What Do Tall Tales Tell Us?

American tall tales are a unique literary genre, quite revealing of the American spirit. They feature the great expanses of space, the strong natural forces, the youthful enthusiasm which thrives in the feeling of unlimited possibilities. With these generally come good doses of humor and bravado, and most often, but not always, optimism.

The stories have diverse origins.[1] Some of them, such as Paul Bunyan and Stormalong, are pure folklore creations with no biographical counterpart. A second category has been dubbed 'fakelore,' which is to say introduced as folklore but really the work of an author and others after him; Pecos Bill and Joe Magarac fall under that category. Finally, a good amount of tales are the embellished and aggrandized versions of real-life characters: such are Mike Fink, Davy Crockett or John Chapman / Johnny Appleseed. John Henry hovers in between fiction and real-life.

Through the device of the tall tale the settlers could create historical precedent and tradition where it hardly would have had the time to mature. They could invoke illustrious precedent and celebrate the most common professions of the new nation and the frontier: Pecos Bill the cowboy, Paul Bunyan the lumberjack, Stormalong the sea captain, Mike Fink the river boatman, Davy Crockett the frontiersman and soldier turned politician, John Henry the steel-driver or Joe Magarac the steel-worker. In addition

[1] The author is referring here to the collected stories in *American Tall Tales* by Adrien Stoutenburg.

they could become emblematic of a state, as Paul Bunyan is of Maine, Pecos Bill of Texas, Davy Crockett of Tennessee.

The general tale plots revolve around uncanny births, unusual feats and unique capacities. Stormalong and Bunyan are of gigantic size; John Henry, Pecos Bill or Mike Fink display an unusual combination of strength and/or skill. And, generally, all of them have great determination and know very early on what they want to become. They all have a unique faith in themselves and their own capacities.

The tall heroes' whole gesture is one of continuous exertion of the will, together with a naive acceptance of the given order of things. Safe rare exceptions they take scientific progress to the letter and do not question paradigms. Rather, the paradigm's limits approach them from without as they exert themselves in all directions. John Henry and Stormalong measure themselves up against technology and realize that they have hit a wall. To keep logging Paul Bunyan has to move to Alaska and Mike Fink has to abandon river boating and become a trapper.

Nature and its abundance are stressed over and over in amazing feats that defy logic and call to humor. Pecos Bill lassoes a cyclone to bring a rain after a drought. Davy Crockett stops a comet from colliding with the Earth by grabbing its tail. When they do not perform these feats they boast about them, as does Mike Fink: "I can shoot all the scales of a leaping trout with one bullet," or "I can out-roar a mother hurricane and all her family, knock down a thunderbolt with my breath, haul up so many whales the Atlantic will sink 100 feet."

The heroes can also strike unique friendships with animals, such as Paul Bunyan with the prodigious Babe the Blue Ox. Pecos Bill lives his childhood among the coyotes. Davy Crockett befriends Death-Hug, the bear. At the extreme—approaching the stature of a Saint Francis—Johnny Appleseed rescues and tames a wolf. Otherwise they can strike fear in others or upon Nature; Davy Crockett is reputedly the terror of the forest.

And all along tall heroes like to emphasize strength and uniqueness, without fear of boasting or pure bravado, all in a striving for the unprecedented accompanied by outrageous imagery: Paul Bunyan "knocked down a mile of trees just by rolling over in his sleep." Together with Babe the Blue Ox he physically pulls the kinks out of the St. Croix River logging road and makes it "straighter than a railroad tie."

In fact, the tales surpass themselves in sheer absurdity and nonsense simply to delight the listener. During the winter of Bunyan's Blue Snow "man's words froze in their mouths and the words turned to ice." During Davy Crockett's Big Freeze "It became so cold that people didn't even dare think about it, because their thoughts froze right inside their heads." In

Stormalong's ship the masts were high enough to "scrape the sun and graze the moon." And the captain picks his teeth with a marlinespike or an oar. Mike Fink "brought in so many furs that half the beaver population was left running around naked." Davy Crockett "could grin in the teeth of a Blizzard and change it into a rainbow." And the "distance between Babe's eyes was exactly forty-two axe handles and one plug of tobacco."

In essence the humor of the tall tales, and the detachment it denotes, display the ability of the Consciousness Soul, which the American soul aptly incarnates, to be an onlooker and look dispassionately at its own doings. When this attitude fully pervades the soul the instinctive recognition arises that what meets us in life is that for which we have laid the foundations. Being able to have a healthy self-doubt and to not take itself overly seriously is another trademark of the American soul. This is something that can strike the foreigner on a first visit. Americans may be laughing out loud about their own misfortunes, sometimes even as they take place.[2] In the tales this self-detachment takes on a post-modern flavor in laughing about the invention of the tall tale itself. When Paul Bunyan shows the Swedish ambassador how amazingly quick the corn seed had sprouted and grown in a matter of minutes, the ambassador asks him to stop its growth, otherwise the Swedish king would believe he is just making up a tall tale.

The above is one side of the equation. On the other hand of boundless energy and detachment lies gnawing restlessness, or the feeling that something is missing. Will is what gives the heroes a sense of fulfilment, but it also finds its limitation when it seeks to fulfil itself through itself. This lack is temporarily compensated by wanting to do something new or more ambitious. Bunyan goes to the Pacific Ocean to see the gigantic redwood trees, then to Alaska. Davy Crockett feels Tennessee is getting too crowded, so he goes to Texas. Stormalong needs to outdo everybody else with the largest ship ever. Going to the limits of the physical becomes a leitmotif. What do you do when there are no more trees to log, animals to hunt or larger boats to build? To these situations solutions are offered along a continuum.

The American soul, with its boundless faith in the individual and its naïve belief in science, progress and materialism, has to arrive at the limits of Self and Nature. At the abyss it has to wrest another understanding of the natural world and of individual goals. In doing so it either rises to the etheric or plunges into Sub-Nature as Steiner tells us very clearly in his last letter to the members. What is said there applies in a special manner to the

[2] It is not a coincidence that the ability to see both sides of things is shown to the extreme, and used therapeutically, in a form of theater that was born on the East Coast, Playback Theater, using deep listening and playfulness in looking at life events. In one common technique actors listen to a difficult story of a participant then play it out, first in an exaggeratedly tragic way, then in a comic way. For some basics and resources about Playback Theater see https://luigimorelli.wordpress.com/2010/10/31/facilitation-in-art-playback-theater/ and the following blog.

American soul, apt representative of the Consciousness Soul, deeply immersed in the world of technology and materialistic science: "But in the age of Technical Science hitherto, the possibility of finding a true relationship to the Ahrimanic civilization has escaped man. He must find the strength, the inner force of knowledge, in order not to be overcome by Ahriman in this technical civilization. He must understand Sub-Nature for what it really is. This he can only do if he rises, in spiritual knowledge, at least as far into extra-earthly Super-Nature as he has descended, in technical sciences into Sub-Nature."[3]

The above is the central challenge, the meeting at the abyss of our legendary heroes. Paul Bunyan can avoid the meeting by keeping on running. Davy Crockett finds relief in politics and dies as a soldier. John Henry and Stormalong put up a valiant and noble fight against the machine, one that is doomed from the start. Essentially they cannot oppose the rise of Sub-Nature.

Joe Magarac and Johnny Appleseed show us the way out. The man of steel Joe Magarac—Hungarian, Croatian or Serbian as he may be—consumes himself in happily working in the mills. He pours himself in the burning furnace to produce the most perfect steel there ever was. He thrives in knowing he can do the good while making other people happy. But he is also a human construct.

[3] Rudolf Steiner, *Anthroposophical Leading Thoughts*, "From Nature to Sub-Nature," letter of March 25, 1924.

Historical, though embellished, Johnny Appleseed goes a step further. John Chapman (1774-1845) was a successful Pennsylvanian nurseryman who traveled across the state and the Mid-West managing nurseries and introducing apple trees. He was also a Swedenborgian, a pioneer in spiritual knowledge and commitment for his time. As his semi-fictional counterpart, he was devoted to a simple life in service to his fellow human beings, Nature and the spirit. Appleseed has the capacity to talk to animals and heal people. His idea of planting apple seeds grows itself like a seed. He is a friend of the Natives because of the above capacities but considered crazy or a simpleton by many of his people. He lives a life of contentment and continuous service in line with a deeply rooted and generous faith. At his apotheosis seeds are scattered over the rainbow to fall back to Earth or be taken up as stars, illustrating a life lived at the boundary between the two worlds.