ihab hassan

SELVES AT RISK

PATTERNS OF QUEST IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LETTERS

SELVES AT RISK

Patterns of Quest in Contemporary American Letters

IHAB HASSAN

The University of Wisconsin Press

The University of Wisconsin Press
114 North Murray Street
Madison, Wisconsin 53715

3 Henrietta Street
London WC2E 8LU, England

5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Hassan, Ihab Habib, 1925-
Selves at risk: patterns of quest in contemporary American letters/Ihab Hassan.
248 pp. cm.—(Wisconsin project on American writers)
Includes bibliography and index.
1. American prose literature—20th century—History and criticism.
2. Quests in literature. I. Title. II. Series.
PS374.Q47H37 1990 89-36082
818'.50809'353—dc20 CIP
ISBN 0-299-12370-7

We Americans are the peculiar chosen people—the Israel of our time. . . . We are the pioneers of the world; the advance-guard sent on through the wilderness of untried things, to break a new path in the New World that is ours.

—Herman Melville

If you are ready to leave father and mother, brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again—if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man—then you are ready for a walk.

—Henry David Thoreau

O we can wait no longer!
We too take ship, O soul!

—Walt Whitman

Old men ought to be explorers
Here and there does not matter
We must be still and still moving . . .

—T. S. Eliot

Acknowledgments

Chapter 2 appeared, in another version, in *Contemporary Literature* 29, 4 (Fall 1988); and some pages of other chapters in *Michigan Quarterly Review* 27, 1 (Winter 1988) and *American Literary History* 1, 1 (Spring 1989). An earlier overview of my topic appeared also in Malcolm Bradbury and Sigmund Ro, eds., *Contemporary American Fiction* (London: Edward Arnold, 1986). I am grateful to the editors of those journals and books, most particularly to Malcolm Bradbury who, as friend, artist, fellow critic, stimulated my ideas about literature and culture over the years.

I remain grateful to the Vilas Trust Fund and the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, specially to Dean William Halloran of the College of Letters and Science, for their enduring support of my research; and I thank Yuan Yuan for his cheerful and thorough assistance in that research.

Allen Fitchen, Director of the University of Wisconsin Press, invited me to contribute to the Wisconsin Project on American Writers, which he initiated. I much appreciated his tactful insights and patience.

Contents

Selves at Risk

In-Quest: A Synoptic Introduction

I am afoot with my vision . . .

—Walt Whitman

Much of the extraordinary ignorance of most Americans about what has been happening elsewhere . . . is due to the fact that their eyes and ears—their writers—have stayed home.

—Edward Hoagland

1

THIS IS a book about quests in contemporary American letters, and about contemporary reality. These quests are of a particular kind. They solicit adventure—I would call them "questures," but we have had critical neologisms enough.* They also affirm essential values even as they assay new modes of being in the world. Spirit, effort, peril constitute these journeys, in fiction or nonfiction, as does the great wager with death. Such journeys put articulate selves at risk, selves that may incur failure or folly but always spurn the glossy ironies, the camp and kitsch of our day.

Still, one may ask: Quest? Adventure, in the fading glare of our century? In this era of satellites and supersonic jets, of the ubiquitous McDonald's and pervasive Panasonic? In our coddled jacuzzi culture, our cybernetic, if not quite cyborg, society of acronyms and first names, where acedia measures lives between hype and fix? Indeed, the very name of quest may strike some as quaint, lacking as it does deconstructionist brio, Marxist bravura, or feminist coloratura.

Yet the spirit of quest endures, unquavering, with stiff upper lip. It endures, moreover, confident of its future and proud of its (largely British) pedigree. From rain forests, across oceans, steppes, savannahs, saharas, to the peaks of the Andes or Himalayas, men and increasingly women still test the limits of human existence. They test spirit, flesh, marrow, imagi-

*Henceforth, *in this work,* I will use quest and adventure freely, interchangeably, though the terms may not be identical in other contexts.

nation, in a timeless quest for adventure, for meaning really, beyond civilization, at the razor edge of mortality. And they return, with sun-cracked skin and gazes honed on horizons, to tell the tale.

Indeed, seekers can be eloquent, even loquacious. I limit myself in this book, therefore, to postwar American prose writers whose works reshape the traditional genre of quest in hybrid forms. In a way, we are, both reader and author, in quest of an ideal text of quest. Though we may never find such a text, we may in the process develop a working concept, an effective sense, of the enterprise. We may also discover in these vicarious voyages compelling images of our own concerns. And who knows but that we may take some pleasure in works uncommonly blessed with style, the vivid, verbal grace of human beings under pressure?

Already, the reader notes, certain qualities of quest have begun to emerge: hope, movement, danger, exposure to otherness in alien cultures or natures, all rendered in a distinct personal voice. And since the authors I address all write in the first person about the present—no historical quests or romances here—their works have the timbre of autobiography. Still, the word quest evokes projects as various as those of Parsifal, the Pilgrim Fathers, and Indiana Jones. Thus quest, metaphor of life itself, of life even beyond death, requires from us sharper demarcation.

I have taken quest here in its singular sense, though from the Argonauts to the Astronauts seekers have also journeyed in groups. But "superalpinists" now scale Everest alone, dispensing with oxygen if not with faith, thus confirming Salman Rushdie when he says: "the myth more often seems to require the existential purity of a single human being pitted against the immensity of the universe. . . ."[1] At the same time, I have not considered quest simply as a personal matter, a private transaction between an individual and the universe. Rather, I have viewed quest as a vital, symbolic option in the postmodern world, a focus of choices and constraints in American society, and, beyond that, as a signal to us all about risk, strangeness, achievement, the terrible splendors of self-renewal. Therefore, I have eschewed quests that are mainly interior, those night journeys through the inverted forests of the soul. For once, D. H. Lawrence missed the mark when he wrote: "Superficially, the world has become small and known. . . . There is no mystery left, we've been there, we've seen it, we know about it. We've done the globe, and the globe is done. . . . Yet the more we know superficially, the less we penetrate vertically. . . . There still remain the terrifying under-deeps, of which we have utterly no experience."[2] But the mystery remains, and it is both "vertical" and "horizontal," private and public: in *both* dimensions quests persist, discovering spirit in action, making meaning.

2

The public aspects of quest and adventure merit our first attention, for they reveal a central, historical tendency in the West. Michael Nerlich traces this tendency back to the high Middle Ages, perceiving there the beginning of a "systematic glorification of the (knightly, then bourgeois) adventurer as the most developed and most important human being," a glorification that "defined the inalienable fundamental condition of human existence."[3] This "ideology of adventure," Nerlich argues, transgresses boundaries of class, abets change, tolerates uncertainty, and entails confrontation with others, "other races, other languages, other names, other necessities, other desires, etc."[4] All this leads to our modernity, the climax, Nerlich insists, of that dynamic, innovative impulse no society can stifle in its individuals without becoming sterile.

The ideology of adventure finds its preeminent instance in the American experience. As Todorov put it: "the discovery of America, or of the Americans, is certainly the most astonishing encounter of our history. We do not have the same sense of radical difference in the 'discovery' of other continents and of other peoples. . . ."[5] Discovered first by Europeans, America perpetuated the quest on its own continent; later, it repatriated the quest to Europe, Africa, Asia, repatriated, as it were, the American Sublime together with its native versions of cultural imperialism. In the process, America constructed its own histories, myths, and legends, its own ethos of quest, in and out of literature.

Certain commonplaces of criticism reverberate still in our minds. American literature, critics have said, is largely autobiographical, a literature of the Self, enacted most often on the margins of society, from Poe's Arthur Gordon Pym through Melville's Ishmael, Twain's Huck Finn, and Whitman's Myself, to Salinger's Holden Caulfield or Bellow's Augie March. It is also, we are often told, a symbolic, visionary literature, less social than metaphysical, with a prepossession for myth and romance. Its bias is for innocence, evasion, solitude, wonder, change, errancy, as the titles of even scholarly books intimate: *The American Adam, The American Newness, The Imperial Self, The Reign of Wonder, Errand into the Wilderness, The Virgin Land, A World Elsewhere, Radical Innocence.* Finally, it is a literature, though Adamic, of extremity, of intense and brooding modernity, as D. H. Lawrence insisted.

Such critical commonplaces shift with the moods of historical revisionism, as if we know "now" better than "then," see things more clearly—in fact, we see them only otherwise.[6] Yet even revisionist works confirm quest in the American grain. The quest moved west, absorbing that dire and daz-

zling energy Europeans expended in their colonial empires. The quest, as Myra Jehlen has noted, also translated time into space. "The most interesting aspect of the general belief in a national destiny to expand ever westward is one we tend to overlook, perhaps because we take it for granted," Jehlen says; "the American teleology cites the will of heaven and the human spirit, but it rests its case on the integrity of the continent"; and so Americans traveled restlessly, leading "lives in a state of perpetual landing."[7] Moving out, the quest also found its need for otherness in the wilderness, and found its motives in the eternal search of misfits, outlaws, scalawags, crackpots, vagrants, visionaries, individualists of every stripe, for something they could hardly name: El Dorado, the New Jerusalem, the Earthly Paradise, the Last Frontier. "Philobats" (walkers on their toes), as Gert Raeithel argues in his psychohistory of *voluntary* American immigrants, they formed weak attachments to objects, persons, places; they relished stress, movement, exposure, transgressive fantasies.[8] Yet Americans could no more exempt themselves from history than from power or desire. Their quests, therefore, reveal certain social attitudes, historical patterns, that we also need to ponder.

Here Martin Green's *The Great American Adventure* proves pertinent. Green reviews classic adventures, from Cooper to Mailer, and discerns in them particular features—and I would say manners. These include a pagan, anti-intellectual, antipacifist outlook; a masculinist, often misogynist, stance; a concept of manhood linked to nationalism, patriotism, America's Manifest Destiny; and a strong sense of caste, if not class, led by military aristocrats *and* democratic woodsmen (hunters, trappers, Indian fighters) who magnificently possess the frontier virtues of valor, self-reliance, knowledge of the wilderness, and, above all, a rude *ecological ethic.* Thus, for Green, venturesome quests mark "the highest achievement of American literature," a counterpart to the "Great Tradition" (F. R. Leavis) of the European novel.[9]

In any event, though adventure became secular in the last century, possibly anti-Christian, it often took a spiritual, even mystic, turn. As Green says: "Although hunting is an activity of the aristo-military caste, being a hunter in the American sense is in some ways not a caste activity, in that it takes place in a non-social space, outside the frontier of society. . . . Just for that reason, however, it represents more vividly the sacramental function of the man of violence. . . . Thus, if the hunter fails to represent the social aspect of caste, he nonetheless represents its religious aspect vividly."[10] The religion in question is, I believe, "natural," the kind we sometimes see shimmer through the paintings of Thomas Cole, Frederick Edwin Church, Winslow Homer, or Albert Pinkham Ryder.

Spirit was never a stranger to violence, of course, the violence of nature

first, the sacramental violence also of the hunter or primitive warrior who on behalf of his tribe breaks the taboo against killing. Indeed, some historians of the American frontier have come to consider the notion of "sacramental violence" as crux. Thus, for instance, Richard Slotkin claims that "the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience." He continues: "an American hero is the lover of the spirit of the wilderness, and his acts of love and sacred affirmation are acts of violence against that spirit and her avatars."[11]

Slotkin's use of the feminine pronoun with reference to nature is instructive. The American hero loves nature but must also violate "her," either profanely—exterminating the buffalo, wasting the land—or sacramentally.[12] This ethos also affects the hero's attitude toward women, as Leslie Fiedler has famously argued in *Love and Death in the American Novel.* For quest always tempts the hero to abandon hearth, family, friends, leave society behind, a willed alienation aggravated by frontier conditions which released one kind of desire (freedom) only to constrain another (love).

We can plausibly conclude, then, that the historic experience of America proved singularly congenial to the spirit of quest. That experience provided an alternative to European colonialism, provided a colonialism within, a dramatic, often destructive encounter that became, through dime novels and Hollywood movies, an international myth: the myth of the Indian, the myth of the Frontier and the Wild West. Similarly, the "journey centeredness" of that historic experience offered "matter, form, directional association for the literary imagination," offered a mythic focus for all the contradictions of American democracy and empire.[13] It is as if the "complex fate" of which Henry James spoke at the turn of our century really entailed, more than a confrontation between Europe and America, a spirited adventure into the uncharted wilderness both of the New World and of the Old Adam, Caliban, whom Lawrence derisively invoked:

> Ca Ca Caliban
> Get a new master, be a new man.[14]

3

Lawrence might as well have invoked the new American woman. For quest also concerns gender, and in this concern touches all the sexual complexities of America.

Women, of course, rarely engaged in adventurous quests or explorations before the end of the eighteenth century. Increasingly, though, they have become intrepid travelers—witness Leo Hamalian's *Ladies on the Loose,* Mary Russell's *The Blessings of a Good Thick Skirt,* and Elizabeth

Fagg Olds's *Women of the Four Winds.* Still more recently, women have undertaken daunting tasks: Libby Riddles won the solo Alaska Dog Sled Race, covering 1,135 miles; Enda O'Coineen crossed the Atlantic alone in a rubber dinghy; Pam Flowers reached, in fifty-four days, the North Pole by a route hitherto impassable; Jan Reynolds skied down 24,757-foot Mount Mustagata in western China; and Julie Tullis perished *after* conquering K2.

The tradition of errant women, though, was largely British; Americans, male or female, expended themselves on their own westering frontiers.[15] Later in the nineteenth century, some doughty Americans—Fanny Bullock Workman, Annie Smith Peck, Delia J. Akeley, Marguerite Harrison, Louise Arner Boyd—ventured far, high, and wide, founding the Society of Woman Geographers in 1925. But the historical climate of strenuous travel was already changing, affecting its appeal to women. Elizabeth Fagg Olds puts it thus:

> The new women travelers were largely American. And they were different from most of their predecessors, who had tended to be romantic dreamers, more intrigued by the exotic aspects of travel, the "spell of the East," for instance, and with the novelty of independence than driven toward defined goals. The new women explorers, by contrast, were highly goal oriented, single-minded, and stoutly dedicated to specific objectives. They freed themselves from their Victorian upbringing to organize and lead expeditions of their own, with institutional or other backing if possible, but in any case asserting themselves as serious explorers.
>
> They are important as a transitional group in the evolving advances of women, for they were the direct forerunners of today's trained women scientists and field workers. Although themselves heirs and successors to their Victorian counterparts, they cast off, as soon as possible, the quaint and inhibiting sidesaddles, flowing skirts, long tresses, and veils of their sisters. But they were not yet modern, either. Having after all been born in the Victorian era, they donned their knickers with misgivings, rode astride but wore concealing robes or jackets, and bivouacked with their porters and bearers with uneasy apologies. But meanwhile they managed to explore some of the earth's most unlikely spots, encounter adventures as wildly improbable as their predecessors' and contribute much to our knowledge of people, customs, and geography.[16]

This new attitude, "stoutly dedicated to specific objectives," encourages science more than quest.[17] Also, pure motion in space, without inner need or visionary gleam, without a quality of awareness that gives resonance to narrative, indeed without narrative itself, can not serve us as model for quest. Hence the relative scarcity, in *Selves at Risk,* of postwar American

women writers, writers of the order, say, of Freya Stark, who was English and traveled in another age.

But the question of gender in quest does not arise only in the recent history of women. The question inhabits myth, and is charged with contradictions. Male seekers have traditionally kept aloof from women, only to discover the woman within. Inspired often in their adventures by some actual woman, these mythic heroes also used their journeys against the "other sex," to liberate themselves from social and erotic bonds. With clear intuition, Paul Zweig summarizes the paradox: "This is where the adventurer discoveres the elusiveness of woman. She is the house from which he frees himself in order to give birth to himself as a pure male. But she is also the means within him by which he escapes. And she is still more: her various incarnations appear before him as occasions for adventure, mysteries beckoning to him out of the obscure fertilities of chance."[18] Thus hoping to reinvent himself arduously as a man's man, the questing hero ends, as we shall see, by sublimating his "femininity" into a cosmic vision.

It is not essential for us to speculate here on the differences between men and women regarding their inherent character or behavior. Such speculations usually draw on a large, common fund of ignorance and prejudice, recycle debates about nature and culture, and finally expend themselves in ideological fictions of resentment or self-esteem. Some ideas about gender, though, are relevant to quest; they enjoy reasonable consensus, and so warrant review. Only men, for instance, seem to have hunted, headed tribes, made war, and sought some form of violence to validate themselves.[19] Men also seem more prone than women to catastrophic fantasies, feelings of insecurity, hence to striving and strain.[20] They generally evince, as Walter J. Ong puts it, a higher degree of "adversativeness," restlessness, solitude—also, paradoxically, of extreme bonding—a larger need for self-redemption.[21] In their stance toward risk, men also differ from women:

> Margaret Hennig and Anne Jardim in *The Managerial Woman* (1977) put very pointedly what countless proverbs, folktales, and literary works express about the human experience of male and female agonistic attitudes across the world: "Men see risk as loss or gain; winning or losing; danger or opportunity," while women "see risk as entirely negative. It is loss, danger, injury, ruin, hurt. One avoids it as best one can. . . ."[22]

Risk and contest, Ong further argues, also relate to "othering," differentiation between individuals or species. This process of differentiation creates the "I," the self, which exists both in connection with other "I's" and "in a state of terrifying isolation"; thus when "the human ego is threat-

ened with dissolution, often there is nothing like a good nonlethal fight, a contest, to get it back together again, even if the contest is lost."[23]

How do these ideas about gender illumine the subject of quest? In so far as quest entails isolation, combat, delight in risk and strain, it expresses a *traditionally* male aspect of the human character, and this may also account for the relative paucity of female quests, *quests as here defined.*[24] To moot the "biological" or "social" character of this tradition, moot its origin, is futile. In all things human, biological evolution and social conditioning have become inextricable, their separation, in favor of one or the other, an egregiously ideological act. Nor is the "individual" more or less a fiction than "society," since in all things human, again, idiolect, sociolect, and biolect continually interact.

But the decisive point about gender in the literature of quest envisages the near future rather than the distant past. If literary narratives now turn inward, as Erich Kahler has argued, if the oral stage of epic feats now yields to more subtle introspections, can we also conclude that quest, like American culture itself, has become "feminized"? I am tempted to answer with an ambiguous "yes." Ong, I think, is in the main right: "Narrative centered on raw male combat, such as the Western or the typical television whodunit, is today usually regressive, for it can no longer be made to carry the serious psychic load of combat stories in oral cultures."[25] But history, we should also recall, is often "regressive," and cultural fashion even more so—witness *Rambo I, II,* and *III,* and all the arts of nostalgia in our space age. Moreover, contemporary quests may signal a renewal of literature, a restitution of belief, a way past the wasteland of our ironies and ideologies. Thus Zweig would argue against Ong: "The very movement inward, which undermined the traditional framework of adventure, created in its place the medium for a new exploit, and a new simplicity. . . . We have circled back to a level of primitive certainties."[26]

Have we? It remains to be seen whether this "new simplicity" will prove wish or prophecy, and whether a "level of primitive certainties" can still provide a base for the mixed, multiform, anfractuous communities of the future.

4

The wish for a "new simplicity," though, betrays our lacks, betrays the conditions of American society from which seekers flee and to which they return. What conditions? One may as well ask: which American "society"? Nearly half a century has elapsed since the end of the last world war, and America has suffered seismic changes, suffered ruptures, reversals, restorations on a planetary scale. What rubrics or abstractions, then,