American Exceptionalism Through German-European Eyes

The Case of John James Audubon

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There was a time when it was common to refer to both Germany and the U.S. as ›new nations‹. The phrase referred to the fact that both countries reached political statehood many centuries later than, for instance, France or Spain.[1] The ›lateness‹ of this nationhood showed itself in many ways, including the insistence on both countries' unique distinctiveness of their national experience, reflected in what became their national culture. In the case of Germany, this discussion often took place around concepts such as the ›Sonderweg‹; for the U.S., the term ›Exceptionalism‹ came to summarize the argument. While the German discussion emphasized the deviation of German intellectual life from mainstream currents of European thought (e.g. the Enlightenment), American opinion was based on the assessment of national life shaped by its confrontation with the ›Frontier‹, the natural world of a continent regarded as untouched by human hands.[2]

To the extent that these are ideological constructs by which new nations' culture claims its integration with the state, it is not surprising that at many points we can show that much of the culture claimed as particularly distinctive to a new nation was in fact not exceptional, but formed part of a common heritage with Europe or – in the case of Germany – other European states. These relations are quite distinct from the phenomenon to which much research from the mid-1970s onward was devoted, when critics focused on the way in which German writers interpreted the United States in the light (and sometimes darkness) of

1 | See Seymour Martin Lipset: The First New Nation. The United States in Historical and Comparative Perspective [1963]. London 1996. The classic German version of ›lateness‹ is Helmut Plessner: Die verspätete Nation. Über die politische Verführbarkeit bürgerlichen Geistes [1935]. Stuttgart 1959.

2 | The classic text is Frederick Jackson Turner: The Significance of the Frontier in American History [1893]. New York 1962. Literary critics most associated with Exceptionalism include Van Wyck Brooks and Howard Mumford Jones.

their European experience.[3] Writers such as Reinhold Solger, or the Austrian Ferdinand Kürnberger, read the U. S. as Europeans, thus reducing the Exceptionalism of American culture and experience into a merely exotic element, such as exceptional scenery, quaint dialect, or bizarre social behaviour.

In this short text, I wish briefly to consider these issues in a small but telling example. It focuses on, perhaps, the world's most famous and – to judge by the auction-rooms – most expensive bird artist: John James Audubon. Audubon was born in 1780 in France, but fully identified with the U. S., where he died in 1851. The route to Audubon leads through a typical American artist of the 1830s, Edward Hicks (1780-1849), and from him to aspects of the European painting of the time. For those unfamiliar with the art-works discussed here, I reference easily accessible websites.

As a child growing up in post-war Britain, I must admit, with Gottfried Benn, ›In meinem Elternhaus hingen keine Gainsboroughs‹. But for at least fifteen years, I ate my meals in front of a cheap reproduction of an American picture: Edward Hicks' *The Cornell Farm*.[4] I would like to think that the picture came in with the U. S. military (the whole of Britain was, in that sense, part of the American Sector), but I expect it was pure chance. Hicks' picture shows a farm in Pennsylvania – readers of Sealsfield will be strongly reminded of his invocation of that state in *Morton*[5] – on the day of its sale, the picture amounting to an inventory of the farm, its livestock and equipment. Hicks was the leading representative of the so-called American Primitives and, of course, a classic example of the Exceptionalism theory, for these artists were painters untouched by art academies, European aesthetic theories, or by the eye of the tourist, but itinerant through the American countryside, finding commissions where they could. The contrast to the Hudson River School, with its close links to European Romanticism, could hardly be greater. Hicks' picture shows that contrast clearly. It does not follow the laws of perspective or composition laid down by the European academies, but possesses an extraordinary flatness, and a stylization of forms that Europe would not discover until Cubism. It is a picture neither by the elite, nor for the elite, but a democratic picture making no claims to hierarchy of subject or theory. In a wonderful remark in defence of his friend Friedrich Nietzsche, whose *Die Geburt der Tragödie* had just been savaged by the academic world, Wagner said that reading such critics was like listening to a cobbler passing judgment on an Old Master: the cobbler felt justified in his ability to judge ›because the subject is wearing shoes‹. Hicks would have welcomed such a judg-

3 | A rich source of such readings was Sigrid Bauschinger/Horst Denkler/Wilfried Malsch (Eds.): Amerika in der deutschen Literatur. Neue Welt – Nordamerika – USA. Stuttgart 1976.

4 | Reproduced online in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Hicks.

5 | Charles Sealsfield: Sämtliche Werke. Ed. by Karl J. R. Arndt. New York/Hildesheim 1972f., Vol. X,1, p. 114 f.

ment. An American ploughman could comment on Hicks' picture of ploughing (a distinctive type of plough is being used); a stockman might comment on the cattle; an American builder on the carefully painted farm buildings; it is even possible that pigs themselves would have been welcome to express an opinion. This was a literal art; to quote Thomas Mann in a related context, ›eine Kunst mit der Menschheit auf du und du‹.[6]

In this understanding of art, Hicks' pictures closely followed the aesthetic that Ralph Waldo Emerson famously expressed in the speech *The American Scholar* (1837). Here Emerson called for an art that would return to confronting the basic material facts of American life. Its central argument:

> I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar and the low. Give me an insight into today and you may have the antique and future worlds. What would we really know the meaning of? The meal in the firkin, the milk in the pan, the ballad in the street.

These words served as the founding ethos of nineteenth century American literature.

Now of course, Emerson's remark fits seamlessly – but mostly predates – into the European (or global) movement of Realism. We find all but identical expressions of this democratic aesthetic in the novels of George Eliot or Balzac, or in Fontane's essay *Unsere lyrische und epische Poesie seit 1848*. But its links to Hicks have nothing to do with reading or influence. As he toured America, Hicks embraced and depicted »the common [...] the familiar« because he knew nothing else but that America. Hicks, in his exposure to American nature and his untutored approach to art, offers an example of American Exceptionalism, but that does nothing to classify his painting style.

At this point we encounter an exciting art-historical essay by the novelist John Updike under the title *The Clarity of Things* (2008).[7] Here Updike explores what he identifies as the essential style of American painting. He starts from poet William Carlos William's statement that ›for the poet there are *no ideas but in things*‹, and sees in the anchoring of art in the materiality of the world the special quality of American painting. »Born into a continent without museums and art schools [the American artist] took Nature as his only instructor«. What is unusual about the essay is that Updike moves on to define the aesthetic consequences of being instructed by nature and ends up (although his focus is on the Boston artist John Singleton Copley) with what amounts to an analysis of *The Cornell Farm*. He calls this a »liney« style, comprising a physical appre-

6 | Thomas Mann: Doktor Faustus. Das Leben des deutschen Tonsetzers Adrian Leverkühn, erzählt von einem Freunde. Frankfurt a. M. 2007 (Große Frankfurter Ausgabe, Vol. 6), p. 429.

7 | The New York Review of Books 26 (2008), p. 12–16.

hension of objects and content to portray nature through shapes and surfaces. American art is linear art. Updike sums up his argument: »The artist intently maps the visible in a New World that feels surrounded by chaos and emptiness«. The ›linineѕs‹ of American art combines therefore a total commitment to the ›empirical‹, which it delineates markedly, while perhaps emphasizing the self-orientated order of the painting itself.

We note in passing that Updike is simply extrapolating from Heinrich Wölfflin's classic 1929 text.[8] He uses Wölfflin's terminology, starting from the binary opposition of ›liney‹ and ›painterly‹, adding only the Exceptionalist evaluative judgement, and merely omits mention of his European source. Such wilful one-sidedness does nothing to devalue Updike's sense of American art (after all, Wölfflin makes no mention at all of any American painting). What does throw doubt on Updike's contention, however, is the discovery of the extraordinary similarities between Hicks and the most provincial of European art-movements, the *Biedermeier*.

As one walks through the Belvedere in Vienna (or through its excellent website) there is a huge number of *Biedermeier* pictures, but one in particular that strikes the eye of anyone who knows Hicks' work: *Michael Neder. Die Heimkehr der Herde*.[9] Not only does Neder, known as the ›Schustermaler‹, resemble Hicks in biography (e. g. both were largely untutored artists), his painting is executed exactly in Hicks' style. The picture portrays what the title says: a farmer brings his animals in for the night (hence, the picture acts as a kind of inventory), but the animals are portrayed linearly, without perspective, like theatrical flats, with the same formal reduction and disturbing objectivity of Hicks' work. What does it mean that two provincial painters, on different continents, with obviously no knowledge of the other's work, produce works in one aesthetically striking style, for which their contemporaries offer no encouragement? And how can we relate a painter who epitomizes American Exceptionalism to a half-forgotten *Biedermeier* painter in Vienna?

In passing, we might suggest that provincialism, rather than the open frontier, was a constitutive feature of nineteenth-century American life. Benjamin West, Abraham Lincoln, Theodor Roosevelt; in all of these figures, the nostalgia for a past America is unmistakable. For all the adventurous and new opportunities that Europeans saw in the U. S., the nostalgia for the old settler life, for the log cabin and the small town sociabilities, were a central part of American culture. In this respect it would be hard not to recognize an affinity with German culture at the time, pulled towards a dynamic future yet hankering after

8 | Heinrich Wölfflin: Principles of Art History. The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art. Transl. by M. D. Hottinger. New York 1932.

9 | Picture online at https://artinwords.de/michael-neder-malerei/.

the familiar. As de Tocqueville remarked of the Americans: »they love change, but they dread revolutions«[10] – a mixture of emotions familiar in new nations.

These issues come together in Audubon. Nothing represents the cultural side of the American frontier mentality more fully than Audubon's central ambition: to provide a complete pictorial inventory of North American avifauna. His extensive and often dangerous travels along the frontiers of America are a literal enactment of Turner's thesis, and they were undertaken in protest at European cultural condescension towards America. In particular, Buffon's monumental *Histoire Naturelle*, the seminal text of European zoology in the last decades of the 18th century, not only contained grotesque errors concerning American birds, but in it Buffon subscribed to the idea of a general degeneration of American species in comparison to those of the old world. Audubon represented that mixture of pride in the U. S., a search for objectivity – *no ideas but in things*, as Williams had written – and the determination to live American life at the frontier that was at the heart of Exceptionalism. It is, in short, rather surprising that Updike does not mention him, for Audubon perfectly illustrates that ›clarity of things‹ which is Updike's subject, and the issues which his work raises are important in an understanding of transatlantic culture.

It's usual for those who study Audubon's pictures to be familiar either with other bird painters of the 19th century (Thomas Bewick, perhaps, or Josef Wolf) or with the salesrooms, in which Audubon folios easily reach seven figures. Our discussion of Hicks and Neder suggests what may be a more productive approach. Above all it highlights a central difficulty in naming the distinctive style in which Audubon painted. It draws our eyes to the extraordinary flat linearity of Audubon's images, so far removed from the rounded substantiality practised in ›painterly‹ art. It is a constructed realism, not just in the sense that disturbed some ornithologists of the period; namely, that Audubon often killed the specimen and then mounted it on an intricate wire structure to hold the pose that is to form the basis of his picture. Even within the frame of the picture, the bird forms part of an artificially constructed space, and when he portrays groups of birds their arrangement is spatial and ›liney‹ (just how Neder and Hicks arrange their animals in a decorative order) rather than, for instance, reflective of the species' group behaviour. Such insights were to characterize the bird-paintings of the Swedish artist Bruno Liljefors some 20 years later.

So what are we to do with these observations? It would occur to no one to call Audubon a primitive artist. Starting from the moneyed public at whom his collections of paintings were directed, he has little common ground with Hicks or Neder, even though he suffered physical and economic hardship throughout his working life. His family origins in the France that Napoleon was starting to destabilize removes him further from these figures. Yet, Audubon unmistakably

10 | Alexis de Tocqueville: Democracy in America [1835]. Ed. by Richard Heffner. New York/London 1956, p. 267.

shares with them an aesthetic that – while rooted in Realism – took on formal aspects that appeared to clash with it. We suggested earlier an alienating element in the objectivity with which Hicks and Neder composed their pictures. In Audubon, the alienation is seen in a contrasting sense of decoration: the one clearly betraying something of his artistic education in France before the final move to America, the other in that marked affinity with Hicks and Neder. A picture such as *Carolina pigeon* shows both elements strikingly.[11] The arrangement of flowers and birds is on one hand a style that may be found in the decorative porcelain of Sèvres; on the other hand, the sharp delineation and stylization of the birds' outlines conforms to the decorative qualities of Hicks and Neder. Similarly, his *American flamingo* both echoes a rococo artist such as Jean-Baptiste Oudry, and works with the linear surfaces of the Primitives.

It is at this point that, to an outsider's eye, *andererseits* is happily situated. It is not satisfactory merely to comment on either the distinctiveness of two influences even in such an archetypical artist as Audubon, or on the questionable claims for the exceptional status of American art. Although understandings of Audubon's work may strengthen our sense of what Marie Irene Santos so brilliantly identified as »the mid-Atlantic space«[12] (for Audubon of course knew both sides of the Atlantic and crossed that space frequently), it leaves as a challenge the powerful affinity between Hicks and Neder, re-surfacing as it did in Audubon's work. A clue may be found in recent revaluations of Neder's work. In introducing a recent exhibition of his work, Sabine Grabner makes the remarkable claim that *Die Heimkehr der Herde* is »das wohl eigenwilligste Kunstwerk, das in der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts in Wien entstanden ist«.[13] From this we might suggest two concluding thoughts: the first is that despite the label of ›primitivism‹ attaching to some artists and styles (before the wholescale rediscovery of the primitive in Gaugin and other modernists), primitivism can be the starting-point of radically innovative art. It contains freedoms and potentialities that do not necessarily attach to art that is more sophisticated, and its potentialities are not contradicted by modern, advanced societies wherein it may flourish. Secondly, the modern and dynamic society that German intellectuals posited in the U.S. continued to share far more features with European culture than those which a particular tradition of American criticism has been ready to acknowledge. Reading these affinities requires the observer to look beyond programmatic statements and ideology and to be sensitive to those artistic issues out of which all art draws its power.

11 | There is a good selection of pictures on the Wikipedia Audubon website. Otherwise entering Audubon Carolina pigeon on a browser will reveal the picture concerned. It's also rewarding to look at Audubon's various pictures of the Stormy Petrel.

12 | Maria Irene Ramilho Santos: Atlantic Poets. Fernando Pessoa's Turn in Anglo-Amereican Modernism. Hanover/London 2003.

13 | The exhibition Michael Neder: Ohne Kompromisse ran in the Oberes Belvedere in 2013/14. The curator was Sabine Grabner.