

PROGRESO Y PROSPERIDAD

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Legend has it that Einstein was fond of saying that if he couldn't explain the theory of relativity to a 10 year old then he didn't know what he was talking about. Perhaps a hero of science, a genius, can cleave to such a rhetoric, but what about us in the humanities who find ourselves lost between competing theories, debating the status of our most basic terms and defending the very existence of our disciplines?. Few of us nurture the dream of being scientific, i.e., shaping testable hypotheses, a utopia once allied to the structuralist melange of charts, diagrams, schematic models and underlying truths that serve to tell us what codes we share, how alike, in our thirst for narrative, we all really are... A utopia that ran smack into the brilliant skepticism of deconstruction.

What then do we nurture?. How shall we talk, those of us who find ourselves rather far away from either the explanatory power of inductive science or skepticism?. What I propose to do today is talk in one of the less-appreciated modes left open to us. It is the game of rational speculation, a la Edmund Wilson, in which one uses and explores our shared assumptions about American literature and contemporary culture to probe the story of our progress and prosperity.

In this spirit, I should like to return to Einstein and my favorite of his stories for 10 year olds; it is the one about the identical twins, one of whom goes off into space nearly at the speed of light only to return home years later, young and fresh as ever, to discover a doddering older brother obsessed with rejuvenation.

Suppose then a simple scenario drawn from this tale. The younger twin never did make it home but stayed in the United States leaving the older twin in Spain. Hearing of his older brother's troubles, the younger twin decides to return to the Old World, carrying back with him the Fountain of Youth (American mass culture). Part of the older twin clutches to the Fountain of Youth like a bald man to a hair potion, but another part smells fraud. He suspects the Fountain of Youth is not a rejuvenation of culture, but the now superannuated fantasy of progress and prosperity, a getting and spending guaranteed to lay waste to the world.

Simple, yes, and serious. For while Presidents, Felipe González and Ronald Reagan alike, exhort us to progress and prosperity (hopefully all of us remember the slogans of the most recent political campaigns), intellectuals such as Octavio Paz keep reminding us that "La modernidad (el cambio) está herida de muerte: el sol del progreso desaparece en el horizonte...". So which is it?. Are we really faced with a choice between the political necessity of optimism and the intellectual recognition of an end or rupture?. What is this thing people want to call the post-modern, post-industrial world?. And where does literature live in such a world?.

This is not simple. It is a messy business, made all the more complex by our speaking of New World and Old, of our numerous and complex origins and histories. And so, with your permission, having planted the problem, I shall pretend for the moment that I am the twin who left the Old World never to return, but lives in the United States as it maneuvers between its guises of world's best hope and imperial master. I will talk about my own literature and its conflict with progress and prosperity, for I suspect it speaks to all of us twins born to Western Civilization.

Given my ground rules, I might have entitled my talk "Progress and Prosperity" and left Felipe González's political slogan in its own Latin register. But I am afraid I knew no more striking entry to the shared cultural crisis of our two countries (or should I say, once again, Western Civilization?) than to call out these two words at the heart of the heart of the contradiction. It is this contradiction, this "America" that so much of American literature has made its subject. By "America" I refer to America the cliché, that bustling economic community of freemen whose first great hero was none other than Benjamin Franklin, inventor/inventor of self, who desacralized the Protestant work ethic and made it

into a fad for the industrious; and whose autobiography was to define a genre—the self-help book.

But it wasn't Franklin's autobiography that placed him in the literary vanguard. Rather, it was his *Poor Richard's Almanac* (and later *Poor Richard's Improved*), fount of popular wisdom and Franklinesque riches. While other American writers were first dreaming of standing beside their European brothers as masters of the arts, Franklin was seducing the American audience in a language flagrantly American, a fact that would not escape Mark Twain some hundred years later. Lover of twins and contradiction (like myself), Twain would find the exact combination of self-promotion, realistic and vulgar and vernacular prose to make it big with the ungentle. As such, Twain was the model Chamber of Commerce businessman launching himself into progress and prosperity. But his *Huck Finn* was a rejection of progress and prosperity, and in this, as simple or facile as it may sound, lay the roots of Twain's contradiction and his unhappiness. This was the America Twain himself had described and named in *The Gilded Age*.

Twain, as we all know, claimed, as Walt Whitman and Franklin had, to be the model American. But unlike Whitman, Twain could not imagine the American democracy as the model for man's evolution. Rather he saw progress and prosperity as a struggle in which each man fought for his due. And yet, social difference and injustice (and his own success) was hateful to him; and he vacillated between downhome huckster and robber baron, socialite and *enfant terrible*. Unlike Franklin and Whitman, he was unable to celebrate America in his work. With increasing bitterness, he decried what I have come to call the three pillars of American literature: racism, violence, and greed.

Perhaps it is unfair of me to compress the American narrative (at least the standards of the canon) into a struggle between a no-saying literature (c. f. Leslie Fiedler's "No! in Thunder") and a yes-saying society (listen to any Ronald Reagan speech) with the poor novelist (the person) caught inbetween. Perhaps I should avoid the flat strokes of the television bio-pic, but my intention is to confront the banality of the representations made of America (the grand virtue of American Studies standards such as *The Virgin Land* and *The Machine in the Garden*), and also praise American novelists for pounding away at the contradiction in their culture and in themselves. From Twain to Kurt Vonnegut (an odd but happy lineage, right down to the ironic mustaches), from Faulkner to Alice Walker, from Nathaniel Hawthorne to

Philip Roth (if one can imagine Hester Prynne oversexed and living in New Jersey), for more than 100 years the American novel has been obsessed with the failure of what we blithely call "The American Dream". The novel keeps asking, "How in the world's richest country, with its ideology of life, liberty...?". One is tempted to yawn, to call the American novelist naive, to turn, as Barth, Coover, Gass, and Hawkes did, to a fiction of sounds and movements; but for better or worse, the American novel and its critics, as in the case of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, keep returning to a literature that addresses the frustrations of the individual set against the promise of America. I am reminded in *The Color Purple* of the American passion for the first-person narrative as the last stand against the collective racism, greed, and violence of American life. It is a first-person speaking in his own voice, apparently unliterary, that unites such distinct works as *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Invisible Man*.

Those familiar with the recent debates over literary theory and the canon (re: the series on the rewriting of American literary history in *American Literature*) may find the route I am taking somewhat strange. But what I wish suggest, briefly, is that our acceptance of diversity and difference may actually reopen the discussion of central themes and obsessions in our literature. The fascination with *The Color Purple*, for example, has provided such an opportunity. In this *bildungsroman*, we encounter the dream of self that appears to have died in white male American fiction. This is the subject of my talk: the America that killed that dream. For in its attainment of progress and prosperity, white America failed the individual. Could it be this simple? Does it help explain why *The Color Purple* searches for a seam in American history where there might have been space for an individual to emerge?

But to return to white American fiction and its attack on the American business mentality. If the American realists and naturalists, Crane, Dreiser, Lewis, Dos Passos, were relentless in their denunciations, their distance from their characters allowed readers, in turn, to distance themselves from the obvious. F. Scott Fitzgerald, the literary yuppie with a conscience, closed that gap in a single work, *The Great Gatsby*. In his novel (and in his life) Fitzgerald gave testimony to each of the angles we have been playing on: the rupture between the public rhetoric of progress and prosperity and the individual discourse of discontent; the impossibility of moral men in an immoral society, to paraphrase Reinhold Niebuhr; the novelist's contradictory role of critic of society lusting after success in that society; the failure of

modernity; the overwhelming power of a "false" culture. In *The Great Gatsby*, we are presented with Gatsby, the mystery, who in the pathetic meeting between his father and Nick following his death is reduced to nothing more than the product of his own boyhood diary with its Franklinesque order and list of Do's and Don't's, its promise of self improvement: the logical product of the false culture.

What has always struck me about this scene is not the revelation of Gatsby's ordinariness, but Nick's compliance with the grandiose gameplan Gatsby had laid out for himself. Here, as in the rest of *Gatsby*, Nick indulges the artificial simplicity of Gatsby's life along with Gatsby's simple (false) telling of it. Thus, Nick reduces Gatsby's (and America's) desires to one: the image of the unattainable girl he died for, the girl with the voice like money. Nick's Gatsby lives outside ordinary contradiction, absolved of the turmoil of conflicting desires. It is a clean life, highly functional, but with the disadvantage, like any piece of vacuous mass culture, of not offering much in the way of character. The result is a novel whose theme is the failure of progress and prosperity (e. g., rotted billboards, death-dealing automobiles, long lists of the meaningless names of the rich), but whose story, wisely, is given over to Nick, and his conflict and confusion over Gatsby's failed desire. As such, Nick's assured narrative voice is also a veneer. Finally, all Nick can do is convert his putative history of a man, Gatsby, into a private nostalgic *tour de force* in which he invokes an imagined primitive and utopian America. In the inspired, famous closing passage, Nick calls up both the awe of the first Dutch sailors before the virgin land and the beguiling future he hopes will unite him with that past, and so drifts toward delirium: "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms further... And one fine morning.

"So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past".

Like the meretricious happy ending of a Hollywood film, Nick's closing eloquence can not recoup either the futuristic romance of progress and prosperity or the primitivist vision of the goodness of man in nature. Possibility and cruelty have been set at their grandest extremes and neither has weathered Nick's confused lyric: Gatsby and America were their own romantic inventions.

Finally, all Nick is left with is his refined *pasotismo*, his complicity, which he tries to pass off as objective and pragmatic. He will return home with the remains of his bourgeois comfort because, as the saying goes, Rich or poor, happy or sad, it's nice to have money.

Fitzgerald wrote in his autobiographical piece, "The Crack Up", that the test of a great mind was the ability to hold two contradictory ideas and keep on functioning. If anything marks our times and defines that illusive sense of netherness so often called postmodernism, it is precisely the knowledge that we are functioning in the midst of such a contradiction: the ethos of progress and prosperity no longer smack of truth (the mathematics of relativity are hardly necessary to count up the dead in nuclear apocalypse), but it seems to be the only rhythm the drummer knows to beat. Hence, our fascination with America.

Gatsby is remarkable for the skill with which it orchestrates this rhythm, this America, revealing the production of great excitement, movement, and variety. But it is, of course, going nowhere, like the proverbial runner on the treadmill building Herculean thighs for tomorrow's stint on the treadmill. And the world, our world, has fixed its eyes on this apparent motion, fixed its trepidations on "the world's best hope". America's power has made it the repository, rightly or wrongly, of our fears, of the failure of *civilization*. For we know, to quote Claude Levi Strauss, that "civilization manufactures monoculture like sugar beet". Or to abuse Andy Warhol's more famous epigram: We've all been famous for 15 minutes and it's turned out to be so damned boring. Or, finally, as Juan Cueto remarked recently, he's learned from his American friends how to ZAP: hit the remote control button on the video and you skip all the boring parts.

ZAP! and I'm back to Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald, the person (as I imagine him) lacked Gatsby's or Franklin's (the invented Franklin of *The Autobiography*) will to rationalize. Gatsby and Franklin each took success as his American right, while Fitzgerald, the conscience-stricken novelist, brooded over manners and morals. Gatsby's dirty millions were as alien to Fitzgerald as Franklin's capitalist homily, "A penny saved is a penny earned". And so Fitzgerald failed, spendthrift of his pennies and his passion in a society he was sure measured success and sanity by a healthy balance sheet and a balanced mind. He was fascinated and awed by the businessman, the maker 'n shaker, the Radical who in reinventing economic life inevitably reinvents social life while claiming to protect the traditional irrational and symbolic forms

connected with the old way of doing things. This is the Radical we encounter in "Bartleby the Scrivener", the unnamed attorney who with his routine and religion can not imagine why a man hired from an ad in a newspaper to copy out the capitalist liturgy would prefer not to; the man without qualities Henry James throws upon a grave in "The Beast in the Jungle"; the fool Sinclair Lewis villifies in *Babbitt*. He is the perversion of Emerson's Man Thinking. He can tour America for General Electric proud to say "Progress is our most important product" with little idea what the phrase means.

These, then, are what I suspect are our shared assumptions about American narrative literature and where the American model of progress and prosperity have led us. But to this I must add a rather large BUT. The younger twin can now drop his pretense and admit what has been obvious all along: he has been in the Old World listening not just to the complaints of his countrymen, but of Levi-Strauss and Juan Cueto and the French university students rebelling against the imposition of "the American university model", etc., etc. They insist that the Americans are *doing it*. Or as Wim Wenders, the German filmmaker so succinctly put it, "The Americans have colonized our unconscious". American mass culture has, allegedly, absorbed the entire world, and Wenders has gone to America to make movies.

So what is to be done? I suggested in my introduction that we in the humanities are unsure of how to speak. What I've tried to do here is return, for a moment, to the obvious in order to ask if we might not look once again to the novelist (as my representative artist) laboring to recoup the individual from the mass lie. It is, perhaps, a conservative move, but one, I believe, made not just by Americans, but by novelists such as Salman Rushdie and Milan Kundera (in their widely published essays as well as their novels). For each of us is responsible, finally, for our shame (to invoke Rushdie once again) whatever our nationalities or critical persuasions. We must reinvent our dialog and struggle in a world so strange that our sage, Albert Einstein, has left off telling us fables, and was last seen wandering about a movie set making insignificant passes at something that vaguely resembles Marilyn Monroe.

