

# Interpretation

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# Interpretation

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Catherine H. Zuckert, *Natural Right and the American Imagination: Political Philosophy in Novel Form* (Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 1990). xi + 271 pp.; \$40.75.

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In that portion of *Democracy in America* concerned with the influence of equality on the action and productions of the mind, Alexis de Tocqueville speculates on the connection between politics and poetry:

Among a democratic people poetry will not be fed with legends or the memorials of old traditions. The poet will not attempt to people the universe with supernatural beings, in whom his readers and his own fancy have ceased to believe; nor will he coldly personify virtues and vices, which are better received under their own features. All these resources fail him; but Man remains, and the poet needs no more. The destinies of mankind, man himself taken aloof from his country and his age and standing in the presence of Nature and of God, with his passions, his doubts, his rare prosperities and inconceivable wretchedness, will become the chief, if not the sole, theme of poetry among these nations.

Writing at a time when, according to him, “the inhabitants of the United States have, . . . properly speaking, no literature,” Alexis de Tocqueville nonetheless ventured to predict the character of America’s literary future. Catherine Zuckert is also interested in the peculiar genius of American authors—a genius no longer merely prospective. Although she does not mention Tocqueville’s assessment, her book, *Natural Right and the American Imagination*, might be read as an elaboration, and at the same time a refinement and correction, of his hypothesis.

Zuckert’s exploration of the links between our political constitution and our literature proceeds by a chain reading of six American novelists (Cooper, Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, Hemingway, and Faulkner) whose works employ a common format: the hero who withdraws from society to live in nature. From the frontiersman Natty Bumppo to his latter-day descendants, Nick Adams and Isaac McCaslin, from the seagoing Ishmael to the runaway Mississippi rafter Huck Finn, from the rebel and outcast Hester Prynne to the Blithedale utopians, they all, in one form or another, “light out for the Territory.” Zuckert argues that this “characteristically American motif . . . parallels and recasts the movement of thought in the ‘classic’ statement of American political principles in the Declaration of Independence.” The dissolution of social and political bonds, the appeal to the laws of nature and nature’s God, followed (if possible) by the

reconstitution of government on a more just basis are chief ingredients of both the Declaration and these classic American novels. Tocqueville may have been prescient when he identified the theme of man “standing in the presence of Nature and of God,” without a country; but in keeping with his general downplaying of the theoretical and practical significance of the Founding, he did not connect this stance with the state-of-nature reasoning at the origin of the American regime.

Whereas Tocqueville strongly suggests that it is politics which guides art, according to Zuckert the American writer’s engagement with the nation’s founding principles has not been determined or subordinate, but creative and critical. The imaginative re-presentation of the founding argument has been deliberately undertaken by novelists from Cooper onward, as a sort of exercise in democratic myth-making. Far from being apologetic in intention, their myth-making often exposes the ambiguities and deficiencies of the original Lockean formulation of the doctrine of natural rights. As presented by Zuckert, the Leatherstocking tales of James Fenimore Cooper, for instance, embody a “Rousseauian” correction of Locke, forwarding a moral rather than an economic understanding of the American regime, grounding human community in compassion as well as calculation. Although Cooper’s reputation has been in eclipse for some time, Zuckert stresses his importance. By means of his dramatization of natural goodness in the figure of Natty Bumppo, Cooper “initiated a literary debate of sorts not only about the character of the human psyche and its political implications, but also about the basis and wisdom of the whole notion of returning to nature.” Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, Hemingway, and Faulkner are all shown to ring changes on this theme.

Zuckert places Melville and Hemingway closest to Cooper, for despite great differences among them, all three believed that “the most important function of the literary artist is to provide a fictional illustration of the essential and rational goodness of human life.” Cooper, of course, does this most emphatically and unproblematically. Moreover, while Natty Bumppo’s natural justice and natural theology cannot be transposed directly to social life, any more than Natty himself can, they do have civic equivalents. Natty’s moral sentiments provide a natural standard capable of informing political life. Solitary communion with nature is likewise at the heart of Hemingway’s fiction; there, however, it offers no such possibility of social redemption. What Nick Adams experiences in “Big Two-hearted River” is not religious wonder, but the pure sentiment of existence, a momentary and fleeting passion, good in itself, albeit devoid of specifically human content. Cooper and Hemingway’s common desideratum “To live according to nature” is susceptible of radically different constructions. Nonetheless, both authors show a certain unity of humanity and nature. Melville, by contrast, grounds “the value, beauty, and dignity of humanity” in its solidarity in the face of an indifferent nature. Even at the extreme, or perhaps especially at the extreme, men recognize the goodness of life. Ishmael goes to

sea to find a reason for both himself and his fellows to live. Despite their different assessments of the friendliness of the cosmos to human endeavor, Cooper, Melville, and Hemingway each finds the encounter to be beneficial, whether it be productive of natural and political right, or individual happiness, or human understanding and camaraderie.

Hawthorne, Twain, and Faulkner form something of a dissenting tradition, believing that "such idealized depictions of human life in the state of nature have dangerous political effects." In their novels, the protagonists' attempts to return to nature are misguided, sometimes comically, sometimes tragically so. There is no real freedom to be found in the flight from convention. Whatever lessons the protagonists take (or fail to take) from their misadventures, the reader is likely to come away chastened, reconciled afresh to family, law, and tradition. That is not to say, however, that the stance of these authors toward the American regime is simply defensive. The critical thrust of their work resides in their reinterpretations of the old staples of sexual morality, the rule of law, and the bearing of history (respectively the specialties of Hawthorne, Twain, and Faulkner). Hawthorne's anti-utopianism manifests itself in his critiques of both Puritanism (*The Scarlet Letter*) and Fourierist communism (*The Blithedale Romance*). In their antithetical ways, Puritans and Blithedalers absolutize community and undervalue (whether blithely or deliberately) the importance of passion, particularly sexual passion. As the source of the human desire to live together, as well as a source of division and quarrel, passion must be accorded some scope, but also some regularity. Hawthorne, accordingly, endorses the liberal solution: the establishment of a private realm (constituted by family and property) and a public realm that respects that privacy. However, he assigns a new primacy and extension to the affectional aspect of the liberal solution, such that the social contract itself is understood more on the order of a marriage contract than a business contract. It becomes an enduring commitment that reaches beyond mutual profit to encompass the participants' need for sympathy and support.

Twain and Faulkner, like Hawthorne, seek to dampen the ingrained American fondness for starting over. Yielding to the call to "come-out from corrupt institutions" (as the nineteenth-century abolitionists put it) is not seen by them as the best route to the abolition or reform of those institutions. After all, in *Huckleberry Finn* it is not flight that secures Jim's freedom (downriver being the last place for a runaway slave), but the allied action of religion and law (Miss Watson's conscience as expressed in her will). Similarly, in *Go Down, Moses* Faulkner expresses reservations about the wisdom of Isaac McCaslin's renunciation of his tainted patrimony, an act which forfeits the possibility of effective public action on the race question for the private satisfaction of moral purity. Of the novelists discussed by Zuckert, Twain and Faulkner deal most directly with the theme of American slavery. It may be part of why they discern in the longing to return to nature a dangerous inability to learn the truth about

oneself and others. Historic injustice renders the innocence of natural equality an unattainable illusion. Civic equality is the product of struggle, the struggle of black and white alike to attain full humanity, to accept, understand, and transform the bitter legacy of mastery and slavery.

Through their consideration of the respective meaning and choiceworthiness of natural liberty and civil liberty, this select group of American novelists constitutes a microcosm of modernity. With the triumvirate of Cooper, Melville, and Hemingway on one side and the countertradition of Hawthorne, Twain, and Faulkner on the other, they reproduce, Zuckert argues, the two major strands within Rousseau's own thought (as represented by the *Second Discourse* and *On the Social Contract*). They also anticipate and, more importantly, offer responses to certain developments in modern philosophy, including the most potent: historicism and nihilism.

As the subtitle has it, this is *Political Philosophy in Novel Form*. Of course, it was the philosophers themselves who first experimented with the novel as a more popular and democratic conveyance for their political teachings. In the *Persian Letters*, Montesquieu has one of his characters defend storytelling as against "abstract reasoning" and "subtle philosophy" on the grounds that "there are certain truths with respect to which persuasion is not sufficient; they must be felt as well." Rousseau, in *La Nouvelle Heloise*, was to follow Montesquieu's literary lead. Zuckert, however, suggests that the natural-born novelists may be better than their irrepressibly intellectual predecessors at appealing to the passions of readers. Cooper for instance, even though he is the most visibly didactic, and therefore arguably the least novelistically accomplished, of the American writers, is more accessible than Rousseau.

These fictional explorations of the central issue of political philosophy—nature versus convention—qualify not only as a new and peculiarly democratic genre of political thought, but as political deeds. Stated most boldly, as Zuckert does not shy from doing, they are "attempts to re-found the American polity on a truer, more adequate view of nature—including preeminently human nature." Although ultimately dubious about the extent of their influence on the self-understanding of Americans, Zuckert demonstrates that these novels provide, for those who are interested, reflections otherwise lacking on the idea-poor American scene. American political discourse proper manifests a remarkable degree of theoretical consensus about the origin, extent, and end of civil government. Not surprisingly, our most sterling instances of political thought, the *Federalist Papers* and the Lincoln-Douglas debates—appearing in the lowly guises of journalism and electioneering—belong to periods in which consensus on fundamental questions was still at issue, namely, during the fight for ratification of the Constitution and the fight over the future of slavery. Absent for the most part from the nation's political life, the serious questioning and reformulation of our principles took place instead in the realm of make believe.

The most likely objection to Zuckert's enterprise—that her reading is too schematic, that she has simply laid a philosophic template over the course of

American literature—is, I believe, unwarranted. The vindication of her approach lies in the richness of her individual readings. Each novel is interpreted very much on its own terms. There is no ruthless and distorting imposition of philosophic language and concepts. One senses that the idea for such a thematic study grew out of long and faithful acquaintance with the different novels; the framework was not prefabricated, but built from the ground up. Despite the array of heady references (Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Burke, Heidegger, Bergson, and especially Rousseau), Zuckert does not treat these novels simply as dramatic simulacrum of some philosophic treatise; she avoids the tendency of those steeped in political philosophy to denigrate the uniqueness of the poet's handling of his materials. Zuckert regards these works not as adaptations, but as originals.

In perhaps the most fascinating of her readings, Zuckert holds out the possibility that in *Go Down, Moses* and its sequel, *Intruder in the Dust*, Faulkner achieves a philosophically adequate reconciliation of nature and history (via a Bergsonian theory of time), and in doing so provides an American answer to the crisis of natural right provoked by Continental, and especially German, historicism, from Hegel to Heidegger. Buried in the footnotes is a quiet but effective reproof to Allan Bloom, who “has made much of this ‘German connection’ in *The Closing of the American Mind*; but,” she remarks, “he does not seem to have noticed the American literary response.” Bloom's book shows how an idea defeated on the battlefield can rise phoenixlike in the heart of the conquerors. According to Bloom, it is a Nietzscheanized leftism—“Nietzsche without the abyss”—that threatens the university, philosophy, and America. Bloom perhaps undervalues the healthiness of the American ability to render profoundly pernicious doctrines shallow. But, as Zuckert establishes, America has far more admirable self-preservative resources than its philistinism. In the productions of its literary artists, America can match philosophic depth with depth. In *Moby Dick*, that “metaphysical masterpiece,” we are witness to both the mindlessness of Pip as he plunges into the abyss and the inhuman single-mindedness of Ahab as he confronts and seeks to conquer the abyss. But Melville also portrays an alternative outcome: Ishmael, fortified by his “genial desperado philosophy” and perched on Queequeg's friendly coffin, has found both a metaphysical and a real source of buoyancy amidst flux and indifference. While the source of the buoyancy that these American novelists offer is variously located (in religion, family, friendship, law, nature itself), all seek to render human life more livable, individually and (with the exception of Hemingway) collectively.

Should the textual explications not convince one of the “fundamentally philosophic character and the political function of classic American literature,” Zuckert's readings are buttressed by exterior evidence. Cooper and Faulkner, for instance, explicitly acknowledged the novelist's role as public teacher—Cooper describing himself as “an American who wished to illustrate and enforce the peculiar principles of his own country by the agency of polite litera-

ture.” Zuckert looks at both *The American Democrat*, a political treatise written by Cooper during a hiatus from fiction when he thought his message was being misunderstood, and speeches given by Faulkner during his stint as a cultural ambassador. She also documents briefly the six American novelists’ familiarity with philosophic writings. More important than this evidence of a European tutelage, however, is the evidence of an intra-American dialogue. It is Zuckert’s reconstruction of that dialogue which allows her to move so gracefully from one author to the next. Disagreements existed not only over the character of human and cosmic nature, but over the best way to embody and express that character in a novel directed to a democratic audience. In tracing the rhetorical development from Cooper to Faulkner, Zuckert adds another richly colored strand of interpretation to the weave of her book. Hawthorne and his psychological romances are introduced in contradistinction to Cooper’s forthright moralizing. In “Fenimore Cooper’s Literary Offenses,” Twain even more emphatically rejected Cooper’s approach; in *Huckleberry Finn*, he crafted a comic alternative. Zuckert claims that Twain’s ironic presentation of Huck and Jim’s adventures downriver displaced the Leatherstocking saga as “the depiction of a return to the state of nature” and “marked a new beginning in American literature.” By their own testimony, both Hemingway and Faulkner are Twain’s descendants—though of course they make very different use of their patrimony.

All told, Zuckert makes a compelling case that the canon of American fiction has a specific philosophic bearing. English novels of the same period are heavy with convention. Austen, Eliot, Dickens, Thackeray, and Trollope may also inquire into the proper articulation of political order, but they do so without stripping the patina of convention. They are not foundational in the same sense. We don’t get our novels of manners until James and Wharton. As Zuckert demonstrates, the prevalence of the return-to-nature motif is in no sense a function of American backwardness. America did indeed possess a wild and magnificent natural frontier; but more importantly America had open before it a pristine political and philosophic frontier as well. As Alexander Hamilton put it in the first *Federalist*:

[I]t seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force.

Novel meditations on the philosophic basis of the American polity form a part of that ongoing experiment in self-government. Through her investigation of the peculiar genius of the American writer, Catherine Zuckert has given an account, both sound and original, of the Founding’s meaning for literature and, in turn, literature’s meaning for the Founding.