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Transcribing the Territory; or, Rethinking Resistance

A Study in Classic American Fiction

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Pre-liminary

*There are plenty of people who
think they 'ought' to write
'about' America.*

(Pound [1917] 1960: 392)

*Where a door closes, a door
opens.*

(Pierre Albert-Birot quoted in
Mark and Frank 1991: 58)

We have been led to believe it is all but impossible to ponder America as an ordinary-extent-of-space and an ordinary-body-politic. A modern historian makes no bones about it: "If America were not different, it was nothing" (Moorhead 1978: 164). Granted, the country's ideological exceptionalism has received a fair drubbing since its heyday in the 1950's and 1960's, Columbus Day is celebrated with considerably diminished cultural and ethnic enthusiasm, and all the larger notions of a common American identity are being increasingly hushed into a qualified or hyphenated (embarrassed) retreat. Still, in the popular realm, the usurpation of Americanness (in a sense, the continental totality) by the United States has not been really seriously, let alone comprehensively, challenged. Notwithstanding all the energetic de-exceptionalizing and correctively re-historicizing postcolonial, post- and trans-national discursive/academic efforts, the very concept of the U.S.-based American New World is a cultural bias and a way of thinking from which there is apparently no escape. It seems to persist as a distinctively "idiosyncratic, isolated stance" (Bloom 1995: 519).¹

It was Thomas Jefferson ([1813] 1984a: 1312) who proposed that nature had placed his country in such a unique state that it needed to be recognized, to alter slightly his advice to a famous German explorer-astronomer of the day, as a hemisphere in itself. Systematically recorded impressions were initially of the overarching sky so immense that it appeared to surmount and very nearly swallow up the landscape, but it was the land that would eventually pre-dominate and sub-

¹ To bring the argument up to date, two years after the cathartic events of 9/11 an influential British weekly declared: "America has *not* become 'a more ordinary country,' either in foreign or in the domestic arena" (Kohut and Stokes 2006: 2). Cf. Joffe (2008: 600): "The United States is not a 'normal' country".

sume the authority of the sky. Gertrude Stein points out how the New World's geography, far from dazzling the imagination, stimulates a very specific disposition and response. "That is what makes land connected with the human mind only flat land a great deal of flat land is connected with the human mind and so America is connected with the human mind ... Think not the way the land looks but the way it lies" (Stein [1936] 1973: 87). In a postmodernist novella, inspired by a celebrated avant-garde artist, French visitors immediately upon arrival in the United States begin savouring (testing as well as tasting) the local topography. Soon, they are able to determine, or rather confirm: "This is America, he exultantly tells Jill. Feel it, feel it ... doesn't the surface feel different ..." (Abish 1975a: 35; author's ellipsis).

Given the original general ambiance of formlessness, the new territorial expanse had been first variously imagined and projected, and only later accessed, traversed, finally apportioned and discretionally appropriated. "The continent loomed like Moby Dick before European eyes: a vast, blank, white slate ... upon which the colonial imagination was determined to write" (Gilmore 2003: 5).² As against the earlier ephemeral and nondescript milieu in which the native peoples did not seem to have cared to quantify and enclose the land, the white man's thereness and individual rightness came to be synonymous with a widely conceived right of territory and with a broadly functional culture of the line. A drive of ongoing exploration and annexation, the story of America has been impressed on the surface of the earth by the drawing, protracting, crisscrossing and deflecting of lines, the marking, engrafting and aligning of frontiers, the circumscribing, adjoining and sequestering of territories. The result is a solid texture that at the same time appears to be patently discrete. The New World line system is believed to have removed from the landscape such co-ordinates as concentricity, centrality, direction, reciprocity, proportionality and continuity, effecting thereby a breach with some of the received principles of man's spatial orientation and imagination. The fact that regardless of natural geographical features and long-term human considerations and concerns more than three-quarters of the U.S. territory had been subdivided into rectilinear polygons can be perceived as constituting one of the biggest artifacts of hastiness, off-handedness and self-assertion in human history.

Renowned nineteenth-century American landscape gardener Andrew Jackson Downing (1856: 107) was convinced that although there might not obtain any obvious beauty in a straight or level line, any line can always prove intriguing and relevant on account of being intrinsically "expressive of *power*". It is a point showcased in the simplest of terms by Tom Sawyer when he "drew a line in the dust with his big toe, and said: 'I dare you to step over that, and ... [any-

² Joffe (2008: 598) calls America "a construct more than a country – or, more apropos, a canvas".

body] that'll take a dare" (Twain [1876] 1982a: 14). It is still today that only those who can successfully stake a claim to such assets as they may find are acknowledged to be fully participating in the discourse of America. It turns out that in the New World even a poetic gesture can claim a stately dominion anywhere. Elizabeth Bishop's sweeping terraqueous contemplation "The Map" ([1946] 1967a: 9) concludes with an unapologetic clinical lineation: "Topography displays no favorites; North's as near as West". Annie Dillard (1990: 3) sees the creative process beginning with a line of words that mark out a trail one follows; soon, one finds oneself "deep in new territory". When at the end of the twentieth century Toni Morrison put forward her idea of expanding the appreciation of U.S. literature, she sketched her agenda in a familiar *Mundus Novus* rhetoric, in terms of recognizable lines of force and a recognizable cultural blueprint: "I want to draw a map, so to speak, of a critical geography and use that map to open as much space for discovery, intellectual adventure, and close exploration as did the original charting" (Morrison 1992: 3).

The cultural history of America projects the picture of the world not as a fixed, invariant atlas, but as a sequence of images, scenes and episodes animated by someone who proposes to bring the landscape into self-legitimacy by first imaginatively claiming and then cartographing it, and who later comes oneself properly into being by physically redoubling that very act on the ground. This is the foundational re-source and dynamic of the liberated unencumbered autonomous choice, of being able to aspire always to something else and to somewhere else. On entering the world of *The American* (1877), the reader is assured by the narrator that anybody with anything of an eye for "types" would have had no difficulty in appreciating the almost ideal completeness with which the doubly paradigmatically christened Christopher Newman filled the dominant commanding "mould": "[He] was a powerful specimen of an American ... If it was necessary to walk to a remote spot, he walked ... [He] had never known himself to 'exercise' ... but when, under a special inspiration, he straightened himself, he looked like a grenadier" (James 1978: 17-18). As everybody seems to agree, the actual cultural emergence of the imperial, larger-than-life, eccentric self can to be found with James Fenimore Cooper against the broad canvas of *The Prairie*:

The sun had fallen below the crest of the nearest wave of the prairie, leaving the usual rich and glowing train on its track. In the center of this flood of fiery light a human form appeared, drawn against the gilded background ... distinctly[,] ... palpable ... The figure was colossal, the attitude musing and melancholy, and the situation directly in the route ... The effect of such a spectacle was instantaneous and powerful ... silent and wondering ...

(Cooper [1827] 1984: 15).

Henry David Thoreau – a pencil maker who mainly earned his living ascertaining limits, measuring and parcelling out tracts of land – postulated boundaries for all individuals, with considerable ground or at least broad margins between. This is how even in the most sublime Romantic environment it will become manifest that just as the role of Terminus is to set shore to waters, the function of space is to differentiate and demarcate events, entities and creatures. It has become customary to contrast Thoreau's Protestant "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). Grounded in the essentialist urge of resistance to something – in practical terms: anything – Americans are reputed to have found negatives (including, outstandingly, those drawing on materials and metaphors of space) the surest and most convenient way of articulating identity. Moore (1986: 35) argues that if there is a single abiding theme that typifies in a larger sense the American experience and the so-called American way, it is that both men and women must cultivate the courage "to go it alone" – "setting their faces resolutely against what they may see as arbitrary and outmoded rules and regulations". Enyeart (2002a: 16) compiles and unites many voices when he posits that Americans depend on "the right of dissent in every walk of life" – as "the heart" of who they are. The popular collective image of the American sense of identity has come to be associated with the individual as outlier, excluding, incorrigible, tangential, bespeaking generative tension and apartness. German historian and social commentator Golo Mann reflects the prevailing cultural sentiments in his transcription of the United States as a land of extravagant individualists who never fully submit to the received determining categories. "They can live in a shack, in the woods, ... as hermits on the edge of a cliff, as cowboys on the prairie, as fakirs in the desert ... and change as often as they please ... follow[ing] their heart's desire in true as well as false adventures" (Mann 1964: 55). Today, the admiration of the cowboy, the quintessential iconic figure, may not be as wide-spread as it used to be, nevertheless America's imaginative schematization, its cultural 'capital', still depends on the motifs and formulas of atomism, recalcitrance, noncompliance, radical self-reliance, displacement and awayness. It is customary, furthermore, to point out the relative scarcity of vital participatory needs, relevant shared convictions and complex collective meanings. It still appears only natural to insist that the essential American story is not a discovery of society but a circumvention of society, not an initiation into it but an initiation away from it. Ideologies of different persuasions indicate that in one sense or another all Americans are in effect exiles, either voluntary or involuntary, constituting a nation of non-crystallizing people who quite inexplicably live together in being constantly pulled apart.

Within a wider intellectual, cultural, and socio-political discursive context, it seems to have established itself as America's constitutional role and popular

condition to be a living myth or fable whose continued ultimate utility is to embody certain distinctive tropes and themes and to provide thereby for the perpetuation of convenient ready-made definitions and imago-logical recognitions. It is an appreciation summed up by the following de-identificatory modern conceptualization and, indeed, practical expectation: "I ask of the Americans only that they be Americans. I do not ask them to be intelligent, ... I ask them only to populate a space incommensurate with my own ... This is the only country which gives you the opportunity to be so brutally naive ... in terms of the desert, which here assumes the status of a primal scene ... [The] mythical and analytic excitement that made us look towards those earlier societies today impels us to look in the direction of America. ... What you have to do is enter the fiction of America, enter America as fiction" (Baudrillard 1989: 27-29).³

From the very beginning the various attempts to explain America and Americans, both to themselves and others, seem to have had one thing in common. According to Wolfe (1991a: 461) all such attempts tend to be "centred", in that they all presume that America can be captured, or grasped, by a single unproblematic act of cognition and determination, a single thesis round which everything can be organized and through which everything can be explained. As a rambunctious cultural romp, this whole discourse ends up exciting what Vladimir Nabokov ([1955] 1997: 313) would identify as a "copulation" of clichés. Most readily, the clichés come across in the guise of concise, spare, space-efficient one-liners: "In America nothing is ever consciously related to anything else" – "America is an experience of absolute disjunction" (Pound 1960: 19; Critchley 2005: 45). This is how, as O'Connor (2007a: 1) points out, the "ordinariness" of much of American life is lost as the country continues being "fantasized, sensationalized and caricatured".

Addressing at the beginning of the nineteenth century what he saw as a distorted image of the United States, Washington Irving had laid the problem at the door of "purblind" observers, those who are capable of judging merely of the "surface of things" (Irving 1834a: 240). It is an abidingly pertinent reminder that no one map, be it geographical or cultural, can display everything about the territory it proposes to delineate, since all (iconic) representations depend necessarily on circumscription and on a limited number of selectively distributed

³ It is a standard thesis of social sciences that identity is differentially shaped by social and cultural factors, therefore a universal or homogeneous human identity does not obtain. In a cultural study, Pells (1997: 3) talks of how the juxtaposition of America and Europe offers a sense of two completely different civilizations: "The dichotomy [is of] not just geographic but normative significance: It points to a disparate set of values and attributes; it emphasizes antagonistic ideals and patterns of behavior". As Diner (1996: 5) argues: "America remains the counterworld to Europe, a complementary continent of occidental civilization and a screen upon which to project all the images and metaphors arising from its contrast to Europe".