The Great American Novel: Writing National Identity

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Abstract

This thesis examines the tradition of the Great American Novel (GAN). Against current academic trends, this literary canon is not understood to safeguard conservative hegemonies. Here, it is rather studied as an ongoing discourse that has questioned ostensible certainties in American national identity throughout the twentieth century. A select number of GANs are shown to have survived in the canon for decades, and to share an even more select number of archetypes which the novels consistently problematise. The continued resonance of these narratives is argued to be indicative of inherent ambiguities that fester on in American identity as cultural unfinished business. An added relevance is the fact that those uncertainties cropped up precisely during periods when US nationalism seemed to peak, a pattern that forms a surprising, alternative cultural history.

The term "Great American Novel" was coined in 1868 by John William DeForest, who called for realist American novels to equal European ones, and to present an imagined US community that overcame post-Civil War regional divisions. Ever since, the tradition has been alluring to American authors seeking to establish their cultural weight. Yet the canon as we know it today only took shape after the confidence-boosting outcome of the First World War, when critics and academics renounced the European, realist ideals of their predecessors in favour of "Romance", a symbolical style which they claimed had always been the basis of literary American exceptionalism. Retroactively, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby-Dick* and *Huckleberry Finn* were canonised as the Romance-edifice, as if they had always been just that. Their archetypes, namely individualism, the American Dream and the frontier spirit, together became a national mythology of sorts, so successful was this invented tradition. Soon it was so familiar, that subsequent authors who sought to reflect on American identity could do so by alluding to those three ultimate GANs. The canon thus became an ongoing discourse, a cultural conversation in which a limited set of rules and clichés were contemplated as national roots.

Authors from the Great Depression were the first to demonstrate this. They took the three tropes mentioned, and superimposed them onto topical stories of economic hardship. GANs from the era thus romanticised the canonical archetypes as the eternal foundations of American exceptionalism, precisely by linking their betrayal to contemporary, "un-American"

injustices. The years following the Second World War, by contrast, saw such a boost to national confidence that they were named a “Golden Age.” Yet a new generation of authors showed its teeth by digging up GAN-archetypes and weaponizing them, especially those related to frontier-adventurism, against contemporary ideals of dull material comfort. Indeed, the canon’s role as underminer of cultural certainties became fixed in these years. Hence the nadir in GAN-output amid the blows to American superiority of the 1960s and 1970s: the eras of Vietnam and Watergate required no reminding of American problems.

The Reaganist 1980s did, however. Especially black authors began to attack Americans’ sense of innocence regarding their history, by again returning to the GANs’ archetypes: taken as the roots of US exceptionalism, they were rewritten as shared traumas. Far from weakening the canon’s position, this attack on its traditions actually revitalised its function as ongoing discourse. Consequently, the 1990s saw more (critically acclaimed) GAN-attempts than any other decade. Within them, authors indicated how the end of the Cold War not only boosted American exceptionalism, but also left it without a signifying Other, and thus without direction and narrative. Again, cultural confidence in the wake of a victory in a major global conflict was being undermined by GANs’ exposing hidden ambivalences in national mythology.

The GAN’s imagined community has always destabilised American certainties. The canon forms a surprising, alternative cultural history, in which anxieties invisible in other histories come to the fore, precisely when one would least expect them to. Understanding canons as mere conservative bastions is thus argued to be highly reductive, and damaging to their rich analytical promise in cultural analysis.

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Contents

It's easy to forget how young this country is; how little distance really separates us from the beginnings of the myths (…) that still haunt the national imagination. It's easy to forget how much remains to be settled. Since roots are sought out and seized as well as simply accepted, cultural history is never a straight line; along with the artists we care about we fill in the gaps ourselves. When we do, we reclaim, rework, or invent America, or a piece of it, all over again. We make choices (or are caught by the choices others have made) about what is worth keeping and what isn't, (…) dispensing with the rest of the American reality if we can.

– Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train*[1]

It is not down on any map; true places never are.

– Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*[2]

[1] Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train,* 4th edition (London, 1991), p.5.
[2] Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick: or, The Whale*, 1851, (New York, 2009), p.61.

Introduction

In 1630, a fleet of sixteen ships carried hundreds of Puritans across the Atlantic, with prophecies of Messianic grandeur buzzing through the air. Although the "New World" awaiting the migrants was hardly a blank slate, they certainly seemed to think it was: a narrative waiting to be told, *ab ovo*. The awareness that the United States is a "made up" country, built on a set of symbols rather than ancient foundations, has never wholly disappeared. Even though it shares its being a construction with every nation, Americans, due to the original myth of being "the first new nation", seem especially obsessed with their symbols and nationhood.[1] Much has changed since John Winthrop, aboard the *Arbella*, warned his Puritan congregation that should they fail to live up to their community's unique fate, "wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world."[2] But what has stuck is the heightened consciousness of being "a story", the illusion of being uniquely so, and thus having the potential to be exceptional.

Winthrop's famous sermon was but the beginning of a long obsession in American culture with its own identity-as-narrative. America was a dream, wrote Thomas Pynchon 367 years later, articulating the original sentiment: a dream "in which all that cannot pass in the metropolitan Wakefulness [of the Old World] is allow'd Expression away in the restless Slumber of these Provinces, and on West-ward, wherever 'tis not yet mapp'd, nor written down."[3] Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*, written in the archaic language of the US' foundational years (its master code, so to speak), self-consciously and half-ironically continues the dream, pondering the potential of a nation-as-narrative, its burden. Indeed, it has been named a "Great American Novel" because of that, as have hundreds of novels throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Together they form a corpus that continues, scrutinises, mocks and romanticises the imagining of America. It is a literary tradition unparalleled in national self-obsession, yet one that historians and cultural analysts alike increasingly choose to ignore. The reason is simple: it is a literary canon. And those, as we will see, have fallen from grace spectacularly.

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[1] Seymour Martin Lipset, *The First New Nation: The United States in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (New York, 1967).
[2] John Winthrop, 'A Modell of Christian Charity', 1630, *Hanover Historical Texts Collection* (1996), https://history.hanover.edu/texts/winthmod.html, (accessed 17 June 2020), p.47.
[3] Thomas Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon* (New York, 1997), p.345.

Canons as historical source material?

"Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulus? The Proust of the Papuans? I'd be glad to read him", author Saul Bellow once sneered.[4] A response to the trend to "open up" the literary canon (attempts to include more non-white and female writers), this oft-cited remark exemplifies the widespread experience of the literary establishment as inflexible and conservative. Once hailed as the ultimate achievement of Western culture, its canons are now perpetually under siege.[5] Though canonical prestige is still enthusiastically upheld through the circulation of "classics"-series by publishers such as Penguin, they are obvious fodder for the critical pens inspired by the linguistic turn, multiculturalism and feminism: a group of cultural artefacts deemed proper expressions of peoples, representative of their achievements and mentalities, canons apparently propagate exactly those ideas of timeless, universal values that said trends have always deemed suspicious.[6] This critical current, which has been building up steam since the 1980s, claims that, far from being spontaneous or democratic phenomena, canons are formed by cultural elites, residing within patriarchal Ivory Towers.[7] The resulting top-down constructs, according to tried and true Foucauldian dogma, are then thought to express and perpetuate unequal, non-inclusive power structures that favour "dead, white, European males."[8]

These views tie into a larger turn away from high culture across academia.[9] Franco Moretti has been at the forefront of that trend within Literary Studies. He expressed concerns over "the great unread" and lamented cultural analysists' focus on less than "even one percent of published literature", *i.e.* the canon. Therefore, he has argued for "distant reading", a quantitative approach that would include *all* of literature.[10] Moretti's reasoning seems common-sensical: surely, lesser known works can say just as much about historical realities as the ones that happen to have been favoured by some professors from the past?

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[4] Dominic Green, 'Mr. Bellow's Planet', *The New Criterion*, 37:3 (2018), https://newcriterion.com/print/article/10322, (accessed 27 November 2019).
[5] The term "canon" is derived from the Jewish practice to select certain texts as official Scripture.
[6] Frans Willem Korsten, *Lessen in Literatuur* (Nijmegen, 2009), p.49.
[7] Tim Lacy, 'Dreams of a Democratic Culture: Revising the Origins of the Great Books Idea, 1869-1921', *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era,* 7:4 (2008), pp.397-441; John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago and London, 1993).
[8] Pascale Casanova, 'Literature as a World', *New Left Review*, 31 (2005), pp.71-90 there pp.82-83; E. Dean Kolbas, *Critical Theory and the Literary Canon* (Abingdon, 2018), pp.1-2.
[9] Peter Burke, *History and Social Theory* (Cambridge, 2005), p.120.
[10] Franco Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature', *New Left Review,* 1 (2000), pp.54-68, there p.55-57.

That logic has spilled over into academic methods of cultural and historical analysis, with its core assertion that canons do not offer us the claimed "total" representations of cultures, blatantly fail to "recognize pluralism as a (…) basic condition of contemporary life."[11]

Yet is it really so self-evident that the unread is just as viable for historical research as the widely read and discussed classics? Here, the new cultural analysts appear to forget the lessons of hermeneutics, reception theory and reader-response criticism. Each one of these theoretical currents postulates in its own way the intentional fallacy, the axiom that the intention of the author does not determine a text's meaning, which is rather decided by its reception. In other words, the historical significance of a book is the audience's understanding of it.[12] If we accept this, as I think we should, it suddenly appears curious to consider unread texts to be equally significant historical sources as canonical ones, which, no matter how top-down their selection might be, have at least been widely read, and have thus interacted with historical contexts. To accept Moretti's theory is to assume that writers' choices of subject matter provide us with more trustworthy reflections of historical reality than audience's interests and responses, a notion far more elitist than "opening up the canon" is understood to be. Also problematic is the assumption that fictions are supposed to be "windows" into the past, which causes all sorts of epistemological doubts and has often reduced literary material in historical research to a seasoning of hard facts derived from other sources.[13] Yet literary sources can be much more fruitful if we understand their representations not as more or less "realistic", but as adhering in various degrees to regimes of cultural verisimilitude: the norms of certain genres, media and, especially, societies.[14]

This complication does not negate literature's value as a primary source, but redefines it: codes of cultural verisimilitude have enormous value in coming to understand historical contexts otherwise hidden from primary sources. And though canonical works undoubtedly add up to an "unrealistic" portrayal of historical reality, they have pre-eminently adhered to fundamental cultural verisimilitudes, as testified by their survival within ever fluctuating literary tastes. Fictions may be detached from material reality, but

[11] Paul Lauter, 'History and the Canon', *Social Text,* 12 (1985), pp.94-101, there p.96.
[12] Terry Eagleton, 'Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, Reception Theory', in Idem, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, 2008), pp.47-78;, pp.ix-xxvi.
[13] Telling examples of this reasoning (Schmidt speaks of literature "substantially enriching" (p.27) historical research rather than actually serving as primary source) can be found in Sigurd O. Schmidt, 'Great Works of Literature as a Source of Historical Knowledge', *Russian Studies in History*, 47:1 (2008), pp.14-29.
[14] Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction to Poetics* (Brighton, 1981), pp.118-119.

people's dreams are equally part of the past. A counter-argument could be that canons, as top-down constructions, only reflect the preferences of the conservative powers that be. Cultural analysts usually adhere to this theory, seeing canonisation almost as a sinister conspiracy: though audiences have massively bought and read these texts, their free will apparently had little to do with it.[15] That position is defensible, valuable, but does not remotely tell the whole story. This can be illustrated by shifting our focus to the case that will be the subject of this thesis.

The Great American Novel

The term "Great American Novel" ("GAN" hereafter) was coined in 1868 by John William DeForest, who called upon his fellow American authors to write a work that would paint "the picture of the ordinary emotions and manners of American existence."[16] Coming as it did during the boom of cultural nationalism in Europe and just after the Civil War, when the US was in desperate need of a unifying identity, we can say that the comprehensive image desired was to be a performative one disguised as a constative, constructing rather than capturing the national spirit. And like the country and its identity, America's literary landscape lay open like an endless promise still frustratingly unfulfilled: in the Old World's shadow, one critic wrote in 1872, "the absence of a fully developed literature was keenly felt."[17] So DeForest implicitly called not for a single work, but for a tradition: "the great American novel will be in the plural; (…) America is a chord of many nations, and to find the keynote we must play much and varied music", as one commentator put it in 1916.[18] The call was heard: the GAN became the "impossible mountaintop" for authors to climb, the attempts contributing to a new, "more general obsession" of capturing America in one canon.[19] In 1927, Edith Wharton wearily noted that every new American work of fiction was about "Main Street", in other words painting DeForest's picture.[20] It was an unmitigated

[15] Brook Thomas, 'The New Historicism and Other Old-Fashioned Topics', in H. Aram Veeser ed., *The New Historicism* (New York, 2013), pp.182-203 there p.196.
[16] John William DeForest, 'The Great American Novel', *Nation,* 6 (1868), pp.27-29, there p.27.
[17] Thomas Sergeant Perry, 'American Novels', *North American Review*, 115 (1872), pp.366-378 there p.368.
[18] James Huneker, 'The Great American Novel Never Will Come', *The New York Times*, 16 July 1916, pp.13-14, there p.13; Lawrence Buell, *The Dream of the Great American Novel* (Cambridge and London, 2014), p.8.
[19] Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (London, 1967), p.23.
[20] Edith Wharton, 'The Great American Novel' (1927), in Idem, Frederick Wegener ed., *The Uncollected Critical Writings* (Princeton, 1996), pp.151-158 there p.152.

hype, and only four years after the term's emergence it was said that the hunt for the GAN had been going on for generations.[21] This was an invented tradition if ever there was one: DeForest had unleashed a fiery discussion about what made American fiction and culture American, and the rules were being written as the debate unfurled.[22]

One reason the GAN-discussion is so interesting is that all the usual criticisms levelled against canons have applied to this one in particular: derided in- and outside academia, the idea has been called a "Loch Ness Monster" and "pure hogwash" in recent discussions.[23] More surprisingly, critics and scholars alike started to declare the GAN-craze dead around 1900(!) already, not entirely unmotivated by the fact that the by then flourishing tradition of American literature made an invented one superfluous: "is our age so distraught, our intellects so feeble (…) that we can but go on dreaming of golden deeds, not doing them?", one 1895 complaint read.[24] The most famous condemnation came from novelist Frank Norris, who in 1902 declared the GAN "not extinct as the Dodo, but mythical like the hippogriff." Capturing "the" US was nonsensical, he said, as the country consisted of myriad identities and experiences.[25] We recognise this problem, with which Norris' fellow polemicists and recent critics have overwhelmingly agreed,[26] from the general discussion about canons today**.** The GAN, however, particularly undermines the other major canon-critique: if it has become commonplace to assume that elites impose canons upon unsuspecting consumers, we have here a completely different story. The supposed patrons of high culture – critics, scholars and intelligentsia – were noted as early as 1935 to have been displaced by regular audiences as the principal canonisers: who remembers the former's 1920s favourites, novels like *The Virginia Comedians*, *Queechy* and *Horse-Shoe Robinson*?[27] Not their, but primary school teachers' favourites from the mid-1920s, *i.e.*

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[21] Perry, 'American Novels', p.368.
[22] Herbert R. Brown, 'The Great American Novel', *American Literature,* 7:1 (1935), pp. 1-14, there pp.7-9.
[23] A.O. Scott, 'In Search of the Best', *The New York Times,* 21 May 2006, https://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/21/books/review/scott-essay.html, (accessed 11 June 2019); Cheryl Strayed and Adam Kirsch, 'Why Are We Obsessed With the Great American Novel?', *The New York Times*, 13 January 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/18/books/review/why-are-we-obsessed-with-the-great-american-novel.html, (accessed 11 June 2019).
[24] 'The Great American Novel', *The Interior*, 21 February 1895, available from ProQuest Historical Newspapers Database, (accessed 5 December 2019); Kevin J. Hayes, 'The GAN', in Idem, *A Journey Through American Literature* (Oxford, 2012), pp.136-157, p.143.
[25] George Knox, 'The Great American Novel: Final Chapter', *American Quarterly,* 21:4 (1969), pp.667-682 there p.668.
[26] Ibidem, p.671; See n.26.
[27] Brown, 'The GAN', pp.2, 12.

Moby-Dick, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Scarlet Letter*, still tower over the canon today, after a full century of scrutiny.[28]

Those who are thought to control the means of canonisation have been proclaiming the death of the GAN as *fait accompli* for 120 years, but the tradition has proved largely immune. During the interbellum they shrugged at the concept, but Edith Wharton noted that the GAN "continues to be announced every year; in good years there are generally several of them."[29] Jumping ahead, the only twenty-first-century author deemed important enough by *TIME* to grace their cover was Jonathan Franzen, because he was a "Great American Novelist (…) showing us the way we live now."[30] The Library of America's mission statement still upholds the canon as a vantage point from which to oversee "the country's multi-faceted identity."[31] The Pulitzer Prize for fiction is awarded to novels "dealing with American life", the American Book Award to those that stand in a tradition of the US' ever continuing "discovery."[32] The *New York Times* routinely picks novels in the GAN-tradition for its year-end lists, novels that describe "a national crisis", or deal with "America writ large", quoting two 2019 examples.[33] Time and again, DeForest's legacy is discernible: "capturing" the nation yields prestige. Still, every American author at one point "feels compelled to make his big statement about the state of the union."[34] Audience lists appear regularly, there is a steady supply of new candidates, widely read classics are re-evaluated – all of this within the boundaries of the original question: how can America be captured in literature?[35]

The awards mentioned emphasise that there are, of course, factors outside the whims of audiences. Literary scholar Richard Ohmann has even argued that canonisation in postwar America consisted of a highly causal trickle-down process: when "gatekeeper intellectuals" in prominent (often New York) publications payed continuing attention to a text, that in time led to its being discussed in academic journals, then to inclusion in college

[28] Buell, *The Dream of the GAN*, pp.54-55; Appendix.
[29] Wharton, 'The GAN', p.158.
[30] Lev Grossman, 'Jonathan Franzen: Great American Novelist', *TIME Magazine*, 10 December 2010, cover page.
[31] 'A unique undertaking: To celebrate the words that have shaped America', *Library of America*, https://www.loa.org/about, (accessed 4 December 2019).
[32] '2020 Plan of Award', The Pulitzer Prizes, February 2020, https://www.pulitzer.org/page/2017-plan-award (accessed 6 April 2020); 'About', Before Columbus Foundation, https://www.beforecolumbusfoundation.com/about/ (accessed 6 April 2020).
[33] 'The 10 Best Books of 2019, The New York Times, 22 November 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/22/books/review/best-books.html (accessed 28 March 2020).
[34] Tim Adams, 'How America Sold Its Soul to the Devil', *The Observer*, 13 July 2008, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/jul/13/fiction.reviews3, (accessed 14 November 2020).
[35] Buell, *The Dream of the GAN*, pp.59-60.

curricula, then canonisation.[36] We will sometimes encounter this exact chain of events, yet not only has scholarly attention never guaranteed the almost nation-wide awareness such as almost every GAN enjoys, which begs the question why certain novels have trickled down and others have not; this particular canon is, moreover, uniquely small. Out of heaps of proposed candidates, some 25 continue to resonate with relatively diverse audiences (see Appendix), not merely as classics – which is a significant difference with Ohmann's research object –, but as national parables. For a text to be known as GAN today, it and its consistently DeForestian interpretation have had to survive dramatic cultural changes, collective forgetfulness and an overwhelming amount of competition over a long period of time, as well as academic dismissals of canons altogether. Gatekeeping intellectuals are frequently necessary, but never sufficient explanations for such survival.

So what, then, does decide what sticks? My hypothesis differs from most analyses of literary canons today, in that I do not approach it as a hegemonic cultural work (at least not primarily), but rather as an ongoing discourse with arguments that either resonate or fade away. If DeForest's open question about American identity had to be answered by the canon, texts must contain within them some unfinished business regarding American identity to have kept resonating as GAN. This would allow the DeForestian interpretation of a novel to survive the whims of the culture it is still thought to have some special grasp on.

Methods, sources, objectives

As discussed above, canons have mostly been "exposed" and "opened up" in recent years. This is not to say that (American) canonical texts have not been frequent objects of cultural analysis. That would be ridiculous. What is shunned, rather, is historical narrative: if the interpretative potential of canonical texts as social products is still accepted, that of the canon as a coherent cultural history is usually not. My interpretation of the GAN as an ongoing discourse, as well as its relatively broad resonance, implies otherwise: I consider it to be a whole, and believe it to hold a substantial analytical promise as such. I do not claim uniqueness: Lawrence Buell's *The Dream of the Great American Novel* (2014) considered the thematical coherences within the canon, wove GANs together into one tapestry. Buell's

[36] Richard Ohmann, 'The Shaping of a Canon: U.S. Fiction, 1960-1975', *Critical Inquiry*, 10:1 (1983), pp.199-223, there pp.204-207.

work has different ambitions than this thesis, though: it approaches the GAN as a literary artefact, not a historical one as shall mine.

The deconstructionist trend regarding the canon has been met with occasional backlash, with scholars like Allan Bloom defending the canon's timeless values, complaining of "spiritual entropy" since its dismantling.[37] Harold Bloom has pointed out that these opponents likewise offer political statements instead of analysis. His alternative position, which achieved considerable popularity in the 1990s, posits that the canon is indeed worth studying, but only in a purely apolitical, aesthetic way.[38] Though this might bring us a step closer towards analysing the canon itself, academics cannot be expected to simply forget about the interaction these texts have had with historical contexts. We should equally refrain from reasoning away that interaction because its politics are supposedly illiberal: material that allows us to understand the past is not to be judged by its desirability. What's more, the representational limits of the canon have been attacked within the discourse itself, so as a result, letting the GAN tell its own story involves addressing those issues anyway.

The odd concoction of audience favourites, critical darlings and literary milestones that the GAN-canon has grown into, allows us a unique insight into a history that is hidden from the "hard facts": the imagining of communities. Benedict Anderson famously stated that communities "are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined."[39] Especially national communities, their cultures being shared systems of meaning and symbolic expressions (the Geertzian definition), necessarily strive for some sort of logical coherence in order to tie together their people.[40] But this coherence is never completely achieved – there is too much diversity in any nation to claim homogeneity – so an effort must constantly be made to connect the loose ends into one overarching dream of unity. Is this not exactly the total image the GAN seeks to grasp as well? What then if we consider GANs not as politically corrupt or superior, but as acts of imagining, working through the question of what defines America? What if we disentangle

[37] Guillory, *Cultural Capital*, p.3; Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York, 1987), p.51.
[38] Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (San Diego, 1994), p.38.
[39] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York, 2016), p.6.
[40] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), p.89.

its cultural "webs of significance", following Geertz, and trace their meaning?[41] What will we find?

This thesis explores the question how the twentieth-century corpus of the GAN-tradition was constructed, and what images of the US were canonised in the process. In formulating an answer, an alternative cultural history will appear. The first chapter examines the construction of a distinctly American literary identity until the 1920s, closely linked to the GAN and defined against a European Other. The second traces the canon's focus on the American Dream from the Great Depression to the 1950s. Chapter three then continues the narrative up until 2000, a period in which the canonical rules had become crystallised, so that authors could use the GAN-genre as an ongoing discourse in which to attack national narratives and innocence.

Because of the supposed rigidity and conservatism of canons, readers might expect clear-cut, nationalist ideas to predominate the following history, but my hypothesis is different. As Harold Bloom put it, classics mostly stand apart because of their strangeness and "tang of originality": "successful literary works are achieved anxieties, not releases from anxieties."[42] Although this claim is undoubtedly far from universally applicable, we will see that the GAN-corpus tends to indeed canonise doubts or "unfinished business" regarding America, rather than conservative certainties. Allowing this narrative to unfurl chronologically will expose the way in which the canon grew into a catalogue of anxieties, and will emphasise the surprising fact that most GANs were written precisely in eras when national confidence soared: uncertainties festered on in the canon whenever they were hidden elsewhere.

This interpretation of the canon has consequences for the hierarchy between the two different types of primary sources utilised in this thesis: of course, sources relevant to reception histories – reviews, articles and analyses throughout the years - are important building blocks. One might indeed think they ought to be the pre-eminent ones. Jane Tompkins for example wrote that *The Scarlet Letter* is not canonical because it passed one singular test of time, but many different ones, and each time it has had "to suit the culture's needs" all over again.[43] If reception constantly remakes *The Scarlet Letter*, surely its actual

[41] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, p.5.
[42] H. Bloom, *The Western Canon*, pp.3, 6, 36.
[43] Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York, 1985), pp.34-35.

content could be understood as subordinate to its reception? Yet although we can trace when certain novels were canonised, the reason for their *continued* resonance remains elusive. In accordance with the hypothesis that anxieties regarding identity fuel continued resonance, I propose a method of meta-analysis, in which I try not to trace the texts' singular meaning, but study their poetics of confusion regarding American identity. Attention to such textual complexity will add to the historian's bird's-eye perspective the "close reading" methodology derived from Literary Studies: it is impossible to do justice to a literary source (even within a historical narrative) without the tools to deconstruct its poetics. Close reading involves paying attention to the text's underlying or overarching mechanisms, and then relating them to those of society at large, which is very much in accordance with the aforementioned "cultural verisimilitude."[44] New Historicist critics use comparable interdisciplinary strategies for their inquiry into culture through literature, but are aligned with just the anti-canon and -high culture trends that this thesis tries to nuance.[45]

A text is a viable source in getting to know the GAN-tradition when, plainly, it is widely considered to be part of it, for that means that it is being read in the context of and joins in the conversation surrounding American identity. When we combine academic and low-brow listings of texts considered GANs, as well as polls/blogs that ask audiences for their personal choices, we see a remarkable degree of agreement as to which titles form the core of the canon, a selection that can be found, with extensive justification, in the appendix. GANs come and go, but these have stuck: the perceived relevance of their take on American identity is, at least for now, understood to be enduring. Here the passage of time is key, so novels after 2000 are not taken into consideration. For every core book in the canon, there are twenty on its fringes, so the list is no ultimate authority. It is nonetheless a good synecdochic tool to understand the overarching tradition of the US writing (about) itself. We have seen how this self-obsessive tradition was kickstarted by the GAN-concept, so my corpus is a frontline where larger trends and discussions are most clearly visible.

In what follows, interdisciplinary methods and canonical material are not merely used, but advocated. Literary sources might induce epistemological panics, canons may be

[44] This explanation refers to close reading in the modern sense, not to its nearly extinct but famous form as advocated by the New Criticism; Korsten, *Lessen in Literatuur*, pp.270-271.
[45] Thomas, 'The New Historicism', Burke, *History and Social Theory*, p.120.

unfashionable, but we will see that they add up to an otherwise obscure history of America trying to attain a firm grasp on its elusive self.

Chapter 1: US Literature Finding a Voice of its Own (1868-1920s)

In this chapter I will trace the origins of cultural canons and the GAN. Defined against a European Other, American literature sought to find a voice of its own, but it did so within the realist style that defined precisely those rivals from across the Atlantic. This curious situation will be examined through *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which also presents us with the first example of a GAN as part of public discourse. Then follows the next stage in the history of the GAN: the Romance theory, which sought to reinterpret the history of US literature from a more exceptionalist perspective. From the 1920s onward, this invented tradition became accepted as fact. Its central texts were ingrained in the collective consciousness as a national mythology, and because they had been canonised for their admired complexity, their supposed expressions of national character turned out highly ambiguous.

The European canon and realism

The canon-concept as we know it today emerged in 1840s Europe, when the arrival of international railway networks there made possible a quickly homogenizing musical, artistic and literary world. A cultural elite emerged in its wake, its members living in each others' cities, reading and translating each others' works, and all of them visiting the same exhibitions, operas and ballets. Within this network, something of a European canon was formed, embracing the continent as a whole.[1] In the following decades, the canon spilled over into the soaring middle classes, who had an insatiable hunger to immerse themselves in "respectable" culture. Just like the advent of tourism enabled them to make their Grand Tour (formerly reserved for the upper classes they aspired to mimic) past Europe's most famous landmarks as prescribed by Baedeker/Murray guides, the canon was their set Tour through essential European culture, its stops inherited from the elites.[2] The latter's cosmopolitan ideals effectuated a convergence of literary traditions into one transnational

[1] Orlando Figes, *The Europeans : Three Lives and the Making of a Cosmopolitan Culture* (London, 2019).
[2] Ibidem, pp.224, 434.

style, causing translated works to outnumber domestic ones in most countries.[3] The rapid spread of literacy and lowering of printing costs enabled supply and demand to raise each other to new heights until book business, formerly a luxury market, was suddenly an industry: halfway through the century, tens of thousands of titles were being printed each year in France, Germany and Britain alone.[4]

With big business come capitalists, and book publishers certainly acted the part by favouring sure-fire hits over risks. Those texts whose cultural value had been established by canonisation, so attractive to class-conscious readers eager to be educated, became the foundation of their business. The resulting marketing strategy of publishing "libraries", series of cheap paperback classics presented in one visual style, has stuck: think, for example, of today's Penguin Classics, whose covers are likewise immediately recognisable. Besides the visual aspect, contemporary publishers inherited the didactic promise that nineteenth-century libraries used to lure in middle classes: Penguin Classics promise to hold "the smartest thinking and the best ideas, (…) [to] shape the broader cultural life of our society and inform the national conversation."[5] With this background in mind, the now popular position that the "Great Books" concept is a top-down fabrication with conservative academic origins, begins to look reductive. It is a brand of prestige with progressive roots, that found fertile soil in audiences' quest for knowledge, and came to fruition as a capitalist enterprise. At the very least, the latter's tidings of supply and demand are complex and dynamic, so to wave canons away as conservative and static is too simple: if a novel has survived in it for decades, it has a cultural significance.

In the 1880s, nationalism would appropriate canons for its own agenda, betraying its original ideals. Yet while several countries started to deify their "great writers" (Victor Hugo being a notable example), the ideal of literature crossing borders never vanished.[6] In fact, the separate visions went hand in hand in the case of DeForest's GAN. He sought to erode regional differences, but also wanted to prove that American literature (and culture at large) could be exceptional, was able to produce more than the European counterfeit it had

[3] Figes, *The Europeans*, pp.43, 181, 405.
[4] James Raven, 'The industrial revolution of the book', in Leslie Howsam ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the History of the Book* (Cambridge, 2014), pp.143-161, there p.156.
[5] 'About Us', *Penguin Classics*, https://www.penguin.co.uk/company/about-us.html, (accessed 14 February, 2020); Figes, *The Europeans*, pp.52-55, 450-451.
[6] Ibidem, p.434.

embarrassingly delivered so far. The shadow of the Old World's canon loomed large across the Atlantic, its ongoing cultural revolution understandably causing something of an inferiority complex in America, not in the least because the aforementioned mass-market paperback classics from Europe easily outsold more contemporary US titles, which were published in more expensive and limited editions: "have we as yet the literary culture to educate Thackerays and Balzacs? Ah! We only buy them – cheap", a frustrated DeForest wrote.[7] The realist tradition of those authors was what he had in mind for American literature as well: the aforementioned "picture of the ordinary emotions and manners of American existence" and "what has made the nation in the past" would have to be recorded between the GAN's covers.[8] The perceived importance of such a tradition is hard to understand outside the context of realism's heyday: something of a positivist craze had taken hold of authors and reviewers. Balzac called himself "the secretary of French society", so all-encompassing had the ambitions and scope of realism become, audiences and writers sharing the conviction that it could master reality like an exact science.[9] Today, it is impossible not to marvel at the importance these literati ascribed to literature.

In hindsight, it is tempting to think DeForest astutely understood the performative dimension of positivist pretentions, the power of realism to shape the perception of reality by claiming to record it faithfully. A mere three years after the Civil War he complained that "we are a nation of provinces, and each province claims to be the court", lamenting his fellow writers' lack of grand visions *parallel to* the broader lack of national unity. He taunted them into writing the border-erasing GAN, blaming their regionalism for the embarrassment of US literature. They were probably incapable of writing a GAN – or American identity – any time soon, DeForest complained. Yet he concluded his article with a challenge, asking despite his pessimism: "is it time?"[10] This was an open invitation to his colleagues to turn over a new leaf and finally attempt to challenge the literary Goliath that was Europe, create a unique canon with GANs to challenge the realists of the Old World, and in the process knit together the States into a nation. In other words, to "record" a unified America, was to dream it into existence.

[7] DeForest, 'The GAN', p.28.
[8] Ibidem, p.27.
[9] Lilian R. Furst, *Realism: Modern Literatures in Perspective* (London, 1992), pp.2-3.
[10] DeForest, 'The GAN', p.29.

As set out in the introduction, writing the GAN was quickly on every American author's mind. Most early attempts have been forgotten (we will see why shortly), but one has remained: Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). DeForest already pointed it out as the only novel to come anywhere near his ideal, because of its "national breadth (…), truthful outlining of character" both Southern and Northern, and its painting "a picture of American life."[11] Indeed, the novel has all the characteristics of a national epic, crisscrossing the country and delivering grand statements about its character. It did so within a charged atmosphere: the 1850s saw Americans pondering and writing (about) the "mystic bonds" holding together US identity, precisely while those between the North and South were under significant strain.[12] We see this ambivalence reflected in *Uncle Tom*. It puts Christian family values on a pedestal as the ethical base of American identity; the national "bond", as it were. Those superior morals are especially upheld by wives and children who, while their husbands and fathers are out being corrupted by worldly matters, remain in the morally pure domestic sphere.[13] They are constantly convincing the book's many *patres familias* to treat the enslaved kindly, free them, or shelter those on the run. Slavery, then, is the main ideological antagonist of the idealised family ties: at the novel's outset, the enslaved Uncle Tom and five-year-old Harry are sold, separating the former from his wife and children, and the latter from his mother.

Harry's mother Eliza flees with him to the North, while Tom, Christ-like in his compliant suffering, disappears further and further South. These two journeys give the slavery-Christianity dichotomy a spatial dimension: the further North, the more civilised, liberal and religious. When Eliza, on the run, is about to cross the Ohio river into the North, it is described as "lay[ing] like Jordan, between her and the Canaan of liberty on the other side."[14] She then finds "Canaan" in an idyllic Quaker community. By contrast, Tom's journey southward reads like a descent into hellish wilderness, the slavers getting more violent every mile. It is quite telling that DeForest, who hoped the GAN would overcome regional divides by conceptualising America as a whole, picked *Uncle Tom* as the closest thing to it available,

[11] DeForest, 'The GAN', p.28.
[12] Eric H. Walther, *The Shattering of the Union: America in the 1850s* (Lanham, 2004), p.xxiv.
[13] Eduard van de Bilt, 'De-sanctifying Affairs of State: The Politics of Religion in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852)', in Joost Augusteijn, Patrick Dassen and Maartje Janse eds., *Political Religion beyond Totalitarianism: The Sacralization of Politics in the Age of Democracy* (New York, 2013), pp.77-99, there p.88.
[14] Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin: or, Life among the Lowly* (New York, 1986), p.107.

while it contains such an obvious Northern superiority claim. Apparently the wound of the Civil War was so fresh that it poisoned even well-intentioned attempts to heal it.

This religious nationalism, focussed around a Northern cultural heartland, resonated. *Uncle Tom* became the best-selling book of its century save only the Bible, and it is said that Abraham Lincoln, upon meeting Beecher Stowe, exclaimed: "so you're the little lady who started this great war!" The anecdote is likely apocryphal, but does reflect to what extreme extent the novel indeed advanced the abolitionist cause by appealing to readers' emotions rather than political sensibilities.[15] This first GAN already pre-eminently illustrates its rhetorical potential: to "describe" American identity is to (re)write it. Doing so predictably provoked Southerners to respond that "the vile wretch" had misrepresented them out of "malignant bitterness", but Beecher Stowe maintained she was a mere recorder of reality, obliged "to hold up in the most lifelike and graphic manner possible Slavery": classic realist dogma.[16] The philosophical poverty of such mimetic claims, however, would fall from grace quickly, and the realist novels of the original GAN-craze would not survive. Neither did *Uncle Tom,* as *realist* GAN at least: it was later reinterpreted as a sentimentalist novel (see p.72). Realism's demise was in fact logically inevitable: Beecher Stowe adhered perfectly to DeForest's ideals, precisely because she was immersed in the European literary style and scene.[17] If the GAN had to construct a *Sonderweg*, this was an awkward path to take. The whole idea of US literature as realist and distinctly American was a contradiction in terms.

Romance

We have already seen how, around the 1920s, the hunt for the GAN ceased to be carried out by critics and academics. The reason was simple. There is a tide to artistic traditions, and every couple of decades, a new generation of readers, writers and critics *en masse* reject the literary ideals of their predecessors. As realism had once come to the forefront of Western art for its being the perfect antithesis of the Romantic predecessor, it was now realism's turn to make way, and the GAN (still considered its spiritual child) with it. Critics complained of

[15] Van de Bilt, 'De-sanctifying Affairs of State', p.93; Walther, *The Shattering of the Union*, p.9.
[16] Ibidem, pp.7-8; Shirley Samuels, *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in 19th-Century America* (Oxford, 1992), p.135.
[17] Denise Kohn, Sarah Meer and Emily B. Todd, 'Reading Stowe as a Transatlantic Writer', Idem eds., *Transatlantic Stowe: Harriet Beecher Stowe and European Culture* (Iowa City, 2006), pp. xi-xxx, there pp.xv-xvi.

realists' "Puritanism", "sentimental Socialism", "sluggish imagination", and called for a deeper form of verisimilitude:

> he who is to write the "great American novel" must look at life, not as the statistician, not as the census-taker, nor yet as the newspaper reporter, but with an eye that sees, through temporary disguises, the animating principles, good or bad, that direct human existence.[18]

Not only did Americans apply these new ideals to contemporary fiction, they reinterpreted their entire tradition along its lines as if they had always dominated. The interbellum saw a boom in anthologies of US literature which consisted not of the realist classics that had been its bread and butter for decades, but "Romances" (not to be confused with Romanticism), suddenly understood as the "real" national literature. The term was derived from Nathanial Hawthorne, who opposed them to "Novels"; the latter were realist, whereas his own Romances were symbolic tales that captured "shadows", *i.e.* human emotions and subjective experiences.[19] The division was largely arbitrary, as many realist novels were hardly journalism and did not hesitate to focus heavily on psychology – think Flaubert, Dostoevsky, George Eliot. However, the American interpretation of realism had been so rigid that even Hawthorne seemed a modernist by comparison.

The Romance anthologies grew out of the same frustrations that DeForest had voiced decades earlier, as the wave of ambitious fiction he had unleashed had sadly changed nothing about the country's literary prestige: its production was still considered inferior to that of Europe. Around the turn of the century, there was no US canon to be taught in secondary schools, and no more than an embarrassing ten percent of the country's universities offered curricula in their own national literature.[20] This was deemed unacceptable within the upsurge of national confidence after the global event that helped revive the GAN: the First World War.[21] Whereas President Woodrow Wilson famously

[18] Perry, 'American Novels', p.378; Huneker, 'The GAN Never Will Come', p.13.
[19] Nina Baym, 'Introduction', in Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (London, 2003), pp.vii-xxx, there p.xv.
[20] Joseph Csicsila, *Canons by Consensus: Critical Trends and American Literature Anthologies* (Tuscaloosa, 2004), pp.1-2; Kermit Vanderbilt, *American Literature and the Academy: The Roots, Growth, and Maturity of a Profession* (Philadelphia, 1989), p.129; Elizabeth Renker, 'The Making of American Literature', in Priscilla Wald and Michael A. Elliott eds., *The Oxford History of the Novel in English, Volume Six: The American Novel 1870-1940* (Oxford, 2014), pp.549-565, there pp.551-2.
[21] Hayes, 'The GAN', p.143.

became a globalist in WWI's aftermath, the rest of the country had seen their sense of exceptionalism confirmed.[22] All the more enraging then that culturally, it had nothing to offer the world: US intellectuals bemoaned the shallowness of their country, and many of them took off for Paris, only to be gloomily dubbed a "Lost Generation."[23]

The weight literati attached to this cultural poverty was articulated by Van Wyck Brooks in his seminal 1918 essay 'On Creating a Usable Past.' He connected his frustrations regarding literature to the "national culture" as a whole.[24] The fundamental problem, he wrote, was that the American intelligentsia operated in a vacuum, cut off from any meaningful tradition, whereas Europeans had the luxury of a "family tree that nourishes and sustains them and assures their growth."[25] US audiences indeed wanted their own echelon of writers to worship as national heroes.[26] Brooks had a philosophical solution: "the spiritual past", he wrote, "has no objective reality; it yields only what we are able to look for in it."[27] He was not interested in the lack of actual roots, but asked "what ought we to *elect* to remember?"[28] A "family tree" could be planted.

Romance anthologies did just that. Indeed, this was the finest hour of academics as canonisers: during the interbellum, they were able to reinvent US literature, creating a tradition out of thin air and putting it on a pedestal as the essence of the national arts. It was a literary version of American exceptionalism, that claimed its novels to transcend rather than copy European realism: their verisimilitude was supposedly deeper than that across the Atlantic (where, actually, modernism far exceeded Romance's rejection of realism).[29] The anthologies were not influenced by Brooks' essay – the earlier ones that set the tone had been in the works before 'A Usable Past' was published –, but mirrored its constructivist understanding of Americanness. This tempered the Romance canon's nationalist agenda, as did the transnational ideals that were still connected to canon-thinking. For example, John Erskine, contributor to the first and most influential anthology, *The Cambridge History of American Literature* (1917-21), was part of the Great Books movement from the 1920s

[22] Nathan Miller, *New World Coming: The 1920s and the Making of Modern America* (New York, 2003), p.26.
[23] Ibidem, pp.199-202.
[24] Van Wyck Brooks, 'On Creating a Usable Past', *The Dial*, 11 April 1918, pp.337-341, there p.341.
[25] Ibidem, p.337.
[26] Csicsila, *Canons by Consensus*, p.128.
[27] Brooks, 'Usable Past', p.338.
[28] Ibidem, p.340.
[29] John McWilliams, 'The Rationale for "The American Romance"', *boundary 2*, 17:1 (1990), pp.71-82, there p.73.

onwards, which sought to educate Americans by immersing them into the classical texts of Western rather than US culture.

The anthologies, though part of the move away from the realist aesthetic that defined the GAN-concept, oddly helped the latter to survive. They did so, firstly, by further popularising canons in the US, and simultaneously creating a blueprint of literary American exceptionalism. Secondly, bearing titles like *American Literature as an Expression of the National Mind* (1931), they presented their central texts as capturing the spirit and roots of the nation.[30] Thirdly, the Romance classics were not thought to "document" society, but to grasp its spirit through a creative, often symbolic act. Such a strategy was far less vulnerable to scrutiny, and fitted better the idea of a "new nation" built on communal ideas, a spirit, instead of actual roots. If they were officially opposed to it, then, the new generation of literary critics in practice revived the GAN's core principles. The difference was that now, audiences were the ones to use the term.[31]

"Finally," a 1920s memoir reads, "in literature the foreign yoke was almost completely thrown off (…), and at last there was an audience quite unconvinced that American literature must be forever inferior or imitative."[32] Although the Romance theory was an invented tradition, it caused unprecedented focus on national literature in secondary schools and universities, and its central novelists – Herman Melville, Mark Twain and Nathaniel Hawthorne – have never since dropped from the canonical firmament.[33] Previously, the latter two had been appreciated as peripheral figures in the American tradition, now they and Melville were seen as its foundation. Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) had always been cherished, but whereas earlier generations had admired its *realist* use of Southern vernacular (within that paradigm it had been called a GAN in 1891 already), it was now re-canonised as a complex, symbolic meditation on the American spirit.[34] Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) had been one of the first American "bestsellers" in 1850, but DeForest specifically rejected it as GAN-candidate because it

[30] Stephen Mathewson, 'The Canonical Whale: Moby-Dick and American Literary History'', (PhD diss., University of New Mexico, 1989), p.107; Vanderbilt, *American Literature and the Academy*, p.156.
[31] Brown, 'The GAN', p.2.
[32] Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday: An informal history of the 1920's* (1931), Part IX, chapter 5, *Project Gutenberg*, http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks05/0500831h.html, (accessed 22 June 2020).
[33] Vanderbilt, *American Literature and the Academy*, p.398; Renker, 'The Making of American Literature', p.564.
[34] Louis J. Budd, 'Introduction', in Idem ed., *New Essays on* 'Adventures of Huckleberry Finn' (Cambridge, 1985), pp.1-34, there p.18.

caught "little but the subjective of humanity." In 1868, this was a reason to see it as "belong[ing] to the wide realm of art rather than to our nationality."[35] Within the Romance-paradigm, the same qualifications became an argument *for* its Americanness. An even more intense reinterpretation befell Melville, whose *Moby-Dick* (1851) had originally been ignored by readers and destroyed by critics, one reviewer saying it "would justify a writ *de lunatico*" against the author.[36] Its unorthodox mixture of adventure, non-fiction and extraordinarily ambiguous symbolism, however, went from borderline unreadable in the nineteenth century to immensely exciting in the twentieth. Consequently, the mostly forgotten Melville rose from the ashes.

Subsequent generations of critics and academics, all the way up to the 1950s, cemented the central position of the aforementioned three novels and their status as originators of a uniquely American Romance tradition, to which were added later examples for whom the created past had proven usable, to repeat Brooks' phrase. We will examine the decades surrounding WWII in the next chapter, but for now it is important to mention that high school literature curricula then became organised along the lines of Romance.[37] During those years, the mythologizing of Melville, Hawthorne and Twain was truly completed. To illustrate the extent to which the Romance thesis, or even Hawthorne's original definition (p.17), had remained intact, we can read critic Leo Marx' 1964 summary of what was thought to constitute Americanness in literature:

> The difference between American and English novels: (…) our writers, instead of being concerned with social verisimilitude, with manners and customs, have fashioned their own kind of melodramatic, Manichean, all-questioning fable, romance, or idyll, in which they carry us, in a bold leap, beyond everyday social experience into an abstract realm of morality and metaphysics.[38]

The shift from realism to Romance did not happen overnight, of course. For example, 1925 saw Theodore Dreiser's conventionally realist *An American Tragedy* being championed

[35] DeForest, 'The GAN', p.29.
[36] William V. Spanos, *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick: The Canon, the Cold War, and the Struggle for American Studies,* (Durham and London, 1995), p.13.
[37] Vanderbilt, *American Literature and the Academy*, p.536.
[38] Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, 1964 (New York, 2000) pp.342-343.

as *the* GAN, while F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* was simultaneously ignored, even though it told a similar rise-and-fall story as an "all-questioning fable."[39] Eleven years later still, the traditional Southern novel *Gone with the Wind* easily outshone Faulkner's psychological tour-de-force *Absalom, Absalom!*, which was deemed an incomprehensible mess in a critical climate supposedly favouring everything the novel embodied. DeForest's original notion never wholly disappeared: in 2010 still, Franzen's realist *Freedom* was widely hailed as GAN because of its showcasing the "social verisimilitude" that Leo Marx had opposed to American literature.[40]

Still, slowly but surely the twentieth century disposed of the old realist classics; some were forgotten, others knocked out in direct confrontation. Lionel Trilling's famous *The Liberal Imagination* (1950) scolded Dreiser's "showy nihilism" as a realist and the "roughness and ungainliness" of his prose, saying it had only been "indulged" because critics had supposed his "dullness and stupidity" captured that of the ordinary folk he portrayed.[41] Such passionate hatred against the tradition of yore helped quicken Dreiser's demise. Today, hardly anyone reads *An American Tragedy* anymore. Even *Uncle Tom*'s reputation fell dramatically, though never completely.[42] The core of the Romance canon meanwhile became that of American literature as a whole, and together with the understanding of it as an expression of the national spirit, it remains supremely influential to this day.[43] That academics were able to chisel a new canon into the national consciousness, however, was because the audience, in a national atmosphere emboldened by two World Wars, had demanded it.

The frontier myth

One of the most dominant threads in the GAN-canon's tapestry is the frontier myth, so before I turn to the three central Romances, a brief introductory section on that theme is necessary.

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[39] Buell, *The Dream of the GAN*, p.142

[40] See Grossman, 'Jonathan Franzen', in which *Freedom* is praised as a "Victorian", "way-we-live-now novel", and a GAN.

[41] Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society*, 1950 (New York, 2008), pp.12, 15, 18.

[42] Csicsila, *Canons by Consensus*, pp.140-141.

[43] Chase Coale, *In Hawthorne's Shadow*, p.233.

The frontier myth revolves around the era of North American expansion, from early European settlements in the seventeenth century onwards. As a cultural theory, it was formulated by Frederick Jackson Turner in his extremely influential essay 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History' (1893). The article described the expansive epoch as a heroic struggle to overcome nature and primitivism, moving the frontier of civilisation ever further into the continent. That historical fight was then thought to have engrained individualism in the American psyche, as well as an entrepreneurial mindset, supremely reflected in the adventurous, fortune seeking pioneer-archetype. Turner characterised this figure as having a "practical, inventive turn of mind", "restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism (…) that comes with freedom", all of which had supposedly remained fundamental to American identity ever since: "to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics."[44]

Turner did not come up with these concepts in a vacuum: the idea that the liberty of early settlers and their solitary struggles in and against nature coloured the national character, had in fact enjoyed a solid presence in American "literature, folklore, ritual, historiography, and polemics" for centuries already, and was deeply connected to the American Dream (more on which in the second chapter): the life of a US citizen, as had the land behind the frontier, was thought to be a promise demanding to be fulfilled by sheer individual will.[45] It was also linked to the marker of American exceptionalism known as the "Manifest Destiny": the belief that it was the settlers' mission to spread civilisation across the North American continent.[46] Civilisation (best understood as Western, Christian culture), the entrepreneurial spirit and individualism, so familiar in discussions about US identity, thus all found a convenient origin story in the progressive movement of the frontier across the North-American land. It was one of the most persuasive "mystical bonds" available in the common past.

Uncle Tom, in a way, is the most straightforward treatment possible of the idea that the cultural heartland, located around the first settlements of the North, had a mission to

[44] Frederick Jackson Turner, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History', 1893, in Idem, *The Frontier in American History* (2007, Project Gutenberg), pp.1-38, there p.37.
[45] Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-century America* (Norman, 1998) p.10; Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation* (Oxford, 2004), pp.4-5.
[46] Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (New York, 1996), pp.xi-xii.

spread Christian civilisation across the continent, and had as of yet done so insufficiently in the remotest areas. Beecher Stowe essentially prescribed a thickening of the civilised layer in Southern regions. Certainly, this conception of American society as a pre-eminently virtuous Protestant commune has always been at the heart of the Manifest Destiny, but representations of the frontier in other GANs draw our attention to the fact that this contradicts the intense individualism likewise associated with the frontier, and also considered part of the US' foundational philosophy.[47] The most recognisable example is Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* (1903), one of those "Romances", later considered a GAN, that had initially been widely enjoyed but not taken too seriously. The novella deals with a dog, Buck, who is stolen away from his home in the civilised world and has to adapt to the harsh realities of the wild. Used to comfortable, domestic life, he now has to rely on himself and fight for survival. What follows is an inverted *Bildungsroman*, in which the *Bildung* consists not of civilising, but *decivilizing* the hero.[48] Yet the traditional structure still imposes upon the audience a logic of growth rather than degeneration, a defamiliarization device allowing readers to regard the civilisation-wilderness dichotomy afresh. This is by no means an idyllic, pastoral vision of the frontier, as Buck's immersion into the wild makes him violent and ruthless, yet he is unmistakably represented as progressively noble: "instincts long dead became alive again", for "in this manner had fought forgotten ancestors."[49] Buck "came into his own again" by leaving behind the decadence of civilisation, as the pioneer had found his dignity away from the Old World.[50] His violent struggle for pack leadership among his fellow sled dogs is thus not a tragedy: "he wanted it because it was his nature."[51]

Turner's "restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism (…) that comes with freedom" was not just the result of a struggle against nature. It was also a struggle *in* nature: "gr[owing] up under these conditions" was "the really American part of our history", which made that "the outcome is not the old Europe."[52] London's experience in his own story's setting, the 1896-1899 Klondike Gold Rush, mirrors this growth away from civilisation, for it was during his visit to this grim place, where people sought fortune in the harshest of

[47] Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*, pp.5, 15.
[48] E.L. Doctorow, 'Introduction', in Jack London, *The Call of the Wild: A Library of America Paperback Classic* (New York, 2016).
[49] Jack London, *The Call of the Wild* (London, 1957), p.25.
[50] Ibidem, p.26.
[51] Ibidem, p.35.
[52] Turner, 'The significance of the Frontier, p.4.

conditions like true pioneers, that London claimed to have "found" himself.[53] Away from civilisation, like Buck, the American individualist "came into his own." One of the characters in London's *Klondike Tales* says that "the man who stays by the lodge by the fire grows not cunning and strong. (…) He does not live."[54] Here then, American culture's webs of significance become tangled, for the feral Buck is irreconcilable with Beecher Stowe's domestic religiosity, or in other words: the frontier myth with the Manifest Destiny. Together they were upheld as one pillar of American identity, and we will time and again see the schizophrenic consequences exposed by GANs alluding to both traditions simultaneously.

The new canon

Uncle Tom may have been the first book to be considered a GAN, but the slightly earlier *Moby-Dick* and *The Scarlet Letter*, as well as *Huckleberry Finn*, retroactively became the "usable past" for American literature in the twentieth century. Whereas Beecher Stowe claimed to represent reality untarnished, these novels and those canonised in their wake were thought to capture or express a certain reading of the national spirit. Their intentions are consequently far less clear-cut than that of *Uncle Tom*. What's more, the dominant academic form of literary analysis after WWII, New Criticism, explicitly championed complexity to such an extent that they even came to equate internal contradiction with High Art.[55] As this preference trickled down to audiences outside academia, the central symbols of *The Scarlet Letter*, *Huckleberry Finn* and *Moby-Dick* became sacrosanct, a national mythology. Mythology has been defined as "a complex of narratives that dramatizes the world vision and historical sense of a people or culture, reducing centuries of experience into a constellation of compelling metaphors."[56] This is an apt description of what these Romances have become, with the significant exception of the word "reducing": myths, at least these ones, do not "reduce" national identities, but collect all of their glorious

[53] Jack London, *Klondike Tales* (New York, 2010), p.vi.
[54] Idem, *Klondike Tales*, p.132.
[55] Andrew DuBois and Frank Lentricchia, 'Modernist Lyric in the Culture of Capital', in Sacvan Bercovitch ed., *The Cambridge History of American Literature: Volume 5, Poetry and Criticism, 1900-1950* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 9-178, there p. 175.
[56] Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Norman, 2000), p.6.

confusions and inconsistencies in one expression. Their ambiguity is precisely, I propose, what has ensured their continued resonance. In this section, the aim will never be to offer specific analyses of these texts, but to set out their poetics of confusion, their stacking of uncertainty regarding the American identity readers think they describe.

The oldest GAN is *The Scarlet Letter*, the novel whose author invented the Romance-concept. Importantly, it is set in seventeenth-century Salem, one of the oldest European settlements in the New World, which gives the novel, along with its stately prose and heavy symbolism, the ambience of a foundational myth of the US; as which it is more or less taught, today.[57] The novel's central symbol is the titular letter "A" that protagonist Hester Prynne is forced to wear to mark her banishment, following her giving birth to an extramarital child. To the Puritan settlement that ostracises her, the A marks Hester an outcast. But as this commune is still under construction, so is the network of symbols that comprises its culture. Hester utilises that circumstance and makes the scarlet letter her own by wearing it proudly while aiding the poor, ill and elderly: "such helpfulness was found in her—so much power to do, and power to sympathise—that many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said that it meant Able, so strong was Hester Prynne."[58] The narrator never wholly ceases to condemn Hester's "sins", but the sentimental redemption-plot seduces the reader to sympathise with her. The religious commune that assigned the letter and thought to have fixed its meaning, thus loses control over it.

The mostly approving portrayal of Hester's individualism confuses the master code of Americanness that Hawthorne meddles with in choosing old Salem as his setting. The Pilgrims and their earliest settlements are the origin story of the more conservative, religious interpretation of American exceptionalism (as defended by *Uncle Tom*): "the Pilgrims arrived with a *principle*, and that principle, we are led to believe, is what has defined "America" ever since."[59] It is the religious nationalism at the heart of the Manifest Destiny. But the Americanness of that principle is problematised in *The Scarlet Letter*, which repeatedly alludes to two dark passages from Salem's early history: the infamous witch trials of 1692-3 and the Antinomian Controversy, a complex theological debate that resulted in the

[57] Buell, *The Dream of the GAN*, p.86.
[58] Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 1850 (London, 2003), p.141.
[59] Abram C. van Engen, *City on a Hill: A History of American Exceptionalism* (New Haven, 2020), p.3.

excommunication of spokeswoman Anne Hutchinson. Prosecuted women from both historical episodes are mentioned favourably throughout the novel (*e.g.* "the sainted Anne Hutchinson"), and its sympathetic protagonist is obviously based on their fates.[60] A split national narrative is thus foregrounded, for although liberty and individualism have always been understood as the core business of the US, the same John Winthrop that proclaimed America a "city upon a hill", the central image of American exceptionalism, likewise propagated a very rigid communalism based on strictly Christian order and obedience: "wee must be knitt together, in this worke, as one man."[61] The fundamental issue is that extreme individual freedom and communitarian ideals are *simultaneously* seen as pillars of US society; two traditions, writes political scientist Rogers M. Smith, that have always dwelled side by side in America's understanding of itself, often defended by the same thinkers and politicians as if there was nothing contradictory about them.[62] In fact, of the ten largest Western countries, Americans, despite their well-known individualism, turned out to be the "least likely to defend the individual against national interest" when asked to respond to moral dilemmas featured in a 2004 survey.[63] *The Scarlet Letter* incorporates both legacies (the Lockean Founding Fathers and pioneers on the one hand, the communitarian Pilgrims on the other) in its account of the origin of US society, and the plot pits the two against one other, defamiliarizing its concurrence in the national identity.

The relation of this discussion to a "pioneer spirit" permeates several chapters of the novel. When Hester is exiled to a nearby forest, it "sets her free": "her intellect and heart had their home, as it were, in desert places, where she roamed as freely as the wild Indian in his woods."[64] This is Turner's frontier psyche in full bloom, or even the transcendentalist philosophy of, say, *Walden* (1854, four years after *The Scarlet Letter*), which likewise called for immersion in nature to purify the individual of society's corruption. However, it is not aligned with but opposed to the values of religious nationalism. Whereas *Uncle Tom*'s Eliza finds an all-American idyll in a Quaker-community, Hester can only find her "native courage and activity", like London's Buck, "in a moral wilderness", emphatically at a distance from

[60] Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.45.
[61] Bercovitch, *The Office of The Scarlet Letter* (New Brunswick and London, 2013), p.30; Winthrop, 'A Modell of Christian Charity', p.46.
[62] Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven, 1997), pp.2, 6.
[63] Claude S. Fischer, 'Paradoxes of American Individualism', *Sociological Forum* 23:2 (2008), pp.363-372, there p.366.
[64] Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.174.

the original Protestant commune.[65] Significant in this aspect is that the novel's preamble, set in Hawthorne's nineteenth century, showcases a libertarian sentiment: the narrator informs us that the "federal eagle" on the facade of Salem's custom house, "that unhappy fowl" symbolising the American state, "appears by the fierceness of her beak and eye, and the general truculency of her attitude, to threaten mischief to the inoffensive community".[66] So state order in *The Scarlet Letter*, even in its then present-day introduction, is a Leviathan.

What are the consequences for American identity? Which is its root in this historical tale: Hester's individualism, or the Salem commune? Is America the tight-knit Christian city upon a hill, or the country of "dominant individualism"? The indecision is reflected by the novel's final sentence: "ON A FIELD, SABLE, THE LETTER A, GULES [on a black field, the letter A, scarlet]", the field being the very first burying ground of the new colonies and thus a metaphorical primal ground of the US.[67] An A is on display on Hester Prynne's tombstone as a floating signifier. The uncertainty surrounding that single letter demonstrates how the American symbolical order contains contradictory narratives of a cultural homogeneity based on the Puritan commune, on the hand, and of anarcho-individualism on the other: an unsolvable arrangement expressed through a symbol that, fittingly, cannot be pinned down. No wonder then, that the novel is not only still at the centre of the GAN-canon, but has also inspired several hundreds of retellings and adaptations in the twentieth century: the mystery is never exhausted because it is the mystery of American identity itself.[68]

Moby-Dick likewise revolves around a symbol that, though absolutely essential to the narrative, is fundamentally ungraspable. The hunt for the titular whale by Captain Ahab is shown as insanely obsessive, admits even the chaser himself: "what cozening, hidden lord and master, and cruel, remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time?"[69] Yet Ahab's chase has a certain romantic appeal, and his struggle against nature aligns him with the heroic pioneer's on the frontier. The description of his ship, the Pequod, floating on the sea as moving "through the tall grass of a rolling prairie: as when the western emigrants'

[65] Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.174.
[66] Ibidem, p.9.
[67] Ibidem, p.228.
[68] Buell, *The Dream of the GAN*, p.73.
[69] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p.592.

horses (…) wade though the amazing verdure" is telling.[70] Ishmael, the narrator, constantly oscillates between admiration and fear. As to the second: Ahab is evidently insane and sacrifices his entire crew for his personal obsession. The all-American struggle against nature thus leads the Pequod's crew, which is often taken as a symbol for the democratic, American melting pot,[71] to be ruled by a despot that repeats the sins of the Old World, whereas Turner, by contrast, supposed this civilising strife had sculpted the American psyche into exactly the democratic phenomenon that it here undermines. Thus we might think frontier mentality is wholly discarded as a mistake, yet it is hard to deny the alluring grandeur of the hunt: when Ishmael describes Ahab's fights with nature, his vocabulary turns explosive and overtly Shakespearean: "thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee."[72] He exclaims that if writers should "rise and swell with their subject", then "give me Vesuvius' crater for an inkstand!"[73]

That audiences are generally unsure about the significance of the book's symbolism (though very much in agreement that it has something to say about American identity) is reflected by references to it in popular culture. Not only the whale, but Ahab especially is a cultural archetype even more ubiquitous than Hester's letter, and just as confused: "Ahabs", politicians, managers or athletes, "appear as both reckless authoritarians and as heroic strivers, threats to the body politic and emblems of human achievement, men to be feared and to be admired, exemplars of tragic hubris and models of undaunted courage."[74] To give an example: Silicon Valley entrepreneur Elizabeth Holmes, at the time (2015) revered for being the youngest self-made female billionaire in the world, said that *Moby-Dick* had shown her the value of leadership in the unyielding pursuit of a dream. When she was subsequently exposed as a criminal fraudster, Ahab was referred to again, now to illustrate her (self-)destructive illusions of grandeur.[75] A documentary about Holmes' web of lies superimposed

[70] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p.534; Bruce Plourde, 'Frontier As Symptom: Captain Kirk, Ahab, and the American Condition', *Cercles* 19 (2009), pp.114-123, there p.122.
[71] Ibidem, p.120.
[72] Melville, *Moby-Dick,* p.625.
[73] Ibidem, p.469.
[74] Jeffrey Insko, '"All of Us Are Ahabs": "Moby-Dick" in Contemporary Public Discourse', *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 40:2 (2007), pp.19-37, there pp.28-29.
[75] 'The Whale and the CEO – a Review of "The Inventor Out for Blood in Silicon Valley"', *LibrarianShipwreck*, 22 March 2019, https://librarianshipwreck.wordpress.com/2019/03/22/the-whale-and-the-ceo-a-review-of-the-inventor-out-for-blood-in-silicon-valley/, (accessed 27 June 2020).

her mentioning Ahab as an inspiration on an animation of the Pequod's sinking, a perceptive reversal of the double-sided archetype this narrative has become in popular culture.[76]

Indeed, Ahab's dramatic soliloquizing that "what I've dared, I've willed; and what I've willed, I'll do!" is fatal for his crew, but could work very well for a Presidential campaign slogan looking to capture the ethos of an uncompromising American Dreamer.[77] So it is unclear whether the Dreamer's chase-turned-obsession is to be celebrated as the noble force underlying American identity, or feared as a dangerous element, causing self-destruction personal and collective. Adding to this ambivalence are Ishmael's efforts to scientifically delineate the whale and its significance, attempts adding up to hundreds of pages of facts, philosophies and legends surrounding the animal. All these different interpretations confuse and mystify, adding up to an utterly unknowable yet infinitely intriguing symbol of innumerable but uncertain meanings. In this respect, the whale and the scarlet letter are akin. After one of his many long and feverish ramblings filled with possible interpretations, Ishmael says: "of all these things the Albino whale was the symbol. Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?"[78] The desire to know the whale ultimately becomes so intense that it echoes Ahab's epic chase in a different form.

All this is allegorised in a scene during which Ahab nails a golden doubloon to the Pequod's mast. Crew members walk past it one by one and each offers his own interpretation: "there's another rendering now; but still one text. All sorts of men in one kind of world, you see." Some see it as the "white whale's talisman", others as a symbol of Ahab, or the ship's "navel", or the Holy Trinity, etc.[79] The doubloon, Ishmael muses, "like a magician's glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self."[80] And that is exactly the point: onto the literally blank slate of the white whale are projected all sorts of larger-than-life significances, only to give meaning to the chase itself. Perhaps the reason that this plot has proved so captivating in the context of US identity, is that it shares that sense of constructed meaning individual and collective: literary scholar Bruce Plourde has said of the frontier that "without such a symbolic space into which Americans project their values and desires, America has no clear sense of destiny", and the same could be said

[76] Alex Gibney dir., *The Inventor: Out for Blood in Silicon Valley* (HBO, 2019).
[77] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p.183.
[78] Ibidem, p.212.
[79] Ibidem, p.474.
[80] Ibidem, p.471.

about each individual Dreamer, all their "restless striving" towards projected goals adding up to a national sense of purpose.[81]

Finally, there is *Huckleberry Finn*. Though seemingly less symbolical than the novels discussed above, this adventure story set in the antebellum South has increasingly been read as a metaphorical illustration of the roots of the American psyche.[82] A *Bildungsroman* in reverse like *The Call of the Wild*, child protagonist Huck grows towards moral superiority by refusing to be "sivilised", instead fleeing down the Mississippi River with Jim, a runaway slave, on a raft gliding into the Deep South. Huck initially intends to betray Jim's location to his "owners" (he says he would then be "washed clean of sin"), but the boy's innate decency slowly surfaces.[83] The culmination of this process comes when Huck, in a famous scene, decides not to return Jim to his "owners", and thus chooses his individual values over the mores of society: "all right then, I'll *go* to hell."[84] Eventually he develops a friendship of sorts with Jim, all the more admirable because it is a taboo in his original cultural context. Immersion in nature, as was the case with the pioneer-archetype on the frontier and the transcendentalists alike, frees Huck from the corrupted morals of civilisation. And so, above all, *Huckleberry Finn* introduced an American stock character very much in accordance with Turner's theory: "the outsider with a big heart, the kid who refuses to assimilate."[85] As such, he was considered "an incarnation of the better side of the ruffianism that is one result of the independence of Americans" in 1885, "just as hypocrisy is one result of the English respect for civilization."[86] To this day, Huck is routinely cited in popular culture as an embodiment of bold, American independence, finding his way into many (or even most) discussions on the country's national identity.[87]

At first glance the dichotomy between civilisation and nature thus appears to be relatively straightforward, as civilisation is associated with the loathed Old World, the cruelty of slavery and the repression of Huck's individualism; whereas the untamed river that Jim and Huck float on expresses the all-American merits of freedom, adventure and uncorrupted

[81] Plourde, 'Frontier as Symptom', p.122.
[82] Budd, 'Introduction', pp.20-1, 25.
[83] Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: Third Norton Critical Edition* (New York, 2014), p.222.
[84] Ibidem, p.223.
[85] Jay Parini, *Promised Land: Thirteen Books that Changed America* (New York, 2008), p.181.
[86] Perry, 'Thomas Sergeant Perry: review, *Century Magazine*' (May 1885), in Frederick Anderson ed., *Mark Twain: The Critical Heritage* (London and New York, 1997), pp.128-130, there p.129.
[87] Budd, 'Introduction', p.25.

morality. Such, indeed, were the symbolic interpretations of T.S. Eliot and Lionel Trilling (who even spoke of a benign "river-god" opposing the "money-god" of civilisation, perhaps just as much a criticism of his own times as of Huck's), which have been firmly attached to the novel ever since.[88] But as the narrative progresses, the peaceful landscapes and boyish fun on the Mississippi are increasingly interspersed with scenes of sudden terror. The image of a pastoral dreamland is shattered by passages of murder, greed and cruelty that disrupt and defamiliarize romantic frontier-clichés, turning that mythical landscape, at times, into a Hobbesian nightmare. Tellingly, those troubling subplots constantly invoke stock-situations from European titans Walter Scott and Shakespeare. Also, terror is spread mainly by two criminals calling themselves the King and the Duke, echoes from the European aristocratic order that Americans claimed to have transcended on the frontier. Yet here, though assumed to have been "productive of democracy" by Turner, it is precisely that moral wilderness where "Old World" exploitation and corruption can take root, in the absence of a new order.[89]

Twain was not insensitive to the Manifest Destiny narrative: although he publicly changed his mind in 1899, he had "wanted the American eagle" (*cf.* Hawthorne's tyrannical, "unhappy fowl") "to go screaming into the Pacific, spread its wings over the Philippines (…) [and] make them as free as ourselves."[90] Therefore, it is unsurprising that the underdeveloped Mississippi towns of *Huckleberry Finn* are not romanticised for their primitivism: Twain believed in the merits of American civilisation. We end up with an uncertain hierarchy between the primitive and "sivilised": if the sense of freedom on the frontier is idyllic, so are the evils that absence of civilisation lets loose emphasised. Both are symbolised by one, wild river, sometimes pastoral, sometimes brutal. Toni Morrison perfectly summarised that "the brilliance of *Huckleberry Finn* is that it *is* the argument it raises", unsure whether being "sivilised" is a blessing or a curse.[91]

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[88] T.S. Eliot, 'Introduction to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*', in Thomas Cooley ed., *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: Third Norton Critical Edition* (New York and London, 1999), pp.348-354, there p.352; Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, pp.107, 114.

[89] Turner, 'The significance of the frontier', p.30.

[90] John Carlos Rowe, 'How the Boss Played the Game', in Forrest G. Robinson ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Mark Twain*, pp.175-192; Twain, 'Mark Twain Home, An Anti-Imperialist', *New York Herald,* 16 October 1900, p. 4.

[91] Toni Morrison, 'This Amazing, Troubling Book', 1999, in *Norton Huckleberry Finn*, pp.385-392, there p.386.

One fascinating aspect of *Huckleberry Finn*'s reception is that its first review in a major publication, a laudatory one, celebrated the "total absence of morbidness in the book." The reviewer, prominent critic Thomas Sergeant Perry, went on to unironically cite the gruesome, violent conclusion of a blood feud between two families, which kills several children, as a perfect example of the novel's "genuine charm."[92] Perhaps the myth of the uncorrupted pioneer spirit, which Perry admired as the national ethos and considered Huck to be an "incarnation" of, was then too much engrained in the national self-understanding to recognise a portrayal of its dark underbelly. Interestingly, as wallowing in Southern nostalgia became less accepted throughout the twentieth century for all sorts of reasons, the novel's stature only skyrocketed further, since it was thought to reflect rather than obscure the complexities of that legacy: Huck has become the archetype of charming all-American liberty and its association with the frontier, but the novel constantly disrupts the cliché it helped eternalise. Twain thereby helped canonise a split image of the Old South, perhaps through his own hesitations. After all, he grew up by the Mississippi River in a slave state, and in his *Autobiography* voiced deep, romantic feelings for that "heavenly place", even if he was a staunch supporter of abolitionism.[93] His *Huckleberry Finn*, then, reads like a nostalgic daydream at once condemned by the dreamer himself.

Conclusion

It is no coincidence that the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, discussed earlier as asking for novels that capture something essential about US life, was first awarded in 1918, a formative year of the Romance canon: the GAN-tradition then blossomed because Americanness became the accepted source of literary prestige. With this new-found confidence US authors' stature grew in international eyes, and in 1930, Sinclair Lewis became the first American to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. But the discourse on how to write the GAN, which may seem a purely aesthetic matter at first, had helped shape a cultural history that resonated far beyond literary juries, academies and editorial offices.

Books canonise books, transforming predecessors into tradition, and this certainly happened with the novels discussed above: their characters (now archetypes), poetics (now

[92] Perry, 'Review', p.129.
[93] Twain, *Autobiography of Mark Twain: Reader's Edition Volume 1* (Berkley, 2012), p.30.

conventions), and obsessions loom large over modern US literature. In the broader American culture, their routinely being read as an expression of national character meant that the central symbols of the Romance canon were elevated to national mythology, and because artistic ambiguity was put on a pedestal in the canon, the result is a collection of American epics that do not express conservative certainties but intense doubts US identity's archetypes. Whereas *Uncle Tom* was quite unambiguous about its religious nationalism and abolitionism, *The Scarlet Letter* is far more difficult to pin down: who exactly represents America in it? Hester Prynne, her persecutors, or both? In *Moby-Dick*, the chase of the whale is the result of a dangerous obsession and could thus be read as a cautionary tale, but its mythological proportions have led it to be praised as nobly American as well. So what could be its conclusion? And what is *Huckleberry Finn*'s, which alternates between pastoral imagery and deromanticizing horror?

It is entirely possible to formulate interesting explanations of these novels, but in this context, the point is their uncertainty. Not exactly palimpsests, no single interpretation can entirely suppress their ambiguity. Here, then, we have the cultural unfinished business that has continued to resonate with later audiences, for they have not failed to show up in the supply-and-demand dynamics these books were plunged into after canonisation: the conversation about these texts is never over, because when they are understood as national allegories, we end up with endless contradictions. Between their covers crop up anxieties otherwise hidden away in the murky subconsciousness of US identity, and here they come to the surface as riddles. That renders the scarlet "A", the white whale and Huck's river so immune to the wear and tear of time and critical audiences always eager to dispose of previous generations' classics: like any national identity, and especially that of the US, they are complex, paradoxical and fundamentally elusive. Hence their status as three of the Greatest American Novels. One can never be done with them.

Chapter 2: The American Dream (1930-1950s)

"The reason they call it the American Dream is that
you have to be asleep to believe in it."
– George Carlin

In this chapter, we will examine what is by far the most persistent theme in texts considered GANs: the American Dream. So central to the US' self-image, the term was coined relatively late, during, remarkably, the Great Depression. After explaining the origins of the term and its role in American culture, we will shift focus to Depression-era literature and its GANs, their notions of individualism and the American Dream. Then we will take a closer look at the second wave of retrospective Romance-canonisation, and their response to the themes raised in the 1930s.

The American Dream

Although the Puritans' religious American Dream, encountered in the first chapter, has not altogether vanished, their central narrative of the country's unique fate was relatively secularized during the nineteenth century. The Dream became more and more defined by upward mobility, which made sense within the combined contexts of American individualism and its central tale of a nation under construction: "the burden of creating a new nation, a new society, has shifted into the thrilling, terrifying obligation to create a new self."[1] Within that double narrative, the thus obligatory "pursuit of happiness" from the Declaration of Independence changed, somewhere along the line, into a pursuit of wealth; not illogically, as the pioneer/frontier narrative was very much associated with fortune seeking. The idea was that every individual could achieve anything he (generally not she) set his mind to, and perhaps even had something of a civic duty to do so. Simply "because the American Dream depends on it", writes cultural historian Jim Cullen, Americans even *have* to believe in such absolute opportunity.[2] On the whole they do: in the early 2000s, several surveys showed

[1] Marcus, *The Shape of Things to Come: Prophecy and the American Voice* (London, 2006), p.100.
[2] Cullen, *The American Dream*, p.108.

that a majority of Americans still thought they and their fellow countrymen were wholly responsible for their own fate, and were "twice as likely as Europeans to say that laziness explains poverty", considering a strong will and freedom to be sufficient ingredients for a successful life.[3] And even though research has shown that throughout the twentieth century, social mobility has been very limited in the US, its citizens stoically held on to the conviction that they live in the "land of opportunity."[4]

In all sorts of ways, Americans have made sure that they would indeed maintain this "cruel optimism", as Lauren Berlant has called it: for centuries, they have *en masse* read and produced heaps of "rags-to-riches" narratives, a cliché that actually dominated many of the late nineteenth-century GAN-candidates (which were forgotten, perhaps, because they were so obviously interchangeable).[5] It has also very much been part of advertising culture, ever since its heyday during the economic boom of the 1920s: historian Roland Marchand goes so far as to say that advertisements functioned as "integration propaganda", imposing as it did the capitalist ideology of the Dream onto its audiences.[6] Marchand quotes "Andy Consumer", a cartoon everyman, who feels that every advertisement sold and demanded success: "looking at the advertisements makes me think I've *got* to succeed. I guess one reason there is so much success in America is because there is so much advertising."[7]

Then, however, came the Great Depression (1929-1941). Surely, this period of intense economic hardship and widespread unemployment ended the belief in an infallible Dream, showed Americans that conditions outside of one's control could influence personal fate to a dramatic degree? It did no such thing. In fact, it was precisely this severest of crises that allowed historian James Truslow Adams to introduce the phrase. His was no "invention of tradition", for he merely brought some well-familiar concepts together under one colligatory term. *The Epic of America* (1931), which coined the concept and outlined its supposed influence throughout US history, was a huge bestseller, and the phrase quickly became unparalleled in ubiquity. Adams' analysis itself was hardly revolutionary, describing "a dream of a chance to rise in the economic scale" regardless "the accident of birth", "but

[3] Fischer, 'Paradoxes of American Individualism', p.365.
[4] Michael Hout, 'Americans' occupational status reflects the status of both of their parents', *PNAS*, 115:38 (2018), pp.9527-9532, there p.9531.
[5] Cullen, *The American Dream*, p.60; Brown, 'The GAN', p.12; Laurent Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, 2011).
[6] Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1986), p.xviii.
[7] Ibidem, p.285.

quite as much, or more than that, of a chance to develop our capacities to the full."[8] Origins, predictably, were to be found in the communal quest for material wealth on the frontier: "the mark of that struggle remained on everyone."[9]

What was somewhat more distinctive, was Adams' sense of a Dream both fundamentally American and, lamentably, lost. The sentiment struck a chord with audiences who read daily newspaper headlines hardly reflecting the limitless opportunity they had always thought of as their national identity. This may serve to explain why the book became such a success *when* it did. The narrative of the study consisted of Americans time and again overcoming threats to their identity, as they would have to do now, by sticking to the fighting spirit of the Dream. The sum of each all-American *individualist* struggle was thus prescribed as a *collective* national ethos. Though essentially based upon a paradox, *The Epic of America* was an attractive guideline of hope for the 1930s, disguised as an historical study. It etched the Dream deeper into the national consciousness, precisely by lamenting its loss.[10] The novels we are about to discuss very much took part in this Depression-era romanticizing of the Dream, not despite but because of these inherent tensions, which are the ambiguous unfinished business that allows them to stay in the canon.

The Depression's GANs

The GANs of the Depression era are inevitably characterised by a deep interest in poverty and social injustice, sometimes to the point of activism. The times' considerable number of left-wing writers can thus be said to have been exponents of social realism, but they often combined that style with some European modernist influence which, ironically, resembled the "uniquely American" Romance-style: formal experiment, symbolism, multi-perspectivism etc. crossed the Atlantic into 1930s US novels through the French Connection that was the Lost Generation (*e.g.* Ernest Hemingway, the Fitzgeralds and Gertrude Stein).[11] Most novels discussed in this chapter are examples of that mixture, although there are dramatic

[8] James Truslow Adams, qtd. in Lawrence R. Samuel, *The American Dream: A Cultural History* (New York, 2012), p.13.
[9] Idem, *The Epic of America*, 1931 (New Brunswick, 2012), pp.124, 304.
[10] Howard Schneiderman, 'James Truslow Adams and the American Dream', in Adams, *The Epic of America*, pp.ix-xviii, there p.x; Samuel, *The American Dream*, pp.13-14.
[11] Peter L. Hays, 'Modernism and the American Novel', in Alfred Bendixen, *A Companion to the American Novel* (Oxford, 2012), pp.60-75, there pp.61-62.

differences between them. The spectrum of popular success was equally wide-ranging, as we'll see. Despite their diversity, the texts below share the achievement of continued readership well into the twenty-first century, and have together made up the public imagination of the Great Depression during and after the 1930s for a great variety of audiences.

More overtly than any novel before and perhaps after, *U.S.A.*, a meganovel in three parts by John Dos Passos, made clear beyond a shadow of a doubt that it aimed to be *the* GAN. A concoction of modernism and social realism, it is the most typical Depression-era novel of all, its publication appropriately spanning eight of the crisis' twelve years (1930-1938). Designed as an encyclopaedic statement on the first three decennia of the twentieth century, it follows, across ±1300 pages, a dozen of mostly unrelated working-class Americans and the many more they meet on their quest for success, hopping from state to state and job to job with a ferocious narrative pace that evokes the excitement of the Dream. *U.S.A.*'s archetypical American wants to "learn the trades, take up the jobs, live in all the boardinghouses [sic], sleep in all the beds. One bed is not enough, one job is not enough, one life is not enough, (…) head['s] swimming with wants."[12]

Collages of interrelated headlines, songs and other cut-up texts, Dos Passos' autobiographical streams of consciousness, and prose-poem biographies of notable Americans intersperse the already polyphonic narrative, adding to the energy. All of these threads are fired off into the nineteenth century like one ("*The twentieth century will be American*", the first of many "Newsreels" concludes), and throughout the novel keep converging in a homogenous stream of parallels.[13] A perhaps intentionally bland style across the many different sections emphasises that uniform fate, which turns tragic in the third part: Dreams are left unfulfilled, ideals lost, and the few characters that do "make it big" are corrupted to the core by *The Big Money* (the title of the novel's final part). Like the true Marxist he was at the time, Dos Passos argues through such "epic impersonality" that political and economic contexts (history, in other words) dictate the life of the individual.[14] Like many Americans, he believed that industrialisation and *laissez-faire* policies had

[12] John Dos Passos, *The 42nd Parallel*, 1930 (New York, 1969), p.xix.
[13] Ibidem, pp.28-9.
[14] Arnold Goldman, 'Dos Passos and His *U.S.A.*', *New Literary History*, 1:3 (1970), pp.471-483, there p.474.

poisoned the country's principles, especially the opportunity to make one's own fate.[15] In *U.S.A.*, the individual is always "trapped in history", big business time and again constraining the characters' Dreaming.[16] The wry irony of *U.S.A.* is that precisely those principles are shown to be at the root of industrialisation in the first place. For example, Henry Ford and the Wright brothers are portrayed as classic Dreamers in their biographies. Yet "when the country [lived] on cracked shoes, in frayed trousers, belts tightened over hollow bellies" in 1932, "all they could think of at Ford's was machineguns. (…) they mowed the marchers down"; and the Wrights' romantic dream of flying culminates "in the snorting impact of bombs" thrown out of warplanes during WWI.[17]

Nevertheless, on the final page of *U.S.A.*, the crushed American individual "still waits with swimming head" for the Dream to come true.[18] As did Dos Passos: across 1300 pages of pessimism and social criticism, he never ceases to romanticise the national promise. Like Adams, he *pre*scribes the Dream by *de*scribing the consequences of its betrayal. Ultimately, his characters' impersonal homogeneity is a source of hope in this respect: the US, more than its historical reality, is "the speech of the people", the novel's prologue says, "words worn slimy" by the powers that be. Yet that identity ("clean words our fathers spoke") lives on in the spirit of the common people, hence their uniformity.[19] Many socialists and anarchists founded communes during the Depression, attempting to restore a sense of liberty and dignity within a new collective.[20] Dos Passos undertook the same with language.

In 1936, Dos Passos appeared on the cover of *TIME*, the accompanying profile stating that "to find the equivalent of his nationalism, one must look abroad, to Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, to Balzac's *Comédie Humaine*", US counterparts of which DeForest had once looked for in vain.[21] The GAN had been found, the Hippogriff caught, critics agreed. However, the audience failed to show up: *U.S.A.* was a commercial flop and is today read almost exclusively by academics.[22] It is still respectfully mentioned in discussions on the GAN, but

[15] Robert P. Sutton, *Communal Utopias and the American Experience: Secular Communities, 1824-2000* (Westport, 2004), p.111; Marcus, *The Shape of Things to Come*, p.50; Goldman, 'Dos Passos and His *U.S.A.*', p.473.
[16] E.L. Doctorow, 'Foreword', in Dos Passos, *The Big Money*, 1936 (New York, 2000), pp.vii-xi, there p.ix.
[17] Dos Passos, *The Big Money*, pp.44-45, 226.
[18] Ibidem, p.448.
[19] Idem, *The 42nd Parallel*, p.xiv; Idem, *The Big Money*, p.372.
[20] Sutton, *Communal Utopias and the American Experience*, p.111.
[21] *TIME*, XXVIII:6, 10 August 1936.
[22] Hays, 'Modernism and the American Novel', p.73.

mostly with the reverence of an archaeologist digging up a fossil. After WWII, its considerable stylistic flaws, once fashionable for adhering to DeForest's every principle, ensured a slow fall from grace.[23] The novel we will turn to now, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936), was initially not taken as seriously, but was a sensation in its own right: awarded the Pulitzer Prize, it was the best-selling novel of its year *and* the following, and was, in grave contrast to *U.S.A.*, discovered to be Americans' favourite book behind the Bible by The Harris Poll in 2014 still.[24] This is all the more astonishing because of the novel's overt racism and defence of slavery, which did not age particularly well.

Although *Gone with the Wind*'s popularity today is probably to a significant degree due to the faithful and classic film adaptation from 1939, its influence in the 1930s eclipsed that of every other novel already. It had such an impact because audiences could read it as both a parable on their own situation, and as a nostalgic, rural escape from the Depression's urban nightmare.[25] The novel tells the story of Scarlett, a Southern "belle" whose father is a wealthy plantation and slave owner, who loses everything during the Civil War: the mores and splendour of the Old South, painted as a paradise in the book's early stages, are "gone with the wind" by the story's halfway point. With her "practical, inventive turn of mind", ardour and "dominant individualism" (Turner's description of the pioneer), though, young Scarlett manages to regain material wealth and social status with all-American tenacity. This starts when she, returning home during the war and finding her family's plantation "Tara" impoverished and nearly destroyed, has to work the land for years to make it flourish as in the days of slavery. Her resilience is her greatest strength and fuels the plot: "opposition had the effect of making Scarlett more determined on her course."[26] When, near the end, she loses everything for the second time because her husband leaves her, she realises that she has to return home yet again to rebuild her life. The conditions of Scarlett's survival are thus

[23] Buell, *The Dream of the GAN*, p.390.
[24] '20th Century American Bestsellers', *University of Virginia Library* (2016), https://bestsellers.lib.virginia.edu/, (accessed 31 July 2020); 'The Bible Remains America's Favorite Book', *The Harris Poll* (29 April 2014), https://theharrispoll.com/new-york-n-y-april-29-2014-theres-always-one-it-might-be-something-you-remember-fondly-from-when-you-were-a-child-or-it-could-be-one-that-just-resonated-with-you-years-after-your-first-expe-2/, (accessed 31 July 2020).
[25] M. Carmen Gómez-Galisteo, *The Wind is Never Gone: Sequels, Parodies and Rewritings of* Gone with the Wind (Jefferson and London, 2011), p.27; Marian J. Morton, '"My Dear, I Don't Give a Damn": Scarlett O'Hara and the Great Depression', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*,5:3 (1980), pp.52-56, there p.52.
[26] Margaret Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind*, 1936 (New York, 1973), pp.752-3.

contradictory: independence on the one hand, and a periodic return to the native soil (Tara ≈ *terra* = land) of her community on the other.

Ironically, the latter partly pairs the novel's national ideal with that of the abolitionist *Uncle Tom*, as the domestic sphere is its essence. It resembles, on the other hand, *U.S.A.* and *The Epic of America* in proposing a set of US values by evoking a nostalgic sense of loss around them, specifically "the sacredness of home and of owning a piece of land" that has always been associated with the American Dream: from Thomas Jefferson's idealisation of Westward expansion as a means to open up land for "yeoman farmers", to the Homestead Act of 1868, which ensured a piece of land to almost anyone willing to work it, and to the once uniquely American Dream of suburban home-ownership of the twentieth century.[27] It was precisely this staple of US identity that was threatened during the Great Depression, when millions of Americans became homeless, left on their own to survive. The once exclusively domestic role of many middle-class women changed as well, suddenly forcing them to find jobs to make ends meet. They formed the largest part of *Gone with the Wind*'s audience, recognising themselves in Scarlett's reversal of fortune after being a carefree "belle", as well as being inspired by her individualist resilience.[28]

Although Mitchell was mystified by her audience's interpretation, stating that she had simply attempted to spin a good yarn, her concept of the Dream was thus smuggled into her audience's understanding of the Depression.[29] Lamenting the loss of home and community in a parallel history, it comforted Americans that they, like Scarlett, would *jointly* survive because *individual* struggle was the basis of their identity, rooted in the very soil: frontier mentality flows into Scarlett when she reconnects with family estate Tara, exclaiming that "if I have to steal or kill – as God is my witness, I'm never going to be hungry again."[30] However striking its paradoxes, it is no wonder such resilience resonated. *Gone with the Wind* painted a romanticised picture of the domestic Dream to wallow in, sentimentally described a loss of it to mirror the horrors of the Depression, and therewith pointed to the individualist Dream as the root of rebirth: escapism, social criticism and a

[27] Samuel, *The American Dream*, pp.27, 112.
[28] Morton, 'Scarlett O'Hara and the Great Depression', pp.55-56.
[29] Gómez-Galisteo, *The Wind is Never Gone*, p.27.
[30] Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind*, p.421.

solution, all in one narrative. And the ending was ultimately optimistic: "after all, tomorrow is another day."[31]

As said, the classic film adaptation helped popularize Scarlett's story even further. That goes, to a lesser extent, for our next novel as well: John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), successfully adapted to the screen in 1940. As explained in the appendix, I have chosen to select only one novel per author to keep things concise, but it is worth mentioning that Steinbeck's oeuvre as a whole, for which he received the Nobel Prize in 1962, played a significant role in 1930s culture and the era's legacy in hindsight. *The Grapes of Wrath* is mentioned most as GAN, probably due to its combining social realist description of an American history with overt usage of cultural archetypes. It was additionally the best-selling novel of 1939 and a top-ten one in 1940, came ninth in the aforementioned Harris Poll of 2014, won the Pulitzer, and is still one of the books most discussed in American classrooms.[32]

The Grapes of Wrath tells the true story of the "Dust Bowl", a series of North American ecological disasters during the Depression characterised by extreme drought and wind erosion. Years of misguided and increasingly industrial agriculture had left the soil exhausted and vulnerable to such extreme conditions. The Oklahoma Dust Bowl of 1935 left hundreds of thousands of farmers homeless, forcing them to look for work in a country where unemployment was soaring like never before. Most of the refugees took off for California, and this is the group *The Grapes of Wrath* follows, linking their hope of finding a home and workable land in the West to the all-American (pioneer's) pursuit of happiness in the continent's abundance of workable land: California is a cornucopia dreamland where "valleys in which the fruit blossoms are fragrant pink" and grapes "cascade down to cover the trunks."[33] However, the national myth of a westward trek toward pastoral splendour is betrayed by the laws of big business, the enemy here as in *U.S.A.* The following passage dramatically contrasts the "rot" of capitalist reality with the promise of fertile land in American folklore:

[31] Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind*, p.1024.
[32] Chip Rhodes, 'Social Protest, Reform and the American Political Novel', in Bendixen ed., *A Companion to the American Novel*, pp.187-205, there p.194; '20th Century American Bestsellers'; 'The Bible Remains America's Favorite Book.'
[33] John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, 1939 (London, 1975), p.366.

> First the cherries ripen. Cent and a half a pound. Hell, we can't pick 'em for that. (…) The purple prunes soften and sweeten. My God, we can't pick them and dry and sulphur them. We can't pay wages, no matter what wages. And the purple prunes carpet the ground. And first the skins wrinkle a little and swarms of flies come to feast, and the valley is filled with the odor of sweet decay.[34]

As in *Gone with the Wind*, the "sacredness of home and owning a piece of land" is tarnished: the American Garden of Eden is "owned. It ain't our'n."[35] The cultural cliché of land in abundance in the West is turned inside out by the principle of ownership that is equally associated with it.

Indeed, the novel's central Joad family are refused work, put in camps and, when finally employed, exploited in dehumanising ways. Steinbeck, in leftist Depression-era tradition, represents these hardships in great detail, utilising authentic dialect and formulating causes and explanations for real-life events like a journalist. Also typically, he infuses his social realist narrative with modernist/Romance elements. We have already seen a poetic passage from one of the "interchapters", which do not follow the otherwise central Joad family but the community as a harmonic whole, expressing a holism typical of Steinbeck.[36] They embed the story of the novel into a national context with a focus on Fernand Braudel-like *longue durée* history, describing natural processes and technological revolutions in semi-Scriptural language, and occasionally, with their use of "you", segue into accusations at the address of middle-class readers.[37] Moreover, they are infused with biblical allusions: parallels are drawn between the novel's mass-migration to California and Exodus, there are Messiah figures (especially preacher Jim Casy, whose initials are no coincidence), meditations on the Holy Spirit, a variation on the Flood myth, etc.[38] This serves to attribute a near-sanctity to the fortune-seeking masses, and emphatically not the singular pioneer: "mankin' was holy when it was one thing", Casy preaches, "when they're all workin' together, not one fella for another fella, but one fella kind of harnessed to the whole

[34] Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, pp.367-368.
[35] Ibidem, p.249.
[36] Oliver Scheiding, 'John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939)', in Timo Müller ed., *Handbook of the American Novel of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (Berlin, 2017), pp.237-249, there p.244.
[37] Ibidem, p.242.
[38] Peter Conn, *The American 1930s: A Literary History* (Cambridge, 2009), p.234.

shebang."[39] Steinbeck's holistic philosophy resembles that of *U.S.A.*'s "epic impersonality": on the road and in the camps the "families became one family, the children were the children of all. The loss of home became one loss, and the golden time in the West was one dream."[40] The American Dream is alive in *The Grapes of Wrath* wherever the group stands above the individual: "this is the beginning – from 'I' to 'we'."[41] Yet again, the mourning of the American Dream allows a GAN to uphold its own version of it as the source of a better and more American identity. Even two far-left novels are united with a book as conservative as *Gone with the Wind* in this respect.

The reader may have noticed that, bizarrely in such a diverse country, we have as of yet only encountered white authors. Explanation is hardly necessary: it makes sense that black Americans were not the most prolific and respected authors in a country where they still had to fight for basic human rights. Yet since roughly WWI, output had started to increase, beginning with the 1920s' cultural explosion known as The Harlem Renaissance. Recent studies have shown that this blooming period of black culture actually continued into the Depression, with an increasingly activist and far-left character.[42] Richard Wright, a black man and one of the most successful Depression-era writers, was indeed heavily influenced by both the Renaissance and Communism. Bursting with the revolutionary spirit, he sought to actively fight oppression with social realist literature, claiming that "Negro writing in the past (…) [had] went a-begging to white America."[43] His first attempt at disrupting that tradition was *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), which attacked the docile slave-stereotype popularised by Beecher Stowe. Although the collection was a success, Wright felt he "had written a book which even banker's daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears."[44]

[39] Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath*, p.89.
[40] Rhodes, 'The American Political Novel', p.194; Ibidem, p.206.
[41] Ibidem, p.161.
[42] Cherene Sherrard Johnson, 'Revolutionary Potential: African-American Aesthetics in the Depression Era', *American Literary History*, 27:2 (2015), pp.351-362, there pp.351-352, 357.
[43] Richard Wright qtd. in Markus Nehl, 'Richard Wright, *Native Son* (1940)', in Müller ed., *Handbook of the American Novel*, pp.250-263, there p.252
[44] Richard Wright, 'How "Bigger" was born', 1940, in Idem, *Native Son*, 1940 (London, 1981), pp.9-39, there p.31.

That book was to be *Native Son* (1940). Indeed utterly devoid of sentimentality, its shocking plot forced readers to react with more than easy pity. Protagonist Bigger Thomas, who lives in a decrepit black neighbourhood where the American Dream is but a distant rumour, is employed as a driver by a rich white man. That same evening he murders his employer's daughter and his own girlfriend, acts described in gruesome detail. "Banker's daughters" would be appalled, no question, but Wright sought to redirect their abhorrence, attributing Bigger's crimes (and here his Marxism shows) to the society that made him. Like the Joads and *U.S.A.*'s characters, Bigger is portrayed as a product and victim of his surroundings, to the point where he is almost completely irresponsible for his actions: black Americans, one of many selfless Marxists in the novel lectures, "constitute a separate nation, stunted, stripped, and held captive within this nation, devoid of political, social, economic and property rights."; "not allowed", Wright himself said, "to live as an American. Such was [Bigger's] way of life and mine", in a "No Man's Land" between American and black identity.[45] Bigger intuitively revolted against this situation: very much like Frantz Fanon later did in 'The Fact of Blackness' (1952), *Native Son* describes a sense of entrapment in an identity determined from outside, a negative white gaze that Bigger has internalised.[46] He wears his skin like "a badge of shame", and white people "made him feel his black skin by just standing there looking at him."[47] Wright thus shows racism and inequality to betray the American Dream: it is impossible for Bigger to become an individual and pursuer of happiness, because he is denied a personal identity. That is why he rebels: "they wouldn't let me live so I killed."[48]

In- and outside his novel, Wright justified Bigger's misogynist crimes to an uncomfortable degree, which led to understandably scathing denunciations from feminist critics in the 1970s and 80s.[49] We will furthermore encounter a critical literary response later on, which did much to undo Wright's initially supreme influence on black American literature. Predictable enough, the novel was controversial in its own day for its shocking violence and, among black readers, the sense that Bigger was a negative caricature.

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[45] Wright, 'How "Bigger" was born', pp.431, 27-28.
[46] Frantz Fanon, 'Doorleefde ervaring van de neger', 1952, in Idem, *Zwarte huid, blanke maskers* (*Peau noire, masques blancs*), transl. Jeanne Holierhoek (Amsterdam, 1983), pp.73-95, there pp.73-74.
[47] Wright, *Native Son*, p.107.
[48] Ibidem, p.461.
[49] Andre Warnes, 'A Bigger Vision: Richard Wright's *Native Son* and the Great American Novel', in Bendixen ed., *A Companion to the American Novel*, pp.525-536, there p.532.

Nevertheless, *Native Son*'s original release was a triumph. The book was received as the first novel to truly capture "the Negro experience" and the potentially ugly effects of its desperate circumstances.[50] Due to Wright's polemical tone and huge commercial success, the novel was deemed "not only a literary but also a political event", as such paving the way for much postwar black American writing.[51] With a structure that mirrored *An American Tragedy*, then still considered a pre-eminent GAN, it was a concentrated effort at a sort of subversive take on the concept, showing the unattainability of the Dream for non-whites. Therefore, Americanist Andrew Warnes sees the fact that *Native Son*, despite being a critically acclaimed bestseller, was not immediately named a GAN as the ultimate proof that the concept was associated with white authors only.[52] As the oppression of black Americans has increasingly become understood as an inherent element of American identity, though, *Native Son* has entered the GAN-canon and kick-started the black tradition within it.

"All-questioning fables" in hindsight

The Romance canon enjoyed a huge boost during the 1940s and 50s through reassertion and new inclusions. The US, for the second time in the century, saw its power growing exponentially after a World War, becoming the *de facto* leader of the Western world. Add to that the clash of cultures that was the Cold War, and we can understand why the literary incarnation of American exceptionalism now begot an even more welcoming audience than the 1920s: what exactly was the identity that America sought to impose upon the world?[53]

Amid this hunger for Americanness, the New York Intellectuals (NYIs), a prominent group of critics who enjoyed considerable commercial success, obligingly confirmed the status of the Romance canon and helped expand it with modernist heavyweights.[54] However, they did so out of intense fatalism, not nationalist confidence. In the wake of

[50] Buell, *The Dream of the GAN*, pp.167-8.
[51] C.L.R. James, 'Richard Wright's *Native Son*', 1940, in Scott McLemee and Paul Le Blanc eds., *C.L.R. James and Revolutionary Marxism: Selected Writings* (New Jersey, 1994), pp.88-91, there p.88; Nehl, 'Native Son', pp.250, 252.
[52] Warnes, 'A Bigger Vision', p.527.
[53] Renker, 'The Making of American Literature', p.564; William Ellis, *The Theory of the American Romance: An Ideology in American Intellectual History* (Rochester, 1989).
[54] Samuel Chase Cole, *In Hawthorne's Shadow: American Romance from Melville to Mailer* (Lexington, 1985), pp.3-4.

WWII and the Depression, their pessimism regarding the "crisis of humanity" and individualism grew into a full-fledged discourse, as cultural historian Mark Greif has shown. The NYIs' faith in literature was paralleled only by their despair over its postwar state: convinced that the novel had the power to "re-enlighten" mankind, they spent much of their time fuming over a perceived nadir in quality output, every supposedly failed novel being a betrayal to the artform's ever more gargantuan promise.[55] Once again, critics' longing for Great Novels to solve the nation's defects grew proportionally with disappointment over America's actual literature: DeForest and, say, NYI Lionel Trilling were not so different in that respect. Romance, the "all-questioning fable" (Leo Marx' phrase), thus attained a sacrosanct status in the quest for re-enlightenment. Later, in the Cold War's context, the ideal type of the Great Human Novel was brought back to (still substantial) national proportions: the GAN-quest was revived once again, absorbing the Old and New Testaments of Romance.[56] We will now examine the second, and will again see that ambiguous takes on national clichés form the common denominator of Romance GANs.

Three authors dominated the efforts of the NYIs, the first of whom was F. Scott Fitzgerald. His *The Great Gatsby* was mostly ignored in 1925, and forgotten by the time he died in 1940. Today though, the book sells half a million copies a year, stands side by side with the major titles from chapter one as the fourth Great Romance, and is required reading in almost every American high school.[57] In the weeks leading up to the release of its fifth(!) film adaptation, *Gatsby* was called the "national scripture" in middle- and lowbrow publications, the novel that had "distilled the essence of the American spirit."[58] What happened? The process started when, during WWII, paper rationing led to the dawn of the modern mass paperback. Cheap and reliable classics, as in nineteenth-century Europe's print revolution, were republished *en masse*. In the midst of soaring demands for cheap books a "Fitzgerald revival" was taking place among the NYIs, because he fitted their "declinism": he had portrayed the Roaring Twenties as plagued by decadence and status anxiety, caught like

[55] Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973* (Princeton and Oxford, 2015), pp.3, 104.
[56] Ibidem, pp.107, 114.
[57] Bob Batchelor, *Gatsby: The Cultural History of the Great American Novel* (London, 2015), p.200; Appendix; 'The Bible Remains America's Favorite Book.'
[58] 'Five reasons 'Gatsby' is the great American novel', *USA Today*, 7 May 2013, https://eu.usatoday.com/story/life/books/2013/05/07/why-the-great-gatsby-is-the-great-american-novel/2130161/, (accessed 3 August 2020); David Denby, 'All That Jazz', *New Yorker*, 6 May 2013, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/05/13/all-that-jazz-3, (accessed 4 August 2020).

a disease from the class-conscious Old World during US involvement in WWI. This was also the central notion of *1919*, *U.S.A.*'s second part; Dos Passos and Fitzgerald both served in the war and thus both pointed at their European trauma when depicting the American Dream as a corrupted ideal.[59]

Consequently, Fitzgerald's novels were reprinted, and *Gatsby* got its second chance among them. It subsequently happened to be selected for an Armed Services Edition (books spread among soldiers by a national Council on Books in Wartime), and was consequently read by approximately a million soldiers, who often had to spend long months without action on ships and bases. They and their generation loved the book: *Gatsby*'s interest in the national identity, an obvious hot topic in wartime, resonated.[60] By 1950, the novel was a renowned classic. In the 1960s its stature skyrocketed still further, apparently for no reason other than the audience's persistent interest. All the while it was increasingly seen as a statement on the American spirit, until it became known and, later, broadly taught as one of the quintessential GANs.[61]

As with the Romance classics from chapter one, *Gatsby*'s being considered a GAN canonised an ambiguous version of national identity, specifically regarding the American Dream. Again, I will examine the confusion instead of smoothing over the ambiguities with an explanatory analysis. The titular Jay Gatsby, who has become *the* archetypical Dreamer, is a man of humble origins who has earned a fortune (with louche methods, the novel hints repeatedly) in an attempt to win the heart of his big love Daisy, who has married into the East-Coast upper class. To impress her and her milieu, he puts his sizeable fortune on pompous display, building the biggest mansion of the area and throwing enormous parties. Narrator and neighbour Nick Carraway's hesitations regarding the elusive Gatsby add up to an image torn between opposing interpretations.[62] He initially mocks the shallow decadence and hysterical materialism of Gatsby's parties and his High Society guests. Yet as Ishmael is at least partially tempted by Ahab's craze because of his alluring grandeur, Nick rationally "disapproved of [Gatsby] from beginning to end", but against his better judgement, slowly falls under Gatsby's spell: though he represented everything for which I have an unaffected

[59] Lauren Rule Maxwell, *Romantic Revisions in Novels from the Americas* (Ashland, 2013), pp.101, 105.
[60] Batchelor, *Gatsby*, pp. 51-55.
[61] Ibidem, p.66.
[62] Kathleen Parkinson, *Critical Studies: The Great Gatsby* (London, 1988).

scorn (…) there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life."[63]

Exemplary of this indecision is the scene in which Gatsby tries, and succeeds, to overwhelm Daisy with his colossal collection of shirts, "throwing them one by one before us", reducing her to tears. For sure, the scene satirises materialism spun out of control, its acting as a substitute for romance. Still, Nick's style of observation is decidedly poetic, rich with rhythm and alliteration: "shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel which lost their folds as they fell and covered the table in many-colored disarray", etc.[64] This scene, like the novel as a whole, functions as a *Wunderkammer* of sorts, enchanting Nick with materialist splendour in spite of his simultaneously renouncing it.[65] In the end, like the scarlet letter and Moby-Dick, the green light next to Daisy's house that Gatsby longingly stares at every night, widely taught in US high schools as a symbol of the national Dream, is ambivalent, as the novel at once glamorises the desire and satirises its decadence.

Gatsby's belief that he, born under a different name given to him by poor parents, could "spr[i]ng up from his Platonic conception of himself", is the quintessential American Dream "regardless the accident of birth", to repeat Truslow Adams' phrase.[66] Yet Gatsby ends up getting killed, and his father, whom he had deserted, is the only guest at the funeral: status proved transient, roots permanent. Nick, the initial cynic, is ultimately the only one who feels Gatsby was special after all. In his final remarks (easily the most famous passage of the book), he links the Dream to the frontier in an image oozing with romanticism:

> Gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes – a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder. (…) It eluded us then, but that's

[63] Mary Mcaleer Balkun, *The American Counterfeit: Authenticity and Identity in American Literature and Culture* (Tuscaloosa, 2006), p.128; F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 1925 (London, 1971), pp.8, 160.
[64] Ibidem, pp.72-3.
[65] Balkun, *American Counterfeit*, p.128; Maxwell, *Romantic Revisions*, pp.99-100.
[66] Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby,* p.105; Adams, *The American Dream*, p.13.

> no matter – tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther… And one fine morning –[67]

With this meditation, the epitome of the GAN's fixations, Fitzgerald has further canonised the by now familiar frontier mythology's mirage of an "empty" continent as linked to the American individual, both having to imagine themselves anew. Gatsby's obsessive climbing of the social ladder and reinventing of himself is admired as a national virtue rooted in common history, but is also the cruel optimism that Americans are doomed to repeat: "*we* will run faster, stretch out our arms farther…" Nick ultimately returns to the calm domesticity of his and Gatsby's native Mid-West, but cannot reason away his excitement. This is *Gatsby*'s unfinished business as national parable: even more than Depression literature, it absolutely glorifies *and* criticizes the Dream with striking simultaneity.

Gatsby fitted the NYIs declinism perfectly, with its portrayal of interwar moral deterioration, supposing Gatsby's Dream "was already behind him", in the frontier past wherein the "dark fields of the republic rolled under the night."[68] Edmund Wilson and Lionel Trilling, two of the leading NYIs, did much to unleash the Fitzgerald revival, but we have seen additional engines behind *Gatsby's* canonisation. It is the emergence of Faulkner in the canon that truly illustrates the sometimes puzzling proportions of the NYIs' influence. A for the time attractive sense of doom hung over the great Southern novelist's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930) and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). Critics started to reinterpret those novels' focus on the dilapidation of the Old South as having emerged from a more general interwar loss of human dignity, and the formerly unsuccessful Faulkner happily joined in that public rereading, leading to his receiving the Nobel Prize in 1950.[69] Having battered the lock until it gave, his extremely dense and highly modernist work thus broke into the canon, not in the least because it suited the loosely defined Romance aesthetic rather well.[70] He became the North American James Joyce: far too complex for wide readership, but achieving it nonetheless.

Faulkner's novels, especially *Absalom*, were now thought to hold truths that transcended their Southern setting, read as national parables or even GANs. As such,

[67] Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p.187.
[68] Ibidem, p.188.
[69] Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man*, pp.118-120.
[70] Cole, *In Hawthorne's Shadow*, pp.3-4.

Absalom contributed one of the darkest visions of the US' frontier origin myth to the canon. Its protagonist is Thomas Sutpen, but we never get a firm grasp on him. His story is told in 1910, 41 years after his death, by several characters (some have faulty memories, others make it up as they go along) who all speak in a feverish and near-impenetrable style, stacking obscure interpretations and scattered facts. The mythical tone, ambiguity and relentless repetition by each new voice give the impression that Sutpen haunts his narrators. It is a communal trauma recounted by and to (grand)fathers, sons, aunts and friends, "something you live and breath in like air."[71]

Like the Dreamers we saw before, Sutpen obsessively lives "with a fixed goal in his mind" to transcend his humble beginnings.[72] Somewhere on the Southern frontier, he emerges out of nowhere and builds a large plantation. The wild frontier he thus seeks to tame is indeed the classic "halfway point between what we call the jungle and what we call civilization", but is, against formula, utterly devoid of pastoral peacefulness, "a theater for violence and injustice and bloodshed and all the satanic lusts of human greed and cruelty."[73] Sutpen, forcefully cultivating wilderness according to Turner's pioneer-paradigm, "transform[s] raw matter (land, crops, and slave bodies) into capital", "drag[s] house and formal gardens violently out of the soundless Nothing and clap[s] them down."[74] His Ahab-monomania is more emphatically feral and bleak than any version of this archetype we have encountered so far: Faulkner's view on the matter is devoid of the romanticism encountered in *Gatsby* or *Huckleberry Finn*. Sutpen's victory over nature results in "a soil manured with black blood from two hundred years of oppression and exploitation until it sprang with an incredible paradox of peaceful greenery and crimson flowers and sugar cane sapling size." The historical imagery of Western plenty and idyll, as referred to in *The Grapes of Wrath* for example, is here thought to be soaked with "the old unsleeping blood that had vanished into the earth they trod [and] still cried out for vengeance."[75] Hence Sutpen's haunting his narrators: their history is still present around them and, as literary trauma theory prescribes, "has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned,

[71] William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, 1936, (London, 2005), pp.361, 101.
[72] Ibidem, p.53.
[73] Ibidem, p.250.
[74] Alicia C.Y. Pan, 'Laboring Beneath the Father: The Plantation in "Absalom, Absalom!", *The Mississippi Quarterly*, 61:3 (2008), pp.417-433, p.417; Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, pp.8-9.
[75] Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, p.251.

continues in the present and is current in every respect."[76] This take on history as an original sin and trauma was considered applicable to America as a whole within the NYIs' pessimistic outlook, and would later greatly influence writers in the 1980s. We will encounter them in the next chapter.

The "savage" nature of Sutpen goes back to an ambivalence we encountered in the previous chapter: does the pioneer, as saint of the civilising Manifest Destiny, not threaten his very purpose by being immersed in nature and reflecting that in his much-lauded ruffianism? This question consumes *Absalom*'s Thomas Sutpen and his son Henry, who become insanely obsessed with a child the former had during an engagement he broke off upon discovering that his fiancée had a distant African ancestor, making their son one-sixteenth black.[77] The Sutpens' fear of miscegenation turns grotesquely compulsive, results in fratricide and the downfall of the whole family. It symbolises the impossible paradox underlying the pioneer archetype: "the need to appropriate knowledge, skills and means to survive from the savage inhabitants while remaining separate."[78] In the process of taming the wild, Sutpen has left a legacy that, even if only one-sixteenth, has instilled a rot in the edifice of his racially pure vision of American identity.

The frontier, the pioneer and the Dream lost much of its innocence within Faulkner's paradigm of history as trauma. The third author championed by the NYIs has, by contrast, produced perhaps the most romantic and unambiguous GAN. Hemingway was already a household name since the 1920s, but because his novels never dealt with American identity (at least not obviously), he had remained mostly outside of the GAN-canon. Worldwide bestseller *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) has an abstraction to it, though, that allowed it to be claimed it as a GAN. It repeats the man-against-nature plot of *Moby-Dick*, portraying a fisherman who hasn't caught anything in months fighting the elements for one single, giant marlin. He catches the fish but is dragged dangerously far into the ocean, and once he has returned, sharks have already eaten his prey. Nonetheless, the man is revered by his colleagues, whose awe at the fish's skeleton allow the his pioneer-persistence to become

[76] Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York and London, 1992), p.69.
[77] Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, p.100.
[78] Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies, *American Terminator: Myths, Movies, and Global Power* (New York, 2004).

the heroic pointe of the novella. This was Ahab without the lunacy, just the admirable resilience. It was *Gatsby*'s Dream without the decadence, with added heroism.

Because it repeated GAN-tropes to such an extreme extent, the circumstances surrounding *The Old Man and the Sea* are more interesting than a close reading of the text itself. Hemingway, though a giant of the Lost Generation, had seen his reputation wane somewhat during the 1940s. Faulkner's concurrent rise to fame and Nobel Prize broke Hemingway's heart, as he wanted more than anything to be remembered as the greatest American modernist.[79] In his acceptance speech, Faulkner repeated the by then prevalent ideals of literature: writers had to portray "universal truths", especially humanity's immortal "soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance."[80] He had wholly absorbed the NYI-discourse of Great Human Novels and Romances as "all-questioning fables." Hemingway was indignant about his own brand of modernism's fall from grace, and decided to flex his muscles one last time: "I knew that I could write a book better and straighter than his speech and without tricks or rhetoric."[81] That book, *The Old Man and the Sea*, followed two years later and purposefully met every Romance-requirement, celebrating, indeed, one down-on-his-luck man's "endurance" in a manner that invited allegorising. It was also unmistakably a Hemingway novel, with its minimalism and machismo, ensuring that those elements of his oeuvre as a whole became connected with the new canon: not only the novella, but his entire body of work was re-canonised as NYI-humanism. *The Old Man and the Sea* became a worldwide sensation, selling millions in its first month alone, winning the Pulitzer, and causing Hemingway to win his coveted Nobel Prize two years later.[82] He had made himself a celebrity by playing the Romance game. Therein lies the significance of this story: the canon, we see, was starting to become a performative set of rules. Therefore, its status as the foundation of US literature had become a perpetually self-fulfilling prophecy, for its principles dictated the distribution of literary prestige.

[79] Joseph Fruscione, *Faulkner and Hemingway: Biography of a Literary Rivalry* (Columbus, 2012), p.8, 153.
[80] Faulkner qtd. in Fruscione, *Faulkner and Hemingway*, p.156.
[81] Hemingway qtd. in Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man*, p.122.
[82] Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man*, p.122.

Conclusion

We have seen two "sub"-canons in this chapter: that of the Depression and of Romance's New Testament. Both were incorporated into the GAN-canon, which returned during the Cold War due to popular demand. In the process, the rules of the GAN-game became such recognisable prerequisites for canonical prestige that ambitious authors could mould their work to fit them, sometimes, as with Faulkner, in hindsight.

Naturally, Depression-era GANs presented stories of economic hardship. But in the narrative of the GAN, two other, interrelated common denominators stand out, firstly a 1930s take on the relationship between the individual and society. *Gone with the Wind*, *U.S.A.* and *The Grapes of Wrath* describe losses of home and community. The former then romanticises a decidedly individualist struggle to regain the ideal community of the yore, whereas the latter two romanticise a collective of uprooted Americans, united by and supporting each other through shared national values. *Native Son* likewise presents us with a protagonist that is wholly immersed in a social caste, but Bigger of course finds no solace in the masses. His entrapment within a/the black community is precisely what denies him his chance to be an individual, a prerequisite for the American Dream.

The split account of that Dream is the second common denominator, characterised by an elegiac tone torn between social criticism and nationalism, with nostalgia as secret emulsifier. Many writers we encountered were leftist or even Marxist, but they hardly differed from the conservative *Gone with the Wind* in their final conclusions: the Dream was the root of American exceptionalism, and had, somewhere along the line, been betrayed, with the described loss of principle only reaffirming the principle. *Gatsby* and *The Old Man and the Sea* follow the same blueprint, combining declinism (on the basis of which they were championed by the NYIs) with archetypical American struggles. Their extreme success etched the romantic image of those myths even deeper into the national consciousness. All of these striking commonalities became apparent only because we took the shape of the canon seriously and observed its corpus as a whole. Arising from this overview is a surprisingly clear intellectual history of the Depression era, to which we can add *The Epic of America*. If that study saw American history as the persistently challenged but ultimately resilient survival of the US' founding principles, *i.e.* the American Dream, then these

extremely successful novels have ingrained the Depression as an episode of such a narrative in the national psyche.

Three more aspects deserve mentioning. Firstly, many of these novels, especially Mitchell and Steinbeck's, initially entered the canon not because of the influence of critics/academics/intellectuals, but due to their popular success. Second, we have now seen two World Wars boosting national confidence, but twice it led to intellectuals' infusing the canon with uncertainties. It seems to be a question of affordance: its roots in nationalist naivete simply allowed the canon to blossom when that very sense needed questioning. Finally, if most of these titles are hesitant about the Dream's reality or even question its merits yet ultimately subscribe to a sort of romantic idealization of it, two of them omit that latter part of the pattern: *Absalom* and *Native Son*. The reason is no mystery, as they are the texts dealing with racism. As a black man and a Southerner, respectively, Wright and Faulkner found little to champion in US national identity. We will see that their bleaker views would be matched in later years.

Chapter 3: Challenging Innocence and Comfort (1950s-2000)

During the second half of the twentieth century, the GAN was constantly dismissed by critics, only to be revived by writers every other decade: if books canonise other books, the novels discussed below have upheld the status of the GAN as a major intellectual arena in which to ponder the national identity. We will time and again see the canon being challenged on its own terms: to enter the arena, authors had to play by its rules, allude to earlier GANs directly, thematically or stylistically.

The 1950s saw the most spectacular economic boom in US history, an incredible lift-off that was felt by many Americans. A sense of prosperity and limitless possibility was ubiquitous in pop-culture. Extreme consumerism and materialism were championed as all-American ideals, the Dream of upward mobility as an act of resistance, stronger than any army in the ideological war with Communism.[1] This was America's "Golden Age", as the Eisenhower-era has often been called in hindsight. Sanctifying the social riser as a national archetype, though, had a troubling consequence, as failure to live up to the Dream's promise became "a kind of betrayal" of that shared national fate.[2] Pop-culture from the era, then, has been described as "obsessed" with "the perils and prospects of becoming an adult", the latter being described in increasingly narrow terms.[3] Reflecting that communal preoccupation, the *Bildungsroman* bolstered its position as American genre *par excellence* in these years. GAN-output, peaking again during a period of national self-assurance, followed and complicated this tradition, while alluding to and updating an old canonical archetype.

Before turning to that broader phenomenon, however, I want to pay special attention to the productivity of authors from minority backgrounds within the genre: "ethnic *Bildungsromans*" were no novelty at the time, but became a full-fledged tradition in these years.[4] Minority communities' optimism during the 1950s was perhaps the "cruellest" of all in America, as even the Golden Age by and large hardly improved their position.[5] This was

[1] Samuel, *American Dream*, p.50.
[2] Marcus, *Mystery Train*, p.20.
[3] James Gilbert, *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s* (Chicago, 2005), pp.1-2.
[4] Buell, *The Dream of the GAN*, pp.191-192.
[5] Robert M. Collins, *More: The Politics of Economic Growth in Postwar America* (Oxford, 2000), pp.41-42.

especially true for black people, and while the civil rights movement was making itself heard on a political level, it was African American literature that kickstarted the "ethnic" *Bildung*-tradition.

The "ethnic *Bildungsroman*" and humanism

Native Son continued to provoke reactions for years after its release. Even if they were rejections, it is due to those responses that the novel can be said to have a significant place within the US canon, as black literati always looked to relate themselves in a meaningful way to Wright's milestone text. But rejections they were: (in)famously, James Baldwin dismissed his one-time friend's novel for its stylistic blandness, its "impossible" ambition to be "representative of some thirteen million people", and unsubtle championing of Marxism.[6] There could be no Great African American Novel, because its existence would suggest that black America was a monolith. Baldwin also thought *Native Son* and *Uncle Tom* as protest novels failed to embrace "the human being" and "his beauty", by favouring the reductive functionalism of realist literature.[7] His complaints are familiar in the broader context of the GAN: they led to the concept's fading around 1900. Its revival was then made possible by the invention of Romance, because a national metaphor is less prone to scrutiny than claims of true and total representation. The "GAAN"-canon would follow the same path soon after Baldwin's plea.

In 1952, then, black literature definitively entered the US canon, when *Invisible Man* was hailed by the NYIs as the answer to their every prayer, the Great Human Novel come at last, the single most important text since WWII.[8] A year later, its author Ralph Ellison became the first black man to win the National Book Award (NBA). His acceptance speech, like Faulkner's in Stockholm, displayed either a keen awareness of, or a contingent alignment with the NYIs' prerequisites for literary prestige: "there must be possible a fiction which", he said, "can arrive at the truth about the human condition."[9] Echoing Baldwin, this is what he considered to be "the chief significance" of his novel: its rejection of realism's "rigid

[6] James Baldwin, 'Many Thousands Gone', in Idem, *Notes of a Native Son*, 1955 (Boston, 1984), pp.24-45, there pp. 32-33.
[7] Idem, 'Everybody's Protest Novel', in *Notes of a Native Son*, pp.13-23, there p.23.
[8] Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man*, pp.165-166.
[9] Ralph Ellison, 'Ralph Ellison's NBA Acceptance Speech', 1953, *National Book Foundation*, https://www.nationalbook.org/nbaacceptspeech_rellison.html#.VtYJ7pMrKV4, (accessed 28 October 2020).

concepts of reality" or "sociology" that had characterised American protest novels before, and its embrace of a reality "simply far more mysterious", to be reflected in "the bright magic of the fairy tale."[10] Initially, Ellison read a black tradition *into* the canon, re-confirming *Huckleberry Finn*'s GAN-status and emphasising its preoccupation with race as its moral core. Together with Fiedler's 'Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!' (1948), he did much to make this reading standard.[11] Turning to fiction, Ellison then sought to position his own "blueprint for Negro writing", as a famous essay by his former mentor Richard Wright was titled, through a rejection of the latter's naturalism and an alignment with broader American traditions. *Invisible Man* did so by embracing *Huck*'s picaresque and Romance's heavy symbolism, alluding to canonical figures like Melville (the novel's epigraph was his, for example), while still "document[ing] virtually every aspect of segregated African American culture" like a true GAN.[12] Looking to bridge the gap between African American and American literary culture, the novel was thus a stylistic act of "integration."

Yet it was a subversive one: the impossibility of black integration in a more literal sense was precisely what the novel problematised. Thus Ellison, despite his fresh approach, ultimately continued Wright's protest. Like Bigger (and, for that matter, Hester Prynne), his protagonist is denied the right to be a full-fledged individual, hence his withholding his name in favour of the titular "invisible man." His story, like Huck's, is essentially a series of vignettes. Each one allegorises a different approach to climbing the social ladder. The invisible man, "like almost everyone else in our country, started out with my share of optimism": faith in the Dream akin to Booker T. Washington's (1856-1915), who thought that black people should refrain from actively fighting oppression, and instead concentrate on rising in society through education and entrepreneurship.[13] Economic independence would eventually result, Washington thought, in emancipation. *Invisible Man*'s earliest scenes satirise this position as, in GAN-terms, "Uncle Tom-ism." First, the protagonist wins a college scholarship, beating the state's other black graduates. Ellison has made this beating literal: a bloody "battle royale" unfolds in front of guffawing white notables, who shout "tear him from limb to limb", and "let me at that nigger!" Yet the boy maintains that these are

[10] Ellison, 'NBA Acceptance Speech.'
[11] Buell, *The Dream of the GAN*, pp.183-187.
[12] John Lowe, 'Writing the American Story, 1945-1952', in Maryemma Graham and Jerry W. Ward Jr eds., *The Cambridge History of African American Literature* (Cambridge, 2011), pp.341-355, there p.352.
[13] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 1952 (London, 1981), p.464.

wise and honourable men, the only ones who "could judge truly my ability."[14] By the time he, covered in the blood of himself and his rivals, delivers a winning speech that actually quotes Washington's "Atlanta Compromise", his faith in just, white paternalism looks utterly ridiculous.

The invisible man is not quick to lose it, but as that first, absurdist allegory suggests, his optimism is indeed cruel. Washington's philosophy of upward mobility denies a black American "visibility": Mr Emerson, a white patron of his all-black college, revealingly tells the boy he is a "cog" in his (Emerson's) fate as patron saint of upward mobility. "But you don't even know my name", the narrator thinks.[15] When he accidentally shows Emerson the old slave quarters adjacent to the college, shocking the patron into hysteria, he is sent away by the institution's black president, Dr Bledsoe: the boy has betrayed his race, Bledsoe thinks, by failing to cover up its traumatic past. Here, failing to "act the part" of Dreamer is not merely a betrayal to the national fate, but to an ethnic one. Ultimately, Bledsoe and Emerson are guilty of the same: they don't see an individual, but a representative of a collective social rising.[16]

Once expelled, the invisible adolescent tries to get a job on his own level, but all he gets out of his visits to New York skyscrapers is an involuntary flirtation with a white man who, in an extended reference to the (in)famous claims of interracial homo-erotic tensions in *Huck* by 'Come to the Raft Ag'in', wants the boy to be the "Jim" to his "Huck." He then attempts to join the working class, during which the Romance canon is similarly ubiquitous: incidents of absurdly inflated symbolism in a factory, which produces white paint in whale-sized tankers under the slogan "keep America pure", result in the narrator's giving up on the social ladder completely. Keeping up the picaresque pace, he then joins the Marxist Brotherhood. Yet when he showcases great talent in spreading the socialist gospel, his fellow revolutionaries kick him out. They had thought it advantageous to recruit a black man for their mission in Harlem, but are frightened by actual input. Thus they, "Norton and Emerson merge into one single white figure. They were very much the same, each attempting to force his picture of reality upon me and neither giving a hoot in hell for how things looked to me. I

[14] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, pp.22-25.
[15] Ibidem, p.41.
[16] Klara Szmańko, *Invisibility in African American and Asian American Literature: A Comparative Study* (Jefferson, 2008), p.31.

was simply a material, a natural resource to be used."[17] This insight leads the protagonist to accept that he is invisible: no-one sees him, only his skin.

Realising now that the promise of "rising *upwards* (…) is just a crummy lie [whites] kept us dominated by", and rejecting Wright's beloved Marxism, the narrator chooses instead to embrace his invisibility.[18] He "knew that it was better to live out one's own absurdity than to die for that of others", and retreats underground, literally.[19] There, he is "hidden out in the open", for who can "recognize a choice in that which wasn't seen…?"[20] The ending is symbolical and ambiguous, leaving plenty of leeway for interpretation: the answer to black America's struggle remains unfinished business to this day. However one reads its act of distancing, though, the novel at least prescribes a spiritual retreat from the sanctified "upward" narrative, and from classifying external gazes (be they white, black or Marxist) that threaten to dissolve their object's ego; a matter that had special significance for people who were so often defined by their skin colour.

"Man must return to Himself", Saul Bellow summarised the novel's conclusion.[21] Such a universalist reading, focussing on individual dignity and a rejection of materialist *Bildung* in favour of a spiritual one, allowed NYIs to claim *Invisible Man* as "their" GAN. Therefore, it was primarily a success among white literati upon publication. Only in the following decades did it become a classic among black audiences, and it has been one of the US' most widely taught novels since the 1980s.[22] Ellison confirmed *Native Son*'s interests (the denial of individualism to black Americans) as the "blueprint for black writing," and consciously pulled them within the GAN-canon by expressing them in the style of a Romance "fable." As said, *Invisible Man*'s most enduring legacy was its boosting the tradition of the "ethnic *Bildungsroman*", which incorporated minority experiences of the American Dream. Jewish authors Bernard Malamud, Bellow and, slightly later, Philip Roth wrote in the same genre, especially the latter causing quite a stir in his community by doing so.[23] Roth later described the 1950s atmosphere with regards to social mobility: having won WWII, "sacrifice and

[17] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, p.409.
[18] Ibidem, p.408.
[19] Ibidem, p.450
[20] Ibidem, p.410; Szmańko, *Invisibility*, p.26.
[21] Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man*, p.188.
[22] Buell, *The Dream of the GAN*, pp.191-192.
[23] See: Philip Roth, *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography* (New York, 1988), in which he describes accusations at his address of being an "antisemitic Jew", especially upon the publications of 'Defender of the Faith' (1959) and, later, *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969).

constraint were over. The Depression had disappeared. (…) The lid was off. Americans were to start over again, en masse, everyone in it together." Social mobility, in this climate, was not an opportunity, but an obligation: "you must not come to nothing! *Make something of yourselves!*"; a Jewish counterpart to *Invisible Man*'s Dr Bledsoe.[24]

Bellow, a Canadian immigrant of Russian parents, was one of the critics to hail *Invisible Man* as a humanist masterpiece, and his own *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953) would receive similar praise a year later. His undisguised attempt at a GAN essentially reiterated that "Man must return to Himself"; even more emphatically, however, set against the (minority) "*make something of yourself!*"-adage. Augie is a Jewish adolescent of humble birth, whose individualism and Americanness are accentuated from the first sentence onwards: "I am an American (…) and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way."[25] This in itself was quite a proclamation in a time when Jewish immigrants were still deemed unfit by many men of letters to write American fiction. Roth has often cited this striking confidence as the boost he and his generation of Jewish authors had needed to dare embrace their own contexts as "legitimate" subjects; precisely what Ellison had meant for black authors.[26] Precisely by incorporating their backgrounds into typically American tales of (challenged) individualism, Romance symbolism and Huck-picaresque, they canonised their narratives as national instead of minority ones.

Huck Finn in the Golden Age

Yet like Ellison's "assimilation", Bellow's proves subversive. As Augie quickly escapes his poor family and skips from job to job, we expect him to rise in society, as the *Bildung*-narrative, that we are led to believe is unfolding, dictates. However, Augie refuses to do so, describing settling down as "individual man (…) illustrat[ing] a more and more narrow and restricted point of existence."[27] Whenever, on his picaresque journey through dozens of highly contrasting jobs and milieus, Augie seems to find his "restricted point" (be it wealth, comfort or the apparent love of his life), he flees. To other characters, he is an enigma: "what are you

[24] Roth did so through his alter-ego Nathan Zuckerman, in: Roth, *American Pastoral* (New York, 1998), p.40.
[25] Saul Bellow, *The Adventures of Augie March*, 1953 (London, 2001), p.1.
[26] Roth, 'Rereading Saul Bellow', 2000, in Idem, *Why Write? Collected Nonfiction 1960-2013* (New York, 2017), pp.292-308, there p.294.
[27] Bellow, *Augie March*, p.436.

slopping around here for? You've got more possibilities than you know what to do with. (…) What are you postponing everything for?"[28] But before they know it, Augie is gone again, off to try another fate. He despises Dreamers with "a chosen thing" (say, Ahab and Gatsby), for it "can't be one that we already have, since what we already have there isn't much use or respect for. Oh, this made me feel terrible contempt."[29]

Augie's sentiment fit the unease many young people and intellectuals felt during the Golden Age. Their experience is best understood within the context of "suburbia", the 1950s' version of home-ownership's sanctity: constantly reasserted as such in television sitcoms and commercials, a traditional family, spacious home and quiet neighbourhood became the archetypical décor of the American Dream come true.[30] Associated with predictability, material comfort, and risk-free conformism, Eisenhower's suburbia contrasted dramatically with Bellow and Ellison's humanist championing of individuality.[31] Their picaresques were modelled after another national archetype: Huckleberry Finn, which Bellow's anachronistic *The Adventures of* … alluded to. Such intertextual linkage added weight to the question whether the much-lauded "ruffianism" and eccentricity of the frontier hero were still possible in 1950s America. Indeed, scholars have time and again noted how "the frontier experience" or narrative was "replicated in the explosive growth of the crabgrass frontier of suburbia."[32] Was the Dreamer a feral pioneer, then, or a white collar worker? Who was the "real" American?

If Augie despises chasing the whale, the "chosen thing" of American Dreams, he fully subscribes to roaming the seas. His is the restless energy of the pioneer: "look at me, going everywhere!", nowhere in particular, "why, I am a sort of Columbus of those near-at-hand and believe you can come to them in this immediate terra incognita that spreads out in every gaze."[33] In this final passage of the novel, Augie links his spirit to the era of discovery and expansion, but his "near-at-hand" twist on the archetype undermines the type of grandeur an Ahab strives for: Augie accepts the restrictions of the everyday, embraces them,

[28] Bellow, *Augie March*, p.203.
[29] Ibidem, p.402.
[30] Jan Nijman, 'Introduction: Elusive Suburbia', in Idem ed., *The Life of the North American Suburbs: Imagined Utopias and Transitional Spaces* (Toronto, 2020), pp.3-19, there pp.5-7.
[31] Ibidem, p.8.
[32] Collins, *More*, p.40; Samuel, *The American Dream*, p.177; Bernadette Hanlon, John Rennie Short and Thomas J. Vicino, *Cities and Suburbs: New Metropolitan Realities in the US* (London, 2009), p.6
[33] Bellow, *Augie March*, p.536.

even.[34] Therewith, more overtly than Ellison, Bellow contrasts Augie's Huck-ism with "*make something of yourselves*!", preferring to stay an eternal Dreamer: "I may well be a flop at this line of endeavor. Columbus too thought he was a flop, probably, when they sent him back in chains. Which didn't prove there was no America."[35] Augie's *Bildung* thus concludes with a claim of ultimate Americanness, yet with no social mobility to speak of: an ultimate rejection *and* embrace of the Dream.

At the outset of this chapter, I have noted the 1950s' special relation with growing up. Augie, somewhat more typically than the invisible man, was one of many postwar literature's "eternal adolescents", as I propose to call them: protagonists in *Bildung*-narratives who refuse to grow up in a conventional sense. Thus reintroduced, the Huck-archetype's canonical status increased dramatically yet again.[36] His *Bildung* gone-awry, as we have seen, consists of realising that conforming to traditional maturity prescribes a loss of all-American individualism and moral integrity. Anticipating and influencing the following decade's counterculture, the new – or, rather, updated – archetype allowed Golden Age-authors to examine the era's conformism and question the gold's glitter, which the US, having caught Cold War fever, had put on a pedestal as ideal type for the entire Western world.

The most famous eternal adolescent was and continues to be Holden Caulfield from J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), which preceded the two "Great Human Novels." It resonated spectacularly with high school and college audiences, who worried about futures within the conformist society their parents' generation had embraced.[37] Holden's crass and subjective style emphatically echoes the one Twain had pioneered in *Huckleberry Finn*. Like his illustrious ancestor, the boy is extremely displeased with the "phony" adult world he sees around him, and is desperate to hold onto the authenticity of youth. He runs away from his education, his parents, from growing up. Yet what embedding his aimless wanderings through New York in the canon clarifies, is that whereas "for Huck there still is

[34] Leonard Kriegel, 'Wrestling with Augie March', *The Nation*, June 5 2003, https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/wrestling-augie-march/ (Accessed 5 April 2020); Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man*, p.196.
[35] Bellow, *Augie March*, p.536.
[36] Buell, *The Dream of the GAN*, pp.182-183.
[37] Sanford Pinsker, 'Restlessness in the 1950s: What Made Rabbit Run?', in Stanley Trachtenberg ed., *New Essays on Rabbit, Run* (Cambridge, 2012), pp.53-76, there pp.56-57; Roth, 'Writing American Fiction', 1960, in *Why Write?*, pp.20-40, there p.31.

the frontier; he can always light out for the territory", Holden is trapped: there is no more un-"sivilised" world, no hope for the charmingly maladjusted.[38] Holden, consequently, is far more desperate. Refusing self-analysis, he projects his fear of growing up into a societal straitjacket onto some fellow adolescent passers-by: "it was sort of depressing", he thinks, "because you kept wondering what the hell would *happen* to all of them", worrying not that they will turn out poor, but "boring."[39]

Indeed, being boring became something of a virtue in the 1950s, with the Cold War giving suburban conformism significant cultural weight: "there are two mythic journeys in the US. The first (…) was the trek to the West, ending in California. The second, the archetypical journey of the mid-20th century, was from the city to the suburbs."[40] Bellow and Salinger certainly mistrusted the latter, but a group of East-coast adolescents went further, flat-out refusing to partake in it.[41] One of them, Jack Kerouac, turned their marginal story into a national "event" through his *roman à clef On the Road* (1957), which controversially prescribed a return to the optimism and energy of the first mythic journey, replicating it as a pilgrimage dedicated to an older Dream. The novel's protagonist and Kerouac's alter-ego, Sal Paradise, is addicted to crossing the continent, feverishly caught up by the promise of the Western frontier: "the whole country lay open like an oyster for us to open; and the pearl was there, the pearl was there. Off we roared."[42] His companion, Dean, figures as the "cowboy" in Sal's constant daydreams of Westerns, prairies and pioneers. He credits Dean with "a wild yea-saying overburst of American joy; it was Western, the west wind, an ode from the Plains, something new, long prophesied, long a-coming."[43] The entire novel is written in this ecstatic tone, with the same emphasis on American (pop-)cultural idiom. Dean is a pioneer, displaying Turner's "restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism (…) that comes with freedom" to the point of insanity: he is "that mad Ahab at the wheel."[44] The difference is that Ahab's obsession had an object, remarkably absent in the Beat's fervour in searching for "IT", a phrase often repeated but never filled in. Like

[38] Harold Bloom, *J.D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye* (New York, 2009), p.7-8.
[39] J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, 1951 (New York, 1991), p.123.
[40] Hanlon, Short and Vicino, *Cities and suburbs*, p.6; Allan Johnston, 'Consumption, Addiction, Vision, Energy: Political Economies and Utopian Visions in the Writings of the Beat Generation', *College Literature*, 32:2 (2005), pp.103-126, there p.105.
[41] Ibidem, p.106.
[42] Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, 1957 (London, 2010), p.122
[43] Ibidem, pp.9, 6, 219.
[44] Ibidem, p.208.

Augie March, *On the Road* rebels against "restricted points of existence" by championing aimless energy and eternal adolescence.

Yet within this rejection, as noted, references to American archetypes abound. *On the Road* conceptually placed the budding *counter*culture, before it had altogether taken off, *within* the confines of all-American conventions. Doing so allowed Kerouac to question, as had Bellow (and Salinger implicitly), what exactly was the American part of the Dream: Dean's frontier-energy, or suburban domesticity? The Beats, a (toxically) virile community, rejected the latter in ways that are shocking today, and were doubly so in Eisenhower's America: Dean betrays three wives and leaves his children fatherless. Still Sal, who never shies away from that ugly side, has absolute faith in the pioneer's Americanness. *On the Road*'s final passage mirrors *Gatsby*'s, with Sal likewise looking over the entire continent, contemplating "all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the West Coast, and all that road going, all the people dreaming in the immensity of it." For Sal, the continent *is* the mythic journey West, and as Nick had Gatsby, so he concludes his prayer: "I think of Dean Moriarty, I think of Dean Moriarty."[45] Dean is the ultimate Dreamer and its ultimate rejection, with absolute simultaneity: the concept's schizophrenia was exposed.

Kerouac's radicalism and then-innovative, highly rhythmic, spontaneous prose style caused an intensely divided opinion among literati, but the 1960s' hippies found it greatly inspirational; as did countless later generations of backpackers, following in the Beats' footsteps and keeping alive the frontier myth as a source of individualist regeneration.[46] "The face of God", Kerouac claimed the Beat adventurers were looking for, because they "were creatures of God laid out here in this infinite universe without knowing what for."[47] Kerouac was far from a devout Christian, though, so we should see this as a "postsecularist" sensibility of the kind that washed over American youths in the 1960s: an intense desire for "re-enchantment" of the world in times of secularism, a quest for transcendence and belonging not in holy books and churches but in popular culture, Eastern spirituality, drugs etc.[48] The Beats' romantic Americanism attained "a mythical aura" for that movement, with

[45] Kerouac, *On the Road*, pp.274-5.
[46] Parini, *Promised Land*, pp.295, 300.
[47] Kerouac, 'Lamb, No Lion', 1958, in Idem, *The Portable Jack Kerouac* (New York, 1995), pp.562-564, there p.563.
[48] Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, vol.1 (London, 2004), pp.97-101; John A. McClure, *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (Athens, 2007), p.6; Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man*, p.276.

Kerouac and poet Allen Ginsberg – who made a habit of dressing up as a messiah – becoming its elder statesmen and "spiritual" guides.[49]

The 1950s' capsized *Bildungsromans* all claim a high, sometimes even heroic degree of nationalism, albeit an alternative one. They claimed a spot in the GAN-canon by adhering to its archetypes (mainly that of Huck), yet so fundamentally un-American is their eternal adolescents' refusal to rise *upwards* that, once they were in, they blew up the final scraps of clarity the canon's vision of the Dream had left. They weaponised US mythology, as etched into the GAN-canon, against present realities.

Rabbit and Atticus

So where did all this uncertainty leave American masculinity? After all, the typical frontier character was male, notwithstanding the occasional Scarlett O'Hara, whereas the domestic focus of (suburban) consumer society was widely perceived as somewhat effeminate; disagreeably so, even.[50] In this section, we'll see two GANs that pondered postwar American masculinity, the first of which specifically attempted to reason its way out of the disturbance *On the Road* had caused within the archetype. John Updike, one of the most decorated American authors of the twentieth century, apparently understood the GAN-canon's functioning as an ongoing discourse. His breakthrough novel *Rabbit, Run* (1960) was conceived as a direct response to Kerouac. Updike later wrote: "I resented [*On the Road*'s] apparent instruction to cut loose. *Rabbit, Run* was meant to be a realistic demonstration of what happens when a young American family man goes on the road – the people left behind get hurt."[51] Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom was Updike's attempt at a US "everyman", his "ticket to America": a thematic return to the realist GAN's "Main Street" (see p.4), though written with a modernist's interest in private subjectivities.[52] Rabbit, a former high school basketball star, has great trouble accepting his adult fate of normalcy. Like many white American males of his time, he has thus lost a sense of cultural centrality in favour of domestic boredom. He shares Sal and Dean's lack of an "IT"; the omission of a strong religious sensibility is

[49] Yaakov Ariel, 'Charisma and Counterculture: Allen Ginsberg as a Prophet for a New Generation', *Religions*, 4 (2013), pp.51-66, there pp.51-52, 56
[50] Gilbert, *Men in the Middle*, pp.5, 50.
[51] John Updike, 'Introduction', 1995, in Idem, *Rabbit Angstrom* (New York, 1995), pp.vii-xxii, there p.x.
[52] Idem, 'Introduction', pp.vii-viii.

ceaselessly emphasised.[53] Frustrated to the core, he leaves his wife Janice and their children for an extramarital affair. Subsequently, Janice's alcoholism spins out of control, until she accidentally drowns their child, less than a month old.

People got hurt: Updike's message was ostensibly delivered. And yet, having entered the GAN-arena, the author was unable to safeguard his book's morals from ambiguity. The descriptions of Rabbit's affair, inevitably controversial at the time,[54] illustrate his disturbing egoism, but also a renewed sense of virility, which together with his despair before the "escape", suggests a sense of impotence within 1950s manhood. What is to be the point of his life, Harry asks a local priest: "be a good husband. A good father." "And that's enough?" he desperately asks, what about "the thing behind everything?", IT? "I don't think that thing exists."[55] There is no solution for Rabbit: conformism will make him unhappy, but "if you have the guts to be yourself", like Dean, "other people'll pay your price."[56] Both versions of the Dream are dead ends.

The matter was thus left unsettled. Therefore, Updike decided to return to his character every ten years, as "a kind of running report on the state of my hero and his nation", slowly forming a mega-GAN, *Rabbit Angstrom* (1960-2000), comprising five best-selling volumes, which together won two NBAs and one Pulitzer.[57] The totality DeForest had envisioned for the GAN was spatial; Updike's was temporal, capturing each postwar decade in one gargantuan text. Except for the first, *Rabbit* novels are suffused with pop-cultural references, adding up to snapshots of the times. The second instalment, *Rabbit Redux* (1971), pondered the difficulties of the 1960s as its predecessor had those of the 1950s. We find Rabbit, a somewhat racist conservative, intensely disturbed by the countercultural revolution. *Redux* mercilessly throws the decade's confusion at its (anti)hero. This time, Janice is the one to leave Harry, who then starts a hippy commune of sorts, members of which partially "convert" their landlord to tolerance. The bizarre and upsetting nature of this conversion, the candid portrayals of drug abuse and the time's loose sexual morale has led many to believe that *Redux* is an anti-hippy novel. In fact, it remains undecided, functioning

[53] Pinsker, 'Restlessness in the 1950s', p.71.
[54] Later, the still more explicit sexuality in his *Couples* (1968) would become an outright scandal, but also his claim to fame, landing Updike a spot on *TIME*'s cover.
[55] Updike, *Rabbit, Run*, 1960, in *Rabbit Angstrom*, pp.3-264, there p.241.
[56] Ibidem, p.129.
[57] Idem, 'Introduction', p.vii.

as "an extended debate on the ideas of the sixties, constituting a sort of Socratic dialogue."[58] And that was progress in itself. Rabbit, at the novel's outset, delivers the macho statement that "I don't *think* about politics, (…) that's one of my Goddamn precious American rights", while defending the Vietnam War; at least his "teach-in" opens him up to dialogue.[59] Updike's 1960s are disturbing, but they do awaken America from its Eisenhowerian slumber, and tone down "everyman's" machismo. Still, enough was left unsettled for three more novels.

Amid all this ambiguity, which perfectly serves my hypothesis of unfinished business, the most commercially successful GAN of the era was an anomaly. Harper Lee's blockbuster *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), despite some dark passages, ingeniously smoothed over complexities in the (Southern) American self-image. In a Jim Crow setting, lawyer Atticus Finch defends a black man who has been unjustly accused of rape. Narrated by his daughter Scout, his perseverance facing the racist community's resistance effectuates her moral awakening. As with Huck and his 1950s offspring, moral *Bildung* here involves a rejection of communal mores. Yet *To Kill a Mockingbird* is less troubling than, say, *Invisible Man*, ultimately comforting its reader that "true" US identity contains the seeds of justice. Personifying the American legal system in an ideal father figure, Atticus' popularity (boosted by Gregory Peck's classic role in the 1962 film adaptation) has done more for the institution's public image than any real-life lawyer.[60] Taken as a "parable of America", it argued that despite the very real presence of injustice within the country, the rot was not in the edifice.[61]

More complexly, the novel inverted the famous stereotype of Southern chivalry. As is approvingly portrayed in *Gone with the Wind*, after Scarlett is attacked by a black man, this masculine code of honour prescribed the defence of white women against the "danger" of black men.[62] Extreme versions are Jim Crow laws, the Ku Klux Klan and lynchings. Atticus, who has become an archetype of towering proportions, inverts the earlier stereotype by

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[58] Marshall Boswell, *John Updike's Rabbit Tetralogy: Mastered Irony in Motion* (Columbia, 2001), p.82.
[59] Updike, *Rabbit Redux*, 1971, in *Rabbit Angstrom*, pp.265-620, there p.304.
[60] Steven Lubet, 'Reconstructing Atticus Finch', *Michigan Law Review*, 97 (1999), pp.1339-1384, there p.1340.
[61] Sarah Churchwell, 'Go Set a Watchman by Harper Lee review – 'moral ambition sabotaged'', *The Guardian*, 17 July 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jul/17/go-set-a-watchman-harper-lee-review-novel, (accessed 11 November 2020).
[62] Richard H. McAdams, 'Empathy and Masculinity in Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*', in Saul Levmore and Martha C. Nussbaum eds., *American Guy: Masculinity in American Law and Literature* (Oxford, 2015), pp.239-261, there pp.239-240.

defending a black man against a white woman/community's false accusation.[63] His otherwise unmistakable "Southern kindness" and paternal masculinity ensure that the virile chivalry-ideal is not erased; Lee uses it, rather, like a palimpsest, saving chivalry from the murky historical burden of slavery and racism. She rewrote the archetype into a noble force, ascribing empathy, as did *Redux*, to modern manliness. Scout's *Bildung* was thus available to all Southern children who looked for (male) role models in a land of tainted history. How much the alternative stereotype mattered became clear when a sequel, *Go Set a Watchman*, was suddenly released in 2015, and revised the palimpsest once again. It caused considerable tumult by dramatically complicating Atticus' heroism: he is told to have attended KKK-meetings, and argues against full civil rights for black Southerners. His millions of admirers were so shocked, that they hardly dared read this new book; some critics were pleasantly surprised by the sudden outpouring of nuance in Lee's literary universe, but for readers, this had never been the point.[64]

In terms of unfinished business, then, *To Kill a Mockingbird* does not fit my narrative at all, as its version of *Bildung* is not plagued by complications, like those of the eternal adolescents. Unhelpfully for my thesis, it is perhaps the most popular of all GANs (see Appendix). Like *Gone with the Wind*, another titan in the field, it ingeniously smoothed over Southern complexities and therewith found a hugely enthusiastic readership. The novel does, however, show the way in which the GAN-canon allowed authors to meddle with America's master codes, its archetypes. GANs would continue to do so with a lot more symbolic violence in the 1980s. However, the decades in between saw a dramatic decrease in the canon's relevance.

Deconstructing the canon, 1960-1980s

When we study the GAN-selection in the appendix, we can clearly discern a postwar boom, followed by a sudden drought: out of all the novels published between 1960 and 1985, only two (not counting *Rabbit is Rich*, part of an ongoing project) have stuck in the canon. What

[63] McAdams, 'Empathy and Masculinity', p.243.
[64] Alexandra Alter, 'While Some Are Shocked by 'Go Set a Watchman,' Others Find Nuance in a Bigoted Atticus Finch', *New York Times*, 11 July 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/12/books/racism-of-atticus-finch-in-go-set-a-watchman-could-alter-harper-lees-legacy.html?auth=login-google, (accessed 11 November 2020).

explains this drop? Tom Wolfe, in his famous essay 'Why they aren't writing the Great American Novel anymore' (1972), gave his answer by claiming New Journalism's victory over fiction: "the novel", he wrote, "no longer has the supreme status it enjoyed for ninety years (1875-1965)." Journalism's public visibility and cultural weight had received quite a boost in the Vietnam era, of course, and would receive another during the Watergate scandal. Wolfe moreover noted how it had achieved a level of stylistic sophistication (think of Truman Capote's 1965 *In Cold Blood*) akin to literature's, and had thereby made the latter's "recordings" of reality obsolete.[65] Though Wolfe's functionalist interpretation of literature is comically narrow, it is hard to deny that American literati from DeForest to NYIs had at times ascribed a significance of gargantuan proportions to the novel, thinking it had the potential to save the nation or even humanity. Such a bloated status was bound to be toned down at some point.

That it happened now might have had something to do with New Journalism, but can also not be understood outside the context of postmodernism. It is difficult to say which came first, postmodernist literature or its academic counterpart, but both built up steam within 1960s counterculture. The academic version can most simply be summarized, following François Lyotard, as "an incredulity toward metanarrative[s]", and a critical deconstruction of existing ones: feminism, deconstructivism and postcolonialism all sought to challenge signifying systems that, they supposed, safeguarded conservative hierarchies.[66] Within this theoretical framework, conventional forms of representation became suspect by definition, as they were thought to exist within such hegemonies. Modernism had already rejected art's objectivity in recording reality, but within postmodernist literature, narrativity itself became suspect: such self-evident aspects as causality and closure were replaced by a fragmentation that was thought to exist outside suspicious ideologies.[67]

Within Literary Studies, this new trend kickstarted what has been called a "scholarly turn", or an increased emphasis on theory and cultural analysis.[68] The ensuing ideological

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[65] Tom Wolfe, 'Why they aren't writing the Great American Novel anymore', *Esquire*, 1 December 1972, https://classic.esquire.com/article/1972/12/1/why-they-arent-writing-the-great-american-novel-anymore, (accessed 16 November 2020).
[66] Jean-François Lyotard, 'The Postmodern Condition', in Idem, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report On Knowledge* (*La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir*), 1979, transl. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Chicago, 1984), pp. 3-52, there pp.35-6.
[67] Brian McHale, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism* (Cambridge, 2015), p.69.
[68] Joseph North, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Cambridge, 2017), pp.9-10.

deconstructions of canonical texts once deemed morally innocent killed the dream of the GAN. After all, even those American authors who could not be described as postmodernists were inevitably aware of ongoing developments, and since the nation is one of the most obvious "metanarratives" around, embarking on a literary "report on the state of the US", as Updike had, was no longer politically neutral. Remember that GANs, even if most criticise US identity, usually adhere to some sense of Americanness to make their point within the canonical discourse. For the new generation of authors, such references as Kerouac had made to American mythology were imaginable only in the form of outright attack.

Unsurprisingly, then, postmodernist literature produced only one consensus-GAN, which was incidentally also the zenith of that very trend: Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). It is largely set in postwar Germany, during the short window of time when the Nazi regime had not been replaced by another power. It was not a country, but a stateless "Zone." The novel's 500 characters, hundreds of subplots, dozens of genres and utter lack of clarity within Zonal lawlessness reflect the postmodernists' sense of fragmentation without metanarrative. It is nerve-wrecking to keep up with, but Pynchon's stylistic playfulness, as well as the limitless freedom in the wake of WWII's nationalist horrors, portray the era as a moment of possibilities: an opportunity to escape national power structures, an "order of Analysis and Death" of which Auschwitz was only an extreme form.[69] Indeed, *Gravity's Rainbow* is infused with paranoia, reflecting Nixon-era mistrust of governments: a "million bureaucrats are diligently plotting death and some of them even know it."[70] Additionally, the protagonist of the novel's middle part is convinced that he is being followed by "Them", a sinister conspiracy whose purposes are comically vague. In the midst of the Zone's chaos, he muses that "either They have put him here for a reason, or he's just here. He isn't sure that he wouldn't, actually, rather have that reason…"[71]

Gravity's Rainbow ceaselessly attacks (especially nationalist) metanarratives, but like the protagonist, most characters fall prey to their own desire for coherence and closure. A variation on *Moby-Dick*, as was every early Pynchon novel – *V* (1963) even ends with a ship being sunk by a whale –, the novel slowly attains narrative order, focussing on the chase of a mysterious Rocket 00000. All sorts of meanings are projected onto the great white object,

[69] Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York, 1973), p.722.
[70] Ibidem, p.17.
[71] Ibidem, p.559.

reflecting little more than a deep desire among the Zone's inhabitants, distressed by the chaos surrounding them, for a "master-signifier."[72] The Rocket, as would a God, infuses the Zonal meaningless with significance; hence the novel's characterisation as postsecular.[73] It symbolises mechanised power, and the parabola of its trajectory forms "spheres of influence", two metanarratives that characterised Pynchon's own Cold War, Arms Race context.[74] But the parabola of power is a comfort to its subjects, becoming "a curve each of them feels, unmistakably", forever present, "as if it were the Rainbow, and they its children…"[75] *Gravity's Rainbow* thus argued that the Western world had squandered the postwar opportunity to start a new order, because its inhabitants had internalised the nationalist metanarrative, required it to live. The novel especially blames the US, which, instead of truly becoming the "shining city upon a hill", with the Cold War had repeated "Europe's Original Sin": "it happens that Subsequent Sin is harder to atone for."[76] This is the same point of imported corruption *Gatsby* and *U.S.A.* had made in the wake of the *First* World War.

Astonishingly for such a long and complex novel, *Gravity's Rainbow* was a bestseller, and was unanimously voted as winner by the Pulitzer Fiction jury in 1974. In fact, its heavy symbolism aligned it perfectly with Romance, which might be why some postmodernists ultimately did enter the canon. Yet there was no mistaking the initial unease between them and the literary establishment: the Pulitzer Advisory Board, disturbed by "obscene" and "unreadable" passages, blocked the actual awarding of the Prize. No replacement was elected by the "bewildered" jury.[77] Only in the following decades would *Gravity's Rainbow* become widely respected.[78] Postmodernist literature baffled anyone but the most experienced readers, for sure, which is another reason why the trend produced only one consensus-GAN.

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[72] Jacques Lacan's term describing a central symbol/object that holds a symbolic order together; Gijs van Engelen, 'Pynchon en de paranoïdepandemie', *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 20 September 2020, https://www.groene.nl/artikel/pynchon-en-de-paranoidepandemie, (accessed 16 November 2020).
[73] McClure, *Partial Faiths*.
[74] Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, p.726.
[75] Ibidem, p.209.
[76] Ibidem, p.722.
[77] Peter Kihss, 'Pulitzer Jurors Dismayed on Pynchon', The New York Times, 8 May 1974, https://www.nytimes.com/1974/05/08/archives/pulitzer-jurors-his-third-novel.html, (accessed 2 August 2020).
[78] Tom Perrin, 'The Great American Novel in the 1970s', in Kirk Curnutt ed., *American Literature in Transition, 1970-1980* (Cambridge, 2018), pp.196-209, there p.198.

Pynchon used his postmodernist sensibility to expose and undermine Cold War power structures. Just as heavily contested a metanarrative, though, was the canon itself: no longer understood as a spontaneous eruption of national preoccupations, reforming it became a possibility. Within American Studies, this project built momentum throughout the 1970s and 80s, with literary critic Frederick Crews concluding in 1988 that a "New Americanism" had swept over his field, "self-righteously" politicising the profession.[79] Donald Pease, subsequently claiming the term as badge of honour, defined New Americanists' mission as opening up the canon (defined as the "hegemonic self-representation of the United States") to previously "absent subjects": minorities and women.[80] Thus, he said, emancipatory movements from outside academia were drawn into it. Indeed, from the late 1960s onward, black Americans had started to demand representation in literature curricula (this is when, as mentioned before, *Invisible Man* started to be embraced by black readers), as had second-wave feminism for women writers.[81] *Uncle Tom*, for example, entered a long period of slow revival as spearhead of a "sentimental fiction", a supposedly female genre that was thought to have been ignored in favour of a male Romance tradition.[82] In the 1990s still, feminists were specifically attacking *Huckleberry Finn*'s position as the anti-racist GAN, seeking to replace Twain with Beecher Stowe.[83] An important reason why *Uncle Tom*'s revival has not hurt *Huck*, though, was many black Americans' embrace of the latter, following Ellison and Fiedler's interpretations mentioned earlier (p.57).[84] Yet other black Americans criticised *Huck*'s use of racial slurs, and some challenge its position in high school curricula to this day.[85] The opening up of the canon clearly was and remains a matter of intense and messy discussion. This lack of consensus is a or perhaps *the* major reason why the canon has endured as a discourse.

Feminist critics' (long overdue) condemnation of the awkward male dominance within the GAN-tradition did not effectuate an increase in women's attempts at writing one. In fact, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, one of the few GANs written by a woman already, became a

[79] Robyn Wiegman, 'The Ends of New Americanism', *New Literary History*, 42:3 (2011), pp.385-407, there p.389.
[80] Donald E. Pease, 'New Americanists: Revisionary Interventions into the Americanist Canon', 1990, in Idem ed., *Revisionary Interventions into the Americanist Canon* (Durham and London, 1994), pp.1-37, there pp.31-32.
[81] Ohmann, 'The Shaping of a Canon', p.199.
[82] Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, p.123; Parini, *Promised Land*, p.154.
[83] Jane Smiley, 'Say it ain't so, Huck', *Harper's Magazine*, January 1996, pp.61–67.
[84] Parini, *Promised Land*, p.154.
[85] Claudia Durst Johnson, 'The Issue of Censorship', in H. Bloom, *Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird, Updated Edition* (New York, 2007), pp.3-22, there p.6.

frequent object of scrutiny during these decades for not being as anti-racist as its reputation suggested.[86] Feminists did, however, instil a great deal of male authors with a sense of "GAN-guilt" during the 1970s: those who might otherwise have participated in the hunt, publicly distanced themselves from their youthful ambitions to do so.[87] Surprisingly, Tom Perrin has found that this decade saw newspapers mentioning the GAN more frequently than any other in the twentieth century.[88] It seems that it was done so in a state of anticipation, like we have seen several times before: where was the GAN to mourn the nation's lack of Greatness in the era of Vietnam and Watergate? Yet nadirs in national confidence, with the exception of the Great Depression, have never stimulated GAN-writing. Its critical reflections would only state the obvious, which was best left to journalists.

The strange result of the split between that mechanism and male canon-anxiety on the one hand, and the expectant atmosphere on the other, was that authors did dabble in GAN-writing, but always ironically so.[89] Postmodernist puzzling safeguarded Philip Roth's *The Great American Novel* (1973), most notably, from the intense scrutiny a serious attempt would have received. *The GAN* is a slapstick comedy, narrated by Word Smitty, who introduces himself, echoing *Moby-Dick*'s Ishmael, with "call me Smitty".[90] He believes his bloated mess of a book is the GAN. It encompasses everything from the Cold War to fishing with Hemingway, to a discussion on the three Romance GANs ("that one's about Good and Evil", a college girl says of all three), to the "national pastime" of baseball. The novel constantly suggests national allegory, only to completely undermine it with a postmodernist foregrounding of its own textuality. The series of mock-GANs that this particular one belonged to were afraid to say something, and therefore took great pleasures in saying nothing. And that, in itself, was saying something, to a degree: it satirised the canon to expose America as mere textual excess. Roth's Gil Gamesh (talk about textuality) delivers the only conclusion fitting the era: "America? (…) It's just a word they use to keep your nose to the grindstone and your toes to the line. America is the opiate of the people."[91]

[86] Durst Johnson, 'The Issue of Censorship', p.6.
[87] Kasia Boddy, 'Making it long: men, women, and the great American novel now', *Textual Practice*, 33:2, pp.318-337, there pp.321-322.
[88] Perrin, 'The GAN in the 1970s', pp.196-202.
[89] Ibidem, p.196.
[90] Roth, *The Great American Novel*, 1973 (New York, 1995), p.1.
[91] Ibidem, p.381.

That literary critics, juries and readers, if not academics, were still eager to champion GANs despite the epistemological anxieties surrounding them, was demonstrated by the extreme success and cupboard-filling amount of awards that *Rabbit is Rich* received in 1981. Shooting for canonical stars in every way possible – it was long, filled to the brim with references to the 1970s' everyday culture and politics, made an overarching point about its times – this third part of Updike's "running report" finds its everyman a prosperous car salesman. Capitalism has served Rabbit well, and he thinks back of the dwindled flame of *Redux*' countercultural moment like a bad dream to be suppressed.[92] It seems the author, in contrast, had made up his mind about American conservatism as a dead end. After all, *Rich* is set during the 1979 Oil Shock, when the spoils of the postwar economic boom were still very visible, but the end was lurking: Jimmy Carter openly questioned if historical progression would be halted by the energy crisis. "The oil companies made us do it", Rabbit's friend says, "they said, Go ahead, burn it up like madmen, all these highways, the shopping malls, everything."[93] Overblown consumerism is wearing out the American Dream. Rabbit knows "that he and the US were both running out of gas. Except that he doesn't *really* believe it."[94] He distracts himself with luxury, spending much of the novel buying gold, a suburban(!) house, playing golf, going on an expensive holiday, and of course discussing cars, which he sells for the Japanese Toyota-company, thus "reap[ing] advantage from American [industrial] decline."[95]

It is telling that the era's widespread pessimism only found its way into the GAN-narrative by describing its repression: direct representation did not fit its aesthetic, hence the dip in canonical output. *Rabbit is Rich* "captures" the 1970s sense of crisis through a portrait of the self-befooling scraps of American consumerism. Rabbit wallows in luxury, and thereby betrays his nature to (remember the first novel's title) run: the American everyman has turned motionless, exchanging the Dream's dynamism for materialism.[96]

[92] Updike, *Rabbit is Rich*, 1981, in *Rabbit Angstrom*, pp.621-1041, there p.649.
[93] Ibidem, p.631.
[94] Idem, 'Introduction', p.xv.
[95] Ibidem.
[96] Boswell, *Mastered Irony in Motion*, p.137.

Rewriting the canon: history as trauma in the 1980s

From the 1960s' countercultural moment onwards, American history was increasingly portrayed in literature as a collective sin rather than a root of superiority. We have seen how *Gravity's Rainbow* certainly adhered to that development. For the sake of clarity, I have not discussed *Catch-22* (Joseph Heller, 1961) and *Slaughterhouse-Five* (Kurt Vonnegut, 1969), two similar novels that are hailed as GANs a fraction less often. Uncoincidentally, since postmodernist chaos is slightly less confusing when used to portray such an inherently absurd topic, these were also anti-war novels. All three attacked the US' sense of innocence about WWII: *Catch-22* portrayed the cruel absurdity of American military life, and *Slaughterhouse-Five* condemned the nation's indifference over events such as the Dresden bombing of 1945. Atrocities abound in Vonnegut's novel, followed *ad nauseam* by a shrugging "so it goes." Concluding his war narrative, Vonnegut suggests that this attitude has instilled a rot deep in American culture: Robert Kennedy "died last night. So it goes. Martin Luther King was shot a month ago. He died, too. So it goes. And every day my government gives me a count of corpses created by military science in Vietnam. So it goes."[97]

As testified by *Gravity's Rainbow*'s Pulitzer-debacle, such outright attacks on American innocence were not greeted with mainstream enthusiasm. Once again showing that national(ist) self-confidence begets critical GANs, it was only during the intensely patriotic Reagan presidency (1981-1989) that an understanding of history as trauma slowly entered the mainstream. Old GANs, like *The Scarlet Letter*, were reinterpreted as trauma histories.[98] Less ingenuity was needed to do the same for the postmodernist anti-war novels: *Slaughterhouse-Five* was consciously designed to reflect the way in which past events can stay "present" for sufferers of PTSD, for example.[99] Contemporary output of trauma-narratives also reached an apex with Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985) and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Beloved* (1987).[100] I have already given a definition of trauma as it is widely accepted in Literary Studies while discussing *Abslom, Absolom!* (p.51). Indeed, William Faulkner was a source of

[97] Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death*, 1969, (New York, 1991), p.210.
[98] Alan Gibbs, *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives* (Edinburgh, 2014), p.45.
[99] Vonnegut was astutely aware of psychological writings on PTSD: Ibidem, pp.51, 57, 66.
[100] Gibbs, *American Trauma Narratives*, pp.71-72.

inspiration for the new generation of "trauma authors" – Toni Morrison even wrote her university thesis about him –, meaning the 1980s saw another instance of books canonising other books: Faulkner's style was *made* a tradition, as well as, once again, the dark symbolism of Romance he had associated himself with.

Black authors were at the frontline of trauma literature, criticising the US' "innocent" history. Into that received collective memory they wrote racism and bloodshed. The sense of resistance against Reaganist optimism is striking, for it was nothing short of a symbolical attack: "canon building is empire building. Canon defense is national defense. Canon debate (…) is the clash of cultures", Morrison wrote.[101] This tradition quickly became canonical, with *The Color Purple*, *Beloved* and Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) winning major awards, to begin with. As we have seen happen before, 1980s black authors, with their attack on the canon, re-established its functioning as an ongoing discourse, and saved it from obsolescence. They did so with great focus and self-consciousness. Convinced that the literary canon had constructed its white version of American identity by "othering" an opposite blackness, Morrison felt herself "struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony": the convictions of a New Americanist.[102] Following the example of Ellison and Fiedler, one way for her to break open the canon was to reinterpret its core texts, analyses of which had "shied away from (…) the informing and determining Afro-American presence in traditional American literature."[103] In a lecture she originally wanted to call, suggestively, 'Canon Fodder', she for example interpreted *Moby-Dick*'s eponymous whale as a symbol for "whiteness as ideology", its inconsistencies dazzling Ahab into crazed schizophrenia.[104] This ubiquity of race in the canon Morrison considered to be the great "unspoken" ideology of American identity. Criticism like her own, she thought, "rendered [it] speakable."[105]

Her own GAN-effort, *Beloved*, foregrounded the unspeakable trauma of black slavery with an experimentalism that not only echoed Faulkner's, but additionally continued the

[101] Toni Morrison, 'Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature', Lecture, *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, delivered in Ann Arbor, 7 October 1988, https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_documents/a-to-z/m/morrison90.pdf, (accessed 17 November 2020), pp.123-163, there p.132.
[102] Idem, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, 1992), p.x.
[103] Idem, 'Unspeakable Things Unspoken', p.145.
[104] Ibidem, pp.123, 141-142.
[105] Ibidem, p.132.

development from Wright to Ellison to full-fledged Romance within the black tradition. The novel's ambition was to give a voice to the "sixty million and more" victims of slavery mentioned in its epigraph. *Beloved*'s protagonist, Sethe, was based on an actual document found by Morrison while researching a historical project, which described how Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman who attempted to flee in 1856, had killed her daughter upon realising she would be recaptured. Sethe has done the same: through her, Morrison offers Garner a voice. After the Civil War, Paul D, a former slave who was forced to work on the same plantation as Sethe, finds her in an Ohio home of her own with a surviving daughter called Denver. The house is haunted by a "presence", an appropriate term within a trauma narrative.[106] Its malevolence is worsened by the "unspokenness" of its host's past: Paul D constantly attempts to break the silence between him and Sethe, but their pains stay repressed. Her stubbornness only adds to the traumatic weight, as is underscored by tree-shaped (thus potentially "growing") scars that she "carries" like a flourishing burden on her back. Adding to this image is the silence's "forest [that] was locking the distance between them, giving it shape and heft."[107]

Then a mysterious young woman called Beloved appears, who Sethe starts to believe is the ghost of the daughter she killed. She is consumed by her constant, guilt-ridden attention to the apparition, or rather the past, which grows and grows while Sethe emaciates. As the epigraph suggested, Sethe's troubles stand for a communal trauma. At one point her, Beloved and Denver's voices blend into one during a dream sequence ending with "you are mine/you are mine/you are mine."[108] The past consumes their "selves", denies individual identities to those that remember and *are* remembered: Beloved addresses her mother as a self, herself as "me who am you."[109] If silence and trauma grow in parallel fashion, its solution is to speak the unspoken, so Beloved disappears when Sethe starts sharing her story with Paul D. The act of speaking thus disarms trauma, as Morrison claimed to do within the canon though her essays and *Beloved* itself. Critics have expressed confusion about the novel's finale, though, which posits that Beloved's story "was not a

[106] Gibbs, *American Trauma Narratives,* p.75.
[107] Morrison, *Beloved*, 1987, (New York, 2007), p.156.
[108] Ibidem, p.201.
[109] Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, 'Narration, Doubt, Retrieval: Toni Morrison's "Beloved"', *Narrative*, 4:2 (1996), pp.109-123, there pp.109-110, 115.

story to pass on", and that the new family "forgot her like a bad dream."[110] Did Morrison suddenly imply that the past was best forgotten, *repressed*? It remains unclear, adding a note of discomfort to the novel: is Sethe's story really resolved?

Beloved was warmly received, as were previous trauma-novels. It was nominated for every major literary prize in the US, but lost the NBA to Larry Heinemann, and the National Book Critics Circle Award to Philip Roth. The latter's *The Counterlife* was then favourite to win the Pulitzer. This upset Morrison deeply.[111] In an unprecedented turn of events, a large-scale intervention was mobilised: an open statement in the *New York Times*, supported by 48 black authors such as Maya Angelou and Alice Walker, declared that Morrison's lack of awards was a travesty. A larger tradition of ignoring black voices was claimed and condemned on the basis of James Baldwin's likewise never having "received the honor of these keystones to the canon of American literature: the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize: never." Well, if the literary establishment refused to acknowledge black authors, they would do it themselves: "urgently affirm[ing] our rightful and positive authority in the realm of American letters", they awarded, "in grateful wonder", the Pulitzer to *Beloved*, a "gift to our community, our country, our conscience."[112]

Many were shocked by this "thirst for trophies (…) that ought to embarrass even a hardened Oscar seeker" (Christopher Hitchens' phrase), and Morrison's eventual win, suddenly followed by many more awards (and a Nobel Prize some years later), has gone into history as a scandal.[113] Additionally, the timing of the uprising was odd: black authors had won at least one of the major literary awards for the three preceding years.[114] Yet what many failed to realise, was that Morrison considered the canon to be a battleground, an award a battering ram. She managed to convince her fellow black authors that her book was, in her words, the "suitable memorial or plaque or wreath or wall or park or skyscraper lobby" that victims of slavery had until then been denied.[115] And despite the Pulitzer-uproar,

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[110] Morrison, *Beloved*, p.120; Buell, *The Dream of the GAN*, p.333.
[111] James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge, 2005), p.238.
[112] 'Black Writers in Praise of Toni Morrison', *New York Times*, 24 January 1988, https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/01/11/home/15084.html?_r=2, (accessed 18 November 2020).
[113] English, *The Economy of Prestige*, p.238-42.
[114] Ibidem, p.237.
[115] Morrison, 'Melcher Book Award acceptance speech', 1989, https://www.uuworld.org/articles/a-bench-by-road?n=, (accessed 18 November 2020).

the demand for canonisation worked: *Beloved* has become one of the most influential novels in American literature, the pre-eminent black GAN, as well as the paradigmatic trauma narrative. In the process, Morrison had boosted the significance of awards and canons, by popularising her notion of them as frontlines in culture wars.

Our next trauma-narrative, *Blood Meridian*, saw a dramatically different reception than *Beloved*: though critically acclaimed, Cormac McCarthy's novels hardly sold at all. It took until 1992's *All the Pretty Horses* before his reputation suddenly skyrocketed. When it did, *Blood Meridian*'s star started to ascend on the GAN-firmament. Even more than Morrison, McCarthy was seen as "still another disciple of William Faulkner": his subject matter and prose style is at times indistinguishable from Faulkner's.[116] McCarthy's oeuvre, like *Absalom*, revolves around the frontier, with *Blood Meridian* standing out for investigating its history, superimposing myths and facts in ways that lift the veil off the former's innocence. We encounter yet another Huck, "the kid", who leaves home and goes to the Wild West looking for adventure. There, he joins a group of cowboys roaming the prairies, the ultimate frontier figures of pop-culture. As the cliché prescribes, the kid finds intense floral richness and pastoral beauty in the West, portrayed in an intensely lyrical style. However, nothing about the cowboy-gang itself is typical: set during the period in 1835 when the Mexican state of Sonora payed fifty pesos for every Apache scalp, *Blood Meridian* rewrote the Western as a history of genocide.[117] Western-mythology was based upon a clear distinction between US civilisation and "Indian" savagery, which completely crumbles in this most gruesomely violent of all GANs, whose greed-driven cowboys gain symbolic weight in stark contrast with their beautiful decor, the pastoral field of American dreams.[118] It was the "ultimate dismantling of old-style U.S. Manifest Destiny-think and the aura built up around it by a century and a half of celebratory fiction, film", etc.[119]

The novel is highly intertextual and draws comparisons between itself and *Moby-Dick*, presenting an albino giant of its own: judge Holden, a figure of nauseating violence and philosophical eloquence just as mysterious and ambiguously symbolic as the whale.[120] He,

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[116] Orville Prescott, 'Still Another Disciple of William Faulkner', *New York Times*, 12 May 1965, http://movies2.nytimes.com/books/98/05/17/specials/mccarthy-orchard.html (accessed 6 April 2020).
[117] Billy J. Stratton, '"el brujo es un coyote": Taxonomies of Trauma in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*", *Arizona Quarterly*, 67:3 (2011), pp.151-172, there pp.151-152.
[118] Maxwell, *Romantic Revisions*, p.82.
[119] Buell, *The Dream of the GAN*, p.343.
[120] Bloom, *How to Read and Why* (New York, 2000), p.259.

the group's leader of sorts, offers a theoretical variation on the Manifest Destiny. He does not see its pioneer as a Dreamer who strives *towards* something. Holden maintains, rather, that the struggle *is* the goal. It is a grim version of the eternal adolescent's aimless energy: "men", he says, "are born for games. Nothing else", no goal to play for. "War is God (…), the ultimate game." It is fighting for the sake of it, a "testing of one's will and the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select."[121] By connecting Holden to Moby-Dick, *Blood Meridian* reconsiders what "national character" the frontier experience had actually instilled Americans with: it was genocide and savagery, just as *Absalom* had suggested, smuggled into the national character when pioneers had immersed themselves in nature in order to master it. This was the Darwinism that Jack London romanticised, but here it serves to undermine the innocence of every American's favourite fantasy-root of national identity: a canonical image covering up unspoken pain. Its mythical tone and present-tense immediacy, as well as the physical shock of its horrors, allow *Blood Meridian* to enter its reader like an involuntary memory, or indeed, a trauma.[122]

McCarthy and Morrison's cultural violence was revolutionary. Before them, even a GAN as bleak as *Gravity's Rainbow* had seen America's position in the world as "a gift from the invisible powers, a way of returning" to the hopes of an unsullied world; its subsequent betrayal did not negate the original promise.[123] In *Beloved* and *Blood Meridian*, though, US history was a trauma of violent racism. Still, their assault on canonical imageries revived their functioning as an ongoing discourse. They re-canonised earlier GANs by alluding to the very symbols they used to enter the arena in the first place; in the process, their significance shifted, but their importance was confirmed. The concluding decade of the century and this thesis, then, saw authors immensely energised by the sudden revitalisation of the "hunt."

The GAN after the Cold War

And then the Soviet opponent was suddenly gone. History, Francis Fukuyama famously declared, had ended, the West had won and its values were now universal. But what is national identity without a narrative? Set against the "Evil Empire", the American everyday

[121] Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian: Or, The Evening Redness in the West* (London, 2015), pp.262-263.
[122] Stratton, 'Taxonomies of Trauma', pp.151-157.
[123] Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, p.722.

had been infused with a heroism of sorts. In a sense, the ideological frontier had been moved from the West to Europe's East, so when the Berlin Wall fell, it took America's Manifest Destiny down with it. For the third time, victory in a global conflict gave rise to the question what defined, or *ought* to define the Americanness that would rule the entire world.[124] What was to be the new frontier? Or as Rabbit asked in *Rabbit At Rest* (1990, the second *Rabbit*-novel in a row to win the Pulitzer): "without the cold war, what's the point of being American?"[125] He misses it, "it gave you a reason to get up in the morning", and "the free world is wearing out" without that sense of purpose: "the human race is a vast colorful jostling bristling parade in which he", Rabbit, everyman, America, "is limping and falling behind."[126] The Dreamer of *Rabbit, Run* has forgotten how to run, having made material comfort his *raison d'être*. Now, in a condo in lifeless Florida, the ultimate suburb, nothing is left to do for Rabbit but die. His final thought is, simply, "enough."[127]

We can understand this lack of purpose as the paradigm underlying much of 1990s US literature. With the symbolic year 2000 nearing, US authors *en masse* attempted to make sense of their directionless century in a GAN, once again cataloguing uncertainties during a time of ostensible national confidence. Looking to play the part of *eminence grise*, household names searched for national roots in lengthy historical novels, which were received with heaps of praise and awards.[128] 1997 alone saw Roth's *American Pastoral*, Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*, Don DeLillo's *Underworld* and Morrison's *Paradise*, all of which are set in the past to make sweeping statements about America. *Underworld* (NBA and Pulitzer runner-up) typically offers an 827-page myriad of 1950s adventures, emphasising how Cold War contexts, unlike the 1990s, united the most disjointed of American realities within a ubiquitous story: it rendered homogenous a narrative as shattered as *Underworld*'s.[129] With his 773-page *Mason & Dixon*, then, Pynchon pondered the eighteenth-century emergence of America as nation-state. Again, the narrativity of identity is emphasised: the New World is a sprawl of diverse and fabulous stories at the novel's outset, but once the English start drawing borders on the continent, this sense of

[124] Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*, pp. 128-9.
[125] Updike, *Rabbit at Rest*, 1990, in *Rabbit Angstrom*, pp.1047-1516, there p.1452.
[126] Ibidem, pp.1370, 1465, 1153.
[127] Ibidem, p.1516.
[128] Philipp Löffler, *Pluralist Desires: Contemporary Historical Fiction and the End of the Cold War* (Suffolk, 2015), p.20.
[129] Ibidem, p.35.

opportunity (like the Zone's in *Gravity's Rainbow*) is squished by a nationalist metanarrative that introduces slavery and oppression.[130]

Both Pynchon and DeLillo emphasised a loss of innocence, as had 1980s authors. *Underworld* for example allegorised the inheritance of decades of US consumerism and world-domination as huge quantities of radioactive waste buried beneath the soil. Allegory was typical for postmodernism, whose perfect applicability to GAN-Romance allowed it to finally enter the mainstream.[131] A younger generation, likewise highly enticed by the GAN-revival, did much to confirm this trend, though with a less historical focus. Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991) attacked Wall Street superficiality, or Reagan-era hypercapitalism more generally, with a similarly exaggerated "underlying waste" metaphor. Patrick Bateman, investment banker, is obsessed with name cards, suits, bland pop music and skin products: the "surfaces" which Frederic Jameson has famously argued to be the key aspect of "depthless" postmodernity.[132] Beneath, Bateman hides insatiable bloodlust. His absurdist and hideous killing sprees, then, are a Romance shock therapy akin to *Blood Meridian*'s, claiming a hidden violence (or "waste") within American capitalism/materialism.

So obviously indebted to postmodernism was the new generation, that some fell prey to "anxiety of influence."[133] Jonathan Franzen, who had written two GAN-attempts already, wrote that "the better [Pynchon] is the more I want to hate him but the less I can."[134] David Foster Wallace openly tried to step out of Pynchon's shadow by rejecting his postmodernism's "formal ingenuity" and "textual self-consciousness", yet his own *Infinite Jest* (1996) was every bit as formally ingenious and self-referential as *Gravity's Rainbow*.[135] For all his ambitions to write *the* GAN, Wallace could not escape the canonical tradition. Like Updike's, Ellis' and the 1950s' GAN-attempts, Wallace's questioned materialist comfort as national narrative, and like DeLillo's did so with an extended waste-metaphor. *Infinite Jest* describes a near future in which the US President has collected all the waste his country has

[130] Van Engelen, 'Pynchon en de paranoïdepandemie.'
[131] Ernst van Alphen, 'Frans Kellendonk's Allegorical Impulse,' *Journal of Dutch Literature*, 7:1 (2016), pp. 1-19, there p.5.
[132] Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (New York, 1991), pp.9-10.
[133] Harold Bloom's concept; McHale, *Introduction to Postmodernism*, pp.136, 177.
[134] John Williams, 'Pynchon's Gravitational Pull', *The New York Times*, 30 August 2013, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/01/books/review/pynchons-gravitational-pull.html, (accessed 24 November 2020).
[135] Wallace, 'Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky', 1996, *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York, 2007), pp. 235-254, there pp.271-2.

produced during half a century of excessive consumerism, and dumped it near Canada, where it is piling up and becoming dangerously radioactive.[136] This concealment and subsequent accumulation of waste, then, is the central metaphor for the novel's approximately 1100 pages, binding hundreds of loosely interconnected narrative fragments.

Everyone in the novel's sizeable cast lacks "something bigger than the self", in typical 1990s fashion.[137] They numb this realisation with substance abuse and American Dreaming, the latter's striving towards some ultimate goal being just another prison "to give oneself away to, utterly."[138] Another path is excessive media consumption, most noticeably portrayed by a movie called "Infinite Jest", which is said to be so addictive that everyone who sees it cannot turn away from it, ever again. The allegory is grotesque (again), but addressed the serious issue of Americans' television-consumption, which in 1996 averaged seven hours(!) a day.[139] Wallace asked: "why am I watching so much shit? It's not about the shit; it's about me. Why am I doing it? And what is so American about what I'm doing?"[140] *Infinite Jest* argues that (media-)addiction is typically American in its striving for an absence of discomfort, a "freedom-*from*", rather than any positive value: "what about the freedom-to?"[141] The result, as with the novel's literal waste, is a worsening of the problem repressed: for addicts, their "radical inactivity and isolation" spins out of control, precisely because they constantly attempt to numb its pain.[142] Like the materialist Dream, addictions offer an illusory freedom from discomfort and Fukuyama-futility.

Infinite Jest thus continued the canonical attack on comfort, as well as postmodernism's narrative excess. The novel, whose size baffled audiences, was received as the "arrival of a massive new contender for Great American Novel, or at least Decade-Defining Doorstop; a huge, Pynchonesque, unsummarizable labyrinth": "columnists talked

[136] Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (New York, 1996), pp.571-3.
[137] Ibidem, p.107.
[138] Ibidem, p.900.
[139] Alexis C. Madrigal, 'When did TV Watching Peak?', *The Atlantic*, 30 May 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/05/when-did-tv-watching-peak/561464/, (accessed 28 November 2020).
[140] David Lipsky, *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace* (New York, 2010), p.81.
[141] Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p.320.
[142] Lars-Frederik Bockmann, 'Freedom-from versus Freedom-to: A Dialectical Reading of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*', *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, 65:1 (2017), pp.51-65, there pp.55-58.

about it like Ahab murmuring about the whale; one couldn't help but be curious."[143] The mere fact of its ambition caused a hype. It is hard to overstate how dramatically this eagerness of post-Soviet Americans to be "guided" by an "all-encompassing" novel contrasts with the GAN-cynicism between 1960 and 1985. It calls into question how sure Americans *actually* were of their identity without an adversary to challenge it.

The same conclusion can be drawn from the reception that befell Roth's "American Trilogy." His status had skyrocketed between 1986 and 2000, when he won each of the four major literary awards at least once, and his streak of bestsellers was deemed "important" "from the halls of academe to *Oprah*."[144] Amid this unparalleled critical applause, Roth delivered the Trilogy, a 1088-page conclusion to the century, and epilogue to 100 years of GAN-ism. He took his regular theme of the American self-as-construct, and transported it into the GAN-arena by adhering to its archetypes. It boosted his already towering position yet again.

Each of the three novels takes a historical trauma as its context, and uses it to expose cracks in American identity and innocence.[145] The first, *American Pastoral* (1997, Pulitzer winner), does so with the Vietnam War and counterculture, set against the pastoral myth of home-ownership. Protagonist Seymour "Swede" Levov is a Jewish man who, in the 1950s, obeys the "you must not come to nothing!"-adage. He faithfully climbs the social ladder, and symbolically finishes the upward mobility his great-grandfather had started by settling in a luxurious homestead. The catharsis of Jewish integration and all-American Dreaming coincide: "three generations. All of them growing. The working. The saving. The success. (…) Three generations of becoming one with [Americans]."[146] Swede imagines himself as Johnny Appleseed, the iconic pioneer who introduced apple trees to the frontier, a symbol of pastoral fertility: he "wasn't a Jew, wasn't an Irish Catholic, wasn't a Protestant Christian – nope, Johnny Appleseed was just a happy American."[147]

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[143] Colby Cosh, 'Enfant terrible, R.I.P.', *The National Post*, 16 September 2008, https://www.pressreader.com/canada/national-post-latest-edition/20080916/281805689735136, (accessed 24 November 2020).
[144] Löffler, *Pluralist Desires*, p.97.
[145] Aimee Pozorski, *Roth and Trauma: The Problem of History in the Later Works (1995-2010)* (New York, 2013), pp.9, 85.
[146] Roth, *American Pastoral*, p.237.
[147] Ibidem, p.316

Then Swede's comfort crumbles. His daughter Merry embodies the fourth, 1960s generation that betrays the earlier three. Protesting the Vietnam War, she shatters her father's Dream by running off and becoming a countercultural terrorist. Not only does her first bomb, planted at the local post office, awaken Swede to 1960s turmoil, it also uncovers the illusory nature of his "national Eden."[148] America's frontier-root is not a pastoral idyll: "you wanted to be a real American(…)? To belong like everybody else to the U.S.A.? Well, you do now, big boy, thanks to your daughter."[149] Not his rural home or Johnny Appleseed, but the Vietnam War is "real" America. Its history is not characterised by innocent domesticity, but traumas: the Independence War, the Civil War, racism, Nixon (whose presence and future disgrace is felt throughout the book), in short "the counterpastoral – the indigenous American berserk."[150] Merry, its embodiment, haunts her father's frontier fantasies, so when the novel's finale, like *Gatbsy* and *On the Road*'s, sees him overlooking the dream-pastoral, Merry's presence destroys it:

> [she comes] up past the hay fields, the corn fields, the turnip fields she hated, up past the barns, the horses, the cows, the ponds, the streams, the springs, the falls, the watercress, the scouring rushes ("the pioneers use them, mom, to scrub their pots and pans"), the meadows, the acres, and acres of woods she hated, up from the village, tracing her father's high-spirited, happy Johnny Appleseed walk…[151]

Like so many GANs, *American Pastoral* denaturalises American comfort and innocence. Upon closer inspection, however, this ideological clarity crumbles beneath the novel's framing device: Swede's story is presented as a book by Nathan Zuckerman, Roth's alter ego since the 1970s. Zuckerman knew Swede as a child, and nostalgically recalls his athletic prowess, his being the "God" of postwar (Jewish) Dreaming/assimilation.[152] However, Zuckerman, like Roth himself, has chosen the outsider life of an artist, renouncing and critiquing conventions: he is perhaps no Merry, but certainly an Augie March. Swede, by

[148] Derek Parker Royal, 'Pastoral Dreams and National Identity in *American Pastoral* and *I Married a Communist*', in Idem ed., *Philip Roth: New Perspectives on an American Author* (Westport, 2005), pp.185-208, there p.202.
[149] Roth, *American Pastoral*, p.277.
[150] Pozorski, 'American Pastoral and the Traumatic Ideals of Democracy', *Philip Roth Studies*, 5:1 (2009), pp.75-92; Roth, *American Pastoral*, p.86.
[151] Ibidem, p.420
[152] Ibidem, pp.19, 40.

contrast, is "completely banal and conventional", made for "that ordinary decent life that they all want to live": "the social norms, and that's it."[153] Zuckerman expresses bewilderment at how millions of postwar Americans have been able to find value in a life of, echoing Wallace, "freedom-from"; yet also a jealous desire, a fear that maybe those who choose to remain on the inside may have it right. Consequently, when Zuckerman hears Swede's history, he can hardly hide his excitement over "Levov's belated discovery of what it means to be not healthy but sick, to be not strong but weak."[154] The narrative that he unfolds afterwards, almost entirely filled in by his imagination, reads suspiciously like a revenge on the past: Swede's fall builds up Zuckerman's countercultural superiority in hindsight.[155] This is not to say that the "American berserk" is nullified by metafiction. What makes *American Pastoral* something of a late-century reflection on GAN-ism, rather, is that it summarises the canon's obsessions with individualism, the frontier and the Dream, while simultaneously questioning the "wishful thinking" underlying their postwar critiques by misfit intellectuals. Swede in fact remains remarkably dignified throughout Zuckerman's attempts to destroy him, so in a sense *American Pastoral* marks the GAN's ultimate failure to undermine "dull" American comfort.

I will skip the trilogy's less canonised second part, *I Married a Communist!* (1998). The third, *The Human Stain* (2000, Pen/Faulkner winner), portrays 1998 in two parallel histories: the traumatic Clinton impeachment, nationally, and university teacher Coleman Silk's story, individually. Zuckerman (narrating again) repeatedly emphasises the latter's setting near the house where *The Scarlet Letter* was written, "in the New England most identified, historically, with the American individualist's resistance to the coercions of a censorious community – Hawthorne, Melville, and Thoreau."[156] It is the opening that allows Roth to enter the GAN-arena. Silk and Clinton's stories, then, are linked to Hester Prynne's: they fall prey to the "persecuting spirit" her story has mythologised, the "appalling fantasy of purity" or innocence in US culture.[157] Silk's fall from grace starts after a nonsensical accusation of anti-black racism, which becomes all the more painful when we find out that he is secretly a

[153] Roth, *American Pastoral*, p.65.
[154] Ibidem, p.29.
[155] Mark Shechner, 'Roth's American Trilogy', in Timothy Parrish ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth* (Cambridge, 2007), pp.142-157, there p.146.
[156] Roth, *The Human Stain* (New York, 2000), pp.2, 310.
[157] Ibidem, p.242.

black man "passing" for white. He has cut off all ties with his family and past to maintain this façade, "purifying" himself of the racist gaze. Zuckerman discovers the secret after Silk's death, and is in total awe of his determination "to become a new being", which is "the drama that underlies America's story" personal *and* communal.[158] He regards him as an American hero for demanding the freedom to construct a self: as a young man

> he was a *Negro* and nothing else. No. No. (…) Never for him the tyranny of the we that is dying to suck you in, the coercive, inclusive, historical, inescapable moral we with its insidious *E pluribus unum*.[159]

This is the invisible man and Bigger's experience with racism, only with a way out.

For Zuckerman, Silk's struggle with "them" constitutes his Americanism. Yet the quote's "*e pluribus unum*" is the communal US motto, illustrating, like the Clinton affair, the country's obsession with purity. So which is the "real" American spirit? *The Human Stain* suggests an inherent duality in the constant pull of a commune based, historically, in puritanism (hence the Hawthorne-references), which *requires* occasional Hester Prynnes as signifying Other. Are rebels still the "real" Americans, then? Or the ones who, by being different, validate the standard? Zuckerman is unsure: "Was [Silk] merely being another American and, in the great frontier tradition, accepting the democratic invitation to throw your origins overboard if to do so contributes to the pursuit of happiness? Or was it more than that? Or was it less?" The questions go on for several pages.

Then follows Roth/Zuckerman's conclusion to twentieth-century GAN-writing. It introduces the ex-husband of Silk's partner, Lester Farley, a traumatised Vietnam veteran incapable of re-integrating. The commune shuns him for his erraticism and violence, which is caused by his fighting *for* that commune. Lester is ostracised for endangering a shared purity in the process of "propagating" that very sense as soldier, akin to the frontier hero's struggle which supposedly kickstarted American identity while making the pioneer himself too "feral" to belong to it. As a living reminder of that impossible duality, the "berserk" underlying the pastoral, Lester gets the final say, like a trauma that fails to stay repressed and bursts into the present: he kills Silk, and gets away with it because the deceased was ostracised already. The novel ends, "at the end of our century", with a "pure and peaceful" image of Lester

[158] Roth, *The Human Stain*, p.342.
[159] Ibidem, p.108.

fishing in the snow "atop an arcadian mountain in America."[160] The commune's "purifying ritual" is accomplished, but it has left, like a century of American traumas, an inerasable human stain on the lilywhite, pastoral dreamscape.[161] The GAN had helped eternalise many of its historical clichés, but ultimately denied American identity its innocence.

[160] Roth, *The Human Stain*, p.361.
[161] Pozorski, *Roth and Trauma*, p.85.

Conclusion

1990s literature was a culmination of and an "epilogue" to the century's GAN-tradition, reflecting as it did on individualism, the frontier, historical innocence and trauma. Yet the GAN's story was far from over. In fact, the following decade saw more mentions of the concept in newspapers than ever before.[1] This had everything to do with 9/11: a crisis of national confidence was deemed the perfect pretext for a GAN. That expectation, however, indicates a fundamental misunderstanding of the GAN: with the exception of the Depression era, the concept has always blossomed in times of ostensible national confidence, acting like a subconsciousness in which uncertainties festered on. The nation that claimed an "end of history", or to have found "the" Western way of life after World Wars, *those* were the GAN's heydays, not, say, the Watergate years. The 2000s, then, saw only one consensus-GAN, *The Corrections*, which was in fact about the 1990s. That decade had needed GANs to attain some sort of meaningful narrative; the 2000s already had 9/11.

Surprisingly, because literary canons are today understood as conservative forces, we have seen that the American one does not paint its country with confident strokes. DeForest had wanted the GAN to envision a nation, but it has rather worked through pre-existent concepts – above all the frontier, the American Dream, and the individualism connected to both – and increasingly infused them with doubts. A first reason for this is the interbellum's Romance canon-builders' favouring of ambiguous symbolism. Their reading of the three Great Romances has become a near-sacrosanct template for everything that followed: GANs were, from now on, expected to be complex, allegorical epics. If taken as such, *Moby-Dick* can be said to allegorise the American Dream, *Huckleberry Finn* the frontier spirit and *The Scarlet Letter* individualism, but all in a state of confusion: the last, for example, exposes the tension between Hester Prynne's independent Americanness, and the Puritan "root" of US communalism. Inherent conflict, therefore, is what the Romance canon has mythologised as the core of national identity. The canon has reflected on these complexities ever since, thus re-canonising and intensifying them.

The Depression saw a GAN-tradition of remarkable unanimity. From the socialist Steinbeck to the conservative Margaret Mitchell, its authors portrayed hardships while

[1] Perrin, 'The GANs in the 1970s', p.207.

alluding to frontiers of hope and Dreams. Those concepts were used to claim a still existent basis of exceptionalism beneath present-day corruption, adding up to an identity more idealised than anywhere else in the canon. They continued *The Scarlet Letter*'s confused communalism-individualism dichotomy, though: the Dream was portrayed as a root for *communal* rebirth, to be dug up in heavily romanticised, *individualist* frontier-struggles. Such ambiguity intensified after WWII, years during which the NYIs carried out a second round of retroactive Romance canonisation. Not only did the era see a further influx of Dreamer-archetypes whose stories questioned the superiority of their ideals in various degrees, the GAN-as-Romance became even more self-evident in the process. So recognisable had it become, that authors like Hemingway could model their work after it.

Likewise, the 1950s saw a younger generation entering the GAN-canon by their understanding of its rules. Utilising the canonical power of the Huck-archetype, a whole series of authors undermined the "Americanness" and superiority of postwar comfort, the way of life deemed a winning hand in the Cold War. They pitted its superior place in the national identity against that of the frontier, exposed a troubling rift between the two. This was perhaps the first generation to consciously grasp the potential of the GAN as a critical discourse, so it is unsurprising that minority voices entered the canon precisely in those years, only to sabotage its remaining sense of cultural superiority from the inside.

When the 1960s and 1970s saw severe blows to the national self-confidence, then, it led to a relative GAN-drought: the canon had become a discourse so fixated on undermining that confidence, that it was now obsolete. Only in the 1980s, therefore, while Reagan was inflating nationalism once again, did authors continue the GAN-tradition. A full-fledged attack on American innocence burst into it, with historical novels adhering to and then subverting its archetypes, rewriting those supposed bases of exceptionalism as communal traumas. This invasion far from undermined the canon: it shifted its meaning, but re-established its relevance as ongoing discourse, a trend that was confirmed in the 1990s. The end of the Cold War rekindled the literary establishment's interest in the now "unchallenged" superiority of material comfort as *the* Western way of life. Without a Cold War narrative, America struggled to exist in any meaningful way. The decade saw heaps of colossal GAN-attempts that looked to infuse the expiring century with narrative, and the readiness of audiences to follow authors in their quests demonstrates how troubling a perceived "end of history" is to national identities.

To summarise: precisely those periods that, in a regular cultural history, appear to be characterised by a supreme level of nationalist self-confidence, see the greatest outpourings of GANs. This is then made truly significant by their subsequent, continuing resonance as cultural criticism. Precisely when US identity is surest of itself, it will always show incongruities with some of its supposed core businesses: there are simply too many contradictions within any national identity to prevent this from happening while claiming homogeneity. Therefore, those periods allow GANs to identify the culture's most jarring inconsistencies, which will continue to resonate because the problems never disappear: as long as there is an American identity, it will perpetuate the unfinished business exposed in GANs.

Final thoughts

In a 2002 *Sopranos* episode, the titular mobster couple visits their daughter Meadow, a Columbia University student. Their son Anthony jr. has just finished a high school paper on Melville's *Billy Budd*: "my teacher says it's a gay book." His mother Carmela bemoans with heavy New Jersey accent that "this stuff is pervading our educational system. (…) *Billy Budd* is *not* a homosexual book!" "Actually," Meadow replies with impeccable, collegiate English, "it is, mother. (…) Leslie Fiedler has written on gay themes in literature since the early sixties, *Billy Budd* in particular." Well, she doesn't know what she's talking about." "She's a he, mother, and he's lectured at Columbia, as a matter of fact."[2]

Carmela's distress exemplifies the deep cultural rift between conservatives and progressives that has existed in the canon ever since the latter began to spend their energies on deconstructing it. Even if the Sopranos have not read a particular classic (Carmela has "seen the movie"), they understand its cultural position, and can be intensely dismayed to hear about subversive reinterpretations. This mutual irritability has enabled the GAN-corpus' maintaining its position as a national discourse throughout the twentieth century: it is recognised as one clash on the larger battlefield of American identity. The 1980s' attack on the canon has only rekindled this sensibility. We can say, though, that "Meadows" and

[2] Terence Winter, screenplay 'Eloise', Season 4, Episode 12 (2002) of *The Sopranos*, HBO (1999-2007).

“Carmelas” have parted ways in the discussion ever since, a situation that we instantly recognise from other areas of post-1980s US culture.

The current countercultural movement poses a far more serious threat to the GAN’s continued existence than attacks like Toni Morrison’s ever did. Accusations of unrepresentativeness are inflammatory like never before, and in contrast with earlier canon-stormers, today’s often intend to erase or “cancel” the discourse altogether. Their sentiment is defensible, but hard to be excited over when we recognise the GAN’s rich self-critical tradition. It has dealt with condemnations before and has never “suffered” from them: they were incorporated, rather, like voices into a discussion. The canon’s most uncomfortable aspect, for example, has always remained the male domination within it, yet since 2000 “counter-canons” have started to include more and more women, as well as Latinos, who had previously been left out completely. Those groups are claiming a spot for themselves and shift the narrative as a whole all over again. Consequently, the situation is by no means hopeless: counter-canons, which claim to challenge a monolith, in fact simply perpetuate the canon’s dynamic evolvement. It is precisely the continuing debate that has been the GAN’s essence since WWII at least.

If the GAN was originally conceived as a key to a clearer envisioning of the US’ “imagined community”, and if we then understand cultures as Geertzian “webs of significance”, we see that the GAN-canon has tangled and jumbled America’s mythological webs between its covers, ending up with a chaotic confusion of networks significant for their shocking insignificance. The frontier-domesticity and individualism-communalism dichotomies, as well as that between the American Dream’s prescribed energy and the material comfort of its goal, can never be disentangled. That it is supposed to be solvable, is an illusion. The GAN-canon’s grasp on this disquieting reality, the unfinished business of American identity, ensures its continuing resonance. It has ended up demonstrating the very fact it was once supposed to conceal: the fundamental absurdity of imagining nations as a whole.

Appendix: GAN selection

Title	Author	Year
The Scarlet Letter	Nathaniel Hawthorne	1850
Moby-Dick	Herman Melville	1851
Uncle Tom's Cabin	Harriet Beecher Stowe	1852
The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn	Mark Twain	1884
The Call of The Wild	Jack London	1903
The Great Gatsby	F. Scott Fitzgerald	1925
U.S.A. (trilogy)	John Dos Passos	1930-1938
Gone with the Wind	Margaret Mitchell	1936
Absalom, Absalom!	William Faulkner	1936
Native Son	Richard Wright	1939
The Grapes of Wrath	John Steinbeck	1939
The Catcher in the Rye	J.D. Salinger	1951
The Old Man and the Sea	Ernest Hemingway	1952
Invisible Man	Ralph Ellison	1952
The Adventures of Augie March	Saul Bellow	1953
On the Road	Jack Kerouac	1957
To Kill a Mockingbird	Harper Lee	1960
Rabbit Angstrom (pentalogy)	John Updike	1960-2000
Slaughterhouse-Five	Kurt Vonnegut	1969
Gravity's Rainbow	Thomas Pynchon	1973
Blood Meridian	Cormac McCarthy	1985
Beloved	Toni Morrison	1987
Infinite Jest	David Foster Wallace	1996
The American Trilogy	Philip Roth	1997-2000

The claim that a novel is widely considered a GAN calls for thorough justification. Whereas the history of their inclusion is set out and analysed in the main text, the point of this list is to show that these novels have survived into the twenty-first century as GANs, and therefore can be said to contain the "cultural unfinished business" that my analyses revolve around. The selection above is an amalgamation of several academic lists, articles (some purposefully "low-brow"), and even polls and blogs that ask audiences to select their personal choices. It has adopted those titles repeated so routinely that they can be called part of the discussion without hesitation. In some cases, multiple texts by one author (*e.g.* Steinbeck and Faulkner) could have been incorporated, but because their inclusion in most cases would have added very little to the ones mentioned already, and for brevity's sake, I have chosen to focus on their most canonical titles. Older texts might seem to be unjustly favoured, yet that follows from the logic that canonisation takes time, and that the more scrutiny a text has survived, the firmer a novel's canonical status becomes.

One of the most striking aspects of the GAN-canon is that it speaks to popular audiences as well as the most elitist of readers. As can be seen in the pages below, however, some novels are mentioned only on one side of the spectrum: *To Kill a Mockingbird* is ignored by the academics mentioned, but is a clear favourite of the larger audience, whereas *e.g. Augie March* (though still a commercial success) scores relatively poorly in popular polls but is taken far too seriously as GAN to disregard. In other ways, the list is clearly less representative: the omission of Latinos is particularly striking. As to the male dominance in the selection: this is in part the responsibility of the selecting actors that have put together the canon throughout the last century, but we have also seen that male writers have been more interested in writing the GAN than eminent female writers throughout the twentieth century.[1] It is anyone's guess as to why.

Sources and explanation

Bloom, Harold. Bloom has had such an enormous influence on the concept of canonisation in the past couple of decades because he has been both the single best-selling literary critic in that period, and because he has, quite uniquely, advocated the idea of canons (see

[1] Boddy, 'Making it long', p.322.

p.8). His selection is distilled from two sources, but what ultimately matters is that he has routinely championed them across his works.[2]

Buell, Lawrence, *The Dream of the Great American Novel*. Buell is probably the best-known academic expert on the topic, so his selection comes closest to an authoritative one as possible: taking into account years of research on writing about the topic, he has a clear view on what novels are generally considered GANs-candidates among scholars, essayists and the like.

Bustle, '15 Books That Have Been Called 'The Next Great American Novel' — And What To Read Instead.' What is interesting about this source is precisely the lack of referencing: presenting alternatives to seasoned classics, the "actual" GANs selected are deemed so obvious that they aren't even motivated.[3]

Goodreads, 'The Great American Novel.' The Facebook of literature asked its members to vote for their favourite GAN (specifically separated from the "normal" American canon).[4]

Hayes, Kevin J, 'The Great American Novel.' This academic article offers a chronological overview of the history of the GAN, and in the process points out the candidates most clearly set into stone.[5]

Library of America, Library of America Series. The Library of America publishes what they consider to be the American canon. Their selection is not only a source of cultural prestige, it is also based on a notion of the American canon that, as mentioned in the introduction, is closely related to the GAN-idea.[6]

Literary Hub, 'A Brief Survey of the Great American Novel(s).' A blogpost that has assembled heaps of individual "nominations" throughout time by generally well-known (thus influential) voices across the internet, newspapers and books.[7]

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[2] H. Bloom, 'Introduction', in Idem ed., *The Great Gatsby* (New York, 2006), pp.7-9, there p.7; Idem, 'Harold Bloom - How to Read and Why4 - Blood Meridian', [interview with C-SPAN], *YouTube*, 2012, https://youtu.be/1cuccco2umo (accessed 5 December 2019).

[3] E. Ce Miller, '15 Books That Have Been Called 'The Next Great American Novel' — And What To Read Instead', *Bustle,* 26 March 2018, https://www.bustle.com/p/15-books-that-have-been-called-the-next-great-american-novel-what-to-read-instead-8558360, (accessed 5 December 2019).

[4] 'The Great American Novel', *Goodreads*, list created 29 August 2008, https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/730.The_Great_American_Novel (accessed 5 December 2019).

[5] Hayes, 'The GAN.'

[6] 'Library of America Series', *Library of America*, https://www.loa.org/books/loa_collection, (accessed 3 December 2019).

[7] Emily Temple, 'A Brief Survey of the Great American Novel(s)', *Literary Hub,* 9 January 2017, https://LiteraryHub.com/a-brief-survey-of-great-american-novels/, (accessed 3 December 2019).

PBS, The Great American Read. This source is somewhat different from the rest, in that it presents us with a top-100 list of the favourite books of Americans, not necessarily American ones. However, it is interesting to see how many GANs are fixed in readers' idea of great literature. Moreover, it is representative in the extreme: more than four million people cast their vote.[8]

Penguin, 'The Greatest American Novels.' Interesting because publishing houses like Penguin have always upheld the canon. Their selection is predictable, but that in itself is revealing.[9]

Pulitzer Prize. As explained in the Introduction, the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction very much follows the GAN-aesthetic and helped popularise it. We have even seen that the prize has its origins in the post-WWI years during which the Romance canon was formed. It is therefore unsurprising and telling that a significant portion of the novels listed here have been nominated for or awarded with the Pulitzer.[10]

Ranker, 'The Greatest American Novels.' Here there can be some question as to whether this poll asks voters for their favourite GAN or American novel, period. But in the description, it becomes clear that this is one of the American canons in which the distinction between the two is blurred: "American novels can represent the spirit of the age in the United States during the time it was written or the time it was set in."[11]

Reddit. The no.5 most visited site in the world houses the most visited literature blog as well. Here people were asked twice about their personal GAN.[12]

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[8] 'The Great American Read', *PBS*, October 2018, https://www.pbs.org/the-great-american-read/books/#/, (accessed 3 December 2019); 'To Kill a Mockingbird voted top 'Great American Read' in US poll', *The Guardian*, 24 October 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/oct/24/to-kill-a-mockingbird-voted-top-great-american-read-in-us-poll, (accessed 5 December 2019).

[9] Matt Blake, 'The Greatest American Novels you should read', *Penguin*, 19 November 2020, https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2020/november/greatest-american-novels.html, (accessed 25 November 2020).

[10] 'Prize Winners by Category: Fiction', *Pulitzer Prize*, https://www.pulitzer.org/prize-winners-by-category/219, (accessed 5 August 2020); 'Prize winners by Category: Novels', *Pulitzer Prize*, https://www.pulitzer.org/prize-winners-by-category/261, (accessed 5 August 2020).

[11] 'The Greatest American Novels', *Ranker*, https://www.ranker.com/list/best-american-novels/ranker-books?ref=search, (accessed 5 December 2019).

[12] 'What is your own personal "Great American Novel"?', *Reddit*, 26 January 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/books/comments/ajxs94/what_is_your_own_personal_great_american_novel/, (accessed 5 December 2019); 'What do you believe is the paramount American novel?', *Reddit*, 18 July 2013, https://www.reddit.com/r/literature/comments/1ikndh/what_do_you_believe_is_the_paramount_american/, (accessed 5 December 2019).

Wikipedia, 'The Great American Novel.' Not only does this article quote many different sources for its selection, it being an open-source encyclopaedia also means that in theory, any internet user has been able to weigh in. Although not everyone has, obviously, there have been thousands of revisions, so some democratic process by people interested in the subject has taken place. It thus almost functions as a poll among GAN-enthusiasts. There is one drawback though: the encyclopaedia excludes all novels after 1987.[13]

Writer's Digest. In 2018, this popular American magazine for writers asked its followers on social media to name the GAN. The resulting article consists of a top ten, followed a list of other frequently mentioned titles in no particular order. Followers were likely aspiring authors, so people with an above-average interest in literature. If books canonise books, it is significant how traditional these writers' choices turned out to be.[14]

Which novels are mentioned where?

- *The Scarlet Letter*: Buell; Bustle; Goodreads #16; Hayes; Library of America #10; Literary Hub; Ranker #18; Reddit; Wikipedia; Writer's Digest.
- *Moby-Dick*: Buell; Bustle; Goodreads #9; Great American Read #46; Hayes; Library of America #9; Literary Hub; Penguin; Ranker #10; Reddit; Wikipedia; Writer's Digest #4.
- *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: Buell; Goodreads #73; Hayes; Library of America #4; Penguin; Ranker#32; Reddit; Wikipedia.
- *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: Buell; Goodreads #3; Great American Read #17; Hayes; Library of America #5; Literary Hub; Penguin; Ranker #4; Reddit; Wikipedia; Writer's Digest #7.
- *The Call of The Wild*: Goodreads #47; Library of America #6; Great American Read #37; Ranker #13; Reddit; Writer's Digest.

[13] 'The Great American Novel', *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_American_Novel, (accessed 2 August 2020); 'Great American Novel: Revision History', https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_American_Novel&action=history, (accessed 2 August 2020).

[14] Jess Zafarris, 'The First Book to Ever Be Dubbed the "Great American Novel" Might Not Be the One You'd Guess', *Writer's Digest*, 4 July 2018, https://www.writersdigest.com/be-inspired/the-first-great-american-novel, (accessed 29 July 2020).

- *The Great Gatsby*: Bloom; Buell; Bustle; Goodreads #2; Great American Read #15; Hayes; Literary Hub; Penguin; Ranker #5; Reddit; Wikipedia; Writer's Digest #1.
- *U.S.A. Trilogy*: Buell; Goodreads #97 (*42nd Parallel*, part one of the trilogy); Hayes; Library of America #85; Literary Hub; Reddit; Wikipedia.
- *Gone with the Wind*: Buell; Goodreads #11; Great American Read #6; Pulitzer winner; Ranker #24; Writer's Digest #2.
- *Absalom, Absalom!*: Bloom; Buell; Bustle; Goodreads #57; (Hayes)[15]; Library of America #48; Literary Hub; Ranker #97; Wikipedia.
- *Native Son*: Buell; Goodreads #60; Library of America #55; Ranker #47.
- *The Grapes of Wrath*: Buell; Bustle; Goodreads #4; Great American Read #12; Library of America #86; Literary Hub; Penguin; Pulitzer winner; Ranker #2; Reddit; Wikipedia; Writer's Digest #3.
- *The Catcher in the Rye*: Bustle; Goodreads #5; Great American Read #30; Ranker #8; Reddit; Wikipedia; Writer's Digest.
- *Invisible Man*: Buell; Bustle; Goodreads #22; Great American Read #72; Literary Hub; Penguin; Ranker #30; Reddit; Wikipedia; Writer's Digest.
- *The Old Man and the Sea*: Buell; Bustle; Goodreads #20; Pulitzer winner; Ranker #11; Reddit.
- *The Adventures of Augie March*: Buell; Goodreads #84; Library of America #141; Literary Hub; Ranker #107; Reddit; Wikipedia; Writer's Digest.
- *On the Road*: Buell; Bustle; Goodreads #14; Hayes; Library of America #174; Ranker #41; Reddit.
- *To Kill a Mockingbird*: Goodreads #1; Great American Read #1; Literary Hub; Pulitzer winner; Ranker #1; Wikipedia; Writer's Digest #5.
- *Rabbit Angstrom (Tetralogy):* Buell; Goodreads #45; Library of America #311, #326; Literary Hub; Pulitzer winner (*Rabbit Is Rich* in 1982, *Rabbit At Rest* in 1991); Ranker #92; Reddit; Writer's Digest.
- *Slaughterhouse-Five*: Goodreads #9; Library of America #216; Ranker #7; Reddit;

[15] Hayes refers to Faulkner as the "Great American Novelist", but does not specify *Absalom, Absalom!*: "in William Faulkner's case, no individual novel stands out. He is best known for his oeuvre" (p.148).

- *Gravity's Rainbow*: Bloom; Buell; Goodreads #52; (Pulitzer winner); Ranker #63; Wikipedia; Writer's Digest.
- *Blood Meridian*: Bloom; Buell; Goodreads #12; Literary Hub; Ranker #74; Reddit; Wikipedia; Writer's Digest.
- *Beloved*: Buell; Goodreads #24; Great American Read #60; Literary Hub; Penguin; Pulitzer winner; Ranker #38; Wikipedia; Writer's Digest #6.
- *Infinite Jest*: Buell; Bustle; Goodreads #30; Literary Hub; Ranker #102; Reddit; Writer's Digest.
- *American Trilogy*: Bloom; Buell; Goodreads #51; Library of America #220; Pulitzer winner; Reddit; Writer's Digest.

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