

Agata Bielik-Robson

A Culture Truly Democratic

In his seminal classic *The Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville, a French aristocrat, erudite and traveller, describes the formation of a completely new, democratic culture. This culture, he says, will be like nothing we have witnessed so far. It will be universal, yet in a completely different way: based not on the philosophical knowledge of the enlightened salons, but on folk wisdom, deeply entrenched in the hard university of life. It will rather avoid excessive sophistication and stay simple in its constant concern to appeal to possibly broadest masses. It will also be very emotional, leaving little space for intellectual analysis. These emotions, however, will come from a different register than the emotions of the European High Culture; for, continues de Tocqueville, whereas Europe's favourite emotive mode always was and remains tragedy, a genre in which the individual encounters the overwhelming power of fate or history he or she cannot overcome, the New Continent won't have time for this kind of high-brow, pessimistic nonsense. After all, it will be the culture of individualists whose world-view will have to be, by nature, as far removed from the tragic predicament as possible. Their sensitivity and their emotive art, therefore, will be more optimistic if not a little naive, but the main transformation will happen along the line of what the ancient Greeks used to call *hubris*: the individual conceit, in the tragic genre always mercilessly punished by mighty agents of fate and history, will turn here into something positive. This transmuted *hybris* will become a new ruling passion: the member of the future democratic culture will believe that he or she, as an individual, has power to change the world according to his or her convictions. The defeatism of the old tragedy, with its characteristic negative emotions of fear, pity and fatalistic melancholy, here, in America, will give way to joy, vitality and confidence in the power of human will to shape the future.

This passage from *The Democracy in America* is one of the best known fragments of the cultural criticism: we read it at every course of history of philosophy, political thought or cultural studies, and some of us in Europe become acquainted with it already in High School. Tocqueville's diagnosis is, however, also the source of one of the most prevailing prejudice against the new American culture. Its author was, after all, an aristocrat: quite adventurous all right, yet still deeply formed by the typically European hierarchic type of thinking, accustomed to divide classes and styles into high and low. For Tocqueville, therefore, the new American culture might have seemed exciting, vital and resounding with unexpected passions, but it was still a low culture, inherently unable to transcend its limitations to raise into the domain of a truly high style. Alas, this prejudice, all the more harmful for the fact that, surrounded by ambivalent fascination, it almost passes unnoticed, remains active till nowadays. For that it is a prejudice, manufactured by a resentful, ageing, decadent, elitist European culture, I have no doubts whatsoever.

The main blunder of perspective lies in the fact that Europe likes so much to cling to her neat conceptual arrangements: the division of high and low styles is one of the most cherished tropes without which a European critic won't even start a discussion on any of the cultural artefacts, be it film, book, song, novel or a philosophical treatise (that's why in Europe you will never get a decent department of cultural studies, which originally were meant to debate intellectually on the achievements of pop-culture – apart from United Kingdom, obviously, but this is precisely what makes Britain so different from the rest of European countries). It had to take an American by birth, T. S. Eliot, who, otherwise very cultured and high-brow, pointed to this unfortunate division and enumerated all its inherent discontents. His famous essay on the dissociation of sensibility seems, in fact, to be written from the fresh American perspective which knows no such dissociation. Eliot's praise of

Shakespeare as the writer who was able to combine abstract, highly ironic wit with bodily, deeply sensual humour could have been uttered only by someone who came from the culture still too young and vital to be bothered by strict conventions. And his dislike for Spenser and Dryden, who destroyed the Shakespearean universe by loosing its integrity, is also very non-European indeed. This contrast between Shakespeare, creating an undivided, monistic world of body and mind, mischief and virtue, lust and love, and the rest of his heirs who chose the path of ever higher sublimation, was rarely spotted by European thinkers, with the only exception of few romantic writers, like, for instance, Friedrich Schiller. Yet, it seems to be the standard line of Shakespeare's reception in America: from Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay, "The Representatives of Mankind", where the Stratford giant is perceived as the most holistic of all writers, via Eliot's "Dissociation of Sensibility", up to Harold Bloom, and his analogous glorification of Shakespeare as "the inventor of the modern human" in her absolute, both sensual and intellectual, totality.

Thus, the proper American culture is neither high nor low; it wants to be total and integral, able to depict the human life as an undivided whole. This is precisely what Harold Bloom, a great advocate of the specificity of this new culture, calls "American religion". This American Religion, however, has nothing to do with the fundamentalist, ultrapuritan protestantism *nobody* in Europe was and ever will be fond of - yet a lot with the Emmersonian preaching of his famous principle of "self-reliance". Self-reliance is precisely the Greek *hubris* turned into a positive passion de Tocqueville talked about, still with mixed feelings. In Emerson there are no more mixed feelings: self-reliance is the only proper stance of the modern individual *as* individual, her only true confession. In his characteristically American, that is, optimistic manner, Emerson takes Nietzsche's highly unrealistic tale about *der Übermensch*, "the superman", and twists it into a powerful prophecy predicting the coming of The Oversoul, the new type of the individual who no longer will have to fear the limiting influence of the external world. From this time on the Oversoul became an archetype of the American Religion: all the mighty monsters populating the universe of Marvell comics, hulks, batmen, X-men, spider men, silver surfers, and – last but not least – Keanu Reeves' Neo from the *Matrix* are, in fact, nothing but the incarnations of the strange gnostic messiah coming straight from the Emersonian oracle. Marvell comics, or the films like *Matrix* are really difficult to describe according to the European standards: is this a low entertainment for the masses, or a skilful, high-brow revision of old faiths and mythologies? It is neither, and both simultaneously: the religious intensity of the Oversoul motif makes it accessible to all modern individuals who share it, consciously or not – while, at the same time, it originates from a non-trivial, metaphysical source forming what William James, a founder of American pragmatism, called a "vital hypothesis".

This, again, is a very important difference between America and Europe. American culture has its new, fresh myths and likes to repeat them into infinity, never tired of watching the same story over and over again. As all relatively young cultures it is based on repetition which hasn't yet worn itself out. While Europe is an old and decrepit system whose functions are no longer based on James' "vital hypotheses": Judeo-Christianity is long dead, its credibility impeached by the horrible failure of all religious and secular "promised lands", and it hasn't been replaced by anything equally universal and lively. European culture no longer believes in repetition: its tropes are rather based on refinement and revision whose final goal is pure formalism, or the ultimate dearth of meaning. Europe thus produces a mandarin, elitist, disdainful, cold and on the whole deeply unpleasant high-culture whose main occupation is to scorn the myths on which "simple people" build their lives, and to demystify them as laughable fictions. So, while America has made someone like Northrop Frye, who could write about myths and archetypes in literature with full seriousness and engagement, Europe has

given to the world a series of tiring French demystifiers, like, for instance, Roland Barthes with his ingenious, yet remarkably shallow, *Mythologiques*.

There is also another, truly endearing feature of the American, democratic cult of self-reliance: the proliferation of all those wonderful, solitary weirdos, growing on the provincial soil, far away from the so called cultural centres, not even fully aware of their existence. This lineage is truly impressive: from Emily Dickinson, via Emerson, Thoreau, Lovecraft, up to such masters of the de-centred self-reliance as David Lynch. Their self-enclosed universes achieve a level of fresh eccentricity no longer available in the overpopulated, hypersocialised, urban Europe. Lynch's metaphysics of little southern and mid-western towns has no match in its originality when compared to the European, even most acclaimed film fantasies. Take *Mullholand Drive*, with its subtle, yet spontaneous, Swedenborgian variations on the after-life in hell, or *Blue Velvet*, with its intense interplay of the surface and the hidden depth of things, or *Twin Peaks* with its X-File-like sacralisation of secret agents – and compare it with, let's say, *The Double Life of Veronique* of Krzysztof Kieslowski, the masterpiece and the highlight of European metaphysical imagination – in fact, a completely improbable drudgery – and you will immediately understand what I mean.

When I asked one of the students of the Creative Writing at the Iowa University about his favourite subject on which he would like to write, he said, in a youngish provocative manner, probably assuming that he talks to a supercilious European savvy: "Well, you know, I am just a child of the corn, I can't write about anything sophisticated, but I would like to expose the delicate, dark underbelly of the Midwestern life". "Great", I said, for this is precisely what we need: a truly democratic culture from which Europe, instead of criticising and scoffing, could finally begin to learn.