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In fuga. Temi, percorsi, storie

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FLEEING, FLYING, STAYING, LEAVING: THE PERSISTENCE OF ESCAPE IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

THOMAS AUSTENFELD

My argument will require three steps, the last of which will be an attempt to bring the discussion of fleeing and flying in American literature to our present time, in the specific interpretation offered upon the theme by novelist and environmentalist Barbara Kingsolver in her book *Flight Behavior*, published in November of 2012. Before that, I want to take a *tour d'horizon* of the American literary tradition in order to point out some of those moments and episodes in which the themes of flight, escape, departure, and disappearance have figured with particular prominence. Any thematic approach to American literature that takes on so large a topic is doomed to fail and fall into banality if it strives for completeness. Nonetheless, surveying both the textual canon and the critical literature demonstrates that flight and escape are indeed prominent in American culture and history, and that physical as well as emotional or spiritual flight are attempted regularly, not always with success. In other words, 'flight' can be a suitable tool with which to approach the American canon.

But to begin, we need to consider the curious linguistic coincidence of the two verbs 'flee' and 'fly' in English. No English speaker dealing with the topic of this conference, *In Fuga*, can blithely ignore the fact that in English, 'flight' means both movement through air – which human beings observed in insects and birds long before we ourselves took to the skies – and rapid or precipitate escape, often motivated by pursuit from which one seeks to distance oneself. Speakers of Dutch – or passengers on KLM – know that each flight in Dutch is a 'vlucht,' while the same word in German, namely 'Flucht,' denotes only the act of fleeing, not the act of flying, the latter being a 'Flug.' The Northern Germanic languages thus partake of this confusion with pleasure. The Romance languages seem to have it a little easier with their distinction into two words; Italian distinguishes *volare* and *fuggire*, and it even has *fugare*, that is, the transitive verb for banishing or sending away. But with the two distinct roots, the opportunity for creative and poetic misunderstanding is lost.

In its etymological article on the verb 'to flee,' the *Oxford English Dictionary* observes furthermore that sociolinguistic history has contributed to the confusion:

The confusion between the vbs. *flee* and *fly* occurs already in Old English. In northern dialects the form *flee* is the normal phonetic descendant both of Old English *fléon* 'to flee' and of *fléozan* 'to fly'. In modern English the association of the two verbs has the curious result that the ordinary prose equivalent of Latin *fugere* is *fly* with past tense and past participle *fled* (the forms *flew*, *flown* have only the sense of

Latin *volare*), while *flee* has become archaic, being confined to more or less rhetorical or poetic diction. Even *fly* and *fled*, indeed, now belong rather to literary than to colloquial English: expressions like ‘run away’ being substituted in familiar speech.¹

If the very stem ‘flee’ has become archaic, then our topic is already heavily circumscribed. ‘Fly’ now immediately suggests flying to an English speaker, not fleeing. We need to think historically if we want to keep both meanings activated in our minds. Some famous evocations of fleeing in which the terms ‘flight’ or ‘fly’ are creatively used include, for example, the Flight into Egypt by Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus, a favorite topic of Medieval and Renaissance art. This act of fleeing the political and military power of king Herodes takes place on foot, not on Egypt Air. When John Milton, in his Sonnet 18, *On the late massacre in Piedmont* bemoans the brutally murdered Protestants, he ends with the hope that future generations “early may fly the Babylonian woe”²; that is, may escape Catholic tyranny. The hoped-for flight here is imagined to be swift and decisive and to remove the escapee to a safe distance. In *Ode to a Nightingale*, John Keats’s language takes full advantage of oscillating between the two senses of the verb as the speaker exclaims,

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy.³

Although the context of a bird in flight, in this case the nightingale, is indicated, the act the speaker wishes to perform is an act of fleeing, a fleeing performed in the poetic imagination on its metaphorical “wings of Poesy”. And at the end of the poem, as the nightingale has disappeared into ever deeper thicket, the poet states, “Fled is that music: – Do I wake or sleep?”⁴ The ‘fled’ is the past participle signaling the disappearance of the ‘plaintive anthem’ in the poetic language the *OED* suggested as the only remaining register. From the shimmering manner in which Keats employs the verb, it seems evident that English speakers have long availed themselves of the homophonic resemblance between the two words for poetic effect. And the *tertium comparationis* seems clear as well: the flight of birds is above all faster than any other human locomotion and so illustrates the precipitous rapidity with which human beings flee. Fleeing is always at first a fleeing from, only secondarily a flying to.

An engaging contemporary illustration of the linguistic duality of ‘flight’ in English occurs in Pico Iyer’s 1995 essay *Where Worlds Collide*. Iyer, we are told, spent an entire week at Los Angeles International Airport, LAX, to record his impressions of the place. The essay, predictably, stresses the transitory nature of airports but then foregrounds some truly unusual insights about the third-world immigrants who arrive at LAX having fled danger-

¹ Flee, v.: *Oxford English Dictionary*, Compact Edition, Vol 1., Oxford University Press, Oxford 1987, p. 1021d.

² *The Complete Poetical Works of John Milton*, D. Bush ed., Houghton Mifflin, Boston 1965, p. 198.

³ *John Keats*, E. Cook ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York 1990, p. 286.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

ous or depressed living conditions in their homelands only to encounter the very people they left behind, now transmogrified into figures of authority in America.

One day over lunch I asked my Ethiopian waitress about her life here. She liked it well enough, she said, but still she missed her home. And yet, she added, she couldn't go back. "Why not?" I asked, still smiling. "Because they killed my family," she said. "Two years back. They killed my father. They killed my brother." "They," I realized, referred to the Tigreans – many of them working just down the corridor in other parts of the hotel. So, too, Tibetans who have finally managed to flee from their Chinese-occupied homeland arrive at LAX to find Chinese faces everywhere; those who fled the Sandinistas find themselves standing next to Sandinistas fleeing their successors. And all these people from ancient cultures find themselves in a country as amnesiac as the morning, where World War II is just a rumor and the Gulf War a distant memory. Their pasts are escaped, yes, but by the same token, they are unlikely to be honored.⁵

The irony is palpable: there is no faster means of escape than an airplane, and there seems to be no more anonymous place to go to than LAX. But precisely here is where the ghosts of the past have flown (or fled) as well, so that the dual flight has changed people's relation to each other but has not erased their history. And most ironically, former refugees may now be customs or security officers. Their personal flight into Egypt (or the United States, for that matter) has also included admission to Pharaoh's Army.

It is a cultural commonplace to assert that Americans are mobile, restless, uprooted. Yet American stories feed that commonplace again and again so that it becomes a truth. Our most abiding images of Americans are persons on horseback – whether trappers, Cowboys or Indians – and persons in cars, whether we see in our minds the Joad family fleeing from Oklahoma to a California that breaks all its promises, or Jack Kerouac on the road to Denver and beyond fleeing his demons, or indeed Thelma and Louise fleeing from their past and their convenience store robberies – and eventually flying, as their car becomes airborne for its final leap into the Grand Canyon.⁶ Fleeing and flying: are these in fact two variations of the same movement?

As literary critics, we need to distinguish, classify, and put some order into the plethora of escapes that literary characters perform. I would like to suggest the following broad categories.

1. Flight as Escape (from prison, from the law, from pursuit, from religious oppression, from abusive parents or spouse or partner). The 'escape' here is thought from the escapee's point of view, fleeing an untenable situation in order to improve himself or herself. In this category we have stories of release from debtor's prison in England in exchange for emigration to the colonies: think *Moll Flanders* (1722) by Daniel Defoe, an Engli-

⁵ P. Iyer, *Where Worlds Collide*, in D.L. Ulin ed., *Writing Los Angeles, A Literary Anthology*, Library of America, New York 2002, pp. 846-847.

⁶ I refer in the preceding paragraph to John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), Jack Kerouac's narrative *On the Road* (1957) and the film *Thelma and Louise*, 1991, directed by Ridley Scott.

sh novel with an American conclusion. We also find fugitives from the law and from paternal authority (think of the boy named Colonel Sartoris in Faulkner's 1939 *Barn Burning*). Here we find Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn escaping from the brutal authority of his Pap (chapter 7, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 1884).

2. Flight as Abandonment or Disappearance (of responsibility, of family, of land or of inheritance, even of identity in order to shape or adopt a new one). In this category, the 'flight' is occasionally, though not always, imagined from the point of view of those left behind. We may think of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) whose protagonist leaves her small town for all the allure of Chicago. I would add all manner of prodigal sons who claim their inheritance and then strike out on their own. Yet American literature tends not to spend too much time on these characters: there will be no merciful father waiting to slaughter the fatted calf. Once fled, characters tend to remain footloose. Americans find, with A.B. Guthrie's Boone Caudill in *The Big Sky* (1947) or with Thomas Wolfe's Eugene Gant, that *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940). Escape is almost always figured as a positive good. John Krakauer's *Into the Wild* (1996), a story of considerable risk-taking, is a fairly recent example of the continuing attraction to readers of this traditional tale. Krakauer's narrative confronts the likelihood of death at the end of a flight. In the same manner, Kate Chopin's Edna Pontellier, in *The Awakening* (1899), flees New Orleans in order to swim, and drown, in the Gulf of Mexico. Thelma and Louise, mentioned above, interpret their collective suicide as a continuation of their journey.
3. Flight as Thwarted Departure (in a more or less orderly way; a planned leaving behind, a journey into hope or self-fulfillment, yet often mitigated by a pull back to the point of departure). A thwarted departure becomes a powerful dramatic motivation. Elisabeth Willard, the mother character in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg Ohio* (1919), unable to leave town herself, wills her son not to suffer the fate of imprisonment in a small town that she endures. Departure is valued as a positive good because it is the first step in a character's self-realization. The distinction between George Willard who will escape and his mother who cannot do so exemplifies the notable gender differences that American narratives have explored in connection with flight. Many of Willa Cather's characters are shown to have transformed an initial flight into some kind of stability. Anton Rosicky (from the 1930 story *Neighbor Rosicky*) finds peace on the prairies after fleeing New York City, while the protagonist of Cather's 1913 novel *O Pioneers!*, Alexandra Bergson, finds herself after leaving behind the tradition-bound household of her siblings. While these characters depart, their goal is to construct a homestead somewhere else, from which they will not depart again.

It would be possible to write a literary history of North America based on the categories of escape, disappearance, and thwarted departure alone. The European settlement of the North American continent was interpreted as an escape since its inception, and the interpretive pattern varied without ever being lost. The biblical exodus of the chosen people from Egypt to the land of Canaan is the single most effective trope with which the self-understanding of America's European settlers can be elucidated. It runs through all of America's foundational documents, from the concept of the 'City upon the Hill' in

John Winthrop's 1630 sermon to the self-determination of the colonists in the Declaration of Independence. Willing exile and separation and a deliberate flight from what was perceived to be limiting conditions of one kind or another were the motivations for unprecedented movement over the course of American history. The Pilgrims who founded Plymouth Colony in 1620 fled from Leiden, the Netherlands, to which they had gone originally to flee persecution in England. The different separatist movements on the soil of New England, be it the 1630 Massachusetts Bay colony, the settlement at Merry Mount, or Roger Williams's colony in Providence, are all evidence of voluntary geographical separation. The Westering movement, starting with Lewis and Clark's mission to find the sources of the Missouri, continuing with gold rushes in Georgia and California, settlements, the Mormon Trail to Utah, land allotments to settlers, the displacement of Native Americans, the railroad, the closing of the frontier, all are landmarks of this development. Religious impulse, commercial interest, and a sense of reckless adventure are difficult to separate from one another as key ingredients in these enterprises. Americans of European ancestry are almost constitutionally in flight, on the wing, taking off, catching a fast ride out of town.

In literature and popular culture, therefore, Americans who defy the law, who are in flight from crimes they may or may not have committed, who fail to integrate or to conform – these are the heroes. Fleeing in American literature is not only not a shameful thing; it is rather an honor that will gain you literary status! Huck Finn can't wait to light out for the territories and escape the civilizing influence of the widow Watson. Western marshals who pursue fugitives from justice are often themselves running away from some unsavory episode in their own lives; see the character of Ethan Edwards, played by John Wayne, in the classic Western film, *The Searchers* (1956). Jay Gatsby, the protagonist of F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby*, was a rum runner before we meet him but the reader admires him and is meant to do so. Hemingway's heroes always flee, from war, from women, most of all from themselves. Dr. Richard Kimble, the protagonist of the 60s TV series and the 1990s film, *The Fugitive*, is an abiding American hero. At Vanderbilt University in the early 1920s, a group of Southern poets and intellectuals who called themselves 'The Fugitives' gathered in retreat from what they perceived as the onslaught of Northern capitalist inhumanism. Note that to be a Fugitive in this terminology was a good thing.

This, then, is the standard narrative with which we are familiar, by osmosis as it were, so that little evidence seems required. Yet one quickly notices the strong masculine bias in the narrative. With few exceptions, some noted above, it is a man who strikes out on his own, to seek gold or fortune, to tame the wilderness, to develop a new piece of land – a man who became one of the quintessential stock characters of American fiction and myth. But there are important alternative visions of flight and disappearance. Starting in the 1990s, scholars called attention to the complexity of women characters in American fiction whose desire to leave and to flee their restricting surroundings is counterbalanced by domestic ties and the need to establish or maintain a home. They stay. They care. They fulfill an ecological responsibility in a dual sense.

Janis Stout noted in her 1998 study, *Through the Window, Out the Door*, that male quest narratives, long familiar to us, often dramatize the departure, the journey, the en-

counter with the goal, and the return home. Women's narratives, by contrast, inspired by the actual constrained conditions of women's domestic lives, dramatize especially the moment of departure, a moment whose promise may remain unfulfilled. Stout takes her argument through the history of modernism and its aftermath, framed by Sarah Orne Jewett on one end and by Marilynne Robinson on the other, with close attention given to Mary Austin, Willa Cather, Anne Tyler, Toni Morrison, and Joan Didion. One central aim of Stout's study is to provide a balance to the tacitly accepted heroic narrative of American self-made men who moved away from wherever they were in order to realize themselves. Movement may be endemic to these stories, but we must never take 'movement' to be an innocent act. A full study of 'movement', Stout contends, would also need to pay attention to Africans who were moved by force instead of moving by will, or to Native Americans, who were removed against their will from ancient tribal grounds.⁷ An entire strand within the American canon is devoted to slave narratives and the escapes, sometimes successful, sometimes ending deadly, featured within them. The late 19th century's Great Migration of blacks to the industrial cities of the North (Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland) is a continuation of this historical heritage.

When 'flight' becomes not just a means to an end, but becomes the narratively foregrounded subject of investigation, we can begin to appreciate its complexity. Of the notable American authors who use the term 'flight' in the title of a work of fiction, three come to mind readily. The earliest is Sarah Orne Jewett of Maine, best-known for *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, a late naturalist or early modernist work of 1896. Willa Cather admired Jewett deeply and dedicated her own *O Pioneers!* to Jewett. Jewett's early story *The Flight of Betsey Lane*⁸ describes the unlikely disappearance of the eponymous heroine, sixty-nine years old at the time of her flight, from an old folks' poor farm one summer morning. Betsey travels to Philadelphia to visit the Centennial Fair of 1876, without so much as a word to her gossipy friends, spends nine days meeting people from all over the world, finds them all to be interesting but essentially human, and returns to the poor farm when her money, which nobody knew about, has run out. The story thematizes a necessary but ultimately inconsequential flight which ends with Betsey's return to the domestic community that has sustained her for all these years. Flight and return: this is one of the possible patterns for women who flee.

Male authors will occasionally give a similar twist to their stories of flight. Although John Steinbeck and John Updike, respectively, deal with adolescent male heroes, they nonetheless dramatize foiled escapes. Steinbeck's story *Flight* in 1938 (integrated into *The*

⁷ The preceding paragraph offers an incomplete summary of the complex, richly annotated argument made by J. Stout in chapter one, "Finding a Way Out: The Imagination of Departure" of her book *Through the Window, out the Door. Women's Narratives of Departure from Austin and Cather to Tyler, Morrison, and Didion*, University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa/London 1998. Stout raises questions about Africans and Native Americans in her Preface, p. xvi.

⁸ Published in 1893 in the *Scribner's Magazine*, 14, August, pp. 213-225, according to Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2003, p. 217, n. 48. Lather that year, collected in S. Orne Jewett, *A Native of Winby and Other Tales*, Mifflin and Company, Houghton 1893.

Long Valley), chronicles the sudden maturation of a Mexican-American teenager who kills a man, flees his pursuers, is reduced to bare survival but finally faces his death heroically. Updike's story *Flight*, first published in 1959 in *The New Yorker*, also features a teenager who vainly tries to live up to the dreams and hopes for fame and distance that his thwarted and artistically inclined mother has for him. Ironically, it is a domestic entanglement, the boy's affection for his unambitious small-town girlfriend, that ties him to the town Updike tellingly called Olinger, a place to linger until the end, when the boy Allen gives up his girlfriend to leave town. Updike's four *Rabbit* novels from 1960 to 1990, his most sustained work, may well be the most careful examination of a thwarted flight in American fiction. Rabbit Angstrom is constantly in flight yet never arrives at a place of ultimate satisfaction. Stout's analysis, then, can be seen to apply not only to female fictions of escape but more generally to stories of thwarted escape irrespective of gender.

In a concluding move, I want to suggest that American writers have imbibed the various scenarios of male and female flight so thoroughly as to effortlessly reproduce them in different and noteworthy settings. Barbara Kingsolver's 2012 novel, *Flight Behavior*, gives new urgency to the motif insofar as Kingsolver joins the two senses of 'flight' with a narrative of climate change. Set in a poor mountain town in Appalachia, most likely Eastern Tennessee, this novel revolves around a huge colony of Monarch butterflies that mistakenly – as a result of losing its Mexican habitat due to a human-induced mudslide – attempts to pass the winter in middle America, where the climate may well destroy the larvae and thus destroy practically the entire species. For most of the novel, the monarchs do not fly at all: they are grounded (although they are literally hanging cocooned in trees), mercilessly exposed to a climate they were not built to withstand. On one level, this novel is Kingsolver's dramatic enactment of the disastrous ecological consequences of climate change.

But the butterflies are not the only protagonists of the novel. The main human character is Dellarobia Turnbow, a young woman with two children, caught in a shotgun marriage to a nice but bumbling and unambitious man. Dellarobia is a woman who needs to flee and does not know how. In the opening chapter, she seeks to escape headlong into an affair with a stranger, a telephone line man: "[her] heart had just one instruction left: run"⁹. Then she discovers the miracle, an entire forest blazing orange, a burning bush, a lake of fire¹⁰: a sign for her to turn back. She has come upon the butterflies without yet knowing what they are.

Neither physical escape nor emotional flight will be Dellarobia's choice in the end. As the story of the wintering insects has made national news and an investigate team of entomologists arrives on the scene, Dellarobia earnestly seeks to escape into knowledge. She takes on menial jobs in the field laboratory set up by Ovid, the professor for whom she feels a kind of puppy love. In the final pages of the novel, when a flood of biblical proportions has washed away much of the town just as the few surviving monarchs took flight and, presumably, will go on to survive, Dellarobia eventually makes an orderly getaway: she will move to the next town, finally attend college, and lead a weekends-only marriage and fam-

⁹ B. Kingsolver, *Flight Behavior*, Harper/Collins, New York 2012, p. 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 16.

ily life, performing a social rupture that in her parochial town is nearly unthinkable. The title *Flight Behavior* as well as most chapter headings refer throughout to the endangered lives of the butterflies as well as to the critically challenged life of Dellarobia. Kingsolver suggests strongly that biological, geographical, and environmental factors are determinative of the lives of both animals and human beings, and that the language of biology may adequately express the systemic problems both for the survival of the monarch species and the survival of Dellarobia's community.

In this novel, Kingsolver offers her readers a variation on the domestic plot of women tied to home but desirous of additional fulfillment. While offering the potential of adulterous escape to both partners in the marriage, she does not realize it for either of them. The escape she accords Dellarobia is one into education – delayed but not abandoned. Kingsolver's academic training as biologist and her long writing apprenticeship come together in this text as she suggests biology as the basis for a cycle of life that includes departure and return in harmony with seasons and elements. The departures can be domestic (leaving your parents to move in with your husband, or worse, your in-laws) or cosmic: the centuries-old migration pattern of the butterflies across the American continent is violently disturbed by human influence, with the potential for complete extinction. The Turnbow family's plan to sell the very acreage on which the butterflies have settled to a logging company makes them, even them, in their insular environment, potential partners in crime to the destruction of the natural world. Although the domestic circumstances of Dellarobia's life are anything but pleasant, and the religious indoctrination of the small town is suffocating at times – though less so than the social control exercised by her in-laws – Kingsolver insists that domesticity is part of ecology. If we remember, then, that 'ecology' goes back to the Greek *oikos*, house, we may understand this novel as an appeal to us to care for the greater house in which we live, our domestic earth. Housekeeping in today's world is not just care of the family and dwelling, but care of the living space of humanity; a living space, moreover, which we share with trees and butterflies.

Thinking about flight in American fiction, we may come to see that all escapes from a house are merely escapes into another house. John Winthrop, Huck Finn, Alexandra Bergson: they flee only a constricting environment. The flight from, and the flight to, are two parts of the same movement. Kingsolver's novel successfully merges the global and the domestic spheres. The British punk rock group, *The Clash*, phrased this particular human predicament more succinctly than I have done here in their unforgettable song, "Darling gotta let me know: / Should I stay or should I go?"

Keywords

American Literature, Escape, Flight Behavior, Kingsolver Barbara.