A Frenchman Abroad:

The Construction of National Identity in Cooper's The Wing-and-Wing

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Since The Wing-and-Wing (1842) is one of the least-known and least-studied of Cooper's works, it may not be inappropriate to say a few words about the story. The novel is set in Italy, in 1799, and, to be more specific, on the island of Elba and in the Bay of Naples (shortly after the fall of the Neapolitan Republic). The hero is a Frenchman by the name of Raoul Yvard, who is the captain of a privateer of the French Republic. He is in love with a virtuous Italian girl, Ghita Caraccioli (an imaginary granddaughter of an Italian historical character, Admiral Francesco Caracciolo). Yet, although he risks being captured by the enemies of France in order to see her — first in Porto Ferraio and later in Naples — she repeatedly refuses to marry him on account of their religious differences: he is a nonbeliever, she a devout Catholic. This being essentially a sea novel, the plot also centers on a chase, as the French privateer is relentlessly pursued by a few ships of the British Mediterranean fleet. Eventually, after several attempts, the British succeed in sinking Raoul's ship and Raoul himself is mortally wounded in the course of the attack. His loved one, Ghita, manages to escape and ends her days in a convent.

The title word "Wing-and-Wing," which may prove obscure to those who are not familiar with nautical terms, indicates a ship moving with sails extended on both sides in order to acquire greater speed. In the story it is the assumed name of Raoul's privateer, a device to deceive the authorities of Elba and pass for an English ship. Its real name is actually "Le Feu-Follet" ("The Will-o'-the-wisp") which, from the very beginning, sets the tone for a
novel in which appearances are often deceptive, in which men and things are often other than they seem. In this respect, as well as for its loving descriptions of the Italian landscape, this novel is strongly reminiscent of a previous work by Cooper, *The Water-Witch* (1831), which was written during the author's sojourn in Italy (October 1828-May 1830).

What is fascinating about *The Wing-and-Wing* is that it is largely about the identification of foreignness, of typical — or supposedly typical — national traits. It presents French, English, and American characters abroad. The main characters are repeatedly under the scrutiny of inquisitive eyes, trying to detect their origins and their customs, and of attentive ears, attempting to identify their accents — an experience, in short, familiar in various degrees to anyone who has lived abroad. What is more, because of the historical moment depicted in the novel, because of the situation of hostility between nations, some of the characters are forced to hide their national identity and put on a mask. Central to *The Wing-and-Wing* is the theme of disguise, the necessity to pass for someone else. For the hero, in particular, the ability to pass for an Englishman, in the first part of the novel, and later, for an Italian, is — quite literally — a matter of life and death. Luckily for Raoul, on the island of Elba the success of his impersonation as the English Captain Jack Smith is aided by the islanders' scant knowledge of, and respect for, the rest of the world. Thus, even Raoul's most serious blunders, such as mistaking Cicero for an English writer, are accounted for by the two chief authorities of Elba as those natural signs of crudeness one expects from "remote and so lately barbarous nations as England, Germany, and France" (90). By attributing to the Vice-Governor and the Podestà of the island the conviction that all foreigners are more or less uncivilized, Cooper hits on something which for centuries has been part of the Italian collective imagination. What we find portrayed in the novel is in fact that odd coexistence of a sense of superiority and a reality of decadence which the historian Giulio Bollati has identified as "one of the most characteristic and stable patterns of the entire Italian history" (956).²

During his first interview with the authorities of Elba, Raoul nearly betrays himself; nearly betrays his "Frenchness", when he impulsively voices his hatred of the aristocracy: "I hate an aristocrat ... as I do the devil" (31). For Raoul's character is strongly and insistently identified with the form of government then adopted in his country; he is almost an emanation of that
form of government. He is French, but more importantly, he is a French Republican, a fact which the Italian setting of the novel—a scene dominated by foreign and local oligarchies—renders all the more relevant. The same is true of his lack of religious faith which is thrown into bold relief, as it were, by contrast with Italy’s Catholicism. What Cooper does here, in his attempt at defining national identity in “opposition, in conflict and contrast” (Kasson 144) is reminiscent of the strategy he adopted in his travel books: the Gleanings in Europe series. There his aim had been the definition of an American national character and an indirect commendation of authentic republican virtues. But The Wing-and-Wing was written after Cooper’s return from Europe, when deep dissatisfaction with the state of things in his native country was making of him, in Daniel Marder’s phrase, an “exile at home”; when America seemed if not “inferior by comparison with Europe”, certainly inferior “by comparison with his ideal” (35). This new disappointing America, the America Cooper had found on coming back (to echo the title of one of his most bitter books, Home as Found, 1838), is incarnated in The Wing-and-Wing in the character of the Yankee seaman Ithuel Bolt. He is the prototype of the “tough” American, aggressive, practical, intolerant, a man whose character traits are as marked as his physical features.

Ithuel Bolt was a native of what, in this great Union, is called the Granite State. Notwithstanding he was not absolutely made of the stone in question, there was an absence of the ordinary symptoms of natural feeling about him, that had induced many of his French acquaintances in particular to affirm that there was a good deal more of marble in his moral temperament, at least, than usually fell to the lot of human beings. He had the outline of a good frame, but it was miserably deficient in the filling up. The bone predominated; the sinews came next in consideration; nor was the man without a proper share of muscle; but this was so disposed of as to present nothing but angles, whichever way he was viewed. (44)

Ithuel Bolt is a valuable member of Raoul Yvard’s crew, but his real function in the story is that of emphasizing by contrast the integrity and nobility of the hero. Raoul may be considered a pirate by his enemies, but Cooper depicts him as a man of high principles. Indeed, the chief motive behind his apparently reckless adventures and love of danger is loyalty to his country. Ithuel Bolt, on the other hand, for all his bragging about his “Granite State” (New Hampshire) and the superiority of the religious and
political institutions of his country, is only loyal to himself. He is a living expression of what Cooper sees as America's boundless individualism, of an extreme commitment to the self. The reason why he is serving in a privateer of the French Republic, when we meet him, is that it gives him the chance to do damage to a people — the English — he hates inordinately. He is, in fact, a former victim of the practice known as impressment, having been enlisted by force, like quite a few Americans at the time, into the English navy. And if, by telling his story, Cooper certainly does not pass up the chance to attack English institutions and mores — in line with what he had done in his travel books and in the novel The Bravo (1831) — it is also true that Ithuel Bolt shares a fundamental trait with his former oppressors. Like them he is ridiculously jingoistic and profoundly contemptuous toward all foreigners: an attitude which, significantly enough, finds expression in an unconquerable aversion for any language other than English. It is not just that Ithuel Bolt and most of the English characters we encounter — including Admiral Nelson — betray their ignorance mispronouncing French and Italian names. What Cooper seems to suggest is that this distortion of words is a form of aggressiveness, a form of violence. The way he makes us vividly sense the full force of Ithuel's contempt for the people of Italy through the pronunciation of the word “Italians” as “Eyetalians” is in itself a remarkable achievement. To the distortion of that word there seems to correspond a disdainful superimposition of another identity on the Italian people, one that Ithuel conceives as based essentially on knavery and moral unreliability. And so strong is Cooper's desire to distance himself from the character of his countryman, that he goes so far as to include in the text instructions on how to pronounce correctly the last name of his heroine: “Caraccioli”.

In one of the most significant scenes in the novel Ithuel and Raoul find themselves prisoners aboard an English ship, where they are questioned about their identity and national allegiance. Accused of being an English deserter, Ithuel proudly discloses his nationality, referring emphatically to his Puritan heritage (“I'm a native of the Granite State, in North America. My fathers went to that region, in times long gone by, to uphold their religious ideas” 249). It is a measure of Cooper's disillusionment with the moral fibre of his country, in his time, that in this novel America's forefathers find no better heir and spokesman than this shrewd and hypocritical seaman. Significantly, the behavior of this son of the Puritans is
compared unfavorably with that of the French captain, a professed nonbeliever.

As between himself and the Frenchman, there existed a remarkable moral discrepancy; for, while he who prided himself on his religious ancestry and pious education had a singularly pliable conscience, Raoul, almost an atheist in opinion, would have scorned a simple lie, when placed in a situation that touched his honor. In the way of warlike artifices, few men were more subtle, or loved to practice them oftener, than Raoul Yvard; but, the mask aside, or when he fell back on his native dignity of mind, death itself could not have extorted an equivocation from him. On the other hand, Ithuel had an affection for a lie — more especially if it served himself, or injured his enemy; finding a mode of reconciling all this to his spirituality, that is somewhat peculiar to fanaticism, as it begins to grow threadbare. (250)

To judge from the denouement of the novel, Cooper had rather gloomy ideas as to whose side History was on. Ithuel Bolt manages in fact to return to America and, unlike Cooper, finds himself perfectly at home. Having become a rich man, by means which are not clear, he soon becomes a highly respected figure in his community:

In due time he “experienced religion,” and at this moment is an active abolitionist, a patron of the temperance cause ... and a general terror to evil-doers, under the appellation of Deacon Bolt (407).

On the other hand, the novel’s gallant hero, a fit type of the natural gentleman, a representative of republican qualities, never returns to his beloved France, but meets with an untimely death on foreign shores.

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1) The Admiral and Ghita’s last name is spelt “Caraccioli” in the text.
2) The English Translation is mine.
Opere Citate, Works Cited

Zitierte Literatur


