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STRATEGIES OF ENDURANCE: THE MYTH OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

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Abstract: *The neoconservatives' reinforcement of the idea of American exceptionalism in the opening decade of the century coupled with the failure of the Bush administration to inspire confidence in the American ideals, has triggered numerous attacks against the myth of American exceptionalism coming from within and without America's borders. In response to such recent attacks, the paper focuses on several strategies that have kept alive the mythology of American power since the Puritans first settled in New England, indeed, since Europe first invented America. The messianic belief in America's moral mission, the inexhaustible mechanism of hope in the infinite possibility of new beginnings and the "regeneration through violence" are discussed in relation to the post-apocalyptic novel of Cormac McCarthy.*

The neoconservatives' reinforcement of the idea of American exceptionalism in the opening decade of the century coupled with the failure of the Bush administration to inspire confidence in the American way, has triggered numerous attacks against the myth of American exceptionalism coming from within and without America's borders. A rapidly growing number of critics argue that with two "intractable" wars going on and the "implosion" of the country's financial system, the United States shows all the symptoms of a great power in decline. In the last two years, the self-destructiveness of America's exceptionalism has been the topic of several books, among them Godfrey Hodgson's *The Myth of American Exceptionalism* (2009), Andrew Bacevich's *The Limits of Power. The End of American Exceptionalism* (2008) and William Spanos', *American Exceptionalism in the Age of Globalization: The Specter of Vietnam* (2008)

Hodgson warns those who still believe in America's special mission "to further the moral and political emancipation of the world" (Cohen 10) that America's exceptionalism is an ideological construct which has been constantly corrupted by the country's blindness to its own history, its self-righteous nationalism and a disastrous foreign policy; Spanos makes his point by exploring the dark aspects of American ethos; Bacevich addresses the combined crisis which the US faces today: economic, political and military - with roots in America's "imperial delusions," and from a Niebuhr perspective warns that what Niebuhr called "'our dreams of managing history' (Niebuhr 3) – born of a peculiar combination of arrogance and narcissism—posed a potentially mortal threat to the United States" (Bacevich 7).

In response to such recent concerns, the paper focuses on several strategies that have kept alive the mythology of American power since the Puritans first settled in New England, indeed, since Europe first invented America. These "strategies of endurance" are discussed in relation to *The Road*, the post-apocalyptic novel of Cormac McCarthy.

The coexistence in American culture of strong pragmatism and high idealism, of the urge to a continuous expansion of the frontier and "regeneration through violence" (Slotkin) and the messianic belief in America's moral mission and the inexhaustible hope in the infinite possibility of a new

beginning, which makes of it “a visionary nation” (Karabell), also makes possible the cyclic renewal of the paradigm of exceptionalism.

The “cycle of vision” (Karabell 5) started, we may say, even before America was discovered. In various mythologies the dreamed-of lands of abundance and eternal life— the Greeks’ Elysian Fields, the Romans’ Islands of the Blest, the Christians’ Garden of Eden – were all located in the West, and so was the New World – a new Garden of Eden, where a new Adam was given the promise and the chance of a new beginning.

In his inquiry into the symbolic construction of America, Sacvan Bercovitch observes that “America was more than an imperial wish-fulfillment dream brought to life in the assertion of nationhood. It was a way of imagining that expressed the mechanisms through which...the made-up becomes the made-real.” (12) More than what Benedict Anderson called an “imagined community,” America, in Bercovitch’s version, “was also a process of symbol making through which the norms and values of a modern culture were rationalized, spiritualized, and institutionalized—rendered the vehicle, as the *American Way*, both of conscience and of consensus.” (Bercovitch 12-13)

In its turn, the ideology of exceptionalism is the vehicle by which the *American Way*, the idea of the uniqueness of the American experience and destiny has endured. For, as Richard Hofstadter put it, “It has been our fate as a nation not to have an ideology, but to be one.”

The thesis of America’s exceptionalism first developed by De Tocqueville in his *Democracy in America* – provided a trans-historical pedagogical and political tool to reassert, in a celebratory and mythologized fashion, the nation’s claim to liberal democracy, uniqueness of experience and cyclic self-renewal. (Pease 95 in Behdad 48-9).

Seen in a historical perspective, the canon of American exceptionalism reveals several cycles of self-renewal that use relatively similar strategies to perpetuate the ideology of exceptionalism.

The Puritan vision of 17th century New England best expressed in Winthrop’s great sermon “A Model of Christian Charity” (1630) speaks of the new-comers to the New World as people chosen by God to be successful in their errand, and of America, as God’s project meant to set an example for the rest of the world: to build a City upon the Hill or a New Jerusalem.

In a more secularized version, the 18th century idea of exceptionalism is articulated in terms of the ideals of the American Revolution: individualism, freedom and liberty. The “Americans” are new, melting-pot identities, their freedom based on equality by birth; they are promoters of the new and promoters of change, “western pilgrims” to a new holy land, guided by their sense of mission, forgetful of the past and confident in their promising future. Such a classical text of American exceptionalism is the famous “Letter III (What is an American?)” in Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782):

What then is the American, this new man? wonders Crèvecoeur...He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He has become an American by being received in the broad lap of our great Alma Mater. Here individuals of all races are melted into a new race of man, whose labors and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. Americans are the western pilgrims. (54-55)

While the vision inspired by the ideals of the Revolution draws on the religious underpinnings of the exceptionalist mythology, 19th century nationalism and expansion produce a discourse of exceptionalism structured around the concept of “manifest destiny” which perpetuates the same belief in America’s higher destiny (America as the “elect nation” or the “redeemer nation”) and hence its mission to “bring a perfected form of democratic capitalism to the whole continent” (Madson 48). Or, in Turner’s

version, a belief in the civilizing function and democratic role of the westward advance of the frontier (Turner).

In a famous article of 1845 attributed to John O'Sullivan, the editor of the magazine, he blames England for obstructing "our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions" (O'Sullivan 1845: 5). And in his influential essay "The Great Nation of Futurity" he resumes the arguments of American exceptionalism and uses the exceptionalist logic to indicate the break with the past as a precondition for the transformation of America from an imagined community into "the great nation of futurity", the nation of new beginnings, of perfected democracy and universal freedom, predestined to lead the world. As he put it:

"...our national birth was the beginning of a new history, the formation and progress of an untried political system, which separates us from the past and connects us with the future only; and so far as regards the entire development of the natural rights of man, in moral, political, and national life, we may confidently assume that our country is destined to be the great nation of futurity." (O'Sullivan 1839: 426)

In an age of territorial and economic expansion, the myth of the frontier as main narrative in the exceptionalist mythology, came to justify the history of exclusion and on-going violence written by a deliberately forgetful nation (Behdad) for which each victory "recharged the culture and justified expansion," as Slotkin points out in *Regeneration through Violence*, the first volume of his celebrated trilogy on the mythology of the American West.

The anxieties produced by what seemed to be the closing of the "frontier" in the 1890s and the idea that "with the frontier gone the nation's uniqueness would fade" marked "a sharp break in the nation's history from the late 19th century through the New Deal" (Wrobel vii–ix). A new cycle of renewal began when Woodrow Wilson resurrected the concept of manifest destiny applying it to the special mission of America in a wider sense, not only as a calling for setting a model for the rest of the world (which has resulted in a strong isolationism) but also for "showing the way for the historically retrograde," for "pushing the world along by means of regenerative intervention" (Stephanson xii). Wilson's argument that the US should enter the Great War "to make the world safe for democracy" has been used ever since in the case of all the major US interventions world wide – most notably, in Korea, Vietnam and Iraq. When Kennedy, at the height of the Cold War, used the term "New Frontier" as an inspirational slogan for his presidential campaign and later as a catch phrase of his administration, he gave a measure of America's new self-understanding, of how far the ideology of exceptionalism aimed to reach:

"We stand at the edge of a New Frontier...—of unknown opportunities and perils—a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threats....Beyond that frontier are uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered problems of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus." (Kennedy)

Apart from the resurrection of the frontier myth, the refurbishing of the ideology of exceptionalism in the Cold War years drew upon the revival of the unifying myths of the garden (Nash Smith's *Virgin Land*), of pastoral America (Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden*), of America as the New Eden and the American, a New Adam (Lewis: *The American Adam*). In the years of the Reagan administration, the Manichean Star War scenario was added to the Cold War mythology of exceptionalism and through it, frontier violence reached a galactic scale.

The escalation of the exceptionalist logic in the neo-conservatism of the Bush administration, especially after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and the failure of the New Economy have been diagnosed by

many as signs of the self-destructiveness of America's exceptionalism. But wasn't the victory of Obama, with his reliance on the power of hope and action and change ("Yes we can" and "Change we can believe in") a renewal of the myth by conquering a new frontier? A proof that the strategies of endurance still work?

There are reasons to believe that the new cycle of vision revolves around strivings to restore hope in the possibility of human action, solidarity and interconnectedness kept alive by the spark of humanity residing in each of us. The recent American novel offers excellent insights into the changes in the paradigm of exceptionalism.

In one of my essays on the post-9/11 American novel, I spoke about the novel's new ethical approach and argued that by presenting it as imperative for mankind's future at a time when the use of force and the proliferation of hatred have turned ever more senseless and destructive, the novel makes an implicit critique of exceptionalism, while, paradoxically, reasserts it by perpetuating America's role of redeemer nation.

Taking as examples Jonathan Foer's novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2004), which has for a coda a sequence of fifteen photo illustrations based on a falling man photograph by Lyle Owersko (2001/Polaris) and Don DeLillo's novel *Falling Man* (2007), in which Drew's famous "falling man" photo provides the central symbol, my critical comments aimed to point out a new humanism at the core of the 9/11 American novel striving to redeem the "falling man" images and to transfigure the horror by placing the seemingly oppositional binaries us/them into the larger universal context of an ethical relation between Self and Other. (Mihăilă)

A special case I address in this essay is represented by Cormac McCarthy's Pulitzer-winner *The Road* (2006), a post-apocalyptic novel, mythic in itself, described by some as a fable or a parable, by others as science fiction, which is also, like all the other novels by McCarthy, a critique of the myth of American exceptionalism.

The book deconstructs the myth of exceptionalism by creating a vivid image of an American Waste Land in the wake of a presumably nuclear disaster which has destroyed all forms of life and civilization, except for some desperate, terrified, filthy and brutalized people, chased by wild gangs of bandits—all of them reduced to a subhuman condition by starvation, death and loss.

Nature, "the wilderness" and the sublime of the American landscape have played a central role in the symbolic construction of America as "Paradise Regained", a second chance for mankind and a new Adam, an "unstoried" (Robert Frost) Virgin land, "nature's nation" constructed in the puritan's imagination as an "errand into the wilderness" and in the pioneer's secularized version as the westward advance of the frontier. Both in painting and in literature, images of the sublime of the American landscape have always reinforced the idea of "manifest destiny".

In most of his novels, McCarthy relies heavily on Waste Land imagery with Eliotian undertones. However, the force of his genius for physical description that erases the enduring sense of place exceptionalism has secured, reaches in *The Road* an all-time high.

The sublime landscape is turned into "cauterized terrain" (14) where "all was burnt to ash before them no fires were to be had and the nights were long and dark and cold beyond anything they'd yet encountered. Cold to crack the stones. To take your life." (14) The main elements of the Waste Land scenery are ash, cold and darkness: "...the country as far as they could see was burned away, the blackened shapes of rock standing out of the shoals of ash and billows of ash rising up and blowing downcountry through the waste. The track of the dull sun moving unseen beyond the murk." (14)

The deserted cities are no better: "The city was mostly burned. No sign of life. Cars in the street caked with ash and dust. Fossil tracks in the dried sludge. A corpse in a doorway dried to leather. Grimacing at the day." (12)

Travelling south across the hostile landscape of this burnt, frozen and dark America, the unnamed protagonists of *The Road*, a father and his eleven-year-old son, born shortly after the disaster, are in search of a warmer climate and minimal indispensable conditions for survival. The motif of the journey as quest and initiation through experience that has served so well the cause of exceptionalism in the American novel is used now to produce opposite effects.

After the disfiguration of nature and the reconceptualization of wilderness, the reversal of the westward direction in the frontier myth is another subversion of the exceptionalist mythology. Father and son travel from North to South rather than from East to West (as did the pioneers who built America); they have left no home behind and there is no “Promised Land” ahead. The road seems to stand for the end of the “frontier”, the ultimate frontier beyond which there is only death.

The father’s obsessive concern is to protect his son, to provide food and clothing, to keep him warm and to teach him the lesson of survival and the meanings of words forged by a lost civilization that the boy never knew. For he himself is dying of a severe ash-induced respiratory condition and he knows it. From this standpoint the journey is not only an initiation through experience like so many others in the American novel, but also a Hemingway-like test of experience, with death as the ultimate challenge, where accepting the test with dignity gives the measure of one’s humanity. And just as a spark of human dignity still lingers on in the relationship between father and son, the sense of mission and the purposefulness that traditionally account for much of the coherence and endurance of the myth of exceptionalism, are not totally lost either. At various times during the journey, father and son speak about “carrying the fire” –a mission, a reason to keep going:

We’re going to be okay, aren’t we, Papa?
Yes . We are.
And nothing bad is going to happen to us
That’s right.
Because we’re carrying the fire.
Yes. Because we’re carrying the fire (83)

The phrase is repeated all through the book, standing for the power coming from the sense of mission (“high destiny”) that distinguishes the “good” guys, who carry the “fire” of humanity, from the “bad” guys, who lost all human distinction:

We wouldnt ever eat anybody, would we?
No. Of course not.
Even if we were starving?
We’re starving now.
You said we weren’t.
I said we weren’t dying. I didn’t say we weren’t starving.
But we wouldnt.
No. We wouldnt.
No matter what.
No. No matter what.
Because we are the good guys.
Yes.
And we’re carrying the fire.
And we’re carrying the fire. Yes.
Okay. (128-9)

The meaning of “fire” is revealed only at the time of the father’s death:

“It’s all right. This has been a long time coming. Now it’s here. Keep going south. Do everything the way we did it.
You are going to be okay, Papa. You have to.
No, I’m not. Keep the gun with you at all times. You need to find the good guys but you cant take any chances. No chances. Do you hear?
I want to be with you.
You cant.
Please.
You cant. You have to carry the fire.
I don’t know how to.
Yes you do.
Is it real? The fire?
Yes it is.
Where is it? I don’t know where it is.
Yes you do. It’s inside you. It was always there. I can see it. (278-9)

The mission takes here clear religious connotations; the son is the chosen one. He is invested with the messianic role of the redeemer. The father’s last wish is to see his son accomplish the mission, which seems an impossible task, as he dies before the boy meets the “good guys” who help him continue his journey.

Far from being lost on mankind, the puritan rhetoric of exceptionalism is rephrased in post-apocalyptic terms, with God’s realm in the Manichean dualism threatened by the viciousness of the “bad guys,” with the wilderness transformed into a Waste Land and with the commitment of the people chosen by God to accomplish the “errand into the wilderness” and build the “City upon the Hill” distilled into the innocence of an eleven-year-old boy who “carries the fire” inside him. The messianic role of America as the “redeemer nation” lives on in the symbol of the boy.

Even hope, an important element in the myth of exceptionalism, though seemingly lost, is restored at the end of the novel by the recovery of the missing female principle. The boy, whose mother committed suicide shortly after the cataclysm, when her son was barely born, is able to continue his journey and he may hopefully accomplish “the mission” despite his father’s death, when a woman who has lost her own son, takes up the role of the boy’s missing mother:

“The woman when she saw him put her arms around him and held him. Oh, she said, I am so glad to see you. She would talk to him sometimes about God. He tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didn’t forget. The woman said that was all right. She said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time.” (286)

Undoubtedly, *The Road* expresses a strong sense of an ending—the ending of a civilization cycle (Cant 197)—but, at the same time, it teaches the lesson of endurance, which perpetuates the myth of American exceptionalism and projects it far into the future of a post-apocalyptic world.

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