Revenge and the “New” Americans

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Abstract

A persistent theme in American ethnic fiction and film involves an ethnic or immigrant character who dreams of and/or performs an act of violence which goes against the law of the land; on the contrary, it is prescribed by a pre-American law, or unwritten custom. Application of such a pre-American law though engenders a question: why should a new American citizen resort to the dictates of a pre-industrial past rather than to the laws of a modern, well-organized, bureaucratic society? This paper claims that, paradoxically, these acts inspired by a pre-American set of beliefs and attitudes expedite the transition of the immigrant and ethnic into the mainstream and post-ethnicity. Contextualized as part of organized crime, labor politics, predatory capitalism, the myth of the Golden Door these violent acts configure as ethnic but are motivated by the desire of the protagonist to join America and move on to a post-ethnic identity. The author analyzes Anzia Yezierska’s “The Lost Beautifulness” (1920), Harry Mark Petrakis’s “Pericles on 31st Street” (1957), and George Pelecanos’s “The Dead, Their Eyes Implore Us” (2003).

Keywords: ethic and immigrant literature, Americanization, post-ethnicity.

Her sin, her ignominy, were the roots which she had struck into the soil. It was as if a new birth, with stronger assimilations than the first had converted the forestland, still so uncongenial to every other pilgrim and wanderer, into Hester Prynne’s wild and dreary but life—long home.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter (1850)

A minor, but ubiquitous, theme in twentieth-century American fiction and film involves an ethnic or immigrant character who dreams of and/or performs an act of violence which goes against U.S. law; characteristically enough, such an act is prescribed by a pre-American law, most particularly an unwritten customary law. Application of such a pre-American custom, however, raises a question: why should a new American citizen comply to the dictates of a pre-industrial, pre-modern custom rather than to the laws of a modern, well-organized, bureaucratic society?1 This paper

1 The historical period I examine in this paper covers examples from the early twentieth century and the first immigrant writers, then moves to the middle of the century during the civil rights period and reaches the beginning
claims that, paradoxically, these acts inspired by a pre-American set of beliefs and attitudes, expedite the transition of the immigrant and ethnic subject into the mainstream and eventually to post-ethnicity. Contextualized as part of the myth of the Golden Door, mixed with the realities of labor politics, predatory capitalism, organized crime, these violent acts configure as ethnic but are motivated by the desire of the characters to become agents as Americans and, consequently, to belong among “people without a culture,” in other words, to acquire a post-ethnic identity. These acts signify a rite of passage.

Anzia Yezierska’s ghetto story “The Lost Beautifulness” (1920), Harry Mark Petrakis’s humorous but also politically astute short story “Pericles on 31st Street” (1957), and George Pelecanos’s crime story “The Dead their Eyes Implore Us” (2003), are analyzed as texts which represent acts of revenge in the context of labor politics and predatory capitalism. In these three narratives, the authors represent the turn of the legally disenfranchized and largely victimized immigrant and ethnic characters to an ethics of retaliation based on the unwritten laws of their home countries. What needs to be pointed out is that the lex talionis that the characters employ does not predicate acts of random retaliation; it limits and focuses the violent acts on addressing and redressing the inequity the characters have suffered (Klimchuk 88).

In literature, the term “ethnicity” has emerged primarily, but not exclusively, in the context of American modernity; it participates and is productive in the broader space we call modernist literature; thus ethnic texts typically question traditional boundaries and categories. For the purposes of this analysis, I focus on ethnic texts which engage the law and the legal system of the new country/U.S.A.; such engagement is deeply critical of U.S. law and the entire legal system. The common element of these texts is the presence of characters that perform acts of violence in response to some evil done to them; or on behalf of a person(s) close to them who can no longer seek justice for themselves. In both cases, these acts are cast as acts of revenge. One is either a revenger or an avenger. These acts of vengeance are motivated by the inability of the revenger or avenger to find satisfactory justice within of the twenty-first century when the third generation becomes involved in the representation of the immigrants. The term “new immigrants” was used to describe those who came with the Second Great Migration (1880s-1924). The term is certainly racially inflected as David Roedigger observes (4, 5). I use the term “new Americans” ironically; in reality these immigrants and ethnic who arrived in the U.S.A. at the turn of the 20th century remained in a liminal space between an imagined host country and a nostalgically recollected country from where they departed.

2 By “immigrant” I refer to the first generation whereas “ethnic” reflects primarily but not exclusively the second and third generation born and raised in the U.S.A. The cultural accommodation the first generation espouses would also categorize them as ethnics. In other words, the difference between immigrant and ethnic is a matter of accommodation. In the three textual examples I analyze, Yezierska’s and Pelecanos’s characters are immigrant, whereas Petrakis’s ethnic. And that in spite of the fact that Yezierska was an immigrant/first generation who made the transition into ethnic, whereas Pelecanos and Petrakis are third and second generation.

3 The phrase belongs to American anthropologist Renato Rosaldo and is analyzed in his book Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis.

4 In her book, A Critical Introduction to Law and Literature, Kieran Dolin begins with Brook Thomas’s claim of “literature’s ability to produce alternative narratives to the dominant ones of a culture,” and argues that the field of Law and Literature has been made the site of an invaluable critique of the stories and ideologies upheld by America’s legal system” (182).
a bureaucratic, modern society; such a society has often marginalized and disenfranchised them as immigrants and/or racial minorities.

It has been argued that revenge is barbaric, mindless, and irrational whereas punishment is civilized, rational.\(^5\) In the texts under consideration, the readers’ perception of the barbaric and irrational character of the revenge is further augmented because the violent acts are expedited as primordial rituals of the old country.\(^6\) These rituals are enacted in a modern context and adapted to focus and limit violence to a specific target responsible for the wrong sustained by the main character or by the character that is being avenged. The rituals have a cathartic and also a transcendent effect on those who perform them and on those on whose behalf violence is enacted.

My claim is that catharsis and transcendence translate into something more than satisfaction of one’s sense of justice. They catapult the character(s) into a state of socio-political consensus for some, dissensus for others; so, the personal acquires a different significance and application in a broader context of U.S. immigrant and/or ethnic politics. Both the revengers and the avengers have experienced disruption of their stable and inviolate identity through the wrong done to them or the wrong done to others. Their move to an industrialized country has placed them in a new world of capitalist and materialistic ethics. As a result, the characters experience a radical contrast between host country and old country ethics. The decision to revenge or avenge constitutes a moment of radical crisis for them, and results in a reconsideration and reconfiguration of their psychic wholeness as well as their political priorities.\(^7\)

I suggest that in the texts analyzed, this radical crisis leads to an identity transformation from immigrant or ethnic to American; it is a compelling moment which calls forth personal, ethical, ideological ambiguities. It is essentially a moment of empowerment where, paradoxically, the ethnic or immigrant subjects restructure their identities around the new roles they assume. More specifically, the climax of revenge or avenge foregrounds the fundamental social issue of the unequal distribution of power and use of violence to confront this imbalance. The plot of these stories centers on who has power and who desires power, and implicitly critiques the discourse of equality promulgated by the rhetoric of the American Dream; in each case, the characters seize power from the “evil” representatives of the fictional status quo and wield violence to them, in the guise of revenge and in the name of justice, according to a pre-American point of view.\(^8\)

This leads us to another important point. The protagonists of the texts under discussion are heirs to the Judeo-Christian tradition and the idea of divine retribution. They are expected to believe that the moral meaning of human behavior is not socially constructed but rather specified by natural law, or reality itself (Keyishian 5-6). However, that is not the case with our protagonists. They would not allow divine or

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\(^5\) Leo Zaibert, however, has convincingly maintained that there is no great difference between the two.

\(^6\) The lex talionis (an eye for an eye) is the most violent.

\(^7\) Harry Keyishian points out that “Through revenge [the victims of malicious assault] attempt with varying degrees of justification and success, to restore their integrity—their sense of psychic wholeness—and stabilize their identities, often restructuring them around their new roles as revengers … or avengers” (2).

\(^8\) See on this issue John Rieder’s article on race and revenge fantasies where much of the phrasing of this paragraph depends.
Poetic justice to take care of it all, much less do they trust human law and legal procedures. The protagonists perceive both the evil they have suffered and the need for revenge contextually, as socially and historically produced; on the other hand, the emotional turbulence they experience is perceived as an impetus to construct new social subjectivities and sovereignties (Engels and Goodale 94).

The modernity encountered by our fictional immigrants when they cross the Atlantic is ideologically signified by the liberalism of the new country. In turn, the liberalism they encounter requires of the subjects to relinquish power to the state. But “what if this necessity is a rhetorical construction rather than an ontological reality?” (Engels and Goodale 109). Immigrant and ethnic subjects seeking justice from a sovereign state wonder if justice is possible in America. As far as they are concerned, economic and political power systems exclude them. Whether racialized, disenfranchised, marginalized, or ethnicized, they feel that they are denied the personhood and the rights guaranteed by the liberal political system of the host society. Furthermore, the different ethnic and racial groups compete for limited spaces, be they workspace or living quarters. Violence expressed as revenge functions as a statement of resistance and, why not, rebellion, but also as a cure for the ubiquitous internecine strife and antagonism.

The paradox here is that these acts of violence and revenge, or violence as revenge, become the protagonists’ response to the U.S. society’s denial of their personhood, which subsequently re-positions them within American society. In this way, new subjectivities are created; paradoxically ethnicity becomes an asset that expedites the transition of the subject to a post-ethnic state. Thus ethnicity is integral in a process which serves to negate it.

In fact, in the restructuring of identity, an ethical ambiguity persists; the end of the process becomes a pyrrhic victory for the protagonist: their reevaluation of the American Dream, which was originally understood as universal inclusion and justice, necessitates a return to the pre-modern ways they presumably left behind. The laws of the modern country constitute a code which cannot be violated; at the same time, the essence of these laws remains a mystery whose illumination is entrusted to judges who do not protect the immigrant and the ethnic—hence, the protagonist’s resorting to a tradition from the country of origin. There is a need for a caveat at this point. Occasionally, the inability of the victim of injustice to apply the ethics of the old country and redress the wrong done to him or her, forces him/her to resort to criminal institutions and pay allegiance to shady figures. The connections of immigrants and ethnics to the different Mafias for protection is a case in point frequently represented in film and literature. Thus, “to exaggerate one’s concern for justice is to corrupt it” (Zaibert 117). The morally ambiguous connection of characters in our texts with ubiquitous criminal institutions of power that deploy parallel systems of justice above or below the US judicial system draw attention to this corruption and open a new field for critical comments.  

9 Kathleen Komar proposes that “[v]iolence is a founding feature of the Western tradition.”

10 This paper is part of a longer study that applies this particular reading of revenge and avenging to a number of films about Greek, Italian and Jewish communities of the U.S.A. In this context Coppola’s Godfather trilogy will
The three short stories analyzed in this paper, Anzia Yezierska’s “The Lost Beautifulness,” Harry Mark Petrakis’s “Pericles on 31st Street” and George Pelecanos’s “The Dead their Eyes Implore Us” were published from 1920 to 2002. Viewed together, they reflect and record formulations of the theme of revenge as a paradoxical discourse that connects the new American with the U.S.; Yezierska’s story is an early example of the treatment of the theme; this theme is developed in the humorous and political story of the silent 1950s. Finally, the theme is explored in the last story which looks at the 1930s from the point of view of the twenty-first century and articulates more fully the connections between violence/revenge, ritual and Americanization. It also reassesses from a twenty-first century point of view, the racial politics that pitted the new Americans against the blacks. The tenor of all three narratives is ironic and so are their conclusions, which remain open and ambiguous.

In Anzia Yezierska’s (1880?-1970) “The Lost Beautifulness,” Hanneh Hayyeh, the early twentieth century Jewish immigrant protagonist, deploys her survival skills as she fights for a place within the U.S.: “Democracy means that everybody in America is going to be with everybody else,” she says (69). In order to gain such a place, though, she needs to confirm her whiteness. Thus the character assimilates a racialized view of democracy, and yearns for a post-ethnic position, but within a racialized status quo. She paints her kitchen white and believes that metonymically this whiteness will reflect well on her and family. She interprets middle class domesticity, which she encounters in the American houses where she washes and irons, as the apex of Americanization. Her husband says to her: “It only dreams itself in you how to make yourself for an American … fixing out the house like the rich” (68).

Ironically, Mrs. Preston, her kind-hearted employer, encourages her aspirations and fantasies. She feeds Hanneh’s delusions about belonging to America. Mrs. Preston bypasses the economic structures that relegate Hanneh to the Jewish ghetto and place Mrs. Preston to an upper middle-class neighborhood; she confuses Hanneh with a discourse of equality based on merit and competent manual labor, rather than

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11 See Kalogeras (2009 and 2012) on a discussion of Toni Morrison’s article “On the Backs of Blacks.” Morrison critiques Kazan’s film America, America and raises the issue of the antagonism of the ‘New’ Immigrants with the Blacks in the U.S.A. at the turn of the twentieth century. Also for an extensive discussion of the issues see David Roediger’s Working Toward Whiteness.

12 For an interesting discussion of Yezierska’s politics see Edmunds.

13 Lori Harrison-Kahan points out that “when America and whiteness are the ideals worshipped the result is tragedy” (421).

14 Wendy Zierler offers a reading of the story that confirms my own; she argues that Hanneh’s resort to a pre-American Yiddish “idiom” foregrounds the birth of her new identity:
on race and economic status. “You are an artist … It’s as if you breathed part of your soul into [the ironing],” she tells her (75).

The chorus of admiring (immigrant?) neighbors to whom Hanneh shows her kitchen congratulates her for her accomplishment. Her neighbors feel that she has finally “arrived” in America. They exclaim: “Gold is shining from every corner; Like for a holiday; What a whiteness! what a cleanliness!” (73), thereby fueling her enthusiasm and confidence. This all changes once the landlord who owns the apartment she lives in comes by to collect the rent. Hanneh is dependent on a predatory system of value; she is also dependent on a judicial system that is blind to merit and hard work and favors capitalist ventures. Her recourse to justice, as she protests the unjust and abrupt raise of rent before the court, fails—in spite of her high hopes which have been cultivated by Mrs. Preston’s rhetoric of a democratic America: “I’ll fight till all America will have to stop and listen to me. You was always telling me that the lowest nobody got something to give to America. And that’s what I got to give to America—the last breath in my body for justice. I’ll wake up America from its sleep” (89).

Hanneh imagines herself as a new American political subject. Her assumption, however, that the judicial system in the U.S. can offer her legal protection and that she will be able to challenge the predatory practices of capitalism, is crushed by reality. Her rights as a tenant are non-existent, as is her social and political power as a new American. She finds herself in the street, evicted, since she cannot afford the rent of the apartment she renovated on her own. The judicial system will not recognize her contribution. The injustice she suffers is a class-based injustice, committed by the judicial system which serves the interests of the owners.

However, Hanneh decides to act on the basis of the understanding she has gained; she resorts to an old world version of justice: an eye for an eye. The white painted kitchen, which has reflected her class ambitions, is also an implicit statement of her view of herself as belonging to whiteness. Now, the night before her eviction, she sees the speciousness of her hopes; she also comprehends the speciousness of the promise the U.S. holds for the new immigrants. She understands that, from her comfortable position on the economic ladder, Mrs. Preston finds it easy to maintain this promise. Hanneh expresses her rude awakening by destroying her beautiful white kitchen. That is her revenge, but also her statement of her disillusion: “She had thought to spite the landlord, but it was her own soul she had killed” (95).

At this point, the story expands the problematic of belonging by introducing a new character, Hanneh’s son, Aby, who is on his way home on a 24-hour leave from the American Army. Having served in Europe, Aby has been decorated for valor and

15 Harrison-Kahan also observes that “in order to realize the rewards of America, they must work, confined to jobs deemed suitable for women, but by virtue of their labor, they render themselves unfeminine, different from the American ‘ladies’ they hope to emulate through their consumption” (421-22). On her part Lori Merish adds that: “the story records the affective intensities—the desire and longing, as well as the anger, disillusionment, and grief—produced by the conflict between the beautiful ‘chimera’ of American democracy and the systematic inequities of class” (207).

16 Nevertheless, as Merish argues, “although [Hanneh] is literally starving by the story’s end, the text foregrounds throughout Hanneh’s psychic hunger for visibility, equating invisibility with social death” (209).
has achieved the rank of sergeant in the U.S. Army. Apparently, he belongs. He is described as “edg[ing] his way through the wet Delancey Street crowds with the skill of one born to these streets and the assurance of the United States Army” (96). In fact, Hanneh’s repainting her kitchen has been motivated by the prospective arrival of her son, as well as by her desire to not only celebrate his success, but also offer him a proof of her efforts to rise socially. In that, she has been performing the perennial pro-
filial gesture of many new immigrants who hope that their children will break away from immigrant status to gain admission into mainstream America. The passage emphasizes Aby’s assurance: he has been born in these streets and he has defended these streets and its people overseas. Such a contribution has been recognized by the state; the insignia he bears, especially the medal with the Statue of Liberty on it, testify to that.

Aby Safransky’s shocking recognition of his mother and the family belongings in the wet street, disabuses him of his assurance and introduces a challenge. Aby’s response to this challenge remains fictionally unrealized. The story ends with Aby’s appalled reaction to the scene. But the consequence of the crisis that engendered Hanneh’s realization and retaliation now extends to Aby as well. He experiences a personal crisis that destabilizes his view of himself as an American; he comes to see that the judicial system is class-based and prejudiced against the immigrants. The task ahead of him is to clarify where his generation, born of immigrant parents, belongs. While his place is certainly not in the old country, escape from the ghetto and admission into mainstream U.S. necessitates a thorough reconsideration of socio-political realities and ideologies. Hanneh’s identity crisis and revenge, as well as Aby’s imminent crisis, point in that direction.

In Yezierska’s short story, the chorus of first admiring, then sympathetic and finally commiserating neighbors consists of Jewish immigrants with similar vested interests as Hanneh Hayyeh. Like her, they are at the mercy of the same or similar landlords or slumlords who, even though also members of the Jewish community, have established themselves within the capitalist system of the host country and are now part of this system. Hanneh Hayyeh and her likes are victims who invest their hopes in their efforts to find justice.

Like Yezierska, Harry Mark Petrakis (1923) also creates a chorus, albeit a multiethnic one. Traditionally, a chorus observes, comments, hopes but does not act, very much like Yezierska’s. In Petrakis’s short story “Pericles on 31st Street,” however, a story of Chicago’s ethnic communities, a chorus makes the unorthodox transition from passivity to action.17

In Petrakis’s story, small business tenants of Lithuanian, Irish, Jewish, Italian, and Scandinavian origins are subjected to a series of rent raises by their Jewish landlord, Leonard Barcevick. The ethnic identities of the main characters are not stated in the text, with the exception of the Greek, Italian and the Irish. However, the names and the professions of the men give clues as to their ethnic background. Also, a comment by the bartender provides some information which identifies them as

17 For a recent discussion of Petrakis’s work see Gerasimus Katsan’s article.
unassimilated immigrants. These men own small businesses and frequent an Italian bar in Chicago after work. The bartender, George, who is also the narrator of this story, is the only character with an unspecified ethnicity and no last name. Bickering among themselves, they feel a certain antipathy for the Cretan street peddler, Simonakis who satirizes their respect for their landlord, Leonard Barcevick, whom they view as a paragon of entrepreneurial and social success.

But Barcevick’s admiring acceptance by his tenants depends on his rhetorical ability to involve his victims in a discourse that celebrates business acumen, a notion which harks all the way back to the Puritan foundations of the American Republic: “It’s perseverance and ability to get along with people. I always say if I didn’t know how to get along with people I wouldn’t be where I am today” (92). His rhetorical talents prove so successful, that when the notices for a steep raise go around his tenants, they complain while justifying his decision. Their response comes as a consequence of Barcevick’s impressive rhetorical talent.

Leonard Barcevick is the archetypical con man who does not hesitate to come into the bar and commiserate with the shopkeepers for the 15% raise that he asks them to pay on their rents. The ploy he uses is semblance of friendship (“you boys [are] not just tenants, you [are] friends of mine”), a misleading view of what constitutes good business (“it is not good business. I would be shamed before my competitors. They would put the screws on me and in no time at all I might be out of business”), and a discourse of patriotism (“I am afraid for the whole economy. Costs cannot keep rising and still keep the country sound…” 94-5). He appeals to their emotion, logic and loyalty to their country to further his financial interests and to deceive his tenants. The group ends up feeling sorry for his predicament.

All of them, that is, except for the Cretan Simonakis who undermines Barcevick’s plea for sympathy by a call to violence: “Stone him!” he proposes. Simonakis proceeds to subvert Barcevick’s rhetoric by introducing an alternative ideological tradition. First, he calls him “a demagogue,” associating him to those classical orators/politicians of Athens of the 4th century who would mislead the crowds with a false appeal to logic. Then, he adds “hypocrite” and “tyrant” to his invective and succeeds in forcing Barcevick to lose his poise. Barcevick finally reveals his true face: he orders the men around and demands that they obey him: “Throw the old bastard out,” he yells, but nobody moves (96). Instead they begin ironically to turn his own arguments against him. George, the bartender, mocking Barcevick’s earlier appeal to the idea of good business, says: “I am underpaid Mr. Barcevick… . My salary barely covers my work. Any extra service would be charity” (97).

Simonakis’s counter-rhetoric appeals to logic and truth. He points out to Barcevick the simple facts: “You wish to become rich by making them poorer” (97). And the tenants begin to wake up to the plain truth. They are no longer susceptible to the emotional appeal of Barcevick’s earlier talk. They take a stand and are now able to offer a logical answer to the landlord’s threats. He cannot break their leases; neither would he be able to rent out the stores in the sorry condition they are in. Last, they assume the ironic tone of the Cretan to taunt the landlord.
In the story, Simonakis creates a new reality through storytelling. His story is that of Pericles of Athens and of the way that the tyrants and the demagogues of ancient Greece were treated after their fall. The rhetorical function of storytelling empowers the tenants who reject the raise as well as the landlord’s hypocritical discourse. The latter’s insidious influence had originally reduced the group to “[men sitting] around the table over their beer, looking like their visas had expired” (93) as George, the narrator, describes them. It is, after all, an attack on their legal status in the U.S. that they have suffered, as the passage implies.

The function of Simonakis in the story is to assume the role of an avenger for the wrong that they sustained. His storytelling restores their sense of ironic detachment from Barcevick’s rhetorical traps. In the end, even the landlord is taken in by the performative power of Simonakis’s storytelling and runs out of the bar in fear for his safety.

The short story, however, does not conclude at this point. The avenging interference of Simonakis has restored the confidence of the tenants and for all we know the rent will remain the same. This spells victory for the downtrodden. There is one more important point to be made as “Pericles” reaches the end. The internecine strife observable at the beginning of the story among the ethnic tenants and the antipathy towards the Cretan, dissipates in a celebration of unity. The comedy has been completed and order in the tiny universe is restored over glasses of wine, Simonakis’s ethnic symbol of civilization. The beer drinking tenants concur with Simonakis’s choice of drink and join him for a glass of wine, humorously toasting “Pericles.”

The story, then, concludes with a comic reconciliation: all ethnics come together in a cultural and political consensus sealed with an ethnic ritual. Even the bartender George, the only character whose ethnicity is not indicated in the text, “abandons a professional tradition of neutrality” and joins them for a drink (100). And this becomes the real ending of the story, an *e pluribus unum* moment that alludes to a harmonious co-existence of the diverse ethnicities in America; such consensus implies the acceptance, or better domestication, of untamed, independent immigrants like Simonakis. The ethnics are different but come together in an American social space which they reformulate and in which they experience empowerment. The political message remains unstated, it involves white ethnics, it does not include people of color, but it can be read in the final act of commitment that George, the bartender, performs.

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18 In a sensitive and informed reading of another Petrakis’s story, Yiorgos Anagnostou concludes that the author’s retrospective critique of Greek American racism in Chicago works towards the homogenization of attitudes of the Greek American community (146). In a private conversation Anagnostou has also observed, “from the perspective of cultural nationalism, Simonakis’s acts as a quintessential ethnic though the effects of his action do bring about a post-ethnic community (ironically around ancient Greek ideals).”

19 An informed discussion of the differences between literary and legal language appears in Thomas’s article. The point he makes about the defining of community both through legal and literary language needs to be quoted in full here:

One crucial difference between White and Posner is the split that the economist makes between literary and legal language. For Posner, legal language is instrumental—part of a technique of government. In contrast, literary language is aesthetic—devoid of instrumental or didactic purposes. White denies this split, not, however, by making literature didactic or law aesthetic. Instead, he stresses their rhetorical
Revenge and the “New” Americans

Unionizing, however, was not a theme that could be easily presented in the late 1950s in the middle of the Cold War period. Furthermore, texts presenting unionizing activities among immigrants and expressions of camaraderie between new immigrants and people of color would not be accepted for publication in mainstream magazines like *The Atlantic* where Petrakis’s story appeared. Even a story like “The Lost Beautifulness” written in the 1920s would present a “chorus” of immigrants that admires Hanneh Hayyeh, follows her audacious acts before the court of justice, but disperses disappointed when the laws of the land are shown to protect the landlords and the bosses.

It remained for the generation of writers that came after the ethnic renaissance of the 1950s to re-imagine in fiction relations of camaraderie but also to depict in retrospect a parallel history of radicalized politics among the new immigrants. George Pelecanos (1957) formulates such relations in the popular form of the detective story.

“The Dead their Eyes Implore Us” is set in Washington DC in the 1930s. The main character and narrator Vassily/Bill arrives in the U.S. in 1929 during the Great Depression. Four years later and after a number of incidental jobs, he finds employment as a busman in an upmarket restaurant whose employees are racially and ethnically mixed. The ethnic/racial hierarchy in the restaurant is as follows: white Americans are waiters, the new immigrants such as Greeks and Filipinos are busmen, and the blacks are cooks and dishwashers. However, the hierarchical segregation of the workplace is transgressed by John Peterson, a white American waiter who is also a labor organizer. He befriends and tries to mobilize Vassily who, despite liking John, is not convinced nor is he won over by his ideas of unionizing.

The appearance of a new waiter, Wesley Schmidt, changes the situation in the restaurant. It turns out that Schmidt is a Pinkerton man hired by the management to eliminate labor organizers. Schmidt reinforces segregation and is hated by everybody, especially the blacks in the kitchen whom he treats as children of limited intelligence. Vassily ruminates: “By the way he talked to me, real slow, … I could tell he thought I was a colored guy” (222). One day, John Peterson disappears and is consequently discovered dead; Vassily, who considers John to be his best friend, suspects that Schmidt is the culprit. John’s death is not fully investigated and his murderer goes unpunished. Thus, Vassily takes things into his own hands: an eye for an eye. He lures Schmidt to Bloodfield, a ghetto area of Washington DC, and stabs him to death with the knife his father gave him before he left Greece. The murder is implicitly condoned by Raymond the black cook, who meets Vassily by chance as the latter is running away from the scene of the crime. The story ends with Vassily conscious of an unspoken bond between him and Raymond; he is dazed by the enormity of his act but also feeling convinced that such an act has sealed his pact with the U.S.

Vassily has avenged the death of his friend and union organizer, John Peterson. He understands and interprets this act of revenge as congruent with the old world familial ethics of blood obsession. As in a traditional revenge tragedy, the short story

commonality. Both have a purpose, the purpose of defining community. That purpose is achieved, not instrumentally, but performatively. (525)
begins with Vassily’s dream vision after the murder he committed (Kerrigan 7). In this dream, he sacrifices a lamb with his father’s knife, the same one he used to kill Schmidt. Is the sacrificial lamb, the *katharsion*, an archaic act of purification that exorceses all evil that Vassily might encounter in his emigration? Is this ritualistic dream vision of *sphazein* then associated with the killing of Schmidt? Furthermore, Vassily has sealed through this ritual of blood, Wesley’s murder, his relation to John Peterson, the union organizer and American friend. This bloodshed creates a strong bond that ties him to the new land. This implies his breaking through the strict parameters of his immigrant life, first emotionally (avenging Peterson’s murder) and second socio-culturally, by implicitly supporting a political institution of U.S. democracy, the union.

It should be noted that killing Schmidt is also a small victory for Vassily, as he has claimed the right to use violence from the evil representatives of the socioeconomic status quo and has wielded it against them in the name of justice. He revenges John’s murder and he understands this revenge in old world ethical terms. However, he also avenges inadvertently the insults Schmidt directed to Raymond, the black cook and the other blacks in the kitchen. At the same time, Raymond protects Vassily when the latter wanders through Bloodfield after the murder, thus silently justifying Vassily’s act. It is interesting that Schmidt’s murder places Vassily at the black man’s mercy, while simultaneously forging a bond between the two men that transcends the historically antagonistic relations between blacks and new immigrants. A racial camaraderie is implied in the end.

The story concludes with Vassily’s perspective expressed as the following thought: “I guess I knew I was gonna be in America forever, and I wasn’t never going back to Greece. I’d never see my home or my parents again” (230). If these words reveal pathos and regret, Vassily, nevertheless, does not end his narrative with them. With a striking turn of the phrase, he overcomes pathos and regret to dream of a future in America. He states his plans to move to a more independent life as a small time business owner and as a member of the lower middle class. He reveals that his act of revenge has expedited his self-realization and determined his next move. He has become aware of labor politics, and depends on racial solidarity for his safety. The act of violence connected him with the politics of race and organized labor in the U.S. and initiated his transition into the American lower middle class, at least in his imagination.

Overall, the characters we encountered in these three short stories respond positively to the promise of the American Dream. Their identities are in flux as they have left behind the Old Country and have decided to strike roots that would connect them firmly with their new home. The irony is that their bond with America is expedited by an act of violence and more specifically an act of revenge. Such an act,

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20 It is tempting to agree with Lesel Dawson “that revenge tragedy and romance both deal with profound injury and bereavement and both engage in fantasies of restoring what has been lost” (123). What had been lost in this story was Peterson’s transcendence of the hierarchical structure of the business establishment. His befriending both Vassily and the blacks in the kitchen had caused an overcoming of the antagonistic relations observed earlier in the paper between people of color and new immigrants. The significance of the ending is that Vassily and Raymond establish an understanding that had been lost with John Peterson’s murder.
Revenge and the “New” Americans

ironically again, is conceived in terms of an old world ritual or ideological construct that militates against the laws of the new land.

Is it then possible to think that it takes a transgression, a crime to make an immigrant an American? And this time it is not the frontier that forces upon the individual a certain response, or the inner city with its violent milieu. Moreover, these characters who commit the violent acts of revenge are not led to prison houses. They are on their way to transcend their ethnic status and move on to a post-ethnic state. They are on their way to becoming Americans. The irony, however, is that they become Americans by applying the axiological and ethical system they brought with them from their pre-industrial home. Ethnicity in this case becomes an asset that expedites their Americanization.

In the epigram that begins this discussion, the narrator of The Scarlet Letter states that Hester Prynne has become an American through “her sin, her ignominy.” Her adultery is an act of love, but as the narrator in the novel claims, love and hatred could be interchangeable; therefore, her adultery could also be construed as an act of revenge in the face of an unfair marriage that she has been subjected to by her father. Or, it could also be an act of rebellion and, why not, revenge against the restrictive community of the Salem Puritans. What persists though it is this statement by the narrator that her sin has led to her second birth. The experience the ethnic characters go through in the three short stories we analyzed is parallel to Hester Prynne’s: a second birth, a new identity. Through ethnicity they move beyond ethnicity.

Works Cited


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