

Notes on 'America Abroad'

Great Britain – the United Kingdom – call it what you will, has for many years been engaged in an geopolitical game of Twister. It is the founder turned junior partner to an ever more formidable United States. It is at the same time a European power (though the anachronism of the Security Council allows it a most improbable swagger on the world stage). A political debate is embodied in this contradiction. Should Britain embrace the American brand of free market capitalism – with its safety net so low that any citizen who takes the plunge touches the ground before the upswing? Or should it adopt, with reforming zeal, the continental traditions of social democracy and state interference?

This dilemma does not exist – or at least, does not exist as strongly – for many other European countries. They are not bound, by language and history, to define themselves in relation to vast America; though everybody does, to some extent. For this reason, a British perception of the United States may illuminate some facets of that vast and contradictory nation.

I first want to dispense with the political myth – much vaunted in Britain, less valued in the States – of the so-called 'special relationship'. It is true that the two nations meet in the ideological dance of history. Candid thinkers on the political Right might agree with James Joyce who, in his lectures in Trieste, described *Robinson Crusoe* as a blueprint for Anglo-Americanism: the battle against nature, the pursuit of material wealth in fulfilment of Providence, the lofty presumption of a right to power. In this context, former rivalries have been consigned to dust, replaced by a mutually satisfying sense of kinship. Thus we have the American invocation of Winston Churchill to justify George Bush's adventures in Iraq. The same capitalist oligarchs brush against the vestiges of the English aristocracy, mixing their 'class' with English 'style' as though to ennoble themselves by association. The British, in return, console themselves for the loss of Empire by becoming the prime sycophant of the new imperial power: Britain's Greece to America's Rome (Macmillan's formulation) or Britain's Rome, perhaps, to America's Byzantium.

The special relationship, then, signifies convenience to America and desperate fear of marginalisation by Britain. It is a fabrication – in many ways pernicious – of vested interests on either side of the Atlantic. Yet it seems to me that it has a real and dynamic counterpart in cultural terms.

It began, perhaps, with a New World sense of inferiority. The American novel needed Melville and Twain to find its 'native' amplitude, while the turn of the century saw Henry James and T.S. Eliot gravitate towards civilised and canonical England. There can be a strange anachronism in American uses of British culture. Still today, Republican politicians will recruit Rudyard Kipling as the authority on 'freedom loving' militarism, though his political star has long since waned in Britain. The British radical tradition may have nourished the American Revolution but, with notable exceptions, it seems to me that only conservative thought still travels from the old country to the new. The dominant flow of influence, now, is from West to East.

The cultural domination, in Europe, of 17th century Spain or 18th century France cannot hope to rival the international influence of the United States in the past century. Think of jazz music, of the blues and rock. Think of modern art, relocating from Paris to Manhattan. Think – if you can bear to – of film and television. Today, American mastery in the audio-visual domain is a fact of global life. For my own country, this is sometimes positive, acting as a spur to British invention. More often, however, the effect is negative, resulting in the financial stranglehold of US distributors and the effacing of cinematic

traditions by pale imitations of American popcorn: Scarface limping up the Ball's Pond Road. What do US audiences – with all those dollars in their jeans – see of Britain? The weary clichés of royalty and engaging toffs in country houses. What, in return, do Britons see of America? Dross and vulgarity, of course. But also much of value; and even mediocre American screen narratives manage to convey something of ordinary, domestic life, which rarely survives in British cinema outside the works of Ken Loach and Mike Leigh.

More interesting to me, however, is the influence of the American on the British novel. Browbeaten by Modernism, forced in upon itself by the apprehension of national decline and the precepts of social realism, the British novel looked, in the '70s and '80s, to America for its liberation. The muscularity of Philip Roth, the Dickensian scope of Saul Bellow, offered writers like Martin Amis or Salman Rushdie an alternative to parochialism. Here was a prose that balked at nothing, mixing high and low culture, the literary with the demotic. Once again, everything human became fair territory.

The response of critics to this influence suggests the ambivalence of British attitudes towards the United States. It may be characterised as a mixture of enthusiasm and snobbery. The present backlash against what one might call the Mid-Atlanticists (Amis chief among them) declares their work to be too sprawling, inchoate and self-regarding. In a word, *vulgar*. 'We may not have cultural superiority,' the consolation goes, 'but we still have greater *refinement*.' This seems to me a form of bravado masking a deep anxiety. Tony Blair, as he received his standing ovation from Congress, manifested a very British desire for American approval. The Beatles had truly made it when they cracked America. We may produce good novels, or television sitcoms, but we can't be sure of their value until they are praised across the Atlantic.

There is, of course, and always has been, a reciprocal force. One has only to note the unmerited authority conferred by many Americans on the nearest, plummy English accent. Plenty of charmers and sycophants have found niches in Hollywood or Manhattan, as Tom Wolfe acidly observes in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*.

One had the sense of a very rich and suave secret legion that had insinuated itself into the cooperative apartment houses of Park Avenue and Fifth Avenue, from there to pounce at will upon the Yankees' fat fowl, to devour at leisure the last plump white meat on the bones of capitalism... They were comrades in arms, in the service of Great Britain's wounded chauvinism.

The balance of influence, however, remains unequal. America is the lodestone to British eyes; it is also the prism in which we see ourselves vindicated or ridiculed. Being the crucible in which the future – dystopian or utopian – is assembled, it is the dream we aspire to and the nightmare we dread.

This wary eye has long been turned on America by the inhabitants of my crowded island. Charles Dickens, when he crossed the Atlantic in the 1840s, was disappointed by what he found. The continuance of slavery, in contradiction of America's founding ideals, struck him as gross hypocrisy; he struggled with the discrepancy between national myths and daily reality. It is a disappointment expressed by many visitors since; but it is no absolution of America's vices to suggest that such disappointment is largely a consequence of the world's unreasonable hopes of America. Repression and poverty, the promise of religious freedom in a country unburdened by ancient failures – all these have driven immigrants to these shores. The myth (with its large part of truth) retains its potency, and sits uncomfortably with the counter-realities of genocide and civil strife.

Why does the world continue to expect of America that it be untarnished? Perhaps it's because America loudly proclaims its virtue. Complexity is antithetical to the image of itself that it wishes to project. And the British – like most Europeans – collude in this simplification. We tend to forget the country's size and variety. How would an Irish farmer like to be mistaken for a Greek fisherman? Smaller and more homogeneous national societies tend to simplify a country which *lacks* such homogeneity. And perhaps this suggests one British advantage over the superpower; for mine is a country small enough to have something resembling a national discourse – and a national culture, though characterised by a happy diversity.

Many Americans seem to regard their country with little scepticism. Certainly there is much, in two centuries of national and international struggle, for the United States to be proud of. But a progressive reputation cannot be sustained by reactionary policies. After 9/11, a fervent hope swept Europe that the 'America First' mentality of the Bush administration would be replaced by a new internationalism – a readiness, by the US, to power multilateral solutions to global problems, rather than hinder or scupper them, as it had the Kyoto Treaty. Instead, we've had American *unilateralism*: a pushy simulacrum of diplomacy filling the media hiatus before ineluctable war in Iraq; a cynical indifference to climate change, to which the US is by far the world's biggest contributor; a petulant rejection of international treaties on biological and chemical weapons, on landmines and child labour; and a reluctance to help AIDS-afflicted Africa in the one most effective way: relaxing patents on anti-retroviral drugs. It is one of the miracles of Bush diplomacy that it has managed, in the course of eighteen months, to squander the universal sympathy that it received following the terrorist outrages. This is due in no small part to an imperious disregard for world opinion. British television, for instance, hosted few calm, moderate, reasoned ambassadors for Bush's policy on Iraq. Instead, Richard Perle greased our screens, treating all opponents with lofty contempt. What has happened to the business of persuasion? American power is such – the Neo-Cons appear to say – that we don't need friends. The parlous aftermath of war in Iraq puts paid to this dangerous illusion.

For generations, the world has pinned its hopes on America. One thinks of wilderness and landscape; of the bustling city, home to jazz and infinite stories; of freedoms and opportunities unequalled on most of the planet. When the ambitions of America's leaders are reduced to the fulfilment of narrow self-interest, is it any wonder that the world should despair of its dream country? Among the million Britons – myself included – who marched against Bush's war in London in February, far more suffered from bruised love than prejudiced hate.