

The "American Dream" and the literature of the 1960s

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Come, writers and critics,
Who prophesize with your pen,
And keep your eyes wide
The chance won't come again. [...]
For the times, they are a-changin'.

Bob Dylan (1964)

Resumo: O "Sonho Americano" se apóia sobre ideais europeus que inspiraram grupos marginalizados e ajudaram a formar a nova nação. O mito atravessa o discurso cultural e político construído nos Estados Unidos e repercute para além de suas fronteiras. Em recorte que privilegia a literatura da década de 60 do século XX, este trabalho examina o desenvolvimento do mito e sua utilização como referência direta em obras literárias daquele período. Paradoxalmente divididos entre o apego ao Sonho e a sua negação, evidenciada na descrença, na revolta e na fuga, os personagens de Edward Albee (na peça *The American Dream*, 1960) e de Norman Mailer (no romance *An American Dream*, 1964) fornecem os subsídios principais para reflexão.

Palavras Chave: Sonho Americano; década de 60; literatura; Estados Unidos; Edward Albee; Norman Mailer.

In the first decades of the 20th century, the black writer Langston Hughes (1902-1967) made claims to nationhood as he reminded his own country, the United States, that it wasn't just white: "I am the darker brother. [...] I, too, am America" (HUGHES, 1925/1998, p. 1618). Amid segregation and violence, it seemed that the utopian ideal of an equal and united "America" was never to be reached. Hughes's verses would raise bitter questions about the constant deferral of the "American Dream" of democracy, peace, and prosperity for black people in the country. The poem "Harlem" (1951), for instance, asks:

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What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun? [...]

Does it stink like rotten meat? [...]

Or does it explode?

(HUGHES, 1998, p. 1619).

As the 1960s arrived, bringing darker days and harsher conflicts, Martin Luther King echoed the voices of millions of blacks who felt betrayed, and insisted that the promises of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence be kept. "I have a Dream", he repeated over and over in 1963. He felt entitled to that Dream: after all, the Founding Fathers had made "a promise that all – yes, black men as well as white men – would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" (KING, 1998, p. 2530).

Not many sensitive souls and critical minds, be they blacks or whites, would be able to keep such unflinching confidence in the promises of the nation. What happened to the "American Dream" in the sound and fury of the 1960s? Did it hide behind the scene, ashamed of the wars at home and abroad? Did it lose impetus, fade away... or, rather, did it gain muscle? Looking back through such controversial times, one may still wonder how the long-cherished beliefs and hopes in a nation – supposedly standing on the pillars of democracy and justice – dealt with the traumas of the Vietnam War, the demands of the Civil Rights Movement, women's liberation, the student rebellion, and the hippie revolution. There were still other challenges: the drug culture, the Cold War, the generalized fear of a nuclear attack, President Kennedy's assassination in 1963, Luther King's in 1967. The list could go on and on. Last but not least, it seemed that the hopes for personal freedom, economic justice, and social bonds would not survive in the greedy, alienating world dominated by technology and big business. The Dream was shaken from within by its own paradoxes, revealing the fissures already there since its first manifestations, the impossibilities of a utopian combination of extreme individualism and general equality.

The works of two mainstream writers of that decade exhibited the word "Dream" on their covers and dramatized it on their pages: *The American Dream*, a play by Edward Albee (1960), and *An American Dream*, a novel by Norman Mailer (1964). As the times, shattered by turmoil and urgency, were indeed "a-changing", as Bob Dylan announced in his famous song of 1964, the literature of the "white majority" was overwhelmed by anger, disillusionment, and despair. New poetic voices exposed the downfall of the Dream and announced the Apocalypse about to come, even as the identification between self and nation was preserved.

A major name in the so-called *Beat generation* of writers, Allen Ginsberg, of Jewish descent (1926-1997), had already howled at the country in the poem "America", written in 1956: "America when will we end the human war?/ Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb./[...] America when will you be angelic?". The first-person voice in the poem realizes that, like it or not, there is no line separating the "I" from the nation around, no innocent position to speak from. Confused and bitter, he sees that his revolt did not prevent contamination, and he could not dissociate himself from the surrounding chaos: "It occurs to me that I am America" (GINSBERG, 1998, p. 2452-3)

The texts produced by Norman Mailer (1923-2007) and Edward Albee (1928-) follow a similar line in the sense that they both evoke and pay homage, however bitterly and satirically, to the long history of creation and growth of the myth of "America", and its contemporary fall and demise. In spite of the variations, contrasts, attacks, and dismissals, the rhetoric of the "American Jeremiad" seems to flash through the anguish expressed in much of the cultural production of the 1960s.¹ The religious concept of the Jeremiad was appropriated and popularized by the Canadian scholar Sacvan Bercovitch in *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975, p. 143). In his revision of early constructions of the nation, he observed how, since the New England beginnings, the United States represented itself "as identity in progress,

¹ Used within quotation marks in this paper, the words "America" or "American" refer exclusively to the United States, to be in keeping with the concepts and critical statements that give support to the discussion.

advancing from prophecies performed towards paradise to be regained". The word is used in connection with the prophet Jeremiah and the especial mission/message he carried, warning people about the fall and punishment of Israel if the covenant were not kept. The Jeremiad, therefore, denotes a lament, a complaint, a denunciation, but may also open the way for repentance, salvation, and renewal in the future.

In the literature of the 1960s, characters often dramatize the hopes and frustrations with the myth and its promises, a disturbing sensation followed by a sense of loss and nostalgia or, eventually, in some writers, by an almost religious faith in a paradise to be restored someday. Among other well-known fiction writers, Norman Mailer shares the radical pessimism of "the first generation of New Jeremiahs", according to critic Elizabeth Rosen (2004):

Just as the instability and disintegration of the Assyrian empire had fostered the original wailing prophet Jeremiah, the instability of the Sixties and the disintegration of the America they knew fostered a new group of lamenting, castigating prophets: Mailer, Vonnegut, Baldwin, Heller, all of them wailing in the newly chaotic wilderness.²

Before a further look into the "American Dreams" that were imprinted in the 1960s (both in the sense of "being published" and of "leaving a mark"), a brief review of the history and literature on the myth can provide a helpful context.

The Dream: religious and political foundations

For the persecuted Puritans crossing the Atlantic back in the 17th Century, the task of carrying the "colony of chosen people into an American wilderness", as recorded by the eminent preacher Cotton Mather (1663-1728), represented the possibility of establishing God's kingdom on earth. It had been only "the devil's territory" before, but now "America" was the Promised Land for the Elect: free, great, and plentiful. Indeed, the poor and unhappy people who would keep

² Rosen (2004) focuses on Mailer's *Armies of the Night* as "an excellent example of first generation New Jeremiad".

coming over believed in its gift of land, home, beautiful nature, honest work, and a stimulating atmosphere (MATHER, 1702/1986, p. 117).

In the following century, the French aristocrat and army lieutenant St. Jean de Crèvecoeur (1735-1813) registered his enthusiasm for the new land, which he adopted as his own. In "What's an American?" (1770-75), Crèvecoeur described that society in almost edenic terms:

Here are no aristocratical families, no courts, no kings, no bishops; no ecclesiastical dominion, no invisible power giving to a few a very visible one; no great manufacturers employing thousands, no great refinement of luxury.[...] We are all animated with the spirit of an industry which is unfettered and unrestrained, because each person works for himself.[...] We are the most perfect society now existing in the world

(1986, p.222-223).

Crèvecoeur voiced the pride and faith that had sprung with the first colonists and bloomed ever more radiantly with Independence. As he explained this new "American" man and society, he was also consolidating the Dream and its basic tenets: the pervading belief that the true "American" citizen is gifted with good European blood, strength and intelligence; that this superior being has developed a better form of government and a better way of life than elsewhere; and that the country offers equality and freedom for all. Crèvecoeur (1986, p. 224-5) shared the Puritan faith in the great destiny reserved for America:

Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great change in the world. Americans are the western pilgrims, who are carrying along with them that great mass of arts, sciences, vigour, and industry which began long since in the east; they will finish the great circle.

Around the same historical time, the *Autobiography* and the *Poor Richard's Almanack* of Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) underlined the concept of individual progress through industry. Franklin himself embodied the ideal of the self-made man, a remarkable living proof, for both Americans and Europeans,

that the New World man was intelligent, moral, versatile, practical, and could get rich easily, provided he showed his worth. The American hero was thus established, soon to be emphasized by the biographies of other "Poor Richards" who rose to high positions, such as Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Edison, John D. Rockefeller, and Henry Ford. From the pen of Horatio Alger Jr. (1832-1899) poured more than one hundred success stories and moralistic fictive biographies of common men who became rich on account of their virtues, boys' books that sold millions of copies as they excited the imagination and the dull lives of the common people.

Similar points were then being put forth by more scholarly works. In *The Principles of Political Economy* (1859), Professor Francis Bowen, of Harvard University, argued that "neither theoretically nor practically, in this country, is there any obstacle to any individual becoming rich, if he will, and almost to any amount that he will" (apud CURTI, 1964, p. 292). Any man could be Henry Ford – this essential aspect of the Dream seems a development from the Puritan belief that wealth was granted by God to the Chosen People, as Walter Allen explains:

Prosperity was taken to be the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. It was as though material blessings were assured to pour down upon the chosen of God. Riches and success became a proof of Election (ALLEN, 1969, p. 25).

In 1855, Harriet Beecher Stowe justified the progress that could already be seen in New England, adopting a kind of reasoning typical of early Puritanism and, even more strongly, of later capitalism. "No people in the world have been more prosperous in every kind of business than those in New England", she declared, "for God always makes most prosperous those who are most obedient to His laws in the Bible" (apud ALLEN, 1969, p. 25).

The Puritan mentality fertilized the soil for the rapid growth of capitalism, based on the tenets of individualism, success, usefulness, thrift, expediency, industry, progress, and competition. The superiority of the white race was demonstrated,

for Indians and Blacks failed to subscribe to the established patterns. The Declaration of Independence defended the natural rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Equality was also part of the text but it remained on the utopian level, more than anything else. Only the "equality of opportunity" actually made sense, added later capitalists and politicians as different as John F. Kennedy and Barry Goldwater (NYE, 1966, p. 345).³

The continuous economic growth of the country seemed to confirm the notion that progress was inevitable in America. In 1890, Reverend R. S. Storrs expressed the general feeling that "it is a fact of encouraging significance that almost uniformly the lines of change have been in the direction of better things". He listed the factors that would guarantee American progress: wealth of material resources, a supply of great men, a "strong native stock", a "readiness for labour", a "disciplined community life", a democratic form of government, and a deep religious faith (apud NYE, 1966, p. 30). Instead of fading away, the Puritan belief in a special mission had expanded— the United States came to be regarded as the best nation in the world, and its people zealous missionaries in charge of morality and goodness.

Senator Beveridge, of Indiana, voiced this widespread belief as he spoke in Congress, in January 1900: "And of all our race He has marked the American people as His chosen nation to finally lead in the regeneration of the world" (CURTI, 1964, p. 656). The creed in the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race, which had been purified by the New World environment and assigned an international leadership role, had been expressed by Josiah Strong in 1855:

³ Nye (p. 345) cites comparable statements by the two men. President Kennedy, 1962: "I do not mean to say that all men are equal in their ability, character, or motivation. I do say that every American should be given a fair chance to develop all the talents he may have". Senator Goldwater, 1964: "When the Declaration declares that 'all men are created equal', it does not mean that their accomplishments, skills, achievements, or ambitions are equal. No, on these levels there is no equality. There is only equality of opportunity".

This race of unequaled energy, with all the majesty of numbers and wealth behind it – the representative, let us hope, of the largest liberty, the purest Christianity, the highest Civilization – having developed peculiarly aggressive traits calculated to impress its institutions upon mankind, will spread itself over the earth (apud CURTI, 1964, p. 652).

According to the myth, "America" offered the ideal conditions for the common man to succeed, stimulating his inventiveness and drive⁴. The original colonies along the narrow strip on the Atlantic coast soon expanded westward, and the West, constantly redefined and enlarged, became the prize and symbol of eternal renewal and rebirth. Government, religion, and business went ahead, hand in hand, and the sense of mission only grew more intense with industrialization and the first international conflicts. The ideas of Captain Alfred Mahan (1890) about the country's Christian and racial mission to spread righteousness over backward and inferior areas were promptly adopted by presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. In their mind, and probably for the majority of people in the country, it seemed normal to "link war and imperialism on the one hand, with moral righteousness and idealism on the other" (CURTI, p. 653).

Literary Reconstructions

By 1870, writers like Mark Twain and William Dean Howells were already questioning the myth of the successful self-made man and his perfect civilization. While the Alger type of writer depicted the city as a "vast stage of opportunity" (CURTI, p. 630), Twain turned his back on the machine and the urban development to recuperate the ideal of rustic men like Cooper's Natty Bumppo in the "Leather-Stocking Tales".⁵ The frontier and the wild West signified the possibility of the freedom and happiness that had been destroyed by eastern sophistication.

⁴ I keep the reference to "man", because the narrative of the nation under construction was totally male-oriented.

⁵ Cooper's series is composed of five books: *The Pioneers* (1821), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), *The Prairie* (1827), *The Pathfinder* (1840), and *The Deerslayer* (1841), cf. MCQUADE, p. 900-988.

Like Bumpo, Twain's hero Huck Finn (1884) voices the disenchantment with the narrow materialism of U.S. society. Instead of denying the Dream, Twain seems to remain faithful to its earliest forms, once projected in European visions of the New World. Huck can be seen as a child version of the Noble Savage, the romantic hero untainted by the evils and constraints of institutionalized life, who can only survive in free nature. In that context, Twain points to the dangers of capitalist wealth and denounces the corruption and speculation of big business in *The Gilded Age* (1873). His warning echoes the earlier opinion of Alexis de Tocqueville, registered in Chapter III of his famous study *Democracy in America* (1835-40): "I know of no country, indeed, where the love of money has taken stronger hold on the affections of men". The power and visibility of progress and the love of money become even greater when the nation enters World War I, making thousands of millionaires and climbing to a top position in world politics and economy, with Europe now turned debtor.

If Huck decides to leave back civilization and "light out for the territory" at the end of his *Adventures*, a similar "westward movement" for freedom and happiness will recur decades later in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925/1971). The narrator Nick Carraway decides to return to his own Midwest (also the author's homeland), as he realizes that all Westerners "perhaps [...] possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life". Gatsby's death seems to indicate that progress and glory are equivalent to the green unreachable light. Nick sees that reality, or the only possibility of contentment, lies back with simple folks and a plain landscape (FITZGERALD, 1971, p. 183).

I see now that this has been a story of the West. [...] Even when the East excited me most, even when I was most keenly aware of its superiority to the bored, sprawling, swollen towns beyond the Ohio... – even then it had always for me a quality of distortion.

At the height of American capitalist prosperity, Fitzgerald suggests that the ideal of progress and success will eventually lead to final failure and death. The noble dreams formed when the "fresh, green breast of the new world" was discovered seem to have collapsed. Or, better, they now lay "on that vast obscurity beyond the city", somewhere in the past, amid lost innocence. From Nick's narrative standpoint, fashionable and glittery New York was simply "a valley of ashes" (FITZGERALD, 1971, p. 187-88, 29).

Failure and death tainted actual life in America in the first decades of the twentieth century, the era that Fitzgerald represented and also helped create. The two World Wars and the Depression following the Crash of '29 corroded the optimism and confidence in the system. Crisis after crisis have contributed to the persisting pessimism demonstrated by many writers and intellectuals ever since. Critical sensitive minds would not be cheered by flaunting statements like "The business of America is business" (President Calvin Coolidge), or "What is good for General Motors is good for the United States" (Eisenhower's Secretary of Defense, Charles Wilson), publicized worldwide. Such aggressive capitalism ruled over social organization and personal choice, degrading sensibility, ignoring feeling, producing alienation, generating hate and violence.

The illnesses of modern society provided major themes for many important writers of the twentieth century, from Theodore Dreiser to Arthur Miller, from Ann Petry to Toni Morrison, from Ralph Ellison to Paule Marshall – and for the writers to be discussed next, Edward Albee and Norman Mailer, major voices from the Sixties.

The Dream falls apart: Albee and Mailer

In the Preface to *The American Dream*, Albee states that his play is "a picture of our time", as he sees it, and "an examination of the American Scene". He uses his satirical talent to expose the hypocrisy and immorality that surrounded him, making "an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society, a condemnation of complacency, cruelty, emasculation and vacuity" (ALBEE, 1960, p. 53-4). In an interview to the *New York Herald Tribune* published on January 22, 1961 (cited in AMACHER, 1969, p. 35), Albee adds that the play is about "the shameful treatment of old people and a symbolic and at the same time actual murder".

Strongly reminiscent of Samuel Beckett's and Eugene Ionesco's Absurdist drama, the one-scene play by Albee has five characters: Mommy, Daddy, Grandma, Mrs. Baker, and Young Man. They are involved in a somewhat surrealist conversation in the living-room of the central couple's rented apartment. Grandma is an old lady who has been taken around to wherever Mommy and Daddy decide to go and live, but she likes to see herself as "a resourceful person" of proud "pioneer stock" (ALBEE, 1960, p. 112). Mrs. Baker is a guest who does not know why she is there. The muscular, movie star-like Young Man, who also arrives to the place without explanation, describes himself as a "clean-cut, midwest farm boy type, insultingly good-looking in a typically American way. Good profile, straight nose, honest eyes, wonderful smile...". But looks is all that he has: "I have no talents at all, except what you see... my person; my body, my face". Besides, he will "do almost anything for money" (ALBEE, 1960, p. 113, 107-9). Grandma is quick to speak out his symbolic role, associating his empty beauty to the "American Dream":

Yup. Boy, you know what you are, don't you? You're the American Dream, that's what you are. All those other people, they don't know what they're talking about. You... *you* are the American Dream (ALBEE, 1960, p. 108).

In Albee's play (p. 114), the Young Man had no family to speak of, and he misses a twin brother who lives somewhere. A sense of incompleteness and loss had always haunted him after he and his identical twin, two halves of the same egg and the same being, "were torn apart...thrown to opposite sides of the continent", when still very young. Their lives had faced adversity and loneliness from the very start, with a father unknown and a mother dying on the night of their birth. If this youth has the looks, the charm, and the ambition to grow rich, successful, and widely admired, but lacks innocence, emotion, and love. Would the long missing twin brother perhaps symbolize the ethical and noble side of the American Dream? One may speculate if the Other Half, who disappeared and may be dead, carried moral values that could not survive the suffocating violence and the consumerism of modern times.

Albee's play suggests that goodness, affection, and spontaneity cannot exist in a society where everything – even children, even dreams – can be bought and replaced like a woman's hat (a recurrent image in the play). What is left of the Dream still looks beautiful and attractive, but it is a paradox, a fake, a stuffed doll with no heart. To hold real value, according to the play (p. 106), the Young Man would need to go back to when he was "about a hundred and fifty years younger" – that is, back to the time when the nation was consolidated as such, in the beginning of the nineteenth century.

With that character, the literature of the United States seems to allude once more to the contrast between East and West, and their respective associations with economic expansion and moral decay, on the one hand, and the possibility of survival, on the other. However, as it is now transposed to a level of mock-heroic parody, the geographic/moral contrast is diluted when the Young Man reveals that he had "lived out on the West Coast" almost all his life, while his brother had gone East. The traditional associations are dislocated. Even if we read that reference as an indication that (part of) the Dream survived somewhat longer in the West, it also suggests that the Dream has dissolved into appearance and illusion, an empty myth, a Hollywood promise of instant satisfaction.

The Young Man apparently found a suitable job as a dubious entertainment figure. He is paid to bring satisfaction to the empty lives of the middle-class couple formed by Mommy and Daddy, a parodic picture of the common family and the average community. They embody some usual bourgeois traits: the concern with a distinctive appearance; the general expectation of male superiority; the idea of 'masculinity' associated with decisiveness, power, and money; the emphasis on ambition and acquisition; the absence of love (even sex doesn't work anymore); the commercialized relationships; the general emptiness and sterility even as 'satisfaction' is presented as supreme goal. The inability of Mommy and Daddy to bear children adds a critical edge and points to impotence and decay. Some references to one imperfect child, once adopted, paid for, and now dead (no wonder, after the ill-treatment and violence inflicted by the so-called parents), spring up in the conversation. Mommy and Daddy had only wanted "a bumble of joy" and were disappointed with the child they had bought in the past. But the Young Man now seems just what they needed – their Dream come true. Under the appearance of normalcy and adjustment, the home is a stage where hypocrisy and self-interest are the major acts played out.

The parallels between *The American Dream's* theme, characterization, and plot with the actual state of the nation were certainly not intended to please either public or critics. In the Preface, Albee (1960, p. 54) explained his bitter attack as "a condemnation of complacency, cruelty, emasculation and vacuity; it is a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy-keen". Daddy is a personification of the American hero flopped-up or gone stale: he is sick, decrepit, impotent, and passive. The only "masculine" decision he takes is to open the door; the rest of the time he simply obeys or echoes Mommy. She is a grotesque image of the castrating institutions and the cruel selfishness of corporate goals in America, in the glorification of efficiency, success, ambition, and individualism.

The older, wiser, and "rural" Grandma (ALBEE, 1960, p. 85), on the other hand, is the only character who seems aware of the fictional quality of the Dream. Being a victim in that structure and not profiting from any scheme, she can

choose to leave the family cage. Echoing Albee, she says that "we live in the age of deformity" (p. 86). Her statement is equivalent to Nick Carraway's realization, in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, of the distortion existing in a society that is so often glorified. Like Nick, and also like Twain's Huck Finn, Grandma decides to leave. Albee's non-realistic style left undetermined the place where she went, but the indictment of "home and family" seems evident. There is no possibility of keeping a healthy and lucid mind in such a rotten atmosphere, so the only way left is the way out.

That conclusion is also suggested by Norman Mailer in his novel *An American Dream*. Mailer pushes the frontier – that promise of renewal, the golden possibility – farther away than either Twain or Fitzgerald had done. Like Huck and Gatsby before him, Mailer's protagonist Rojack also faces murder and violence; the difference is that they are now both *in* society and *within* the human being. The individual is not a victim, but a microcosm of the general chaos. Mailer's hero sees crime and corruption but is also a murderer himself, immersed and lost in the atmosphere of sexual lust, politics, money, and power surrounding him. His luck is that he seems protected by a special guide, the full moon that shows him both the sky and the abyss (MAILER, 1964, p. 10).

Perhaps mirroring the writer's obsessive and ambivalent connection with the Kennedy era, Rojack's name resembles an adapted sum of Robert + Jack. He was a war hero and a Congressman like the President, and aspired to that Kennedy aura that combined sexual and political power. At the same time, according to Dickstein (1980, p. 119-20), the autobiographical references and narcissistic overtones seem to make of Rojack an "ambiguous self-portrait" of the author, with characteristics that seem fitting to "an archetype of the age".

In spite of the charm of those Camelot years, the era is a frightening one. On the American map, East and West are equally artificial and destructive. Like New York, Las Vegas is a fake, beautiful dream in the distance. In Mailer's novel, Rojack narrates:

I walked out in the desert to look at the moon. There was a jeweled city on the horizon, spires rising in the night, but the jewels were diadems of electric and the spires were the neon of signs ten stories high. (MAILER, 1964, p. 251)

Unlike the romantic Gatsby, Rojack is a realistic, cynical man, who sees that he lacks the strength to challenge the artificiality of the world. He knows his limitations, and does not dream of heroic deeds: "I was not good enough to climb up and pull them [the spires] down. So wandered farther out to the desert where the mad before me had come" (MAILER, 1964, p. 251).

By choosing to escape, he assures that he would not be killed by utopia, or the Impossible Dream, the way Gatsby, for instance, had been. Rojack feels that he cannot alter the future for the others, but he does choose a direction for himself: literally, a way *out*. His experience of the American Dream had been a nightmare, and only the thought of crossing the border and leaving the country can bring feelings of hope and rebirth: "in the morning I was something like sane again, and packed the car, and started on the long trip to Guatemala and Yucatán" (MAILER, 1964, p.251-252).

In his modern pilgrimage, a parodic evocation of Christian virtues and heroic quests, Rojack is endowed with a special kind of "grace". In the middle of his chaotic impulses, he can hear voices that will tell him what to do and may save him from damnation ... or reveal his complete madness. These are insane, threatening voices that enhance the ironic, dark tale in its indictment of the hypocritical union of God and Country.

I wanted to escape from that intelligence which let me know of murders in one direction and conceive of visits to Cherry from the other. I wanted to be free of magic, the tongue of the Devil, the dread of the Lord, I wanted to be some sort of rational man again, nailed tight to details, promiscuous, reasonable, blind to the reach of the seas. But I could not move. I bent to pick up the umbrella, and then the message came clear, "walk the parapet", it said. "Walk the parapet or Cherry is dead". [...] "Walk it", said the voice, "or you are worse than dead" (MAILER, 1964, p. 238).

In Albee's plays, people are godless, and when the Church is mentioned it deserves only sarcasm. So it is in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1971, p. 88), where a minister is accused of getting rich with "godly money ripped from the golden teeth of the unfaithful, a pragmatic extension of the big dream". In *The American Dream* (1960, p. 114), the ideal of individual progress and power has crushed all other possibilities and has killed all spiritual needs. Desolated, the Dream (ironically personified in the Young Man) realizes that he has suffered "a fall from grace...a departure of innocence...loss...loss".

The fact that innocence and love cannot survive in the present state of the nation seems emphasized by the violent death of Mommy and Daddy's adopted child, in Albee's play *The American Dream*, and of the symbolic Cherry, in Mailer's novel. The two can be read as signs of goodness and innocence, and they are both unmercifully killed. Similarly to Mark Twain and Scott Fitzgerald before them, Albee and Mailer are unable to portray characters that would face the decay of the American Dream, and do something constructive about that. No hopes of social bonding, no political commitments, no demands for "justice and equality for all" reverberate through their actions.

Since the country is hostile and inhuman, they choose to preserve the integrity of the individual, thus following the precepts of another high individualist, Henry David Thoreau, who advised in *Walden* (1986): "As long as possible live free and uncommitted". So they withdraw or run away, Rojack, Grandma, Nick Carraway, and Huck Finn, as Thoreau himself had done. Neither can they go on being witnesses and partners of violence, injustice, and hypocrisy, nor are they strong leaders who might, of their own wish, change the nation and the world. Hiding away works like Martha's games in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*: " 'tis the refuge we take when the unreality of the world weighs too heavy on our tiny heads" (ALBEE, 1971, p. 111).

Individual choices and existential dramas may, of course, reverberate with social and political meanings. As writers and intellectuals in the 1960s, Albee and Mailer did not withdraw from the public sphere. On the contrary, they held the notion that it was their duty to stay and to use their art for the improvement

of society. In interviews given to the *Transatlantic Review* and the *Atlantic*, for instance, Albee declared (apud WEALES, 1969, p. 35):

The responsibility of the writer is to be a sort of demonic social critic – to present the world and people as he sees it and say "Do you like it? If you don't, change it". [...] I've always thought ... that it was one of the responsibilities of playwrights to show people how they are and what their time is like in the hope that perhaps they'll change it.

In a similar vein, Mailer said that the writer must "educate the nation", the nation that calls itself America, "once a beauty of magnificence unparalleled, now a beauty with leprous skin" (quoted in GROSS, 1971, p. 293).

After a serious economic depression, two World Wars, other wars in Korea and Vietnam, race riots and violence near home, student revolts, and widespread popular fear, "the nation was experiencing a profound crisis of confidence" in the 1960s (SPILLER, 1975, p. 1420). Albee's and Mailer's works speak of the absurdist, cynical, rebellious spirit of the era, and their *American Dreams* could not possibly have been any happier. The heroic ideals of the past and the belief in a good land "crowned with brotherhood" seem to have vanished. Disillusioned, their characters choose a solution that has become a tradition in the literature of the United States. The romantic escape to a solitary and clean refuge takes new shapes and styles, but remains a narrative strategy. New Edens, new Waldens, new Wests are sought with the hope of eventually reaching happiness and freedom, always retranslated and reconfigured on the map. In all their iconoclastic charges, the two books nevertheless interfere in the construction of a mythology for the nation, lining up with a long tradition in U.S. literary history.

And life goes on...after the 60s

Home, family, work, property, liberty, happiness: all that was part of the Dream of early immigrants when they came to America in their flight from corrupt Europe. The Dream also moved white settlers and adventurers who traveled

westward towards "unoccupied" lands beyond the Mississippi River, fleeing the corrupt, crowded East (the Indians were just obstacles to be pushed away). The Dream inspired African descendants, who were or had been slaves in the South, in their northward migration toward freedom. That is the same Dream pushing the Young Man and Rojack on, even as they criticize East, West, and everywhere in Albee's and Mailer's literary works.

The territory still lies ahead to be discovered, as Huckleberry Finn would say. Pages and pages dedicated to the American Jeremiad remind readers that the magical day of redemption and salvation looms in the future. It may be sought in internal renewal or right outside, beyond the southern border, in the vast continent that is also named America, or farther away in other lands. Capitalism and expansionism have gone along with the Dream in numerous interventions abroad, even as millions of Latino, Caribbean, Asian, and African immigrants keep pouring into the United States. They search for their portion of utopia and, as those before them, present their own claims of nationhood.

With its demographic map redrawn by porous borders and busy air/sea-ports of entry, the nation presents a dynamic multiplicity of identities that cannot fit a single mold, nor be explained by one symbol or one hegemonic body of literature. Potentials for renewed hope would be explored and pursued by the next generations of artists, writers, and singers, in the constant process of remapping, redefinition, and hybridization of the nation's colors, values, sounds, languages, and routes. The tone may be sarcastic and bitter, the parody may get wilder, but in many cases versions of the Dream still survive. Whether supported by tradition, the media, propaganda, the capitalist growth, or a cultural construction that is too strong to die, the idea of a Promised Land goes on attracting – and betraying – new immigrants and their generations.⁶

⁶ A version of this article was published under the title "Interpretations of the American Dream" in *De Sur a Norte: Perspectivas Sudamericanas sobre Estados Unidos*, Buenos Aires, v. 7, n. 14, p. 185-198, mar. 2006. Número especial: "La década del 60".

And we can build our dreams, it's Immigration Time.
Yes, I'm trying to go, get out of Mexico.
The promised land waits on the other side.

EL VEZ. Immigration Time (1994).

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