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Horizons of Enchantment

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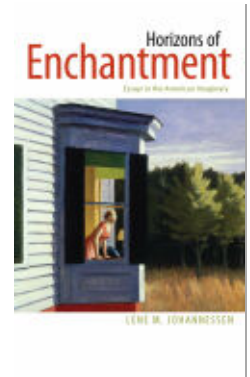
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INTRODUCTION

A FEW YEARS AGO I was on a yearlong sabbatical in California. When it was time to pack up and return to Norway we had a yard sale, a wonderful institution possible only through a combination of pleasant temperatures and plenty of space. An elderly couple strolled by, and the man came up, not to buy anything but to ask where I was going. I told him I was just going back to Norway, but I think he heard only “Norway.” He gave me a quite serious look and said matter-of-factly: “Well, you have to go where your advancement is,” adding that for his own advancement, he had spent several years in Alaska. To a Norwegian, presumably not all that culturally different from an American, the words spoken and the understanding of one’s purpose in life sounded inherently alien. It is not that Norwegians do not try to get ahead or that we do not feel the need to improve and make the most out of life, but I don’t think that deep down we feel that these are things we must do, that they are our foremost tasks. The man spoke to me from the other side of a cultural divide, and he spoke of a very particular prescription.

Not long before this I had been coediting a collection of essays on a new edition of the Norwegian writer Drude Krog Janson’s *En Saloonkeeper’s Datter*, originally published in Minneapolis in 1887. For various reasons Janson spent only eleven years in the United States; the novel itself has few references to America as such and for the most part takes place either in Norway or within the Norwegian community in Minnesota, the cultural parameters in both cases being largely the same. Furthermore, the novel was written in

Norwegian for a Norwegian-reading and Norwegian-speaking audience. And yet, the novel, translated in 2002 as *A Saloonkeeper's Daughter*, was by and large and without hesitation considered an American novel. I fully agree that it is indeed an American text, but the question has stuck: what makes it so?

On a personal as well as professional level, the two incidents that I have discussed served as catalysts subtly to challenge and test the understanding I thought I had of "America." By extension, questions concerning the meaning of cultural provenance and purpose crystallized for me. They made clear that, for all the similarities between (in this case) northwestern European and American cultures, and for all the overlapping that necessarily occurs in histories of immigration and in the emergent cultural rims that connect multiple spaces, certain delicate differences defy the clear explanations we would like to create. I am not really asking with J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, what is an American? Nor am I asking, what is American literature? Rather, I am interested in pursuing the vague contours of the definite certainties of identification that arise from the two quandaries that I have related. How may this contradiction, this paradox, of formless and indistinct firmness and assurance, be examined and calibrated in cultural forms? This question runs through the following chapters. The field of exploration is mainly literature, ranging from the somewhat obscure Drude Krog Janson to Walt Whitman to Ana Menéndez and Richard Ford, among others; but the study also draws on other sources: essayist Richard Rodriguez and political scientist Samuel Huntington, the cultural architectonics of a Norwegian region, and the film *Sugar*. Taken together, the readings cover generic, historical, and cultural grounds that may seem to have little in common, yet despite the discrepancies and unlikeliness of dialogue, these literary and cultural texts are all, at one level or another, engaged in and with the American social imaginary, propagating, repudiating, adapting, revising, and questioning its sway and its premises.

The value of the concept of the imaginary as a methodological lens resides partly in its conceptual echo of the paradoxical nature of "vague certainty" of identification, as a simultaneously enabling and enabled cultural filter. I apply the concept as it has been elabo-

rated in the writings of the philosophers Charles Taylor and Cornelius Castoriadis, whose expositions of the concept, its implications, and its redactions may meaningfully be brought to bear on the specifically American social imaginary. This imaginary dwells in certain archaic structures of feelings, in the sense that its framing sway hails from a conception of order above and beyond nation and culture per se and obtains instead through a sacred-secular system in which the obligation to perform and succeed individually is also a social duty. At this point the American imaginary departs most radically from its Western cousins, in its reliance on a kind of modern magic, which may be characterized loosely as a fundamental and unwavering faith in the secular sanctity of what we have come to think of as the American project of modernity.

In their significance as a resilient axis of culturological continuity, the above elements have been taken up in varied scholarly contexts by scholars such as Robert Bellah and Sacvan Bercovitch, to mention only two. Bellah's influential essay "Civil Religion in America" is a strong argument for the existence of an institutionalized religious ideology parallel to specific denominations. (The United States does not have a state religion.) He suggests that, "What we have, then, from the earliest years of the republic is a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity. This religion—there seems no other word for it—while not antithetical to and indeed sharing much in common with Christianity, was neither sectarian nor in any specific way Christian."¹ By reading presidential inaugural addresses and drawing on such documents as Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, Bellah shows the remarkable and paradoxical existence of a religious, public framework that is able to accommodate the specificities of private, denominational manifestations. I return to the malleability that this eccentric relationship enables in connection with what I call the magic of the American imaginary. Of course, the spirituality of America as project in the world has, in other contexts, been authoritatively delineated in Bercovitch's seminal writings. Here, however, I am most interested in his explorations of cultural identification in terms of the metaphor of the chess game variation. Its potency is that of "a move which opens up a new set

of possibilities within standard rules and regulations of play. . . . It's brilliant insofar as the variation leads us to a deeper understanding of how the rules work."² Bercovitch's chess analogy will be referred to several times further, but for now I point out the resonance of the flexibility of Bellah's notion of civil religion with the similar emphasis of Bercovitch on new sets of possibilities in the chess variation metaphor.

The readings in this book bring out different enactments of the variation and invite different views of how the rules of the game, at once malleable and constant, apply and do not apply. Given the disparate nature of the texts and the cultural forms that constitute the field of exploration, the methodological approaches are also necessarily different. None, however, veers very far from the overarching questions and framework briefly alluded to earlier: What are the limitations and possibilities of the imaginary and its variation(s)? How do we read (for) the magic of vague certainty? The implications and extractions of the imaginary, as the concept figures in Taylor and Castoriadis's work, may also be helpful when thinking about sameness and difference within a cultural and social space that we assume to share and understand. For instance, as the following chapters' readings show, certain calibrations can be made in relation to the unyielding culturological continuities specific to the American imaginary.³ More to the point, texts' refractions of that imaginary also shed light on its contours and potentiality as it continuously adapts and evolves as an umbrella under which other kinds of imaginaries can be subsumed. This has consequences for how we think about our own Western modernity, all too often collapsed into one single perspective. And as the world has in some ways become smaller and the processes of globalization have continued, often in the guise of Americanization, the uniformity of Western cultures has been assumed, in contradistinction to cultures elsewhere: so-called traditional, religious, and tribal cultures, circumscribed by communal values contained in longstanding practices of mediation, and in various degrees serving as buffers against the encroachments of modernity. In relation to such displays of multiple or alternative modernities, it may be equally compelling to think about the fissures and elements of discord that thrive within

our own, presumably identical, space, as a kind of miniature laboratory for studying the constitution of variants of modernity.

I pause here to add that I do not wish to enter into a discussion of American exceptionalism and its nature, genesis, and future. But the term does cast a long shadow on the kind of discourse I am engaging in, and a brief comment is appropriate. As countless studies over the years have shown, exceptionalism as ideological and cultural emblem has orchestrated the beginnings and continuations of the New World in fundamental ways. Thus, Deborah Madsen, one of the many who have participated in this line of inquiry, introduces her study with the statement that “American exceptionalism permeates every period of American history and is the single most powerful agent in a series of arguments that have been fought down the centuries concerning the identity of America and Americans.”⁴ Yet the near-paralyzing effect that the word “exceptionalism” tends to have on conversations should be addressed. Does the command of the concept itself signal, like one of its most potent expressions, Manifest Destiny, a position that is somehow beyond query, or, perhaps like “America” itself, does it forever elude exact identification and hence function as a kind of analytical deterrent? Against such mystification, one could, as Winfried Fluck does in a rather sober manner, simply accept the concept as just that, a concept: While the very term “exceptionalism” designated the “ideology of a promised land and a chosen people,” he says, abandoning the ideology it stands for does not mean that we also have “to give up the idea that the development of American culture has taken place under conditions of its own.” These conditions are moreover characteristic of more general movements pertaining to modernity, but they are not constellated in the same way in all countries.⁵

Fluck’s admonition is extremely valid, and in some ways indispensable. Recognizing difference does not necessarily imply advocacy of imperialist agendas, support for abiding values of individualism, or claims to uniqueness, although imperialist agendas and abiding values of individualism and uniqueness are certainly also part of American history and hence make their way into the grammar of analysis. It is perfectly legitimate to approach and study American literary and cultural legacies and prospects without mak-

ing claims to universalizing authority; indeed, it would be a rather odd situation were it not. Djelal Kadir says as much when he observes that “American culture has labored mightily since the inception of its history to differentiate itself as unique and exceptional. In so doing, it conforms to every other national culture in history.”⁶ A healthy skepticism toward the thwarting effect of discourses centered on the exceptional nature of American exceptionalism is consequently in order, not least because, as Fluck goes on to argue, “If we give up the goal of understanding these different conditions [that are non-axiologically peculiar to the United States], then we will be helpless in the face of a United States that, currently more than ever, is indeed dealing with other nations on conditions of its own.”⁷ Fluck’s observations are made in the context of the drive during recent decades toward the internationalization and transnationalization of American Studies, but his comment goes beyond the concerns of institutionalized study only. As several of the readings that follow will explore, the transnational and transcultural have been ingrained in American culture from day one, but the crossings and movements between and beyond disparate social imaginaries should not be understood as in any way taking place on equal terms. Indeed, the potency of the American imaginary even now commands participation in its magic on its own terms. That may be almost unique in the world, although I do not believe it really is: every imaginary instructs subjection to its instituting grids in order to prevail. And as Richard Rodriguez observes via a quotation from Marshall McLuhan, “the moment America’s culture becomes the culture of the world it is no longer American culture.”⁸

The question that crystallized from the incidents I related initially, of having to go where one’s advancement is, and of wondering why a Norwegian novel is in fact an American one, concerns what we assume about the term “America” as much as it concerns what, how, or indeed, as Arif Dirlik has asked, when the adjective “American” may signify.⁹ The ambiguity configured through the components that constitute the variation, “vague” and “certainty,” allows for any number of interpellations and interpretations, and yet the responses in play seem oddly and unyieldingly continuous, in relation not only to individual textual articulations but also to

how these are received and commented on. Thus, chapter 1 opens with a consideration of Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck's film *Sugar*, which relates a classic story about a Dominican baseball player hoping to make it big. Now, described like that, *Sugar* sounds like just another dime-a-dozen movie about the American dream, but this is far from the case. With great depth and perception the film illustrates some of the nuances and strains underlying the magic of the American imaginary as it plays out in the proverbial field of dreams.

Preliminary reflections relating to *Sugar* lead to a more detailed discussion of the imaginary and some of its conceptual and methodological significations as these are explicated by Taylor and Castoriadis. As I have already suggested, the merit of their argument regarding the question of the imaginary is its disengagement from traditions imbued with conditions and projections of concomitant, generic expectations that stem from the kind of embedded ideological stances coming out of the same predicament as the magic itself. It is my hope that, by employing a different vocabulary to an area that trails the aforementioned and sometimes diffuse shadows of exceptionalism, two things are achieved: First, we may approach the object of study as demystified, as inherently singular in the universal sense that Kadir's statement quoted earlier suggests. Second, we gain potentially renewed and renewing insight into that same object.

The field proper for reading for the magic of the American imaginary begins with the novel that I have already mentioned, *A Saloonkeeper's Daughter*. Upon its republication in 2002, the novel was immediately welcomed as an important contribution to American literature, and classified accordingly. Orm Øverland, who has extensively annotated and introduced the new edition, observes that "For an important period of her life, [Drude Krog Janson] was an American writer. She can now be considered, in translation, for the distinctive qualities of her contribution to American literature."¹⁰ Chapter 2 of the present volume, "'Perpetual Progress' in Drude Krog Janson's *A Saloonkeeper's Daughter*," examines this novel as a marvelously narrated turn of spirit aspiring to an individual's reinvention. The idea of a shining potential and future

shows the protagonist turning her back on the old world, which shifts the tropological references to a quickening embrace of new paths, of futures rid of the imaginaries of the past. The novel can be read as an archetypal illustration of the seamless convergence between individual and society at a very specific time in American history, when the tenor of the resulting conversation echoes the ideological principles of the classical bildungsroman. Astrid Holm's example stands for a near-perfect confluence between the promise and its realization; her turn accurately reflects ideal *Bildung*: "Bildung comes from Bild (image) and so means the process of imposing an image or form on something, or the results of such a process."¹¹ In this it of course replicates countless other immigrant stories as conversion narratives—*Bildung* as formation from within and from without, and the imaginary as enabled and enabling filter. For we must bear in mind, as Jeffrey Sammons puts it, that a "question such as the definition of the Bildungsroman is an issue not confined to academic discourse, but [is one that] spreads into the ideological self-understanding of the culture as a whole."¹² *A Saloonkeeper's Daughter* is in fact an American novel, but the attribution has to do with the mode of conversation that it taps into and connects with, a discourse organized according to a tropological landscape, which was and is unmistakably American in constitution and perpetuation. Consequently, the tropology of the American master imaginary may be tentatively registered in this chapter, but it is only against a much broader backdrop that it can be meaningfully measured.

Chapter 3, "Songs of Different Selves: Whitman and Gonzales," examines the epic "Song of Myself" (1887 [1855]) against and alongside Gonzales's equally epic but lesser-known "I am Joaquín" (1967). Of greatest importance here is how these two foundational texts elucidate the tension between different interpretations of the imaginary. Whitman sings a self into the fabric without rifts, without seams. His are a horizontal outlook and a narrative orientation accommodating difference into the great fold and thus sounding marching orders for a national cultural narrative that is uniquely capable of transference. This all-embracing inclusiveness is both constitutive of and constituted by the American social imaginary at

a very early historical-cultural stage, but it is inherently imagined. If the social imaginary can generally be described, in Taylor's words, as "the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations," then Whitman paradoxically runs up against the very constraints that the American imaginary sets up.¹³ Normative notions and images in this case rest on a tropic of difference, firmly rooted in an Anglo-Saxon religious and contractual view of individual and society that does not and cannot allow for the metaphorical transference Whitman lays out. His position as ur-American poet thus seems to rest on a cultural aesthetics of mere promise, a phantasmagoria of limitless opportunity.

Such a stance signifies very differently from Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales's poem, which delineates and excavates five centuries of forgotten legacies along a line that stays grounded in an imaginary originating within the United States: the Mexican borderland, itself reflecting the aftershocks of a fissure between differently emerging modern imaginaries competing for spatial institutions. Gonzales's "I cry and sing the same" rehearses Whitman's "I celebrate myself" but reroutes Whitman's unbridled optimism and all-embracing, future-oriented energy toward a response that gazes backward and points toward the future with both reproach and defiance. The dialogue sets up "cry" against "celebrate," and the singing of self as metaphor of nation is countered with a conflicted self who is constituted into being differently, into a social imaginary whose potential influence has returned in our own time with renewed force. There are various possible extrapolations from this, but we can tentatively suggest that Whitman's image, for all his idealization of the imaginary as a lasting articulation of the mythological anchoring of society, remains with us to this day.

One manifestation of this is the promise of the suburb, a gestalt that may be conceived according to Castoriadis's category of specific "second-order institutions," as "the essential embodiments of what is of vital importance to that societal institution."¹⁴ From its beginnings in the 1920s (and indeed even before that), the ideologi-

cal particularities of this living and lived space were precisely those of reflection: “Always as much an idea as a reality, the landscape of American suburbia has become and remained something of a symbolic minefield, the mirror (or, perhaps better put, the picture window) through which middle-class American culture casts its uneasy reflective gaze on itself.”¹⁵ And some of the most disturbing and profound reactions to the imaginary may hail precisely from this landscape of picture windows. Chapter 4 therefore focuses on an expression we often ignore as constituting this kind of reaction, even as a negation of the premises and promises of the imaginary. Numerous literary voices have sounded its notes: Crane, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, John Barth, Walker Percy, and John Cheever are just a few representatives of this strain. They have created a pantheon of souls whose predicament may perhaps be summarized in another “lost soul’s” words: “Man exists only in so far as he is separated from his surroundings. The cranium is a space-traveler’s helmet. Stay inside or you perish.”¹⁶ With his portrayal of the apathetic subject in the fold of postmodern suburbia, Richard Ford in *The Sportswriter* gives existential crisis a contemporary form on the foremost stage of the imaginary. It is fitting that the last novel proper to figure in the present work is premised on precisely suburban finitudes: in a disheartening echo of the infinitude of Whitman’s creation, aspiration and defeat are locked in an impossible embrace. The suburb’s promise is, ultimately, the promise of a self-reliance that as enabling filter becomes a condition of stasis.

Chapter 5, “‘Relations Stretched Out’ in the American Imaginary,” reads two representations of very different, diametrically opposed engagements with the imaginary. Ana Menéndez’s retrospective short story collection from 2001, *In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd*, offers various narratives from the Cuban exile community in Miami. The fact that they are informed precisely by exile allows for an exploration of a particular version of encounter in and with the American migratory. A distinctive kind of memory choreographs these stories’ discourse, and its figurations and figures only marginally engage with the imaginary. Herein lie the contours of a different kind of engagement, for some reflections of the proverbial pond remain dark, unyielding. I suggest that Menéndez’s

work stands as an illustration of a strand in which the imagination that enters into the space of the American imaginary retreats, creates itself over again in its own image rather than that of the imaginary, and thus is extremely different from what is examined in chapter 2. This has implications for the social fabric and allegorizes the path of other imaginaries, which, in various ways, by choice or by force, have been excluded from transition into the master imaginary.

A completely opposing version of this encounter is the adaptation that so immerses itself in the imaginary that it brings the imaginary with it when it leaves. For this second part of chapter 5 I draw on the cultural history of a specific region in southern Norway, a case illustrating the transposition of elements from the American imaginary in a reversed and selective process by which what pertains at the outset to the symbolic sphere is instituted elsewhere. Similarly, this case tells us something about the capacity for transference that the American imaginary possesses and the acts of remembering and preferences in processes of cultural bridging, translation, and representation. Both Menéndez's short stories and the history of the Lister region are ultimately also commentaries on modalities of migration and cultural memory as these are mapped out in memory and scripture, be they in writing or in architecture, as spatial and temporal relations, in Doreen Massey's words, "stretch out."¹⁷

The last chapter of the present volume, "Recalling America," also hinges on memory and further explores the tension between different conceptions of the imaginary, its originations, and future. In *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (2004), the late Samuel Huntington launched what may be read as a regrounding of the American social imaginary according to an East-West orientation, thereby detracting from the allure of the all-embracing mirage that Whitman so convincingly schematized. The "conversation" that this chapter stages between Huntington's *Who Are We?* and Richard Rodriguez's *Brown: The Last Discovery of America* thus turns on culturological self-understandings that have been part of the discourse of America about itself from the beginning. From an outside position both are correct: Huntington's

gauging of what American culture is, is not incorrect; but neither is Rodríguez's, which concerns the unrelenting process of literal and figurative "browning." The latter's position also has its echoes in aesthetics; the manifesto of Guillermo Gómez-Peña and his ensemble *Pocho Nostra*, for instance, states:

As ghost citizens of a borderless nation, we may soon have to redefine the meanings of a long list of dated 20th-century terminology. Words such as "immigrant," "alien," "foreigner," "minority," "diaspora," "border," and "American" may no longer be useful to explain our new condition, identity and dilemmas.¹⁸

In the light of observations such as these, the question arises, Do the multiple social imaginaries that reflect on the master imaginary, in tandem with significant changes in the ethnic and cultural fabric, approximate a version of Huntington's original, or do they splinter into multiple ossifications? Or is the malleability of the American imaginary such that it is endlessly accommodating? Doubts lie beneath the surface, not only throughout this book but also in broader discourses of political and social impact. And if it be the case that all the doubts and fears and hopes in the end center on the vague question of values, then one must also ask, according to whose standards, whose imaginary?