

LITERATURE AND AMERICAN VALUES: THE AMERICAN CRUSOE AND THE IDEA OF THE WEST

TATIANA PINCHUKOVA

(Mogilev State University, Belarus)

American national values seem more directly connected to economic and political life than to literature. Literature may reflect those values, and there is an inextricable connection between cultural values and American literature. At the deepest level of consciousness one reinforces and recycles the other. National identity is revealed in literature and is inseparable from the national sense of purpose and destiny.

Robinson Crusoe may be considered an American prototype who embodied American cultural values and whose experiences have become entwined with the American sense of national purpose. Leaving home and family, he traveled across a sea and settled in a New World colony, then embarked on another adventure that left him shipwrecked on a deserted island where his very survival depended upon his wits and natural intelligence. Defoe's story of 1719 paralleled closely the experience of the first settlers in North America. The writer imagined a Crusoe who turned out to be the father of all Americans.

Like the early settlers, Robinson Crusoe brought to the New World a split consciousness in which he had to reconcile his Puritan sense of God with an empirical state of mind. He survived because he learned to read nature and ultimately managed to impose his will upon nature learning to control his immediate environment. He was helped in this purpose by tools that he brought from the ship-wrecked boat as well as his ability to make new ones. His hard work and resourcefulness, his rudimentary understanding of and desire to control his environment, began to pay off. He soon discovered that this new world was beginning to give way to his control. Soon he extended his control over other humans.

As others arrived on the island, Crusoe welcomed them so long as they accepted a contract theory of government with himself as head. Near the end of the novel, as he prepared to leave the island, Crusoe also revealed his beliefs about women. Their role, he insisted, must be subsumed to that of men and justified by breeding purposes. Before he left the island, Crusoe laid claim to the land, part of which he gave up for communal use, the rest of which he claimed for himself. When he returned to the island on the last page of the novel, he began to subdivide and sell it as real estate.

If we step back from this novel, we can find why Crusoe is seen as father of all Americans. Coming from the Old World to the New, he brought with him both the old religious-mythic consciousness and a new empirical-scientific state of mind. With the help of tools and a rudimentary technology he imposed his will upon the land, bringing the animals, the natives, and eventually women under his control. And before he was through, he had turned this control into wealth. The American Crusoe reflects a value system in which the brightest ideas compete with the pragmatic, utilitarian motives

James Fenimore Cooper's *Natty Bumpoo* shows a Crusoe crossing the country from up-state New York to the western prairie leaving civilization behind. Herman Melville shows him at work. In Ahab from *Moby Dick* the American Crusoe is challenged by the American Faust. Ahab cannot accept a world of limits and, therefore, tries to impose his will upon people and nature itself. Melville explores the problem of man's desire to control and subsume nature, and his Crusoe is transformed into a wild kind of man who has a life mission to fulfill.

Walt Whitman celebrated the building of America in *Leaves of Grass* (1855) but he became concerned over the growing materialism of America that he recorded in *Democratic Vistas* (1871). He strongly opposed Robinson Crusoe's idea of individual exploitation of the land and called to restore harmony between man and nature. Such a unity could allow a return of faith that had been "scared away by science."

In *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), Mark Twain gives his interpretation of the Crusoe story. In his vision, the nineteenth century is contrasted to the sixth century, but so is the commercial-industrial world of Robinson Crusoe and the outdated feudal order. Hank Morgan tries to impose his will on the old system and overpowers it, equipped with knowledge of science and assortment of tools and gadgets that were the product of technological progress.

William Faulkner also dealt with the Robinson Crusoe legacy in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). Henry Sutpen tries to create his personal empire out of the wilderness, taming the land. Indians, African Americans, and women are only agents to his grandiose mission. His mentality is in many ways similar to Robinson Crusoe's, but he is quite unscrupulous and forceful and, as a result, wilderness becomes an enemy and leads to his destruction.

In *The Great Gatsby* (1925), F. Scott Fitzgerald's protagonist models himself on the old frontier values which have been dramatically changed in the historical process. At the end of the novel, Nick Carraway thinks back to what America must have meant to the new settlers, the old Dutch sailors who brought their hopes to the "fresh, green breast of the new world": "<...> for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an esthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder." He concludes on a sad note, "He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night." The old ideals are now exhausted of possibility.

Over the centuries, the American Crusoe has changed from commercial-technological man to his far more complex modern counterpart. American writers have tried to identify what Americans are and have and can be. They explore the American Idea trying to show the country and the nation as a matter of both being and becoming.

The sense of American national identity has found its origins in actual experiences. Robinson Crusoe has been in America with its people for a long time, but he has been transformed from without just as the institutions that he embodies have been transformed from within. What has not changed is his persistence.

Электронный архив библиотеки МГУ имени А.А. Кулемина