

VERTIGINOUS PULL OF NEGATIVE RHETORIC:
THE AMERICAN “NO! IN THUNDER”

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents a sample historical-literary survey of a specific popular idea of the gist of ‘Americanness’ in the guise of condensed observations in broad cultural circulation. This is to provoke the question about the degree to which this kind of discourse may reflect the so-called habits of the heart (de Tocqueville [1835-1840] 1966: 264), as against how at a certain point it may explode – to borrow from Paul de Man (1979: 10) – into “vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration”.¹

It pays to be clear about the nature of the
“No! in thunder”.

(Fiedler 1972: 7)

Founded on the essentialist urge of resistance to something (anything), Americans are reputed to have always found nay-saying the surest and most convenient way of articulating and cultivating identity. May (1983: 53) believes there is enough material to write “an interesting history of American nay-sayers”, a project that might bring together “radicals” and “conservatives”. Far from being “afraid of no” (Brooks [1949] 2006a: 34), Americans appear to be given to what Wayne C. Booth has dubbed as the “habit” of negative rhetoric.

[All the while] long lists of negative terms are invented to describe the protest-culture; they are seen as against, nor for, as attacking ... as destroying ... not trying to build ... as revolutionaries, not as preservers or conservers of values.

(Booth 1974: 192-193)

¹ This paper is an illustration of the main argument presented in Semrau (2011b); cf. also Semrau (2011a).

As much as to the habituality, the critic draws attention to the rhetoricity as well as the sheer performativity of this discourse when he quotes an anonymous “passionate” manual of 1970 in which there can be found advice on the various ways of fashioning and actually sporting resistance: “passively”, “actively”, “publicly”, “privately”, “biologically”, “spiritually”, “physically” – as well as “beautifully” (Booth 1974: 3).²

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It is widely accepted that Americans have long been convinced that self-fulfilment and individual autonomy depend inherently on the dynamic of contrariness and defiance: “Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist” (Emerson [1841] 1983a: 261). D. H. Lawrence believes that deep-down in all American hearts there stirs rebellion ([1924] 1965: 4). It is a point transcribed more bluntly by a modern commentator: “The American has always been a rebel” (Karl 1983: 91). Reflecting his ideal of the minimal state, it was none other than a future U.S. president who apropos of a local farmers’ revolt proposed confidently that “a little rebellion” be seen as a “good thing” and suggested that the governors be “mild” in the punishment of the rioters, so as not to discourage them too much (Jefferson [1787] 1984a: 882). Addressing the popularity of Jefferson’s posthumous works, a nineteenth-century British author and traveller found them to be “a mighty mass of mischief”, and decided that such ideas were regrettably but too acceptable to Americans – “each individual of whom would rather derive his importance from believing that none are above him, than from the consciousness that in his station he makes part of a noble whole” (Trollope [1832] 1997: 259-260).³

² Cf. the “Ways to say *no*” in Kemp (2005: 209-212), a long list appended with the general observation that the ways and words to say ‘no’ are “as varied as we are”.

³ Also Charles Dickens during his short visit to America became convinced about “the prevalence of various forms of dissent” ([1842] 2000: 147). It is often pointed out that the United States became independent of Europe much more quickly than any other part of the so-called New World. Pease (1987: ix) suggests that it was the War of Independence that finally produced citizens who believed in “nothing but opposition – to family, environment, cultural antecedents, and even their former selves”. It has been noted that while Americans eagerly embraced the French revolutionary axiom of liberty, they largely chose to ignore its other famous catchwords, such as fraternity, equality, and indivisible unity.

Religious *anti nomos* (without or against law, based on the tenet that relationship with God is an entirely private matter) can boast in America a chapter in itself, beginning with Anne Hutchinson’s well-known early challenge to Puritan dogma through Thomas Paine’s famous declaration: “My own mind is my own church” ([1794] 1991: 565). Hutchinson was officially excommunicated in 1637 for having “rather bine a Husband than a Wife and a preacher than a Hearer; and a Magistrate than a Subject” (Lindley 1996: 5). The “*first rebel ... in the wilderness*” (Cotton Mather quoted in Parrington 1930/I: 63) was Roger Williams, who

One could hardly think of a more expressive personal (fictional) dramatization of the present thesis than the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale's sudden impulse – no less than a “revolution” in the sphere of thought and feeling – to recreate himself with a volley of heaven-defying oaths, to teach bad words to little children, and generally to engage in some “strange, wild, wicked thing or other” – all informed by a profounder self than any that might have wanted to oppose some such urge (Hawthorne [1850] 1983a: 306-308). Margaret Fuller, recognized today as an emblematic nineteenth-century intellectual child prodigy who went on to become a prime critical thinker in transgression(s), would admit: “My law is incapable of a charter. I pass all bounds, and cannot do otherwise” (Fuller 1852: 180). At about the same time, a popular author of children's books would energetically proclaim: “I'd rather be a free spinster and paddle my own canoe” (Alcott [1860] 2000: 568). The transgressive spirit was given particularly succinct articulation half-way through the nineteenth century by Walt Whitman ([1855] 1982c: 551): “Let judges and criminals be transposed—let the prison- / keepers be put in prison—let those that were prisoners / take the keys”.⁴

At Henry David Thoreau's funeral service, held on May 9, 1862, Ralph Waldo Emerson eulogized him nearly *ex officio* as something of a licensed rebel, a possible embodiment of his own radical idea of a genuine self poised against the whole world. One could learn from Emerson that Thoreau had been born a paradigmatic protestant: “[A]lways manly and able, but rarely tender, as if he did not feel himself except in opposition. ... It cost him nothing to say No; indeed he found it much easier than to say Yes. It seemed as if his first instinct on hearing a proposition was to controvert it”. Notwithstanding his attachment and in fact rather close dependence on family and friends, Thoreau's life might indeed be portrayed as a series of renunciations. “He was bred to no profession; he never married, he lived alone; he never went to church; he never voted; he refused to pay a tax to the State ... He declined invitations to dinner-parties” (Emerson [1862] 1950a: 896-898). Admittedly, this stance is discernible in parts of Walt Whitman's “Song of myself” – celebrated as the dithyrambic American declaration of personal identity – “I have no chair, nor church nor philosophy; / I lead no man to a dinner-table or library or exchange”. It appears even more persuasively in the companion “Song of the open road” – “Let the tools remain in the workshop! let the money remain unearn'd! / Let the school stand! Mind not the cry of the teacher!” (Whitman [1855] 1982a: 241; [1855]

in the twentieth century would be hailed as a “Morning star in the galaxy of the American great” (Miers 1956: 51).

⁴ Isadora Duncan ([1927] 1996: 9) would later reveal more intimately: “Within us lurks the breaker of all laws, ready to spring out at the first real opportunity”.

1982b: 307). The grey-bearded bard actually acknowledged that one thing that kept him (otherwise rather unlikely) close to Thoreau was the latter's "lawlessness", his going one's "absolute own road let hell blaze all it chooses" (Walt Whitman quoted in Harding 1959: 201). Even if not exactly all classic American protagonists are likely to harangue let alone howl – to recall Herman Melville's gift of the memorable phrase – "NO! in thunder"⁵, it may indeed appear that "the Devil himself" finds it difficult to prompt them to say 'yes': "For all men who say *yes*, lie; and all men who say *no*, —why, they ... [can proceed as] unencumbered travellers ... with nothing but a carpet-bag, —that is to say, the Ego" (Melville [1851] 1993: 186).

Within an international perspective, to Thoreau ([1854] 1975a: 288) the spirit of England would come across in the image of an elderly gentleman trudging along with a mass of useless baggage – "trumpery which has accumulated from long housekeeping, which he has not the courage to burn". On a more serious note, it has become customary to contrast Thoreau's famous "Resistance to civil government"/"Civil disobedience" (1848/1849) with the earlier "Duty of civil obedience" and "Duty of submission to civil government" by the British (Christian) apologist William Paley (1785). Even before the American Revolution proper, Englishmen found Americans (as against the reputedly more pliant and submissive inhabitants of other British colonies) to be "haughty and insolent, impatient of rule, disdain[ing] subjection" (Miller 1959: 3). Commager (1959: 19) explains that where the Englishman would consider the observance of a rule to be a "positive pleasure", to the American a rule may be at once "an affront and a challenge". In his specialized inquiry into the development of American English, Mencken ([1919] 1980: 91) advances an even larger thesis: "[T]he English have ... respect for what is customary and of good report ... The Americans, though partly of the same blood, ... have plunged to the other extreme".⁶

⁵ With reference to this particular phrase, Hassan (1961: 329) posits: "No more succinct statement on the aspiration of the American Self could be found!". It is worth recalling in the context Leslie A. Fiedler's study *No! in thunder: Essays on myth and literature* (1972: 7) in which he conceptualizes "hard" or "deeper" 'no', as exemplified by "Huck's *no* to womankind, the family and organized society, which remains to this very day a *no*". Using Huck Finn as a reference point, Heller (1995: 192) argues that the protagonist of *Terminator 2* "is the future of American naysaying: courageous, morally intelligent". For a larger sense of the phrase's currency cf. Fluck (2009: 2): "[T]he major works of American literature are characterized by a unique potential for saying 'No! in Thunder'". For a further illustration, cf. Cathy N. Davidson's essay "No! in thunder" in which she describes her feelings on being offered the editorship of Duke University journal *American Literature*: "If I became editor, I *would* change it" (Davidson 2004: 666).

⁶ Seemingly unproblematically, Henry Nash Smith (1965: 66) acknowledges: "We are notoriously not a law-abiding people ... our disrespect for the law and its representatives is the dark aspect of our passionate cult of freedom". Hassan (1961: 69) maintains that "the anarchic im-

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Many students of American cultural discourse are (or certainly used to be) satisfied that its mainstream consists of boisterous denials, protestations, rejections, displacements, evasions and retreats informed by all manner of private agendas. The American protagonist has been typically construed as a self-defining and self-propelling maverick, flouter, drifter or renegade beyond normal human ties. Moore (1986: 35) argues that if there is one abiding theme that typifies the American experience it is that “men and women must have the courage to go it alone, setting their faces resolutely against what they see as arbitrary and outmoded rules and regulations”. On a higher level of appreciation, much of classic American literature gets interpreted as an ongoing saga of the solitary hero versus and against society, endlessly “testing his[/her] strength and durability against his[/her] own resources on a mythic adventurous journey” (Pearlman 1989a: 1). America still tends to be perceived as more than a symbolic field generating its own antagonistic impulses, with the prevailing mode of the self as a “stranger or prophet, rebel or revolutionary, lawbreaker or Truth seeker” (Bercovitch 1991: 31). It is no wonder that the lone American hero might appear, as noted by Allen (1964: xv), not only somewhat “abstracted” but also somewhat “larger than life”. Apropos of his own celebrity status, the most controversial twentieth-century U.S. Secretary of State offers in this context a telling qualification: “Americans like the cowboy ... riding ahead alone on his horse ... [T]his cowboy doesn’t have to be courageous. All he needs is to be alone” (Henry Kissinger quoted in MacDonald 1987: 3).⁷

Karl (1983: 43) points to the abundance of portal metaphors in American literature, as expressive of the foremost need to find an exit – “to the outside ... to liberation from restraints”. Returning home is apparently hardly ever a viable

pulse” is “ingrained” in the American tradition. According to Lippmann (1914: 177) the American temperament leans naturally towards a kind of “mystical anarchism”. Hume (2000: 210) argues more broadly: “America may lack an anarchist party in its presidential elections, but anarchist thought is not trivial in the politics explored by literature. Changing the nature of power and community is at the heart of anarchist and some feminist and Native American thinking”. Claiming that every actual state is innately corrupt, Emerson ([1844] 1983b: 563) seems to offer a moral justification of this general stance and proclivity: “Good men must not obey the laws too well”. Commenting on early American history, McDougall (2004: 5) talks in more concrete terms of how: “[A]ll white males enjoyed full freedom to hustle, white women had their own tricks, and even enslaved Africans (we now know) played the system as best they could. No wonder American English is uniquely endowed with words connoting a swindle”. Cf. Simon (2002: 6): American culture has long made heroes out of outlaws ... What is it within American character that leads us to engage in such unhealthy hero worship?”. Cf. Russell (2001: 2-3): “There are those who would argue that we need the cowboy now more than ever”; the cowboy embodies the American idea of “waking alone to the bitter light of dawn” – “[i]n these dreams, we test ourselves on the anvil of self-sufficiency”.

option since it would impossibly acknowledge defeat, spell frustration and in the end communicate the giving up of freedom. It must appear only natural to insist that the essential American story – which is to say the essential American adventure – is not a discovery of society but an escape from it, not an initiation into it but an initiation away from it. It is accepted as a literal matter of course that “the most memorable characters in U.S. fiction have tended to be socially marginal” (Franzen 2003: 89). This popular sentiment has been probably given the most succinct and memorable articulation by Poirier (1966: 237; emphasis added): “To be ‘outside American society’ is *of course* to be in the great American literary tradition”.⁸ It has been suggested that the paradigmatic American tale features a confrontation of the individual with the promise that s/he will be able to achieve complete self-definition, informed by the assurance that individuals can exist in some profoundly meaningful sense prior to, and apart, from society.

Anderson (1976: 415) appears to insist that the above appreciation does not go far enough: “The sometimes open, sometimes covert, rage at the conditions of associated life, and the concomitant assertion of a separate or individual omnipotence, has had more influence on the character of our intellectual life than we have been able to acknowledge”. Bercovitch (1993: 16) talks of a “beatification of the subversive”, a trend believed to have thematized the American Studies as a field of uncompromisingly adversarial pursuits. Founded on clichéd, mainly nineteenth-century observations, slogans, captions, catch-phrases and quips in persistent cultural circulation, this is how in the course of the second half of the last century the study of the United States appears to have imperceptibly established itself as a study of dissent. Although this ideology and actual critical practice have been since principally challenged (especially by feminists, poststructuralists, postcolonialists, ‘new’ Marxists and New Historicists), according to Malcolm Bradbury (1961: 321), once you have taken this ‘slippery’ road there is no turning back. It is indeed revealing how one of the champions and, indeed, icons of the late-twentieth-century corrective re-thinking and re-formatting of U.S. literary history should choose to conceptualize and advertise to the world her favourite protagonist. The proposition is a perfect illustration of the rhetorical habit invoked here courtesy of Wayne C. Booth: “Improvisational. Daring, disruptive, imaginative, modern, out-of-the-house, outlawed, unpolicing, uncontained and uncontainable. And dangerously female” (Toni Morrison quoted in Galehouse 1999: 339). Acknowledging openly the influence of formulaic movies in which there always seems to feature a female character

⁸ Poirier goes on to explain that it is a tradition in which individuals are characterized less by their relation to one another than by their relation to whatever is responsible for the re-distributions of space and time.

with “red red lips” who is “beautiful and cruel”, another highly celebrated author of the new twentieth-century American writing shapes the identity of her best-known heroine round the supposedly self-apparent agenda of “one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate”; whereby she becomes prepared to declare: “I have begun my own ... war. Simple. Sure” (Cisneros 1984: 89).

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Even without a proper critique of the larger issue(s), it is quite easy to see that rather than extending appreciation in terms of de Tocquevillian habits of the heart (in the sense of moral, intellectual and cultural being of a people), the popular currency of negative rhetoric surveyed here meets a model design and vibrancy of stereotyping. It is a phenomenon of an exaggerated and widely held set of beliefs that develops (into) a vertiginous dynamic beyond local contexts, individual circumstances and existential viability. It is a pull capable of turning a single phrase – such as Melville’s poetically licentious “NO! in thunder” – into a pseudo-categorical definition. All-too-often a referential aberration, when all is said and done, we pick ‘out’ (or pick ‘up’, according to the recent meme-theory) what has been narrowed down to a convenient range of easy communication and ready meaning.

As Booth (1974: 195) explains broadly the pitfalls of stereotyped negative rhetoric, the truth is not necessarily on the side of the rebel – “to say no when everyone else is saying no is just another form of group compliance, a disguised and therefore [disingenuous] yes, and it no more proves moral strength than saying ‘Fuck you’ to an opponent makes one a master of repartee”.

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