted in Etulain 1979: 61) is understandably more expressive: “Who am I? Why I’m de ‘Frisco Kid.’ An’ wot do I do? I’m on de ‘road,’ see!” – echoed by Jack Kerouac’s (1950: 96) “I’m gonna hit the road, Ma! I don’t need any money!”. Hemingway’s assumed posture is to keep oneself loose: “If you get held by anything, break it. Don’t be held. ... Just get away, for the sake of getting away. Beat it!” (Spender 1974: 25). John Updike’s more contemporary protagonist (1960: 307) opts out on the spur of the moment: “[I]nstead of going to his right and around the block he steps down ... [a] little side street ... his heels [start] hitting heavily on the pavement ... growing lighter and quicker and quicker, he runs ...”. Ken Kesey’s most famous novel ([1962] 1976: 310) features the narrator escaping toward the highway – “taking huge strides as [he] ran, seeming to step and float a long ways before [his] next foot struck the earth”. Robert Frost (1967a: 520-521) poeticizes both misanthropic recoil – “Back out of all this now ... put a sign up CLOSED to all” – and sheer awayness – “I but obey / The urge of a song: / I’m—bound—away!”; not unlike Theodore Roethke (1975a: 193) dreaming “Of flying like a bat deep into a narrowing tunnel, / Of driving alone, without luggage, out a long peninsula”. Philip Levine (1996a: 13) advises simply: “Ask for nothing” – “Instead walk alone in the evening / heading out of town toward the field”. Peter Viereck’s poetic address to humanity “I alone am moving” is informed by the rallying cry to “—run, run, no matter where” (1967a: 3). One of Paul Auster’s recent novels (2003: 1) opens with a matter-of-fact description of how “without saying good-bye to any of his friends or asso-

⁶ Cf. Parkes (1973: 442): “America came into being through a long series of migrations, the participants in which generally knew what they were escaping *from* more clearly than what they were escaping *to*”.

ciates, without leaving behind a letter informing anyone of his plans, [a man] walked out of his rented house ... and was never seen again”.

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Against the ready quotability and easy memorizability of excerpted and abbreviated literary lines, it is worth pointing out that the last passage cited above comes from *The book of illusions*. The famous liberating gesture at the end of the classic road movie *Thelma and Louise* (1991) – driving a motor vehicle in defiance of gravity off the edge of a cliff into the open air of a canyon – is viable finally only as a way of bringing to a close a complex plot in an atemporal freeze-frame. The American rhetoric of conviction notwithstanding, Thelma and Louise’s lunge, the seemingly irresistible, run-away American dream, is doubly a flight into illusion and false elation, since even in death the underlying human situation remains unresolved. It is only in (modern) Greek that *metaphor* indicates literally transporting something across, conveniently on a trolley (*metapherein* being, incidentally, a moving van). Just as the Wright brothers’ claim to having been the first in a powered aircraft flight is being put in doubt (Anderson, Jr. 2004), its counterpart literary discourse is proving even more unsustainable.

John Gardner (1978: 42) was dismayed at the fact that what American readers were offered in their books was mainly “escapist models”. From an outside perspective, such high-profile international figures as Salman Rushdie and Nadine Gordimer expressed bewilderment that American writing should have embossed itself so firmly as “a literature of the misunderstood individual” (Gilbert 1999: 109). Allowable by poetic license, the moral offered to both youths and maidens at the end of the address “A false alarm” from which the present essay draws its epigraph is one of healthy skepticism. To wit: it is not a sound idea to raise, let alone stake, all of one’s hopes and all of one’s fears on every word that is whispered both in the air and in the ear ([Anonymous] 1846: 234).

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