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## An American Romance

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*Old Glory: An American Voyage* by Jonathan Raban  
Collins, 527 pp, £9.95, October 1981, ISBN 0 00 216521 X

*No particular place to go* by Hugo Williams  
Cape, 200 pp, £6.50, October 1981, ISBN 0 224 01810 8

*Old Glory* – the book written by Jonathan Raban – is an altogether different book from the *Old Glory* that was praised in the reviews, but it is no less wonderful for that. The book the reviewers wrote about does not exist at all, except as the ghost of an intention. This phantasmal *Old Glory* is the book which Raban originally planned to write, and which he expected would be little more than an elegant travel diary: the record of a passive drifting journey down the Mississippi in the track of Huckleberry Finn. As he reports in the first chapter of the published version, he dreamed, long before he set out, that

the book and the journey would be all of a piece. The plot would be written by the current of the river itself. Where the river meandered, so would the book, and when the current speeded up into a narrow chute, the book would follow it. Everything would be left to chance.

Even the reviewers who most liked what they thought they were reading complained that a book of this sort, like the Mississippi itself, has a tendency to sprawl shapelessly and go on too long. In this, the reviewers were entirely correct. The *Old Glory* that Raban dreamed of writing, the book he hoped 'would be haphazard and full of randomness', would indeed have been as slow and sprawling as they said. That, presumably, is why he didn't write it.

The book he wrote instead is exceedingly shapely and controlled, and not tedious in the least. Raban, who calls himself 'incorrigibly bookish' (he alludes more than once to his days as a university lecturer in English), took the form of his book less from the river than from other books. His model was the quest-romance, especially in its Renaissance versions, but

he borrowed elements from heroic legends of all ages. 'A journey which had all the essential features of a myth': this is his description of a journey reported to him by a woman he met along the way. 'It explained to her who she was, in exactly the same way that the epic stories of immigration had defined the identity of her ancestors. I told her about my own journey,' he continues, 'and how I saw it as really the same American story.' It is also, as he presents it, the more ancient and universal story of the hero who makes a dangerous quest to restore fertility to the waste land. The enemy of this hero is traditionally a sea-creature, a Leviathan or Charybdis; he risks death by water in order to regain the waters of life. Raban's quest begins in the psychological wastes of London, where everyone he meets is trapped in arid self-satisfaction, and he himself is unable to write. 'In London, I had gone stale and dry.' Setting out for the renewing waters of his childhood dreams, he passes through the Minnesota State Fair (a hybrid of Vanity Fair and Langland's 'fair field full of folk'), then rents a small boat and casts off into the Mississippi. His first descent in a lock seems 'a kind of symbolic induction, a rite of passage into my new state as a river traveller'. Armed with warnings and apparatus, he makes his way through a variety of perils and temptations. At the exact centre of the book he survives a night battle with the powers of darkness. Having passed this test, he gradually recovers the social and sexual community he had lost or renounced when he began. Eventually he is received with proper ceremony into the band of heroes who followed the same route before him. In the end, his success is incomplete, but the ways in which he fails are all explicit variants of the basic myth. As Raban's journey imitates the heroic mythical journeys it cannot equal, it continually recollects their archaic splendour and ancient fame. 'Old Glory', in this book, means far more than a pattern of stars and stripes.

At the centre of a quest romance is a night journey, a descent into a phantom realm of chaos and death; typically, the descent is preceded by a threatening omen. In *Old Glory*, just before Raban makes his one rash attempt to navigate the river by night, a band of vultures rises from a dead tree and spirals murderously towards his boat. He tries to frighten them off with a foghorn, but they still circle above him, 'croaking nastily'. Then, abruptly, they go back, leaving him to make his way alone to greater dangers. There is an analogue of this scene in the *Aeneid*, where the Harpies warn the Trojans away from Crete, and another in *The Faerie Queene*, when Guyon and his shipmates are crossing the sea:

Suddeinly an innumerable flight  
 Of harmefull fowles about them fluttering, cride,  
 And with their wicked wings them oft did smight,  
 And sore annoyèd, groping in that griesly night.

(These avian warnings derive ultimately from the bird auguries of ancient myth.) Raban hears later that the vultures that followed him 'never cross the state line. They'll fly out to mid-channel, and the moment they touch Iowa, they'll turn back.' As *Faust* and the *Inferno* testify, even the most powerful demonic forces cannot move beyond certain arbitrary borders.

Despite the omen, Raban pushes off again into the darkness. He quickly loses his way. Thinking he has moved downstream, he finds he has crossed to the other side of the channel. A ship's light passes 'at terrifying speed': it proves to be the headlight of a truck on an adjoining road. Another light blinds him. He panics, drives at full tilt in any direction, nearly capsizes. 'Blubbering with shock', he finds a dim light on shore and an apparently deserted house. 'No one came to the window. No dog barked.' Suddenly he sees a gun pointed at his chest. But his evident misery shows that he is harmless, and he is taken into the house. Its furtive lonely inmates have little to offer, for Raban's quest has brought him to an accursed land, burdened by desolation and disaster. 'We lost our only son last year, mister ... he was lying under a car ... Six weeks after, he had a stroke. Then my hip went. We made the down-payment on a trailer home ... There was a gas leakage. It blew up.' These people are victims of the curse, not its avenging agents, so the next morning they help Raban on his way. When he offers money, they refuse it, not because they are generous but because they are inured to moral isolation: 'I wouldn't be beholden.' Raban casts off, feeling 'as if I was pushing off into the Acheron'. But after five and a half of the book's 11 chapters, the character of his journey changes. That same morning, he is reminded that the waters that threaten death can also bring deliverance. He meets a man who turned to the Bible at a time of tribulation: 'I been reading about Moses. How he led the Israelites out of Egypt.' That afternoon he is told that the waters of the Mississippi have been used for baptisms.

No doubt all these events really happened in the course of Raban's journey. No doubt the hundreds of other events he describes that have similar mythical analogues happened also. What is doubtful is whether they occurred in precisely the sequence he reports or with precisely the same minute particulars. There is no deception involved: Raban strews the book with boulder-sized clues to its literary artifice, and a mythical story is not necessarily a false one. Part of the fascination of *Old Glory* is the deftness with which Raban apparently sacrifices the smallest possible degree of literal truth for the sake of what is traditionally called poetic truth. He announces his purpose and justifies his method in two epigraphs on the opening page. The first, from Eliot's 'The Dry Salvages', points to the mythical quality of the story, its confrontation of questing hero and demonic waters:

I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river  
 Is a strong brown god – sullen, untamed and intractable ...  
 Keeping his seasons and rages, destroyer, reminder  
 Of what men choose to forget.

(Eliot was of course referring to the Mississippi, and he used similar phrases in an essay on *Huckleberry Finn*.) The second epigraph, from Jean François Millet, points to the kind of truth that the inexactitudes of myth can reveal: 'One man may paint a picture from a careful drawing made on the spot, and another may paint the same scene from memory, from a brief but strong impression; and the last may succeed better in giving the character, the physiognomy of the place, though all the details may be inexact.'

The mark of a sophisticated realist is that he denies his sophistication at the same point where his work most elaborately displays it. What I tell you is real, he insists, artfully: what all those other fellows do is write books. Raban makes a great show of figuratively drowning his books before he starts out. He had bought cases full of books in preparation for the journey, but now he claims to know better. 'The river in my books was one thing; that sludgy beast ... was quite another, and I had better start getting the distinction between the two clear in my head.' He starts by inadvertently – so he says – leaving his copy of *Huckleberry Finn* in a hotel room. 'I thought that perhaps my loss wasn't such a bad augury after all. This was a voyage I was going to have to make alone.' Some reviewers, having swallowed the bait, observed that Raban had scrupulously refrained from using *Huckleberry Finn* as a model. They failed to observe that he used Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* instead. Raban never mentions this book, but its references to Twain's father, a justice of the peace, correspond to Raban's references to his father, an Anglican minister. Twain's formal apprenticeship to the famous pilot Horace Bixby corresponds to Raban's formal apprenticeship to the famous pilot 'Boom-Boom' Kelley, and the two pilots are presented in almost exactly the same manner. Raban's style in his set-pieces on the river is a respectful pastiche of Twain's style in comparable passages. Raban weaves in phrases from other Americans as well: Henry James, Robert Lowell, further bits from T. S. Eliot. At the end of his penultimate chapter Raban prints the note he received from Boom-Boom Kelley when he and his boat detached themselves from Kelley's tow. 'It was the one certificate which I had most wanted to earn,' and it corresponds to the final glorification of the hero in a romance. It reads: 'I know very little of writers, but people I do no. You are a good man to ride the River with, Jonathan Ravan.' Faithfully transcribing this note, Raban gives no hint that he notices its resemblance to the line with which he opened the book, Eliot's 'I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river ...'

Eliot's epigraph and Kelley's note would make an ideal frame for a modern quest-romance, if geography and modernity did not conspire against so satisfying a conclusion. The mouth of the river offers no promised land, only the whorish city of New Orleans and the decaying swamp of the Mississippi Delta. On his way down the river, Raban had thought of his journey in terms of a 'complete narrative'. It had a beginning and a middle, but now its end is elusive.

The city keeps mocking his search for an ending: he finds himself on a long dull boulevard called Elysian Fields; a fanatic tells him of 'reincarns' who walk the earth for ever as punishment for their past lives. If the city will provide no ending, Raban will go off and make one. He sails his boat into the Delta, looking for the line dividing green and blue water that marks the end of the river and the start of the trackless sea. Before he finds it, he is almost knifed by a crazed drug-addict who mistakes him for a federal agent, and he lands in an outlaw city where people do nothing but 'Fight. Get drunk. Pick up women.' He sees highways scabbed with the carcasses of dogs run down by motorists for fun. By the final paragraph, 'I had crossed, or thought I'd crossed, the line from green to blue.' All he finds there is emptiness.

Raban's role as quest-hero was, in fact, skewed and incomplete long before the final chapter. It was false from the start: deliberately so. This is not a story in which the hero's reward is marriage to a princess and half her father's kingdom. Raban meets his princess in the wrong place and at the wrong time: in St Louis, with half his journey remaining, he moves in with the daughter of the richest man in the city. 'It was a magical transformation,' but it produces a domestic life with the traditional roles inverted: the man staying home with the broom and dishes while the woman ventures forth into the battleground of urban commerce. Raban 'liked being a housewife', but he is soon making preparations to move on. The last words his forsaken lady says to him are those an aspiring hero most dreads. 'You know?' she asks him. 'Something I didn't kind of see you as? You're a coward.'

There is a political point, as well as an emotional one, in Raban's use of a defective quest as the literary form for his 'American Voyage'. The epic stories of the American frontier are still honoured there as exemplary tales, but they have dangerously outlived their usefulness. Throughout the Mississippi valley, Raban meets Americans nostalgic for the old military glory of World War Two and the crusading ethos of the Cold War. These are Americans whose 'deep, unsatisfied capacity for hero-worship' makes them long for an avenging saviour. In 1979, baffled by 'a half-articulated sense of their national dislocation and national impotence' (it corresponds exactly to Raban's personal distress in the opening chapter), they find Jimmy Carter too weak, too small, too fearful a hero: 'just a real scared man'. In America now, all quests are defective, all heroes unequal to their task. Worst of all

are the heroes Raban hears praised most often: complacent naysayers like Ronald Reagan with his Hollywood pieties, and the 'twinkling demagogue' John Paul II, who toured America while Raban was on the river.

Raban does encounter one local hero worth following, and in Memphis, Tennessee, he abandons his river journey for a few weeks to serve as a squire in a different sort of quest. Judge Otis Higgs is campaigning for election as the first black mayor of this Deep South city. His volunteers, unlike every other group Raban meets on his travels, are black and white, rich and poor, from every religion. Raban joins them. As Higgs crusades against the reactionary incumbent, Raban follows him to impassioned prayer meetings in black churches. Higgs's victory is widely expected. The newspapers endorse him. His followers make plans to celebrate a 'national event' in front of the TV cameras. Then Higgs's enemies publicise his secret: years ago, in his teens, he fathered an illegitimate child. All quest-heroes face sexual temptation; Higgs succumbed. On election night, there are prayers, tears, condolences. A few days later, Raban moves on.

But not before someone says to him: 'It seems like I can't go into a church nowadays without seeing your face there.' In Memphis, politics draws him into churches, but his curiosity, and the religious resonances of his journey, have brought him into a different church every Sunday from the time he first set sail. A mid-Western pew is hardly where one would expect to find a sceptical London journalist, but Raban sits down among satisfied Lutherans, lofty Presbyterians, smug Mormons, severe Roman Catholics, resentful white Baptists, ecstatic black Baptists, even, at the end, the sad communicants of the Israelite Spiritual Church in their flyblown temple at the edge of a slum. 'I was practically a candidate for conversion.' On weekdays also, Raban finds himself treading in unexpected religious depths. When a loud vulgar couple puts him up for the night in Winona, Minnesota, he quickly judges the wife to be 'an enormous slut'. She looks 'like a retired lady wrestler' as she sits before the TV set gorging herself on popcorn. That night he finds a manuscript book in which she copied out excerpts from the Gospels. 'Few of her favourite passages were consoling ones. She liked the knotted theology of St John and the severity of St Paul. In her book there was more suffering and perplexity than there was hope of redemption.' Chastened, Raban makes similar discoveries at every turn of the river. His traveller's luck is a form of genius, but he knows he has attained it at a price. He makes brief friendships with astonishing ease, but only, he implies, because he finds it difficult to maintain more extended ones. His gift for travel is compensation for his inability to stay in one place. Like the woman he meets whose journey had the features of a myth, Raban uses his journey to explain to himself who he is.

Now all this may or may not be true of the actual Jonathan Raban who wrote *Old Glory*. It

is certainly true of the virtual 'Jonathan Raban' who appears in it. This virtual author is a literary artifact, designed, like the quest he undertakes, according to certain systematic rules of genre and form. When an author labours as diligently as the actual Jonathan Raban did to give a literary shape to the heterogeneous data of his experience, he labours mostly for the private satisfaction of a job well done. But it must be hard on him when the reviewers notice only his powers of observation and remark in passing that his work is curiously haphazard. It is almost as hard when a reviewer does at last manage to perceive the hard-won literary form of a book, only to suggest – as Barbara Everett suggested about a book of criticism in these pages a few weeks ago – that the form is 'perhaps not entirely conscious'. Some of the reviewers of *Old Glory* misjudged its tone and content along with its form. In an early chapter Raban recalls being told by a London acquaintance that the Mississippi is 'very boring' – that all-purpose British pejorative which condemns its speaker far more than it condemns anything else. Raban takes only a few pages to establish the Mississippi as a place of terrifying fascination, capable even of sublimity. Two British reviewers, as if to confirm Raban's portrait of London as a waste of 'mighty self-satisfaction', casually called the river 'boring'. They almost seemed to think that was Raban's point.

Raban's American voyage deliberately falls short of its heroic models, yet the voyage that produced this sage and magnanimous book must be counted as a triumph. Hugo Williams made an American voyage also, but he might as well have stayed home. *No particular place to go* records the trivialities and absurdities of a poetry-reading tour from New York to California and back. Where Raban finds unexpected depths, Williams runs aground on predictable shallows. In a typical summary judgment, he dismisses an exotic-looking barroom pick-up as 'just someone's little girl with a built-in sense of inadequacy.' He searches out the nauseous underside of America, and when he finds it he is unable to decide whether to condescend or wallow. So he does both. He invites himself to spend the night with spaced – out young women who fall asleep in the middle of his orgasms or shriek hysterically when they wake. He seems genuinely offended when they finally throw him out, and he pays them back with insults. After a few weeks of hospitality from a woman in New York, for example: 'I think of her yanked mouth and the ghastly boredom of her harangues, a shrink-induced separateness which she shared with half the female population of this city.' Williams's method of rendering the American scene is to fill a paragraph with advertising slogans he observed through a bus window. He provides a great deal of detail about his erections.

The book is not a total loss. It has a well-paced slapstick scene involving a collapsing bed, a clever juxtaposition of Williams's indiscriminate pill-popping and a black woman's endorsement of a radio preacher's 'True Blue Prosperity Package', and a funny sequence

about the making of an avant-garde film. But its main curiosity value is the enthusiastic way it embraces the latest fashion in British travel-writing. Williams is one of the growing number of writers who publish the story of their overseas sexual adventures while they are apparently living at home with a wife and children. No one has bothered to write about the effect of these stories on the writers' families, an effect that would be felt even if the stories were invented. Does the writer's wife feel personally humiliated and publicly shamed? Do his children come weeping home from school? What calculation does he make to balance his royalties against his marriage? Does he bother to calculate at all?

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