

The Recoil Effect of Retaliation: Leatherstocking's Unerring Arm of ('Divine') Justice

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James Fenimore Cooper had an unerring instinct for cultural tensions and paradoxes. When he dreamed of Leatherstocking as an ideal American, he bravely addressed the tension arising from the clash of Christian idealism and with the harsh necessities of the frontier reality—the New Testament ethics of non-violence and forgiveness was put to test against the archaic ethics of violent revenge and retaliation as “justified” responses to the sense of being wronged.

Since Ancient Greece, many cultures have tried to curb the vicious circle of retaliations and transfer the execution of justice to a higher, impersonal agency (gods or courts), and pointed to what I call a *retaliation effect*—a back-hitting force of violence that has a degrading impact on the agent of revenge. This topic is exploited in Ancient Greek tragedies as well as in Renaissance revenge tragedies.¹ Nowadays, in spite of all the general progress and improvements, many of our responses to acts of violence are still determined by archaic patterns of behavior. As Barbara Johnson pointed out in her deconstructive reading of Derrida's critique of Lacan's interpretation of Poe's tale 'The Purloined Letter', in our desire to *do justice* to the text and correct the fallacies of our predecessors, we tend to fall victim to the scheme outlined by the semantic traps of the text and the structuring force of our half-repressed desire (Johnson 1982 [1980]). As a result, we move along the well-trodden warpath of the signifying practice.

Violence and killing is seen in many culture as a legitimate part of the initiation rites. Killing the other, frequently linked to cannibalism, is conceived as an act of an incorporation of the strength of the enemy or of the prey, a bloody Eucharist, as Richard Slotkin calls it. By killing, in a literal and/or metaphorical sense, one strenghtens or regenerates himself. Slotkin points to a sad paradox that while the first colonists 'saw in America an opportunity to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of their church and nation; the means of that regeneration ultimately became the means of violence, and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience' (Slotkin 2000: 5).

Slotkin hit a deep vein in the body of American literature. Many commentators muse about preference of violence to sex in American film and literature. And some of the scenes of violence are endowed with such an enormous energy and power that carries them far beyond the ancient logic of retribution. Something quintessentially American seems to speak out, usually without and beyond the words—it speaks in the form of captivating images, in the form of a striking display of dramatic action.

One can recall Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798) where the title character, in a flash of lunatic vision, kills off all the members of his family, or Brown's *Edgar Huntly*

(1799), structurally important scenes of physical violence that bring about the hero's transformation appear in Frederick Douglass's *The Narrative* (1845), or Melville's *Billy Budd* (1924), or in Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage* (1895), etc.

However, a writer addressing a 'civilized' audience has to establish an acceptable moral frame for the act of violence—it can be a war that legitimizes the use of violence, or it can be self-defence or an act of retaliation for some kind of serious offence.

In the character of Natty Bumppo, J. F. Cooper tried to create, in terms of D. H. Lawrence, 'a saint with a gun', a hero endowed not only with an unerring eye (Hawk-eye) and hand, but an archetypal American with *an unerring sense of justice*. But how can one avoid the recoil effect of violence? This is the problem that I am going to discuss here.

Out of the five novels of the Leatherstocking Tales it is *The Deerslayer* (1841) that comes closest to myth and day-dreaming. Here the young Natty, bearing an Indian nickname the Deerslayer, has to pass the test by fire. One of the major trials of his initiation is the scene of his first killing of an enemy. But while this scene has received a due attention in critical literature, little attention has been paid to his second killing.²

Deerslayer's second combat is almost an antithesis of the first one. While in the first scene the killing is justified on the basis of self-defence (kill or be killed), in the second scene the frame is that of retaliation.

But since our understanding of this scene heavily depends on the specific context (background) of the scene, I will sketch it briefly.

Young Deerslayer was captured by the Hurons and is given a somewhat surprising but in fact a very Indian choice: marriage or death. (This situation is a strange reversal of the choice offered to unfortunate heroines in Gothic novels—see also Cora in *The Last of the Mohicans*, who is given a similar choice.) Needless to say, it is the death of the most terrifying nature: the death by slow torture. According to the Indian custom, Deerslayer is offered the chance of saving his life by marrying a widow of the warrior he had killed in his first combat. Since marriage would mean an assimilation, Deerslayer resolutely rejects the offer (and it is necessary to add that it has nothing to do with the widow's obvious lack of charms). The brother of the unfortunate widow, a fierce warrior named the Panther, offended and infuriated by Deerslayer's refusal, hurls his tomahawk at Deerslayer. Deerslayer gallantly unbound at this moment, catches the flying tomahawk in the air, and sends it back, splitting the Panther's head. Before the Hurons can recover from the shock, he runs away. (Interestingly a similar situation appears in Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly* more than forty years before, in fact Edgar even outdid Natty—he split the head of a real panther and managed to deliver this stunt in a state of utter exhaustion, in complete darkness of a deep cave, and on top of that, without a proper Indian training.)

This is a scene that displays Cooper's gift: it is not just an excellent showpiece of dramatic action, described in a vivid, economic manner, but also a scene that is richly coded, it contains interaction of multiple levels of significance, it is related to various cultural, or discursive, contexts.

On the one hand it is clear that the episode with Deerslayer's chase provides exciting action, lends him a chance of displaying quick wit, cool judgement and nerves of steel, like in the scene where Deerslayer hides himself before the pursuing Hurons under a fallen tree while 40 warriors jump over him and vainly search the ground around.

On the other hand the writer still needs to put Deerslayer to ultimate trials in order to complete his initiation. But besides these two reasons, the connection between the retaliation and Deerslayer's attempt to run away can be reflected in a moral light.

In comparison with the first scene of killing that has all the elements of mythic rites of passage, the structure of the second scene, the killing of the Panther, is radically different in many respects. There is no place for hesitation, no place for chivalry, no place for Christian

consideration or mercy. This is the moment, when Deerslayer comes close to D. H. Lawrence definition of the American: 'The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer' (Lawrence 1977 [1923]: 68).

The moment of immediate, swift retaliation deals a blow to our conception of his character as an ideal, virtuous American Adam. Deerslayer's sudden transformation has an alienating effect on the reader. Is this the generous young man we used to know, we want to ask.

This is the moment of the *intrusion of the real* into the space of fiction as Jan Mukařovský wrote about it. And it is exactly this outburst of randomness, irregularity, that lends the work the power of immediacy and fosters the illusion of real, as it brings the work closer to nature (Mukařovský 2000: 359). Derrida will later call it *aporia*.

The scene reveals the full force of Cooper's gift to express through a dramatic action a complex pattern of human nature. Deerslayer is shown to be captured in the momentum of the event, the path of the flying tomahawk is a path of the signifier which through the force of its impact calls for its reduplication, for its doubling. 'The projecting force was so great, notwithstanding, that when Deerslayer's arm was arrested, his hand was raised above and behind his own head, and in the very attitude necessary to return the attack.' The attack calls for a counterattack, the weapon in his hand demands "Use me!": 'His eye kindled, however, a small red spot appeared on each cheek, while he cast all his energy into the effort of his arm and threw back the weapon at his assailant' (*The Deerslayer* 515).

Cooper reinforces the alienating transformation of the protagonist also on the formal level: for this single moment he abandons the omniscient point of view. As if not only us, but also the narrator ceased to understand the chief protagonist. The contract of sympathy and understanding between the authorial narrator and the hero is broken and the narrator employs the modality of uncertainty to achieve the sense of ambivalence, ambiguity.

It is not certain whether the circumstance of finding himself unexpectedly in this menacing posture and armed, tempted the young man to retaliate, or whether sudden resentment overcame his forbearance and prudence. (*The Deerslayer* 515)

Cooper also applies another strategy of undermining Deerslayer's act of retaliation. Instead of releasing an authorial moral commentary, he shifts the critique into a character's discourse. The character he chooses is Hetty, a woman of evangelical spirit.

In her critique she uses two arguments that substantially undermine the legitimacy of Deerslayer's violent response. The first, very predictable argument is a reference to the Ten Commandments. The other is, however, typically feminine—she draws attention to the consequences—by killing the Panther Deerslayer deprived an Indian wife of a husband and a child of father. In this manner the slain enemy as the fearful other is humanized, and Deerslayer's act of retaliation is made even more questionable.

Deerslayer defends himself but his defense, effective and persuasive as it is, raises more questions than it can answer.

He admits the 'gospel truth' of what Hetty says (itself a nice pun), but he argues that the state of war legitimizes violence and that the attack of the Panther was outrageous, unfair: ' [...] the brother [Panther] brought his end on himself, by casting his tomahawk at an unarmed prisoner' (530).

The second argument appeals to the sense of justice and involves a final judgement—death penalty. Deerslayer's unerring arm of justice, in a swift, smashing airborne deadly efficient manner strikes the head of the enemy, 'literally braining him on the spot' (530).

Here, in the novel from 1841, we already have the essential mythic component of the American notion of justice and retribution. Swift, deadly, efficient, hitting the target from a distance with an airborne weapon, and discreetly reported (no bloody pulp, no bone splinters etc., a clean job). Here is also the pattern of response that demands that mean violence is countered with clean violence as we could witness in recent war conflicts. The physicality and brutality of the moment of death is softened through a recourse to metaphoric reference—the falling Indian is not compared to a falling tree or a rock, but to a deadly serpent: ‘Sallying forward, as the serpent darts at its enemy even while receiving its own death-wound, this man of powerful frame fell his length into the open area formed by the circle, quivering in death’ (516).

There is, however, a third argument of *Deerslayer*, that is based on another discursive level. *Deerslayer* argues that the evangelical ideals would ‘make an uncertain life in the woods’. There is no doubt about it. But the following argument, in its wild pragmatism, appears to me very unsettling: ‘The Panther craved my blood, and he was foolish enough to throw arms into my hands at the very moment he was striving a’ter it’ (530).

It is the context of the situation that calls for a specific pattern of action. The context almost leaves no choice, it controls the responses. With a weapon in your hand, you have to use it. The context screams, I have been set, an eye for an eye, the tools are conveniently at hand, waiting impatiently to be used. The reduplication of the strategy used against us is the first that comes to mind, a blow for a blow.

‘’Twould have been a’gin natur’ not to raise a hand in such a trial, and ’twould have done discredit to my training and gifts’, argues sternly *Deerslayer*.

Deerslayer evidently thinks he had no other choice than retaliation—to act differently, would be a betrayal of his training and a waste of the opportunity to ‘extarminate [sic] the varlets’.

What is so modern and interesting about Cooper is his ability to reflect the context of norms and values that inform the process of decision-making. The decision to retaliate is preconditioned by existing structures and context-bound assumptions: the legitimization of violence in war conditions, the sense of being wronged, and the ready availability of resources of retaliation (weaponry and superior military training), and the sense of Manifest Destiny.

Easy availability of all these elements increase the difficulty of approaching the problem from a different perspective. In fact the plot itself seems to suggest that violent retaliation did not solve the problem—it does not lead to a final resolution—that is a liberation of *Deerslayer* from his captivity. Although *Deerslayer* used the confusion that followed his shocking retaliation and ran away, he was finally recaptured. And, quite significantly, it is Nature that sends him back to complete his initiation. (The undersurface torrents of the lake bring his canoe back to the shore where the Hurons wait for him).

This is also the moment when Cooper reveals the limits of self-reliance. The ultimate rescue of *Deerslayer* occurs by means of collective efforts of all the characters engaged in the scene of conflict as an act of solidarity and friendship.

Through all these strategies *Deerslayer*’s sense of justified revenge is presented as an archetypal pattern of American mind. The archetypal American assumes the role of judge and executor of justice in one person, and his unerring arm of divine justice smites the wicked one like the arm of the angry God of Old Testament. It is both a strength and weakness of the American myth imagination. But without its strength there would be little or possibly no action. Europe has proved to be almost paralyzed in its ability to act since the WW II.

Cooper stands close to the notion of regeneration through violence but in spite of what many critics think, including Richard Slotkin himself, he is capable of a critical examination of the forces of culture and operating in and through culture. The process regeneration through violence, as he envisioned it in the character of *Deerslayer*, cannot be complete

without considering a broader set of options of action and the painful awareness of unintended tragic consequences.

A careful examination of the scene of Deerslayer's second killing revealed that Cooper in a surprisingly complex manner inscribed the recoil effect into the act of retaliation in the form of a loss of innocence, a crack in humanity conceived in terms of New Testament ethics. The recoil effect hurts.

Endnotes

¹ See for instance Ronald Broude (1975), 'Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England' *Renaissance Quarterly* 28: 1 (Spring, 1975): 38-58. For the transformations of the notion of punishment see Michel Foucault (2000).

² I have come across only at one rather irritating article dealing in greater length with the scene but discussing the issue of violence from the stylistic point of view—how the rhetorical romance strategies are used to diminish the representational, mimetic functions and tend to 'damp' the edge of violence. See Michael Kowalski (1984) 'Fictions of Violence in *The Deerslayer*' <<http://www.oneonta.edu/~cooper/articles/suny/1984sunny-kowalski.htm>>.

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