



## *Falling from the Past. Geographies of exceptionalism in two novels by Jay McInerney*

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### GEOGRAPHICAL EXCEPTIONALISM

Jay McInerney's novels *Brightness Falls* (hereafter *BF*), published in 1992, and *The Good Life (GL)*, 2006, narrate the lives of Russell and Corrine Calloway, a book editor and a former stockbroker, across the span of fourteen years, from 1987 to 2001. A new married white couple among the aspiring yuppies in 1980s New York, they get through the 1987 downturn, the financial crash occurring simultaneously with their breakup (*BF*), and are back together in 2001. After September 11, they face a serious marriage crisis, and Corrine starts a relationship with Luke McGavock, a fascinating upper-middle class man, who has recently retired from his work as a businessman (*GL*).

The two novels focus on the representation of the city of New York as an essential stage in the definition of American identity, in the final phase of the Cold War and immediately after September 11. The construction of urban space and the negotiation with its outside define the characters' belonging to the American nation, as if what America is and what it is not had depended first on Manhattan business and social life, and then on the void left by the destruction of the World Trade Center. New York City is thus represented as a geographically exceptional space, an enchanted realm that, at the height of yuppie culture, was the synecdochic equivalent of the United States as a whole, and, after September 11, has come to epitomize a void that needs to be symbolically filled.



Such a reading intriguingly dovetails with the emphasis American studies has lately put on exceptionalism as a discourse that has crucially informed both the construction of the American nation and its worldwide understanding. At the basis of the notion of exceptionalism, as Donald Pease notes, is the configuration of the American past as “lacking the history of class antagonism that they [American studies scholars] posited as the precondition for world communism,” (2010: 60-61) which not surprisingly resulted in the celebration of triumphing capitalism in the 1980s. Deeply questioning the nature of exceptionalism in the aftermath of September 11, Pease maintains that

[a]fter the attack on the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001, Bush inaugurated a State of Exception that did not just change the rules and norms informing the United States’ domestic and foreign policy, but it also changed the framework through which those rules and norms could be interpreted. (2010: 76)

Pease emphasizes the ideological framework and the political unconscious through which the lives of American people started being reconfigured and radically reshaped after the terrorist attacks. In a 2009 book, Pease had used Jacqueline Rose’s notion of “state of fantasy”, pointing out in the introduction (emblematically titled “The United States of Fantasy”) that “State fantasies incite an operative imagination endowed with the power to solicit the citizens’ desire to believe in the reality of its production,” (2009: 4) and thus insisting on the tautological nature of fantasy, which draws its substance from the meanings it provides for its constitutive elements. The circularity of the State fantasy ideology fuels citizens’ hopes and expectations through the construction of myths and icons whose efficacy lies in their alleged and unquestioned ordinariness. Nurturing not only the political desires and expectations of each citizen, but also her/his imaginary relationship with the apparatuses of power and the geographical and political components of the nation, fantasy is substantiated in a combination of different elements that metaleptically conjure up the wholeness of the nation and in the paradigmatic frame that keeps these elements together, providing them with a unifying perspective.

The detour McInerney takes in these two novels parallels and reconfigures Pease’s definition of the State fantasy in geographical terms. Each place represented, charged with a specific symbolical meaning, turns out to function as the circumscribed and local component of a fantasized national identity. This mechanism reinforces exceptionalism as an essential component of State fantasy, each city or region mentioned in the novels being conceived and represented as the (almost Hegelian) concretion of a definite stage in the historical process.

Louis Althusser’s theorization of ideology, which implies the State as an articulated structure that informs and keeps together its fundamental elements, resonates in Pease’s words about fantasy. The fictive and self-sufficient structure that



undergirds the relation between citizens and State apparatuses is introjected and obliterated, and their constitutive mutual dependence is reconfigured as the expression of direct and spontaneous consensus. National belonging thus becomes the unconscious performance of a role the State assigns to citizens, in order for them to act out the rules necessary for this regulatory pattern to function properly. The state of exception produced by the ghostly presence of an external threat (the Soviet Union during the Cold War, Islamic terrorism after September 11), *de facto* reinforces this paradigm, by sanctioning a state of permanent emergency and encoding it within the State-citizen relations grid.

Pease maintains that “[l]aw played a key role in the formation of the U.S. imperial state in that it supplied the state with the power to impose its rule in the name of the law’s adherence to exceptionalist norms.” (2009: 34) Besides law, however, as McInerney’s novels show, also territory plays a fundamental role in this process, being one of the instruments through which the relationships between citizens and State are strengthened. Thanks to a fantasized mapping of the land, US geographical entities are ascribed a specific meaning in the symbolical construction of the national territory. It is the text Pease quotes in his introduction, Jacqueline Rose’s *States of Fantasy*, that provides a powerful insight into the symbolic role of land and territory in the construction of the State as a juridical institution based on mythical, ancestral foundations. Discussing Israeli claim to sovereignty to the territories occupied in 1968, Rose points out that

[m]ost concrete of referents, the one whose tangible, manipulable substance it would be pointless to deny, the land immediately forces us up against the heavy symbolic quotient which gives to any referent its shape. [...] Emptied of its history, the land is packed with appropriating, mythological, intent. [...] a signifier [that] can race across the pages of history from empty – the presupposition was of course that this land was empty – to (over)full sign. [...] If the land has meaning, its ultimate promise is to bring all meaning to an end.” (1996: 24-5)

Similarly, the representation of the United States in geographical and territorial terms contributes to the ideological (or fantasized) construction of the State, thus permeating citizens’ awareness of their territorial belonging as an essential component of the American State of fantasy. The condition of permanent exposure to the invisible threats that menace the integrity of the American territory renders the symbolic elaboration of the American land all the more powerful. This process produces, for any (allegedly) endangered area, a surplus of meaning to be reinvested and recombined in new normative schemes, as happens, in McInerney’s novels, with the substitution of the southern US for Manhattan.



The notion of geographic exceptionalism is, thus, pivotal to an understanding of the shifting, in the two novels, from the representation of New York City as a synecdoche that encompasses and subsumes the US in its entirety to the gradual materialization of the whole country, itself, in turn, translated into symbolic terms. In *Brightness Falls* the presence of an anonymous, widespread territory outside New York is merely evoked, intermittently surfacing in the narrative texture of the book, to clearly emerge only in one marginal chapter. In *The Good Life* the discovery of the rest of the American territory works as the new geographical and ideological perspective in the wake of the recent, tragic events.

As in a play of Chinese boxes, in *Brightness Falls* Manhattan stands for the whole city of New York, and New York for the whole United States. In the long route taken in the two novels, both Russell and Corrine enact the American dream, strongly redefining it in geographical terms, bestowing on each place they discover and experience a precise, as well as quite idealized, meaning. Besides New York, the cities where relevant episodes of the books are set, Los Angeles (*BF*) and Franklin, Tennessee (*GL*), are visualized as fantasized places where the protagonists can project their dreams and finally overcome their losses.

#### OCTOBER 1987. GENEALOGY OF THE FALL

McInerney's debut novel, *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984), is by now regarded as one of the manifestos of the yuppie generation, the novel that best epitomizes the atmosphere David Leavitt evoked in his 1985 essay "The New Lost Generation", by saying that "there could be no greater thrill than being part of the crush riding the escalator down from the Pan Am Building into Grand Central at 5:00." (1985: 92) In McInerney's novels, as well as in Leavitt's essay, New York perfectly fits the requirements for the fantasized place his characters look for, thus allowing for the desired perception of their own selves within the urban space and for the self-projection of New York newcomers onto a mythic urban reality, configured according to the ideological patterns of yuppie culture.

New York City, the capital of the twentieth century, "[i]mage and symbol for America," (Baelo-Allué 2009: 170) is celebrated in *Brightness Falls* as the "capital capital of the world," (*BF*: 315) and thus circumfused with that aura of myth that played a prominent role in the common imagination of the time. Taking a choral perspective, *Brightness Falls*, rather than elaborating a linear plot around one or two characters, uses the different characters as independent elements that, retrospectively, feature a panoramic display of New York. The novel thus provides a collective rendering of the city as an organic totality whose distinct parts, differentiated and differently operating as they might be, nevertheless cooperate in the construction of a unique frame and build up a collective synthesis of the city.



*Brightness Falls* is a novel about the rise and fall of the New York dream, a "lengthy refashioning of *The Great Gatsby* in which the real Jay Gatsby never appears," (McCown 1992: 256) and a narrative construction of the city according to the same mythology that had fascinated James Gatz and the other characters in Fitzgerald's masterpiece. This parallel is made explicit in the words of one of Russell's mentors, the writer Victor Propp, who argues:

"I feel that we in this insane city are living in an era in which anything can happen. Do you remember what Nick Carraway said as he was driving into Manhattan in *Gatsby's* big car and the skyline of the city came into view over the Queensboro Bridge? As they cross into the city, Nick says, 'Anything can happen now that we've slid over this bridge ... anything at all.'" (BF: 79).

The character thus conflates in a single perspective the mythical perception of New York and the role it was acquiring in the 1980s. Similarly, going back to her arrival in New York years later, Corrine's feelings evoke "her pulse quickening as darkness fell and the walls and cubicles of office life dissolved and anything seemed possible [...] the electricity and promise of the Manhattan twilight into which they plunged as a couple." (GL: 154)<sup>1</sup>

After September 11, this image of New York as a place of indomitable vitality abruptly dissipates, and for the first time people living there perceive death as something that can occur even in New York City. In the novel, Corrine all of a sudden realizes that there are no cemeteries in the city: "I just realized there aren't really any graveyards in Manhattan. [...] It's like the dead have been banished to the boroughs and New Jersey. [...] We don't have the space or the time for the dead." (GL: 163-64)<sup>2</sup> A living mosaic of urban and existential mythographies, New York had been conceived

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<sup>1</sup> As Sanford Pinsker notices (1986), in the economy of the novel *The Great Gatsby* and *Manhattan Transfer* can be read as the two extreme polarities between which McInerney locates his story. While the debt to *The Great Gatsby* is explicit, McInerney's introduction to *Manhattan Transfer* tacitly brings to the fore his attempt at creating a novel capable of merging together Dos Passos's organic approach to socio-political issues and Fitzgerald's analytic stance on the single characters, thus also implying a parallel between the 1980s and the New York of the 1920s recounted by Dos Passos and Fitzgerald (as he reminds us, *The Great Gatsby* and *Manhattan Transfer* were both published in 1925). Discussing Dos Passos's prose, moreover, McInerney carries out an analysis that, to some extent, would fit his own work, whose evident flaws could be read as deliberate attempts at matching narrative and stylistic devices to the peculiarities of the narrated object: "Most critics agree that *Manhattan Transfer* register a fervent denunciation of a society that subsumes and crushes the individual. And yet Dos Passos's method may be almost too mimetic of the disease he portrays, his condemnation so complete that it is difficult for the reader to insert a wedge of judgment." (McInerney 1986: 9)

<sup>2</sup> The comparison she makes with Paris sounds all the more interesting, since it insists on the singular (and exceptional) perception of death in the US as radically different from the European one: "You know Père-Lachaise in Paris, that huge cemetery? Every weekend, the Parisians walk and picnic among their illustrious dead." (GL: 164)



as a space in which death was a transcended occurrence. Now this expression of the repressed collective unconscious, long pushed to the invisible outside of the city, immediately appears at its very core, preventing any attempt to react because of the distance that had always separated New York as a living fantasy from the actual, mortal lives of its inhabitants.<sup>3</sup>

Characters in *Brightness Falls* are represented according to criteria of geographical belonging. The novel thus configures a fantasized map of the US where old stereotypes are adjusted to the present reality and where New York is the heart of an imaginary nation and the irresistible catalyst for yuppies and baby boomers. Neither Russell nor Corrine are from New York. Russell's family still lives in the Midwest, and Russell himself is portrayed as intimately linked to his native region, whose typical and conventional simplicity and genuineness he apparently preserves. His arrival in New York, "the land of the freaks and home of the slaves" (*BF*: 22), where he works in a famous publishing house and begins his climb towards success, his attempt to launch a new company, his increasingly unhappy marriage with Corrine, who works as a stockbroker until she becomes completely disgusted with her job, and their final crisis, which happens to coincide with the Wall Street crash of October 1987, can be read as the inevitable stages of an ordinary American success story, whose peculiarity lies in the role McInerney ascribes to New York as the only possible setting for elaborating the 1980s national dream. As Evelyn Toynton writes in her review of the novel, "All these events, which never manage to seem inevitable, are intended to have a larger significance as part of the impending collapse of our corrupt civilization," (1992: 56) thus emphasizing the rhetorical value of the novel as a modern epic orchestrated around the mythical envisaging of New York.

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<sup>3</sup> An interesting, albeit sometimes pointlessly provocative, reading of the perception of the attack against the Twin Towers is provided by Jean Baudrillard and other scholars who, drawing on his work, have pointed out the replicative structure of the Twin Towers as exactly mirroring the serial nature of the present global system; it follows that the attacks were all the more tragic since they destroyed one of the most crucial tenets of the present world system and the way it has by now affected our imagination. A passage from one of Baudrillard's essays is particularly relevant here, since it confirms McInerney's depiction of New York as a mythological space, and September 11 as a mortal wound in the configuration of New York as a city of fantasy. In his "Requiem for the Twin Towers", Baudrillard argues: "Moreover, although the two towers have disappeared, they have not been annihilated. Even in their pulverized state, they have left behind an intense awareness of their presence. No one who knew them can cease imagining them and the imprint they made on the skyline from all the points of the city. Their end in material space has borne them off into a definitive imaginary space. By the grace of terrorism, the World Trade Center has become the world's most beautiful building – the eight wonder of the world!" (2002: 48). Drawing on Baudrillard's and Paul Virilio's reflections, Bülent Diken resorts to the notion of fantasy to argue about the configuration of the new global order after September 11, as a virtual space whose inner structure can be retrieved only by way of imagination: "We no longer have a 'society' organised around the clean-cut territory of a nation-state but increasingly, transversal networks, channelling flows of capital and people. Indeed, 'society' can only be constructed as a fantasy today, as is the case with the popular Big Brother TV-show." (2001: 10)



Many of the other characters are not from New York, which complicates the representation of the geographical mythology of the book, highlighting the perception of the city as a centripetal point of convergence of whatever was going on in the whole country. Even in the chapters or the single sections of the novel set in California or in Frankfurt, the spaces represented are purposely contrasted with New York, and therefore dependent on its centrality. The rest of the US territory is conceptualized merely as a nebulous assemblage of scattered and hardly locatable cities that, in narrative terms, belong to the characters' past lives: the undistinguished spaces they have left behind before moving to the only place where their potential could be really and entirely fulfilled. What that means is that, though idolized as the only tangible and materialized American reality, New York itself is a place essentially made up of the projections of those who, coming from the outside, have finally achieved their dreams by locating themselves in some part of the city (Russell's office is said to be "one of those interstitial regions of the city which until recently had been nameless. It was between Gramercy Park and Chelsea", *BF*: 27). In the same way, most of the characters are strongly differentiated on the basis of their provenance, and animated and recognizable by a sort of *genius loci*, as if essential traits of their personalities were molded after the local color of their native cities.

The financial crash in October 1987 is one of the causes of Russell and Corrine's marital crisis. Though not being really obsessed with money and work, as suits the yuppie stereotype he seems to perfectly fit into, Russell finds himself trapped within the condition of those who, investing more than they could afford to lose and suffering great damage from the financial crash, witnessed the immediate, unavoidable crumbling of their very life, as if it only depended on professional affirmation. Suspected to have an affair with his business partner Trina Cox, deserted by Corrine for this reason, and at the same time unable to arrest the financial losses his company has started suffering after the crash, Russell sees his life and achievements suddenly fall apart.

The continuous shift from the realistic representation of cities to their mythical rendering as ideological projections and idealized images of America is fully rendered when, after October 19 and the end of his marriage, Russell decides to go to Los Angeles and work as a screenwriter.<sup>4</sup> After every regulatory scheme has crumbled

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<sup>4</sup> Moving to California is a version of the American dream that has had long and celebrated currency in American literature. It is not so much the literature of the frontier as the novels of the 1930s Great Depression that provide a clear palimpsest for these passages of *Brightness Falls*. In particular, there is a striking coincidence with John Steinbeck's novels (for instance, *Of Mice and Men*, 1937, or *The Grapes of Wrath*, 1939), whose characters move to California after the financial catastrophe of 1929; additionally, the images of Los Angeles conveyed by McInerney seem to echo several passages from *The Day of the Locust* by Nathanael West (1939). Though harboring "the traditional suspicions about southern California. He imagined it to be the headquarters of cult religions, health fads and Babylonian decadence - the last being the substantial attraction. [...] the outer edge of the whole migration away



under the financial and affective collapse Russell has undergone, his quest for new, heterotopic places is narratively translated into the opposition between the different processes of fantasizing New York and Los Angeles. The hopes Russell had built on his very arrival in New York, his aspirations and desires, are now displaced and reconfigured according to the shape of the new city:

Years before, he'd moved to New York believing himself to be penetrating to the center of the world, and all of the time he lived there the illusion of a center had held: the sense of there always being a door behind further mysteries were available, a ballroom at the top of the sky from which further the irresistible music wafted [...] But Los Angeles had no discernible center and was also without edges and corners. (BF: 389)

Feeling completely spaced out on the endless surface of his new adoptive city, Russell idealizes Los Angeles even in economic terms as the complement and counterbalance of the New York he had experienced, redefining it as the homeland of an improbable socialism, albeit a "lucrative, unofficial" one. (BF: 390) Los Angeles, thus, participates in the process of mythical and exceptionalistic translation of space, marking, not unlike New York, its profound difference from the place where Russell was born and raised, the Midwest occasionally evoked and briefly described when he visits his father, but at the same time identified as completely opposed to New York. Thanks to Los Angeles's topographic structure, Russell constructs it as the place where his rebirth can be properly located, subsuming in the gaze he casts on the actual configuration of the city the traditional stereotypes associated to it and its conventional representation as surreal and phantasmagoric. Perceived as equal and opposite to New York City, Los Angeles, simultaneously the last frontier and the boundless city where he expects to recover from his affective and financial losses and start his life anew, reenacts the traditional narratives of California as American fantasy, the stereotypical golden state where anyone can make easy money and where dreams come true.

#### SEPTEMBER 2001. FANTASIZING THE SOUTH AFTER SEPTEMBER 11

The events occurred in October 1987 are narrated in *Brightness Falls* through repeated references to the falling down of bodies, investments, dreams and expectations, bespeaking a tragic, catastrophic perception of what was going on, though it did not affect ordinary people but only rich businessmen and stockbrokers. "Apparently the world hadn't ended," (BF: 383) McInerney notices, after having pointed out, with disquietingly prophetic tones, that "Half a trillion dollars had

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from history, culture, Europe", (BF: 388) Russell finds himself trapped in the fantasy he needs in order to get through a difficult period.





allegedly vanished in a day, leaving behind neither smoke nor rubble. So far as one could see, the buildings of the metropolis were still standing." (BF: 382)

In *The Good Life*, Corrine lingers on her personal reactions to the 1987 crash, recalling it after September 11; aware as she is of the distance that separates the present time from the 1980s, she is nevertheless struck by the impact the financial crash had on her life and on the lives of the people she used to know:

another lifetime, the bull market of the 1980s. Even though I never really felt like I belonged, there were moments riding that wave when I could almost suspend my disbelief. Then it all came crashing down. Not like this, of course, but the crash of '87 seemed, I don't know, cataclysmic at the time. (GL: 160)

In comparison with the present, something like a lost age of innocence seems to have faded away, as the two falls, analogous as they might have been in their immediate perception, had signaled two different stages of progression toward a tragically attained maturity, not only for the protagonists of the story, but for the totality of the city as a mythic place. *Brightness Falls* opens with a brief preamble written, differently from the rest of the book, in the first person, whose first paragraph impressively ends with a vague and ominous prophecy: "a girl in my unit who claimed to suffer from precognition declared that she could see paper airplanes crashing to the pavement of Manhattan, fifty miles away." (BF: 3) In *The Good Life*, the market crisis of 1987 is echoed, though the fall has now acquired the immediacy and the tragic concreteness of the terrorist attacks. The Twin Towers, abruptly dissolved symbols of New York, have disclosed an uncanny empty space that people need to supplement with new and fantasized objects and places; as Sonia Baelo-Allué notices, "[t]he collapse of the Twin Towers altered New York's geography and brought chaos to an ordered world in which boundaries had been clearly established." (2009: 170) The urban patterns that had provided a security scheme for the protagonists, whose belonging to the fantasized space of New York City was balanced by an indistinct and blurred perception of the rest of the United States, crumble simultaneously with the material destruction of the Twin Towers, thus radically and tragically questioning the certainties on which the protagonists of the novel had built their identities. It follows that, after September 11, America was all of a sudden perceived as a wider, and as such hardly manageable, reality, not limited to nor in any way subsumed by the protected space of Manhattan.

The first part of *The Good Life* outlines Russell and Corrine's daily life fourteen years after the events recounted in *Brightness Falls*, describing them as a happy married couple in the lively neighborhood of TriBeCa. The words of Corrine's unreliable sister, Hilary, who is back from California, sound as the ironic counterpart of what New York will turn out to be in the rest of the book: "I'm tired of L.A. and that whole phony scene. New York is so much more real, you know?" (GL: 48) As the novel



shows, this necessity will produce a new set of imagined realities, thus reconfiguring real places according to the ideological needs of the moment.

Set against the backdrop of Ground Zero, *The Good Life* centers on Corrine and Luke starting their romance, while volunteering for the homeless and the rescue workers.

In a way, the World Trade Center represented both the economic power of the city and its symbolic power. In the novel its collapse makes many New Yorkers believe they are witnessing the beginning of the end of the whole idea of the city. [...] Due to this symbolic function, the collapse of the World Trade Centre distorts the whole city. [...] As the love affair between Luke and Corrine develops, the barricades keep moving down from Fourteenth Street to Canal Street, then down to Chambers, ending the siege of Corrine's neighborhood. (Baelo-Allué 2009: 172)

Everything has lost meaning around them, as the immediate disappearance of one of the most renowned symbols of New York amounts to the annihilation of any background for them both, recasting their existences to a brand-new, unprecedented condition. Corrine and Luke tentatively compare the financial crash of 1987 to what has just happened, evoking past events during a passionate and increasingly intimate conversation. Specific episodes and characters of *Brightness Falls* are mentioned, and, slowly emerging as something that had been previously repressed, Luke's southern origins are gradually foregrounded as implicitly suggesting the existence of alternative spaces, capable, as the novel shows in its final chapters, of accommodating an unprecedented spatial and geographical articulation of American exceptionalism, far away from the tragedy that had suddenly overcome New York. Highly critical of New York exceptionalism as he might be in *Brightness Falls*, McInerney nevertheless participates more broadly in a new understanding of American exceptionalism, as it is configured and elaborated in the mythic construction of the South featured in *The Good Life*.

The South is thus evoked as a fantasized place at the beginning of the second part of the novel, an area strongly characterized as profoundly ingrained in the definition of American identity. The disaster of September 11 is signaled by the reference to September 12th, the "ash Wednesday" that opens the chapter, where Luke is described as "a statue commemorating some ancient victory, some noble defeat - a Confederate general." (*GL*: 73) The first person that Corrine meets at Ground Zero is envisaged essentially as a man from the South, as she is able to infer from "the molasses residue of a southern accent. *Seen* sounding almost like *sane*." (*GL*: 74) Gradually, the opposition between the urban scene of New York and the ancestral, almost mythic, image of the South becomes, at the same time, more profound and more blurred. On the one hand, in fact, New York is described as the city of the "urban



sophisticate" (*GL*: 87), inhabited by people known for "the bluntness as well as the high polish" (*GL*: 109), while the South is evoked through conventional sketches that join together rural simplicity and the aristocratic manners of old country gentlemen. On the other hand, the two realities, clearly distinct at the beginning of the novel, increasingly overlap to become perfectly equivalent at the end. Here the southern defeat after the civil war is paralleled to September 11, and both episodes are considered as two distinct, but similar, milestones in the process of retrieving and rebuilding American identity after trauma.

After September 11, the South starts being perceived as a real option, a place to go and to live, and not simply an imagined location in the middle of nowhere. Yet, however right Baelo-Allué may be in pointing out that

there is also a strong need to leave the city for the suburbs, which become the place to find a face-to-face community of identifiable people. [...] This philosophy is best summarised when Ashley decides she does not want to study in New York but in Tennessee, (2009: 176)

this need does not amount to an epistemic shift from a mythic projection of the city of New York to a critically realistic understanding of other American realities. On the contrary, it results in a slippage from one geographical fantasy to another, both organized according to consolidated clichés and the unconfessed need to find a new territorial order after the destruction of the previous, much more familiar, one.

Evoked by scattered reference throughout the novel, the South provides the actual setting for the last part of the book, "Holidays", when, after his daughter's fleeing to Tennessee to her grandmother's house, Luke decides to go back to his native home. Though narrated through a gradual discovery of the glorious history of the South, this section of the book is significant for its blatant attempt to retrieve a national mythology traditionally associated with slavery and racism. Almost entirely overlooking any trace of the African American heritage, Tennessee becomes the place where America can start a new course in its history, being thus configured within a new ideological frame that transmutes its past into a glorious futurity to be embraced. The whole narrative, thus, works as a slow progression toward the final section, whose emphasis on the quasi-mythical South functions not just as the diegetic epilogue of the story, but as the necessary nemesis of the construction of Americanness after September 11.

The projection of the South over the disappearing scenario of the 1980s USA, epitomized by the void left by the Twin Towers and the complete failure of Corrine and Russell's marriage, allows for a renegotiation of the founding criteria of national identity. The differences between Franklin and New York are among the most recurring themes of the whole narrative, articulated as it is through heated oppositions between a series of clichés obviously attached to both places. For



example, the abundance of a typical southern lunch is contrasted with the food paranoia commonly associated to upper class people from northern urban realities: "Anorexia is kind of like a religion in New York," (*GL*: 293) and, in the same way, the image of a true born New Yorker like Sasha, Luke's wife, acquires the grotesque characteristics of an insufferable, snobbish person, who is said to have "endured these meals over the years with the brittle forbearance of a princess visiting the cancer ward," (*GL*: 294) and who is, later on, criticized by her own daughter for lavishly showing off on the so called "benefit scene." (*GL*: 298) Sasha, overtly disapproving of her daughter's expressed desire to attend college in Tennessee, harshly replies to her objection: "There's life outside of New York, Mom." "There's life on the bottom of the ocean, Ashley, but fortunately for us, our ancestors crawled up on the beach and developed lungs and feet." (*GL*: 364)

Remembrances of the civil war are singled out as traces of a past by now completely legitimated as part of a collective national memory. All the more, a striking parallel between New York's recent destruction and the defeat of the Confederate States more than a century before is carried out in the general attempt to envisage American national identity as a timeless epic narrative, made up of triumphs and misfortunes, in an uncritical reading of history as an eternal present, a constellation of recurring events that, heterogeneous as they might be, provide an organic sense of unity thanks to their ideological belonging to a metaphysical American fantasy. As Donald Pease has put it, "a fantasy that was designed to transmute the South from a discredited region to an exemplary geographical space in which to commemorate the origin of the nation." (2009: 147)<sup>5</sup>

When Luke pays a visit to the Civil War memorial, McInerney writes one of the most striking passages in the novel, not so much for the impressiveness of the scene depicted, as for its unstated, yet absolutely obvious, correlation to Ground Zero. Luke, who is described in the rest of the novel as totally oblivious of his geographical roots, and despising any form of nationalistic and traditional rhetoric, mutely contemplates the graveyard, totally immersed in the scene while walking

carefully to the gate and out among the gravestones, weaving through the narrow alleys separating Texas, Mississippi, Georgia, and Tennessee, each row marked by its state flag, wondering if they had anything to say to him. [...] he sat

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<sup>5</sup> The symbolic value of Tennessee can be traced even beyond the explicit references to the Civil War. The Tennessee Valley Authority, the only big corporation owned by the Federal Government in the United States, with the objective of supporting the economic growth on the entire State of Tennessee and of small areas in the bordering States, was created in 1933 through a law signed by Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a visible trace of what the New Deal represented for the agrarian society of southern states. This would be a further extension of the subtextual references to the crisis ensued after the 1929 and the social and political reconfiguration of the USA in the 1930s, already hinted at in the two novels through detectable references to Dos Passos, Fitzgerald, Steinbeck and West.



up between the white stones and listened, waiting for the dead to communicate. (GL: 304)

The South thus acquires a central role in elaborating a national fantasy after September 11. Faintly materializing on the novel's imaginary map, Ground Zero is charged with a supplementary, highly symbolical role, being substantially equated with the Confederate States graveyard. While providing a fantasized locus for national regeneration and rebirth, southern history is rehabilitated as an essential component of national identity, following a strategy that perfectly replicates what Pease argues about *The Patriot*, Roland Emmerich's movie released in 2000: "The [...] strategies of historical forgetting were not designed merely to assimilate the South within an encompassing national geography; they rehabilitated Southern history in its entirety." (2009: 134) The symbolical return to Tennessee thus evokes a specific phase of American history by now totally incorporated in the mythic construction of the past, in which the whole country was able to recover after a big and apparently overwhelming catastrophe.

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