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"There's no place like home": Geoff Ryman's *Was* and Turner's *Myth of National Childhood*

by Steffen Hantke

The "plot of a historical narrative," Hayden White has argued, "is always an embarrassment and has to be presented as "found" in the events rather than put there by narrative techniques" (21). The "odor of the ideal," which is presumably a foul one, hangs over "a world that is putatively "finished," done with, over, and yet not dissolved, not falling apart." Perhaps White's indictment of narrative as a neutral reflection of historical events accounts for the degree of hostility and admiration that has been directed toward Frederick Jackson Turner and his hypothesis of the frontier as the crucial determinant of the American experience. What is at stake for both admirers and detractors of Turner is not so much the truth or accuracy of the frontier hypothesis but rather that which White keeps referring to as "the impulse to moralize reality" (14), that is to say, "the need . . . to rank events with respect to their significance for the culture or group that is writing its own history" (10). That this "culture or group," which is in control of Turner's narrative, is a specific segment of America, and that therefore "the American experience" is properly speaking "their" American experience, is the reason for most of Turner's critics to reject his hypothesis as a unifying fiction. By telling a story about American history, Turner not only imposes a pre-established formula on a set of events but also, in the process, assigns meanings to these events that reflect an extraneous set of cultural interests and preoccupations. What White calls "the moralizing impulse" in all historical narrative Turner's critics will call by the far less flattering term--ideology--instead.

However, most of Turner's detractors find themselves in the difficult situation of having to argue against a historical narrative which, even if it did not sufficiently account for the period with which Turner is concerned, has held such a privileged position in the collective political unconscious that its explanatory reach seems virtually inescapable. As a central trope or metaphor in a larger legitimizing strategy, its influence has been felt in every expansionist project the US have been involved in during the twentieth century. As a self-fulfilling prophecy, it operates in the deepest structures of American exceptionalism, both as a social and as a psychological force. In order to resist Turner without dismissing him altogether, therefore, critics of the frontier hypothesis would need to intervene on the level of narrative if they hope to be successful. For it is here, according to Hayden White, that ideology is being manufactured. To participate in this rewriting of the frontier hypothesis, let me begin by asking the question which genre, so to speak, Turner chooses for his representation of American history. What type, or archetype, of story is the frontier hypothesis modeled upon? Which experiential paradigms make it intelligible for audiences of all colors and creeds? Is there an ahistorical, non-literal grounding for Turner's historiographic discourse? In other words, where does the foul "odor of the ideal" originate that has troubled critics of the frontier hypothesis all this time?

Right at the beginning of "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," Turner points out that he is about to describe a period that has just ended. It is not only one of many such periods in American history but the first one; nothing of any comparable significance precedes it. The "closing of a great historic movement," (1) as he calls it, opens up the possibility of its description, its critical dissection, and its ideological appropriation. This is the moment which grants the historian or the scholar the necessary critical distance. Turner's reference to "the bulletin of the Superintendent of the Census for 1890," cast in a language that itself carries governmental authority, makes it official that we, together with the speaker, can only conceive of the frontier as a historical event or process from which we are, by virtue of our late arrival to history, excluded.

Narrativizing history in this manner goes against the first instinct to presuppose that the present serves as a positive *telos*, the crowning achievement of the past. The present moment may answer to what Hayden White calls "the demand for closure in the historical story," (21) but if this closure does in fact provide "moral meaning" then its moral is not that every day in every way we all get better. As "sequences of events [are] assessed as to their significance as elements in a moral drama," the drama Turner unfolds for us is one characterized not by a sense of accomplishment but by a sense of loss. His rhetoric, the description of the frontier as a "great historic movement," leaves no doubt that Turner regards his subject with admiration, fondness, perhaps even with awe. It would be fair to describe Turner's sentimental *telos*

as retrospective. Given the frontier's profound affect on both the individual and the national character of the United States, being present right there and then would have provided the opportunity to see history in the making, to observe the taking shape of the present in the aftermath of the nation's birth. As a historian, and as one who believes in the termination of the frontier period, Turner must have been sorry to have missed out on first-hand experience with this awesome historical force. Wishing that he could have been there, yet acknowledging that his own position of understanding and conceptualizing the frontier the way he does requires being shut out from it, are the preconditions of an intellectual and emotional attitude that can best be described as nostalgia.

As profound as this nostalgia might be, both as an intellectual and an emotional force behind Turner's thinking and that of his listeners in 1893 and subsequent readers, later historians have noted that nostalgia does not necessarily lead to clarity. In embracing the past we conjure up an image that justifies and meets the intensity of our desires. In the introduction to a collection of essays reassessing Turner's frontier thesis in 1968, Richard Hofstadter has noted that

precision has never been Turner's forte, and historians were not wanting to argue that his insights, though not devoid of truth, were rendered more or less useless by their elliptical statement. Even the frontier was not clearly and steadily defined; "the West" was vaguely and inconsistently used. (6)

A certain kind of vagueness, as much as it might have been Turner's personal shortcoming as a historian, characterize the state of mind I have described as nostalgia in general. Aware of its hopeless longing, nostalgia desires a past state of perfection that it knows it cannot attain or return to. Self-conscious futility is its most characteristic feature--knowing that what one wants one can never have. Passing through this screen of nostalgia, the image of the frontier loses the specificity, the sharp edges and clear outlines about whose lack Turner's successors and antagonists are complaining. Nevertheless, I would disagree with Hofstadter when he concludes that Turner's ideas are "rendered more or less useless by their elliptical statement." Contrary to what Hofstadter expects to find, however, Turner's frontier hypothesis has its use in the reading of American history, uses that are indebted more to myth than to history.

Turner's notion of the early, formative stage is of course deeply ingrained in Western mythology. His opening statement about the end of the frontier period also comes with the overtones of Christian allegory, i.e. the postlapsarian lament about being expelled from the Garden of Eden, a state of perfect harmony and bliss, a condition outside of history. But there is one crucial difference between the Garden of Eden and Turner's frontier. Eden remains present in our collective myth pool as an image of that which is lost. History does not extend seamlessly and consistently back through the moment when Eden is lost. The story of the Fall speaks of such irretrievable loss that the memory of what was lost has no formative impact on our present postlapsarian state. Surviving history at best as a faint utopian echo, it is by definition a past separate from and irreconcilable with the present. Turner's frontier, however, has the power of shaping the present. It is a stage in a process in which we are still involved, a step along the way. Its pastness is not imperative. Hence, a different metaphor of periodization must be at work.

This metaphor, which Turner is promoting and in which national history recapitulates individual biography, is that of the nation's childhood. Just as individuals on the frontier can recreate a period in their lives reminiscent of childhood, a moment of "freshness," as Turner himself calls it, so the nation as a whole was living through a formative period, accumulating experiences that would shape its later form, and acquiring a distinct and mature character along the way. The analogy works itself out in all aspects I have mentioned already: childhood is the first significant phase in an individual's development; nothing precedes it. It can never, in its full social and ideological dimensions, be experienced by the child. Only retrospectively do we gain access to "childhood as childhood," and then the experience, given the generally positive connotations that our culture places upon childhood, is generally one of loss and longing. Childhood, like the frontier period, is the moment from which the conscious subject is by definition excluded. Childhood can never be the object of self-reflexive criticism. Like the idea of a national character itself, which Turner must advocate in keeping with the inherent logic of his organizing metaphor, the frontier serves to personalize and anthropomorphize the otherwise impersonal and abstract processes of history.

In the interest of fairness as much as clarity, Turner needs to be credited with some awareness of his own function as a storyteller, even though this awareness is somewhat submerged in the rhetoric of serious historiography. Readers of the frontier article will quickly realize that Turner is self-consciously acknowledging the status of his hypothesis as *narrative* whenever he argues for its primacy over rivaling accounts of American exceptionalism, most notably the school that considers slavery and its historical and social ramifications as the mark that distinguishes America from other nations. In these passages, Turner

does not argue about the validity of each theory's underlying facts. Instead his rhetoric is concerned with "finding the best story," the story that will explain it all, from demographics to national character.

Given Turner's self-conscious acknowledgment of his own role as myth maker, it becomes pointless to criticize him for not realizing that his discourse exceeds the epistemological and ontological requirements accepted by historians. Historians like Hofstadter, who criticise Turner for not being a good historian, have consequently been in the minority. They are outnumbered by critics like Richard Slotkin who openly acknowledge Turner's role as a fabricator of national myth. "The myth," Slotkin argues, "can be seen as an intellectual or artistic construct that bridges the gap between the world of the mind and the world of affairs, between dream and reality . . . It draws from the content of individual and collective memory, structures it, and develops from it imperatives for belief and action" (7). Understood as an "intellectual construct," Turner's hypothesis can simultaneously be intended by its author as proper historiography and understood by its audiences as a compelling metaphor for a a complex and morally bewildering historical reality.

It is on these same mythological grounds that the frontier hypothesis has been confronted and debunked. The genre of the Western, for instance, in which the frontier appeared to have found its most enduring home in popular culture, begun to lose its popularity after the 1950's. Its demise was accompanied by a series of anti-Westerns in which the frontier mythology in particular became the target of critical investigation. Rejecting Turner's vision of the frontier as the place where the nation's childhood played itself out is an essential ingredient of these films and novels. So essential, in fact, that contemporary texts in the wake of these anti-Westerns hardly need to reiterate the mythical nature of the frontier; it can be safely considered a given. For them, the path has been cleared to re-examine Turner, now not so much with the goal of debunking his ideas and dismissing him altogether as a fabricator of dangerous dreams, but instead with the possibility of discovering more complex, perhaps even redemptive readings of the myth of national childhood.

One such text, which by virtue of its great artistic accomplishment and insight into the process of myth-making deserves greater critical attention and public acclaim, is the 1992 novel *Was* by Canadian-born writer Geoff Ryman. At first glance, *Was* seems determined to debunk Turner's myth of the frontier as "The Lost Good Place" in the all-too familiar terms. Ryman paints a grim, naturalistic portrait of Kansas in the 1870s, a place of extreme physical and psychological hardship. The Kansas to which one of the novel's central characters, Dorothy Gael, is sent after her parents' death is a place of backbreaking labor, of constant physical discomfort from heat or cold, malnutrition or disease; a place of inconceivable isolation on the one hand--isolation that leads to mental and social depravities--and unforgiving, rigid, and exclusionary, almost punitive social structures on the other. Clearly, the writers lurking in the background of Ryman's depiction are such naturalists as Willa Cather, Hamlin Garland or Frank Norris, shot through with grotesque violence from the likes of Erskine Caldwell or Flannery O'Connor. It is a Kansas straight out of Michael Lesy's *Wisconsin Death Trip*, where violence, suicide, and insanity seem to be the order of the day.

A crucial element of Ryman's portrayal of the frontier is his insistence on the genocidal and ecocidal consequences of European westward expansion. Toward the end of the book, Ryman describes a long nightmare of Dorothy's which plays out the apocalyptic allegory of westward expansion like a Hieronymus Bosch painting. Like the traveling companions on the road to the Emerald City, "America walked with them, westward out of the East" (350). Past the camps where "mounds of buffalo bones [were] bleaching in the sun," we encounter "Mechanical Woodsmen" who "couldn't keep themselves from cutting down the trees." As the pioneers "are pulling the East with them" (351), they refuse to acknowledge the destruction they have caused by worshipping "the things they had destroyed" (354): the buffalo, the Indian, "the child in the manger," and "the mother of the Child, but only because she was a virgin. All other women were bad" (354). Like the mechanized powers of progress, which are to remind us of the Tin Man, Christianity finds itself reflected in this grim secular version: "The Child hung, like a scarecrow, and the wood of the cross bent gently in the wind like a tree. . . and the Child stared like the buffalo." All the while, "Dorothy knew that by the time they got to the Territory, it would be gone, always advancing away from them like a rainbow" (351).

Ryman knows all too well that, even if his readers will not trace his critique back to Turner himself, they will be familiar with the ideological tradition he has inaugurated. In order to tap into this tradition, Ryman chooses *The Wizard of Oz*, with its mantra of a nostalgically enhanced Kansas, "There's no place like home." Its genealogy starts with L. Frank Baum's children's book *The Wizard of Oz*, and eventually transforms itself, first with the MGM film and then with its annual broadcast on TV, into the full-blown secular myth and cultural icon we are all familiar with. At the end of this intertextual chain stands, for now, of course Ryman's novel itself, a fact I will return to later. As one version of the text inspires its

reincarnation in a different medium--as Ryman himself puts it: "A book, a film, a television ritual, a thousand icons scattered through advertising, journalism, political cartoons, music, poetry" (368)--, the narrative is constructed around historically overlapping characters: Dorothy Gael meets L. Frank Baum during his brief stint as a substitute teacher in Kansas and thus becomes the real-life model for the Dorothy in Baum's children's book. While the success of the book inspires the film and thus recreates the child star Frances Gumm as the Hollywood fabrication Judie Garland in the role of Dorothy, the real Dorothy Gael, now sufferi