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HAWKEYE: AN AMERICAN HERO?

Uomini, ossia «sedi elette della coscienza»

ELSA MORANTE, La Storia

The Last of the Mobicans is generally considered as the literary celebration of the nineteenth century American national conscience. Through Hawkeye's figure Cooper is said to have represented the great American hero, that is the common man whose Americanism makes him very uncommon. Americanism emerges entirely in the struggle against a rebellious nature which is eventually converted into the benevolent mother of an individual who is lonely, white and essentially good. Yet, as Europeans we are more inclined to share Lawrence's definition of Hawkeye as «a saint with a gun» who is defeated by a wilderness that «has never been at one with the white man».

What is the meaning of solitude in Cooper's The Last of the Mobicans? Is it the symbol of the triumph of man's selfhood or the emblem of his defeat as a «social animal»? In Cooper's novel there are only solitary beings - Hawkeye, Chingachgook, Cora Munro, Colonel Munro... The novel itself, as its very title suggests, celebrates the theme of solitude implying through the word «last» death and survival, «I» and «non-I». The theme of the solitary «I» is undoubtedly a distinctive American issue; this «I» succeeds in arising from the group since he proves to be the best and, as such, he deserves to be welcomed to the world of heroes as a sort of chosen being in accordance with a Calvinistic interpretation of reality. But success is not only

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1 James Fenimore Cooper, The Last of the Mobicans; A Narrative of 1757, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1983. All quotations from the novel will be from this edition; chapter and page numbers will be given in parentheses in the text.


3 Ibidem, p. 65.

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determined by predestination; man has to face everyday life with the consciousness of being equal to millions of individuals. His better qualities require demonstration but what happens when the background in which his challenge takes place is the American wilderness? Hawkeye is a sort of *a priori* hero: solitary and chosen from the very beginning, not only is he not an ordinary being but he is not a man at all. In the forest man loses his conventional connotation and is endowed with an abstract and conceptual meaning. It is only from his standing in opposition to external reality that man derives his essence; the distance from what Wilson has called «the Abyss»⁴ of the American wilderness is embodied by a «Man, and not a natural man or fallen Adam, but original man or unfallen Adam, which is to say America»⁵. Selfhood and Americanness therefore indicate a God-ordained superiority that is an undiscussed freedom of the ego:

Place everything upon the nakedness of the American self, and you open every imaginative possibility from self-deification to absolute nihilism⁶.

The American wilderness is a reality that symbolizes the «non-I» since it can be perceived through senses but human sensory perceptions can only contemplate or feel its essence. Understanding depends on a higher faculty, that of thought and it is on this level that the man embodied by Hawkeye fails; the wilderness cannot be penetrated through rationality since this world is governed by mysterious intrinsic laws. In this respect, if it is true that man’s nature depends on his ability to think in accordance with Descartes’ principle «Cogito Ergo Sum», it is undeniable that the American wilderness represents the denial of the «I» and stands in opposition to what we have called «selfhood». So that man is defeated by the mere physical qualities of the natural world. Hawkeye is an individual who is not endowed with the capacity of thinking⁷

⁷ According to Heilman’s theories on tragedy and melodrama, as a melodramatic hero Hawkeye is endowed with no intellectual capacities since devoid of a psychologically split personality. The tragic nature of a charac-
and, as such, his creation has asked for a sort of apologetic explanation on the part of the writer:

He [Hawkeye] represents a man of native goodness, removed from the temptations of civilized life, though not entirely forgetful of its prejudices and lessons, exposed to the customs of barbarity, and yet perhaps more improved than injured by the association, and betraying the weaknesses as well as the virtues both of his situation and of his birth. It would, perhaps, have been more observant of reality to have drawn him of less moral elevation, but it would have also been less attractive; and the business of a writer of fiction is to approach, as near as his powers will allow, to poetry. After this avowal, it is scarcely necessary to add, that individual character had little to do with either the conception or the filling up of this fanciful personage.

This is Cooper's declaration of poetics which is to be applied to the entire novel but what really matters for us is that Hawkeye's essence is defined in terms of «fanciful». The scout is simply a creature of romance and, as such, borrowing McGann's definition we may say that, as a product of imagination, our hero comes from history but is to be considered as an inhabitant of eternity since «the products of imagination transcend time and circumstances. Art may appear in time, but its being's heart and home is with infinitude». As a product of imagination to what degree is Hawkeye a man? On the one hand, eternity denies the mere physical essence of man; on the other hand, implying the existence of ideals that defy any kinds of biological limits, it is consistent with man's inclination towards utopian projections but Hawkeye, once again, is an exception since he embodies ideals that stand in opposition to the qualifying moral and rational attributes of man since they are based on an arbitrary interpretation of innocence in which evil is tacitly taken into account. The very essence of the scout's identity and meaning, in fact, consists in the ambiguity of his position. Cooper himself shows Hawkeye's morally questionable code of behaviour through a comparison with Shakes-

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8 1831 Preface to The Last of the Mobicans in The Last of the Mobicans, cit., p. 7 (my italics).
peare's Othello in the epigraph to chapter XVIII: «Why, anything: An honourable murderer, if you will; for nought I did in hate, but all in honour» (XVIII, 180). Hawkeye is implicitly defined in terms of «honourable murderer», an oxymoron which, in a way, reveals Cooper's consciousness of the necessary sacrifice of «inferior beings» such as the Indians or the mulatto Cora for the triumph of national honour. The double connotation of Hawkeye as a «honourable murderer», in a sense, is a definition of his role as a figure whose task is to reconcile the wilderness and history. In fact, in Cooper's narrative world these two dimensions appear to be the depository of opposite values especially if we consider the Indians as symbols of the former and Fort William Henry as the emblem of the latter. Hawkeye gives voice to this contrast, for instance, when he comments on Chingachgook's cruel scalping of an innocent young Frenchman: «Twould have been a cruel and an unhuman act for a white skin; but 'tis the gift and natur of an Indian, and I suppose it should not be denied!» (XIV, 138). On this occasion Hawkeye shows he is aware of being part of a world governed by no Christian laws but, even if he is confronted by a moral dilemma, he chooses not to put its principles into question. Yet, since he actually never abandons Western moral standards because he is too proud of his pure white blood, his creed can be reduced to a form of compromise that can be geographically identified with the «middle landscape»

Leo Marx refers to when considering the American reality. It is an area of freedom where there are neither contradictions nor alternatives. It is this lack of ideological differences that makes Hawkeye a mythical hero:

In myth the hero stands as a condensed symbol for the contradictory materials of a latent content which has been reductively represented as a play of essential oppositions. Because realistic characterization is to a degree rationalized, it can be shown as animated by codes which are at times in conflict; his discourse is a monologue. Between the contradictions of realism and the absoluteness of myth, allegory and symbolism offer ways of compromise: in them, language is neither represented as arbitrary nor as natural but is seen as cultural convention

Through his hero, therefore, Cooper has given voice to the contradictions of America and, in this respect, he may be said to have represented the entire universe of American human possibilities emblematically illustrated by Whitman in *Song of Myself:*

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes)\(^{12}\).

Yet, the union of guilt and innocence, which is accepted and justified by myth, cannot be accepted on the basis of logical terms and it is in this sense that the imperative of American nationhood may be said to transcend man and deny his essence. Hawkeye does not celebrate the victory of man over the wilderness but bitterly suggests the impossibility of retaining not only his moral integrity but also his mere identity of human being since his characterization as a «fanciful» American hero is at one with the triumph of irrationality, that is with the denial of his nature as the embodiment of «Cogito Ergo Sum». Hawkeye is usually considered a stick character but his lack of psychological depth is justified on the basis of the very nature of Cooper’s novel, that of a sensational romance which may also be called «a political enterprise»\(^{13}\). Hawkeye is meant to embody the myth of the American hero but Cooper could not help experiencing and recording the extraneous character represented by the American wilderness. The choice of a stereotyped figure such as Hawkeye, therefore, also reveals the bitter consciousness of the defeat of the self. In short, the scout appears as the embodiment of the so-called «selfhood» but is actually the very projection of the overwhelming Abyss. Wilson asserts that after Emerson’s theorization on the «eyeball», «any Abyss does not so much threaten as exalt the American will to power»\(^{14}\). The challenge to the Abyss strengthens man’s personal ambitions to such an extent that, in the end, he believes he can dominate the wilderness and, on


the basis of this illusion, he substitutes God in the creation of the universe. Hawkeye is the Emersonian man who creates and partakes of all things through his sight which is endowed with a metaphorical potential. His ability with the gun, in fact, is not only the result of sensory perceptions but corresponds to judgement of vision. It is not by chance that Hawkeye’s undis- cussed heroism emerges entirely in the first part of the novel in which he moves in the world of the whites where all the places have already been seen so that they are rich with the experience of previous expeditions but the hero’s failure becomes inevitable as soon as he enters the region of the unknown: no longer being able to see (he loses the right path), he ceases to be a man, if we consider Emerson’s thesis: «I am nothing, I see all... I am part or particle of God» \(^{15}\). *The Last of the Mowicans* is to be read as a response to the constant threat represented by the American wilderness more than a celebration of the best qualities of a white American hero. Hawkeye’s characterization, in fact, is based on the unescapable recognition of the mysterious existence of the reality Melville has defined in terms of «the whiteness of the whale» \(^{16}\). Hawkeye, so perfect and absolute is actually an anticipation of tragic characters such as Melville’s Ahab who, like the scout, represents the embodiment of Emerson’s doctrine of self-reliance but, with Ahab, the equilibrium between innocence and guilt has gone wild. Ahab represents the unveiled triumph of irrationality and, like Hawkeye, he is no longer a man but an idea. It is well-known that the nineteenth century is a period of national optimism; the sense of tragedy was so absent in national life that, as far as Cooper is concerned, Lewis has stated that the novelist «was immune to the terror» \(^{17}\). But Lewis

\(^{15}\) Ralph W. Emerson, *op. cit.*, p. 9.


\(^{17}\) R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam, Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1955, p. 102. According to Lewis Hawkeye is «the hero in space, in two senses of the word. First, the hero seems to take his start outside time, or on the very outer edges of it, so that his location is essentially in space alone; and second, his initial habitat is space as spaciousness, as the unbounded, the area of total possibility». In fact, his mythic initiation belongs to the world Lewis defines as «the apeiron» (ibidem, p. 99); it is the spaciousness of his moral code including all the possibilities that informs his Americaness. Let us consider the scene taken from *The Deerslayer* which
himself reveals the falseness of this assertion when defining Hawkeye in terms of «the hero in space»\(^{18}\). In fact, to say that Hawkeye can only be a man and a hero within the wilderness is to recognize the very limited sense in which he is a man at all. Being the product of the wilderness and existing only within its boundaries, how can he embody the self-reliant young man who is eager to demonstrate he is the best? His selfhood is annihilated by a space in which rational and transcendental capacities are not demanded. In this sense Hawkeye’s illiterate nature may be said to symbolize the unnatural solitude of a non-man and, above all, the attempt to neutralize his intellectual capacities, not an Adamic hero, therefore, but an asocial individual whose loneliness does not seem like a choice but the only possible existential response to the threat of the wilderness. There is no freedom for him but only failure. The remarks the real baptism of Hawkeye who receives a new name and, with it, the burden of white identity. Deerslayer is speaking with the dying Indian he has just shot:

I didn’t wish your life, redskin,... but you left me no choice atween killing or being killed. Each party acted according to his gifts, I suppose, and blame can light on neither... Well, this is my first battle with a human mortal, though it’s not likely to be the last. I have fou’t most of the creature’s of the forest, such as bears, wolves, painters and catamounts, but this is the beginning with the redskins (JAMES FENIMORE COOPER, The Deerslayer, New York and London: The New American Library of World Literature, Inc., 1963, VII. p. 116, my italics; all quotations will refer to this edition).

And what does the dying shot Indian say?


We perceive the presence of a veiled irony in these words uttered by the Indian since they become the verbal concretization of the truth that Lewis has qualified as Cooper’s «immun[ity] of the terror». In fact, after killing the Indian the reborn Hawkeye, to use Lewis’ own definition, despite the Fall, is still an «American Adam» (ibidem, pp. 102-105). Baptism is at one with nationhood and American ethics since it effaces the sin committed by Deerslayer and, as for the original sin, also the presence and perception of wickedness. As Adam, Deerslayer is alone («He was entirely alone, thrown on his own resources, and was cheered by no friendly eye, emboldened by no encouraging voice» (VII, p. 106) and this kind of solitude is an essential component of the American hero since it defines his nature of chosen being. But what about Chingachgook’s solitude at the end of The Last of the Mohicans?

\(^{18}\) Ibidem, p. 91.
ation of a character without conscience is linked to the imperative of ideology and the necessity of the historical course but it also represents the attempt to maintain a balance between idealism and pragmatism. In fact, unable to think and remember, Hawkeye is completely devoid of memory and, as such, he can be a murderer (pragmatism) without compromising his innocence (idealism). In Emily Dickinson's words «Remorse is memory awake»; without memory one can «exterminate the varlets» (XI, 112) and feel no guilt at all. In The Last of the Mobicans history is neutralized by its conversion into myth: the episode which took place in 1757, the massacre of Fort William Henry, is treated as the symbol of a past which can potentially contain any kind of future so that the ruins of the Fort are to be regarded as the emblem of the process which aims to destroy history. In fact, history loses its quality as an objective account of chronological facts and becomes the dimension of ideological necessity.  

19 The attempt to define the history of one's country through romance is the moving premise and basic criterion I have adopted to compare Nievo's Le Confessioni d'un Italiano and The Last of the Mobicans in my dissertation Nievo and Cooper between Chance and Necessity (Relatore Prof.ssa Francesca Bisurti, Correlatore Prof. Anco Marzio Matterle). Since these works are the product of peculiar national contexts, romance has been connoted in different ways; in The Last of the Mobicans it corresponds to the American wilderness and the mythical dimension of the Indians, in Le Confessioni d'un Italiano it derives from Altoviti's love for Pisana. Yet, despite the different associations, the characterization of romance is fundamentally based on the same principles. In fact, in Cooper's universe as well as in Nievo's, romance originates from and develops within history until, in the end, it seems to reach its independence. Actually this detachment from history never really takes place simply because the opposition between history and romance is just an illusion. These poles, in fact, flow together in the same direction and become one precisely under the influence of that character of necessity which governs and determines the progressive quality of the historical course. In both novels history is transfigured in the direction of ideology so that it ceases to be a record of facts and is connoted as memory. The vehicle of this perspective, which treats the past as the background that contains every future, is the figure of the hero who is endowed with the capacity of reconciling past events and future dreams since his characterization partakes of both history and romance. The wholeness of the hero's personality derives from his association with myth, another theme that may be said to forge Cooper's universe as well as Nievo's. In this respect, in order to discuss the peculiar characterization of myth, I have also taken into consideration another short novel by Cooper, The Bravo since it is set in Venice. I have compared The Bravo and Le Confessioni d'un Italiano on the basis of the two authors' characterization of Venice and I have treated the different representation of the town as an integral part of my discussion about myth and art, history and romance, chance and necessity.
Myth presents us with an inversion of real conditions: the past becomes future, memory is converted into desire.

Pantheism moves in the same direction; as a doctrine, it too is to be interpreted as a denial of history since, in Hawkeye's words, it is based on the refusal of books, the traditional depositories of the history of a nation:

Book!... do you [David Gamut] take me for a whimpering boy, at the apron string of one of your old gals; and this good rifle on my knee for the feather of a goose's wing, my ox's horn for a bottle of ink, and my leathern pouch for a cross-barred handkercher to carry my dinner! Book! what have such as I, who am a warrior of the wilderness, though a man without a cross, to do with books! I never read but in one, and the words that are written there are too simple and too plain to need much schooling; though I may boast that of forty long and hard working years (XII, 117).

Pantheism, in a way, is the counterpart of reality as the scene of Glenn's Falls clearly shows:

Ay! there are the falls on two sides of us, and the river above and below. If you had daylight, it would be worth the trouble to step up on the height of this rock, and look at the perversity of the water! It falls by no rule at all; sometimes it leaps, sometimes it tumbles; there, it skips; here, it shoots; in one place 'tis white as snow, and in another 'tis green as grass; hereabouts, it pitches into deep hollows, that rumble and quake the 'arth; and thereaway, it ripples and sings like a brook, fashioning whirlpools and gullies in the old stone, as if 'twas no harder than trodden clay. The whole design of the river seems disconcerted. First it runs smoothly, as if meaning to go down the descent as things were ordered; then it angles about and faces the shores; nor are there places wanting, where it looks backward, as if unwilling to leave the wilderness, to mingle with the salt! Ay, lady, the fine cobweb-looking cloth you wear at your throat, is coarse, and like a fish net, to little spots I can show you, where the river fabricates all sorts of images, as if, having broke loose from order, it would try its hand at everything. And yet what does it amount to! After the water has been suffered to have its will for a time, like a headstrong man, it is gathered together by the hand that made it, and a few rods below you may see it all, flowing on steadily towards the sea, as was foreordained from the first foundation of the 'arth! (VI, 55).

The absence of absolute criteria of interpretation and the idea of a universe which seems to be informed by ideological more than geographical principles emerges from the pictorial scene quoted above and, more precisely, from the idea of a world that «was foreordained from the first foundation of the 'arth». Natural scenery escapes a single reading since the very
Existence of landscape elements obeys a general law of disorder; variation paradoxically becomes the pivotal principle which governs and makes harmony possible. The result is a picture in which the beauties represented lack classical proportions of symmetry and perfection. In this respect, quoting Donald Davie, Dekker underlines that «Natty [Hawk-eye] is here employing an outdated, a pre-Romantic set of standards»\(^{20}\) which, we may add, express a non realistic perspective. In fact, Hawk-eye mingles the real scenery which is spread in front of his eyes with his own experience as a wood-explorer in the wilderness. In the very act of perception, his sight cannot be separated from his consciousness. The whole natural scene is to be judged as the projection of the romantic qualities of subjective imagination since it is subordinated to a hypothetical situation which cannot be verified: «If you had daylight». In total darkness unaccustomed eyes cannot perceive the reality Hawk-eye is illustrating, so that no other version is provided. Moreover, the omniscient third-person narrator, whose status endows him with a sort of unquestionable authority, seems to undermine Hawk-eye’s reliability by judging his subjective portrayal of Glenn’s Falls in terms of «untutored description» (VI, 55) and by furnishing hints about other characters’ viewpoints: «They were much inclined to judge differently from Hawk-eye» (VI, 55). The explanatory note, which provides information about Glenn’s Falls, seems to stress the faithful adherence of Hawk-eye’s own recollection of the river to reality: «The description of this picturesque and remarkable little cataract, as given by the scout, is sufficiently correct» (VI, 56). Despite this «defence» of Hawk-eye’s viewpoint, there is still the impression that the wood-explorer is attributing metaphorical meanings to nature. His words appear to depict a space which is more psychological than physical since water seems to be treated as both a part and the symbol of a larger universe which may be identified with the wilderness\(^{21}\). Ringe, referring to a landscape


\(^{21}\) The wilderness is not real but ideal; Hawk-eye selects the natural traits that contribute to the portrayal of a personal moral world. In so doing, he creates a work of art whose function, according to Hegel, is «to consider the universal value of the object and to neglect those exterior aspects that would simply appear exterior and indifferent for the expression of the content. So, the artist should not take into consideration everything he finds in forms and expressions just because he finds it in the exterior
seen «from a reference point placed high above it», says that this perspective «increases the reach of space in the surrounding scene and suggests a much more expansive view of the natural world». Hawk-eye, in fact, suggests one should look at the river from the height of a rock in order to be able to dominate the whole scene. This rock could also be identified with the relative perspective of vision of «a white man who has no taint of Indian blood» (XII, 121). In this respect, it could be said that Hawk-eye represents the voice of the world he belongs to more than an individual response to the external reality. He experiences the wilderness in accordance with the moral principles of his race. Moreover, he does not speak as a person who is thinking about the landscape he is describing; instead, he appears to be listening to voices and impressions that come from an external system of values and that transcend his mental categories. In front of the dangers represented by ungovernable nature, being aware of the fact that human rational faculties can do nothing against the anarchy of natural forces, Hawk-eye ceases to think and begins to feel:

[His] transparent eyeball as bodily ego seems to make thinking and seeing the same activity, one that culminated in self-deification.

Pantheism, therefore, is a mental and an emotional status and, as such, it stands in opposition to history (facts). There is no better episode in the novel in which the scout appears as

world but, in order to create true poetry, he should choose those traits that appear to be just and in accordance with the concept of the thing». (My translation). FRIEDRICH G.W. HEGEL, Estetica, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1963, p. 207. Sergio Perosa, commenting on Hawthorne’s romance, describes the same process of subjective creation; his observations may also be extended to Hawk-eye’s romantic sensibility: «Hawthorne’s conception of fiction and romance began as a pis aller and disclaimer of virtue or value; it then turned into a view and exaltation of another world, another realm, a natura altera, which is created by art and therefore superior to – or at least an alternative to – life». SERGIO PEROSA, American Theories of the Novel, New York, New York University Press, 1983, p. 52.


23 RALPH W. EMERSON, op. cit., p. 6.

24 Hawk-eye’s innocent eye is «uninformed by time, free from the deposits of history» that is why, with Tanner, we may assert «salvation is visual». TONY TANNER, The Reign of Wonder, Naivety and Reality in American Literature, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1965, p. 14.
the Emersonian hero who partakes of God and His natural creations. The «infinitude» of the private man makes nature his «ancillary» and the height of the rock, from which he depicts the falls, in this respect, represents a dimension in which «the ego can rely for transcendental powers» but it also implies some risks for man. Let Melville's Ishmael comment on Hawkeye's behaviour and doctrine. Ishmael insists on paralleling the physical dangers of a reverie at the mast-head and the psychological dangers of the «sunk-en-eyed» young Platonist or Pantheist who naively commits himself to a simplified view of the world:

... But lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie is this absent-minded youth by the blending cadence of waves with thoughts, that at last he loses his identity... In this enchanted mood, thy spirit ebbs away to whence it came; becomes diffused through time and space; like Cranmer's sprinkled Pantheistic ashes, forming at last a part of every shore the round globe over... There is no life in thee, now, except that rocking life imparted by a gentle rolling ship... But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch; slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror. Over Descartian vortices you hover. And perhaps, at mid-day, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever. Heed it well, ye Pantheists.

Considering the description Hawkeye gives of Glenn's Falls, the last two lines of his message may be said to correspond to the reveries at the mast-head Ishmael gives voice to in his warning:

After the water has been suffered to have its will for a time, like a headstrong man, it is gathered together by the hand that made it, and a few rods below you may see it all, flowing on steadily towards the sea, as was foreordained from the first foundation of the 'arth! (VI, 55).

With Ringe, in fact, we may say that this choice of a distant view of nature «allows the narrator a position of literal and moral elevation from which he can... perceive the «general beauties» while ignoring the disgusting details»²⁸. It may be interesting to underline that in the scene of the massacre of

²⁵ Ralph W. Emerson, op. cit., pp. 9-12.
²⁶ Rob Wilson, American Sublime, The Genealogy of a Poetic Genre, cit., p. 9.
²⁷ Herman Melville, Moby Dick, cit., p. 162.
²⁸ Donald Ringe, The Pictorial Mode: Space and Time in the Art of Bryant, Irving and Cooper, cit., p. 16.
Fort William Henry Hawkeye disappears from events – his situation changes: from the status of God to that of a powerless solitary individual (This humiliation is symbolically indicated by the loss of Killdeer, the emblem of sight and power (XV, 148). Hawkeye has no room in the episode of the Fort since he is a «fanciful» character who does not belong to history but his extraneousness from violence is here meant to stress the devilish nature of the Indians and the connotation of the scout as an American Adam. Yet, let us compare his innocence with that of another famous American Adam, Melville's Billy Budd:

Billy in many respects was little more than a sort of upright barbarian, much such perhaps as Adam presumably might have been were the urbane Serpent wriggled himself into his company.  

Billy Budd is another Father of America; his figure embodies another myth of origin which apparently stands in opposition to the one represented by Hawkeye since it is based on the recognition of tragedy in life. In front of such an Adamic hero who is executed despite his innocence, it is possible to see the evolution from Hawkeye, who not only remains unpunished but is not even judged, to Ahab who is justly punished and to Billy Budd who pays the price of his naivety. Cooper's hero is actually not so different from Melville's characters since he is not the total individual the novelist and the reader suppose he is; within himself, in fact, there is already that weakness that will lead to a tragic moral collapse. His undiscussed moral code of personal manufacture together with the reversal of real aspects, in the second part of the novel in which artificiality prevails, are the concretization of the so-called beau idéal and it is this poetics which may be said to create a link between the different heroes in question since it is based on the recognition of evil on the part of the author:

It is the privilege of all writers of fiction, more particularly when their works aspire to the elevation of romances, to present the beau-idéal of their characters to the reader. This it is which constitutes poetry, and to suppose that the red man is to be represented only in the squalid

misery or in the degraded moral state that certainly more or less belongs to his condition, is, we apprehend, taking a very narrow view of an author's privileges (Appendix, 354).

The final scene of the funeral of both Uncas and Cora is to be considered as the emblem of Cooper's beau-idéal since the image of the garden symbolizes a systematization of the wilderness in accordance with principles of order and harmony. The garden represents the human attempt to tame a wild landscape in order to create a controlled dimension similar to the well-ordered Western societies. This schematization of nature is the result of a mental and ideological necessity, that of defeating the threatening anarchy of the natural world. The garden is a superstructure which corresponds to artificiality of purpose and result. Artificiality is another name for beau-idéal and this poetics, in turn, becomes an attempt to exorcize evil. Cooper created this image of nature as a benevolent mother not because he was «immune to the terror» but, on the contrary, because he was well aware of the distance there was in America between the natural landscape and Western man. It is not by chance that, in The Last of the Mohicans, nature has eventually been converted into a garden, an image that in the Western tradition symbolizes and «inevitably suggest[s] paradise, the bounty and bliss of the Garden of Eden» ⁴⁰. Yet, paradoxically, while Billy Budd, in this «Garden of Eden», appears as still untouched by the Serpent, Hawkeye seems to have accepted its existence as a necessary pact with the wilderness in order not to be overwhelmed by it. In a way, this is the meaning of the mythical friendship between Hawkeye and Chingachgook – «the big serpent» (VI, 57). Through the poetics of the beau-idéal Cooper has identified evil with his Indian characters but the recognition of evil as a distinctive feature of Indian nature indirectly becomes a profession of innocence as regards the whites. Talking about red men, in fact, is a sort of expedient through which Cooper can talk about the whites without even mentioning them; it would be difficult, in fact, to apologize for their idealized characterization since this would discredit their innocent conduct. Cooper’s silence on Hawkeye’s beau-idéal, therefore, is meant to hide the consciousness

of an unmentionable component, that of guilt. The Indians perhaps are to be seen in the «degraded moral state» Cooper attributes to their nature but Hawkeye is not so different from them; on the contrary, we may say that our hero much resembles them. Let us consider once again the episode in which Chingachgook kills an innocent Frenchman in cold blood (XIV, 138). In the novel Cooper frequently and openly criticizes the behaviour of Montcalm and describes with irony his refined European gentility, eventually stressing his responsibility in the massacre of Fort William Henry. But just as Montcalm is implicated in the actions of his Indian allies, so is the scout implicated in Chingachgook’s cruel scalping of the French sentry. On this occasion the poetics of the beau-idéal is pronounced by the scout himself who gives voice to Cooper’s fascinated disgust. Hawkeye’s assertion is very meaningful since he indirectly shows he has accepted evil as a natural component that exists outside and within himself. In this respect, Chingachgook appears as even more symbolic than Hawkeye. Associated with the wilderness he is identified with its evil powers and then converted into the best friend of a white man. The Indian chief, therefore, symbol of compromise, is to be seen as another face of Hawkeye, perhaps another Hawkeye. The final episode of the novel contains an important declaration of complicity: «Sagamore, you are not alone» (XXXIII, 349) revealing the two qualifying components of Hawkeye’s being, Indian and white nature, evil and innocence. The strong link between the scout and the Indian chief Chingachgook appears as quite unnatural and not entirely believable as Lawrence has underlined:

The red life flows in a different direction from the white life. You can’t make two streams that flow in opposite directions meet and mingle soothingly... [T]he Natty and Chingachgook myth must remain a myth. It is a wish-fulfilment, an evasion of actuality... [T]he folds of the Great Serpent would have been heavy, very heavy, too heavy, on any white man. Unless the white man were a true renegade, hating himself and his own race-spirit.31

Yet, Hawkeye’s most distinctive trait from the very beginning of the novel is his «sturdy honesty» (III, 30); throughout The Last of the Mohicans he declares himself to be «a man

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31 D.H. Lawrence, Studies in Classic American Literature, cit., p. 61.
without a cross» (XII, 117), stressing, in so doing, his distance from Chingachgook as from any other Indian character and, as a consequence, his loneliness. The forest decrees the denial of his nature as a social animal. This is the triumph of the wilderness and the defeat of man.

**ABSTRACT**
Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* is to be read as a response to the constant threat represented by the American wilderness more than a celebration of the best qualities of a white American hero. In the light of this European perspective Hawkeye’s solitude epitomizes the existential void of a non-man living in a timeless non-world. The creation of such a fanciful hero is not the result of an innocent vision of the American wilderness; on the contrary, it is the very product of Cooper’s awareness of evil and comes to life as an ideological attempt to exorcise it.

**KEY WORDS**