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Arrivals and Departures

In memory of Sacvan Bercovitch

Last December, shortly after Sacvan Bercovitch (known as “Saki” to his friends) succumbed to a long struggle with cancer, Giuseppe wrote me that you had wanted to invite Saki as one of your plenary speakers, but that after the sad news of Saki’s death had reached you, “the AISNA Board thought we should invite the closest scholar and colleague to Saki,” me. As you can imagine this was a touching invitation that I very happily accepted, since Saki was, indeed, a scholar whose immense learning, limitless curiosity, pathbreaking scholarship, and deep sense of self-questioning irony I admired and whose friendship I cherished.

I was all the happier that the topic you had chosen for your conference was “Harbors,” since Saki and I loved, in the early 1980s, to take long walks along the decrepit piers at the Hudson River, where once steamboats had arrived to busy immigration inspection stations and porters at what was once the flourishing harbor of New York. Ernest Poole, in his novel The Harbor (1915), from exactly a century ago, described such piers: “Brand new gigantic piers they were, . . . roofed over, dim and cool inside” (175, 176). What we saw three quarters of a century later was different. As airports had replaced harbors, only skeletons of those piers remained, and we once entertained the fantasy of staging a Kafkaesque arrival scene at one of those impressively rotted piers.

As I remember it, the scene would have included a single passenger arriving out of nowhere at the ruined, rotted pier where a single inspector seated at a bent metal structure that once might have been a desk would interrogate the passenger and ultimately arrest and detain him. Saki loved to pose for a photograph as the man behind bars—it appealed to his anarchist instincts.

What we were parodying was, of course, the myth of America, one of Saki’s abiding interests, embodied, for example, in stereotypical arrival scenes of immigrants in the land of freedom, with prison-like metal bars rather than the Statue of Liberty awaiting the newly arrived migrant.

[Figure 1]
I. Arrivals

One frequently reproduced image representing this mythic moment in pure form is available at the Library of Congress Resources website, where it is identified as a wood engraving from 1887 and carries the caption, “New York. – Welcome to the land of freedom – An ocean steamer passing the Statue of Liberty: Scene on the steerage deck.”

It is summarized as “Immigrants on deck of the steamer ‘Germanic,’” and its subject headings are given as: “Statue of Liberty (New York, N.Y.). . .; Immigrants . . .; Emigration and Immigration--United States--1880 - 1890.” It is kept in a collection of “miscellaneous items in high demand,” and originally appeared as a double page (may one already call it “centerfold”?) in Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, or Leslie’s Weekly for short.

It is a striking wood engraving, indeed. Placed in a wide angular space created by the rope ladders and the ship’s deck and railing (both in diagonal positions) is the completely horizontal horizon (delimited by the American land) on which the completely vertical statue of a surprisingly slim Liberty is sharply outlined against a bright, lightly clouded sky. Three smaller ships are sailing in front of the statue and two others can be made out in the background.

The right half of the image—and that is the one a reader would have seen first when turning the page in Leslie’s Weekly to the double-paged illustration—shows four similarly vertical rear-view figures (the Rückenfiguren from the tradition of veduta painting) in various ethnic-seeming outfits who are apparently looking at the statue, hence are encouraging the viewer to do the same.

This encouragement is reinforced by the three figures on the upper left, who are elevated above the others as they are climbing up on or clinging to the ship’s Jacob’s ladder. Their chests are at the level of the horizon, and while two of them gaze into the direction of the statue, the third man, the one closest to the statue is turned toward the other two, clearly telling them to look since his stretched out hand and index finger point at the statue. (It made me think of Ham pointing out to Shem and Japheth their drunken father Noah, but here Shem and Japheth are looking.) The presence of a fourth man who is climbing up the rope ladder to share the view further increases the intensity with which
the viewer is compelled to draw a connection between the human figures in the foreground and the statue in the back.

The human figures are standing on the crowded deck (I count 21 adults and two infants who are being held by their mothers); their faces are largely, but not exclusively, turned into the direction of the statue, which also means looking forward, toward the bow and the goal of the voyage. Whereas the couple on the lower left seems to be entranced by the view and the vision of their future that it seems to promise and some older people also look intently to the right, two older women are not looking forward and upward, but backward and even downward instead. The child at the very center of the image seems more interested in playing with her mother than taking in the sight of the statue; the mother makes up for this with redoubled attention. Also different is the casually positioned dandyish-looking man who is profiled against the railing. His chin is resting on his left hand and his right hand is in his pocket, his body resting on his right leg, while his left leg is bent at a relaxed angle. He seems to be looking forward but not at the statue; he is also the most isolated figure. Could he be a cabin passenger returning to America whereas all the others came in steerage, with the intention to immigrate? Or a member of the crew? Yet his own gaze notwithstanding, the angles that his figure makes and the arrow-like shape of his torso and arms also point diagonally toward the statue’s torch. Though he is somewhat isolated, he forms a visual bridge between the four back figures on the right and the faces of the crowd on the left.

A tag line below the caption in the original issue of *Leslie’s Weekly* further identifies the image as derived “from a sketch by a staff artist.” *Leslie’s Weekly* had many of them, including Georgina Davis and Joseph Becker, and though I was unable to identify the artist, perhaps one of you will undertake the effort to do so. The tag line ends, “see page 327,” promising further information about the image and its intended meaning. Since at this point I was already looking at *Leslie’s*, I did, indeed, turn the page to the recommended page and found a more detailed exegesis than I had expected.

After a general opening about possible motives for immigration, this mini-essay continues: “To the immigrant from famine-haunted Ireland, or from the Scandinavian countries where opportunities of individual growth and development are so scant and rare, the first glimpse of the shores of this Land of Promise must indeed be inspiring and
joyful, and as they sail up our beautiful Bay and for the first time see the majestic statue of Liberty, standing, so to speak, at the very gateway of the Republic, we cannot wonder that their exultation should, as it often does, find enthusiastic expression.” The anonymous Leslie’s staff writer then identifies the ship and praises the White Star line that operates it: “Our double-page illustration depicts a scene of this character on the decks of the steamer Germanic, one of the best known of the steamers of the favorite White Star Line. For many years the steamers of this line have made their ocean voyages with a regularity and certainty which have established it in the favor of all classes of passengers. Four steamers, surpassed in appointments by none, comprise the regular transatlantic fleet, and to these extra steamers -- during the Summer months -- are frequently added. To the immigrant traffic the White Star steamers offer, by the celerity and the certainty of their trips, special advantages and a saving of time, which are none the less agreeable than to the tourists and travelers for pleasure. The appointments of the steerage are as complete as those of the first cabins, and although the demand for accommodation often exhausts the supply, nothing is omitted which may promote the health or the comfort of the seekers of wealth and fortune on the shores of the New World.”

Moving from the practical-commercial to the idealistic-patriotic level, the conclusion returns to the image itself and offers this reading: “As the great steamship comes slowly up the harbor, every eye is turned towards the statue, which, if it could speak, would salute the newcomers with welcomes, and every soul is stirred, feebly it may be, but none the less really, by emotions for which there is no fitting speech. May all who sail past it to these hospitable shores find every just expectation realized and prove in all things worthy of the citizenship which the land of freedom confers upon them.” It sounds as though the author knew Emma Lazarus’s poem “The New Colossus” (written in 1883) and offered an elated paraphrase of it, in the subjunctive: “if it could speak.” The issue of Leslie’s came out on July 2, 1887, and this ending makes it sound like a Fourth-of-July oration, a genre the pat rhetoric of which Saki never tired to hold up to scrutiny. The prose piece in Leslie’s gives us a very good sense of the reaction to the image that was expected from its readers, reinforcing the already quite strong clues we noticed in the picture itself.
The *Germanic* was indeed a proud steamship of the White Star Line, equipped also with four masts, enabling it to sail as well as run by steam. Built in Belfast and launched in 1875, she achieved record speeds of more than 15 knots and ribbon-winning transatlantic crossings in a mere seven days. The *Germanic* offered 13 crossings from Liverpool to New York in the year of *Leslie’s* wood engraving and shared her cabin plan with that of her sister ship *Britannic*. The load could vary from a few hundred to more than a thousand passengers, and the passenger manifests list many labourers, wives, and spinsters, predominantly from the countries *Leslie’s* mentions: Ireland and Scandinavia. (In the 1890s, Poland, Russia, and Italy would gain more prominence.) Each manifest also included a summary of nationalities on board. For the June 1, *Germanic* crossing, the steerage fare was $20, while the Saloon rate went up to $100.

[Figure 2] On May 19, 1887, the *Britannic* (the *Germanic*’s near-identical sister ship, we remember) suffered a serious collision, as it was struck by the White Star Line’s own *Celtic* in evening fog near Sandy Hook and almost sank. Four steerage passengers died and thirteen were injured. A panic broke out on the *Britannic* when the *Celtic* hit it, and the captain had to restore order with a gun. It was a disaster reported, with lavish wood engravings, in the *London Illustrated News*, just three weeks before *Leslie’s* cheery coverage of the *Germanic*’s arrival. As it happened, an American artist named George Allen Rudd was a passenger on the *Britannic* who witnessed, then sketched the disaster. The article mentions that he was traveling to Tyrol, and the only George Allen Rudd I could find on the web was lost and presumably died in the Alps in 1888, at age 35.

Published such a short time after the collision, were the story and the image in *Leslie’s* perhaps meant to offset readers’ fears of shipwrecks, most especially, potential passengers’ worries about the White Star Line?

One yearns for a letter or a diary from one of the passengers on the *Germanic*, and perhaps one of you will one day find such an account. Is the old lady in the front of the image who is looking down perhaps writing something outside the frame of the picture? Would it, in any way, be similar to the story in *Leslie’s*? How, more generally, were immigrant arrivals in New York harbor represented in prose?

Abraham Cahan arrived in 1882, but in Philadelphia; Anzia Yezierska immigrated to America in 1890, but was only five years old and, as far as I know, did not pen an
arrival scene: her protagonist narrator in *Bread Givers* (1925), Sara Smolinsky, when asked what she remembers of Poland, answers, “Nothing—nothing at all. Back of me, it’s like black night.” Her memories begin only on Hester Street, and she identifies her own with America’s beginnings: “I felt like the pilgrim fathers who had left their homelands . . . and trailed out in search of the New World.” Mary Antin gave a most detailed account of her transatlantic voyage—but her *Polynesia* arrived in Boston in 1894.

Fortunately, there is one autobiography that lavishly depicts an arrival scene from just about a year and a half before the image appeared in *Leslie’s*. It is the Russian Jewish anarchist Emma Goldman’s *Living My Life* (1931). Goldman was sixteen, but already married and divorced when, as she writes, she “left St. Petersburg for Hamburg, there embarking on the steamer *Elbe* for the Promised Land.” She and her older sister Helena arrived in New York harbor on December 29, 1885.

We travelled steerage, where the passengers were herded together like cattle. My first contact with the sea was terrifying and fascinating. The freedom from home, the beauty and wonder of the endless expanse in its varying moods, and the exciting anticipation of what the new land would offer stimulated my imagination and sent my blood tingling.

The last day of our journey comes vividly to my mind. Everybody was on deck. Helena and I stood pressed to each other, enraptured by the sight of the harbour and the Statue of Liberty suddenly emerging from the mist. Ah, there she was, the symbol of hope, of freedom, of opportunity! She held her torch high to light the way to the free Country, the asylum for the oppressed of all lands. We, too, Helena and I, would find a place in the generous heart of America. Our spirits were high, our eyes filled with tears.

Gruff voices broke in upon our reverie. We were surrounded by gesticulating people -- angry men, hysterical women, screaming children. Guards roughly pushed us hither and thither, shouted orders to get ready, to be transferred to Castle Garden, the clearing-house for immigrants. (10-11)

This would seem to be a very good inward account that only partly matches the July 4th rhetoric we saw in *Leslie’s*. The elation at seeing “the Statue of Liberty. . ., the symbol of
hope, of freedom, of opportunity” was tempered by the “appalling” scenes at the immigrant inspection, in an “atmosphere charged with antagonism and harshness.”

American culture, from Jamestown to Plymouth Rock to Castle Garden and Ellis Island has always emphasized arrivals, perhaps more so than ultimate origins, and mobility more than sedentary claims. Arrival signals birth, beginning, and promise, and the Statue of Liberty came to embody this cultural emphasis visually and textually, well into the 20th century. Concerning visual representation, there are many familiar and some less familiar images that link immigrant arrival to the Statue of Liberty.

Thus a Scandinavian immigrant paper, Valkyrian, placed a large Valkyrie in front of a small Statue of Liberty on its masthead. Mary Antin put images of the Statue of Liberty on dust jacket and cover of her autobiography The Promised Land (1912); she also used it in her pro-immigration tract, They Who Knock at Our Gates (1914). [Figure 3] Adolph Treidler’s war bonds poster of 1917 exhorted viewers to “Remember Your First Thrill of American Liberty,” the word “first,” signaling fresh contact, or a threshold experience inviting us to think of Victor Turner’s work on liminality, that Saki also drew on at various points.) The image that was used for the poster was also sold separately. One notices the back figures that may have been inspired by the image in Leslie’s, and this is also true in other engravings, paintings, photographs, and posters that one can readily find online these days, though the Statue now generally seems more massive than in 1887.

[Figure 4] Even when the Statue of Liberty was replaced by an allegory of Fortune, as on the striking cover of Life of December 18, 1913, titled “El Dorado,” one notices the use of back figures to make the appearance of the red-headed Goddess-like figure even more imposing. She does not hold—as it might seem at first—a cornucopia. What looks like her horn of plenty is actually a cup out of which dice are rolling toward the newcomers, who might win or lose in the country they are approaching, depending on chance. (Paradise: pair o’ dice, as a cartoon about heaven from the 1940s had it.)

Charlie Chaplin’s film The Immigrant (1917) includes a two-minute arrival scene that follows Goldman’s script. After the experience of steerage and storm, seeing the Statue is a stirring moment, but, as in Goldman’s narrative, it is immediately followed by a harsh inspection scene.3 You could trace this trajectory through many more examples.
A less well-known image is the cover of the book by an immigration inspector, Feri Felix Weiss’s *The Sieve; or, Revelations of the Man Mill* (1921) who focuses on the difficulties of weeding out the bad immigrants from the good ones. Here Uncle Sam takes center stage, whereas the Statue of Liberty is literally marginalized.

At the beginning of John Sayles’s film *The Brother from another Planet* (1984), an alien crashes his spaceship into New York harbor, right next to the Statue of Liberty, and, with his extraterrestrial abilities, soon hears all the languages that were spoken at Ellis Island in the past—even though he cannot speak. An extra bonus is that this alien is played by Joe Morton who has meanwhile become Olivia Pope’s evil (or perhaps not so evil?) dad in the TV series *Scandal*.

Textual examples exist in abundance, too. In 1906, Edward A. Steiner’s *On the Trail of the Immigrant* gave the following account:

The steerage is still mute; it looks to the left at the populous shore, to the right at the green stretches of Long Island, and again straight ahead at the mighty city. Slowly the ship glides into the harbour, and when it passes under the shadow of the Statue of Liberty, the silence is broken, and a thousand hands are outstretched in greeting to this new divinity into whose keeping they now entrust themselves.

Some day a great poet will arise among us, who, catching the inspiration of that moment will be able to put into words these surging emotions; who will be great enough to feel beating against his own soul and give utterance to, the thousand varying notes which are felt and never sounded.

*The Life Stories of Undistinguished Americans As Told by Themselves*, a collection of short autobiographies that Hamilton Holt, the editor of the *Independent*, put together in the same year 1906 contains variants of this mythic arrival scene. I found that book in a used book shop some decades ago and have been fascinated by it ever since.

The Polish Jewish sweatshop worker Sadie Frowne notes that upon arriving in New York she “saw the beautiful bay and the big woman with the spikes on her head and the lamp that is lighted at night in her hand (Goddess of Liberty).” The Syrian journalist L.J.A.—his life story is actually a composite of three different Syrian immigrants—mentions that he “passed close by the grand Statue of Liberty and saw in the distance the
beautiful white bridge away up in the blue sky and the big buildings towering up like our
own mountain peaks. I was almost prepared to see snow on their tops.” (250).

Yet more than that, these lifelets also contain interestingly willful misreadings of
the familiar symbol that had become generic early in the 20th century. Thus Mike
Trudics, a Hungarian peon, describes the statue’s torch as a broom: “A well dressed man
who spoke our language told us that the big iron woman in the harbor was a goddess that
gave out liberty freely and without cost to everybody. He said the thing in her hand that
looked like a broom was light--that it was to give us light and liberty too.” Yet despite
being corrected, the Hungarian continues to perceive the torch as a broom: “he told us a
man could stand inside the broom.”

In that respect, the Hungarian foreshadows such famous misreadings of the Statue
of Liberty as those in Franz Kafka’s Amerika (1913): “a sudden burst of sunshine seemed
to illumine the Statue of Liberty so that he saw it in a new light, although he had sighted it
long ago. The arm with the sword rose up as if newly stretched aloft, and round the figure
blew the free winds of heaven.” (Kafka, one of Saki’s favorite authors, may have been
thinking of Prague’s coat of arms rather than of the Statue.) The classic American
immigrant novel’s view of the Statue in Henry Roth’s Call It Sleep (1934) was similar:
“Against the luminous sky the rays of her halo were spikes of darkness roweling the air;
shadow flattened the torch she bore to a black cross against flawless light--the blackened
hilt of a broken sword. Liberty. The child and his mother stared again at the massive
figure in wonder.”

Salom Rizk’s immigrant memoir Syrian Yankee (1941) returns to the memory of a
more expectable arrival scene. He approaches America with some trepidation (“Will I be
able to make it? Fit in? Act right?” [118]). He says a prayer of resolve on the deck of the
ship (“Let the ocean swallow all the bitter memories, the doubts and hatreds and fears.
Let me enter worthy of America, worthy of all that she stands for” [119]). This sounds
almost like a direct response to the mini-essay that accompanied the image in Leslie’s
Weekly. “And I remember hearing, from my cabin below, the sudden shouts on the deck,
the running of feet, and the heavy stir which announced the first sight of American
shores. I remember crowding to the rail and seeing a dark mass on the horizon, the
sharpening outline of things; the great tall lady with the flaming torch; the immigrants
pressing the rail and shouting deliriously, cheering the statue as if it were a living thing which heard and responded to their wild and childish greetings” (118).

Ilaria Serra has examined Italian emigrants’ perceptions of the Statue.4 The Friulano Bricklayer Antonio De Piero (1875-1922) has a fantasy of his trip before his departure.

Sleep didn’t want to come, many things were crossing one another in my brain and I closed my eyes to see them better, the first was the bitter departure; the train that had to take me to Paris, the Ship, the sea, North America with his treasures, the big bay of New York the big metropolis, The colossal statue of liberty with her right arm raising a big lit torch, symbol of protection and liberty for all the peoples; and it dominates majestic on the sea at the harbor’s entry.5

Gabriel Iamurri (born in Campobasso in 1880) went to America in 1895 as a boy, dreaming of American "fairy tales" (25) but feeling lost upon his arrival in New York: “I felt like one who is carried somewhere into the woods blindfolded knowing where he is but not knowing where he came from nor where to go to get out” (35) and the Statue of Liberty “could not speak, she was mute, could not tell me where to go or what to do about it" (37).6

F. Michele Daniele (born 1879 in Molise), arrived in New York in 1905 but the Statue of Liberty makes him look backward and doubt whether anyone ever felt elated at seeing it:

it only served to remind me of all that I had left behind - my family, my friends, my home. Perhaps if my background had been somewhat humbler [. . . ] I might have been more excited by that symbol of freedom. Yet I honestly doubt that even the poorest, lowliest paesano experienced any different sensation tha[n] I did [. . . ] This, I fully appreciate, shatters one of the dearest stereotypes of romantic legend.7

Antonio Margariti, born in Ferruzzano (Reggio Calabria) in 1891, left for America in 1914 on the Olympic, a White Star Line’s second-generation steamer and sister ship of the Titanic.
From there we embarked on The big Ship Olympic of the English company white star line that after 5 days crossing left us In new york on may 5 1914, in front of the Statue of LIBERTY and of human Brotherhood."\(^8\)

The Statue of Liberty has remained a staple for the presentation of American multiethnic literature and its cover art. Two of many possible examples are Mark Mathabane’s autobiography *Kaffir Boy in America* (1986) and the poet Tato Laviera, who sports the statue on more than one of his books of poems: See his *AmeRícan* (1985) and *Mainstream Ethics = Ética corriente* (1988). I am sure that you can think of many other examples from the 20\(^{th}\) and 21\(^{st}\) centuries.

II. Departures

Both arrival and departure are what Maria Lauret has discussed as “Wanderwords” in her recent book by that title, words that migrated from one language—in this case, Old French or Anglo-Norman—to another, English. Arrivals, we already said, are associated with birth and newness, and the *Oxford English Dictionary* confirms that association. While the primary meanings it gives are “act of coming to shore, landing in a country, disembarkation,” and “act of coming to the end of a journey, to a destination, or to some definite place; appearance upon the scene,” with a rare and obsolete use as “landing-place,” the word arrival, especially together with the adjective “new,” also signifies “newborn baby” or “birth of a child.” There is, therefore, a logic to Abraham Cahan’s comment, in his first-person-singular novel *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), that: “The day of an immigrant’s arrival in his new home is like a birthday to him. Indeed, it is more apt to claim his attention and to warm his heart than his real birthday” (513). Hence Levinsky wishes to celebrate the 25\(^{th}\) anniversary of his arrival with a shipmate. Delmore Schwartz mentions in his wonderful short story “America, America!” (1940) that women who arrived in America on the same ship considered themselves *ship sisters.*

Whereas arrivals were therefore like births or rebirths, making siblings out of passengers on the same steamer, departures obviously have connotations that are less happy. Departure, in addition to signifying the opposite of arrival in the sense of “action of setting out or starting on a journey; spec. the starting of a railway train from a station”
also carries echoes of the meaning “action of departing this life; decease, death” (OED). Arrival and departure: birth and death.

People cry at departures and are elated or may also cry, but with joy, at arrivals. Traditional, “old” societies cherish sedentary qualities and a long, deep history of belonging to a place. Colonial and migrant societies, all the more so if they have displaced indigenous populations, value and memorialize arrivals, fresh contacts, and newness. As some migrants themselves undergo the process from “old” to “new” self-understanding, they may emphasize the melancholy good-byes from family and friends before emigrating. Emigrant pain, immigrant excitement, perhaps.

European museums and archives house many images of emigrant departure scenes. One may notice a sad last embrace on Raffello Gambogi’s Gli emigranti (1894). Amidst the crowds on the pier at Genova, as painted by Angelo Tommasi in 1896, you see a woman in the classic pose of Dürer’s Melancholia on the lower right front. The ship has already left Belfast harbor in James Glen Wilson’s 1852 painting, and the people left behind are still waving their good-byes. Thomas Hemy’s “An Emigrant’s Departure: Inishmaan, Aran Isle” shows a parting embrace and a maternal figure crying. Another Irish departure scene from Queenstown—as the port city Cobh near near Cork was called before Irish independence—shows an animated crowd ready to leave; on the very right you can make out a young girl crying at the departure of a dear one, perhaps her brother who is standing barefoot at the same level as she is. The writing on the sea chest identifies the painter-engraver. On a painting by Geskel Saloman, Swedish emigrants wave another last good-bye on their way to the port city of Göteborg.

Mere news from America may generate a mood of sadness. In Jakob Kulle’s painting, America letter, the son who may have written that the streets are paved with gold in the New World (a phrase derived from the celestial city in John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress), but his absence is noticeable in the family portrait, and the family reads the letter in apparently somber spirits, and in a dim but very proper room.

That news about America can be saddening is illustrated by another one of the Life Stories of Undistinguished Americans. There Antanas Kaztauskis, a Lithuanian butcher, hears a man read from a prohibited newspaper what seem to be good news about America – the man paraphrases (or the editor retranslates) the Declaration of
Independence and says: “Life, liberty and the getting of happiness. Oh, that is what you want.” But when his mother hears these words she begins to cry. “He cannot go if his father commands him to stay,” she keeps saying.

A Swedish farmer, Axel Jarlson, reports: “So at last it was decided that my brother was to go to America, and we spent the last day bidding him good-bye, as if we should never see him again. My mother and sisters cried a great deal, and begged him to write; my father told him not to forget us in that far off country, but to do right and all would be well, and my uncle said that he would become a leader of the people.” These are just a few of many, many tearful departure scenes from the Old World.

Ilaria Serra gives examples of emigrants’ sadness at departing from Italy. For example, the tenor Giovanni Zavatti, born in 1911 in the province of L’Aquila, turns melancholy amidst a crowd of singing emigrants:

Suddenly I became sad and a thousand thoughts came crowding my mind: why was I leaving my native town? Why was I leaving my family? Why was I going so far? Where was I going? Why was I going? Would it really be better my life far from my beautiful Italy? Was it worth starting all over again? These were the questions I posed myself and did not know how to answer; some of these I still have to answer after so many years of life.

Are there departure scenes from America similar to these? Perhaps one has to look at stories of removal, deportation, or exile. We know that there have been many deportations, a steadily growing practice from the time it was first statistically registered in 1892 (the year the United States centralized its immigration procedure and Ellis Island opened). In recent years there have also been significant numbers of noncriminal deportations, and there are probably contemporary storytellers who tackle with that. But for us, again, Emma Goldman may serve as a key witness, as she represents fully not only the perfect arrival scene but also her expulsion from America as an anarchist in 1919. She writes:

I looked at my watch. It was 4:20 A.M. on the day of our Lord, December 21, 1919. On the deck above us I could hear the men tramping up and down in the wintry blast. I felt dizzy, visioning a transport of politicals doomed to Siberia,
the étape of former Russian days. Russia of the past rose before me and I saw the revolutionary martyrs being driven into exile. But no, it was New York, it was America, the land of liberty! Through the port-hole I could see the great city receding into the distance, its sky-line of buildings traceable by their rearing heads. It was my beloved city, the metropolis of the New World. It was America, indeed, America repeating the terrible scenes of tsarist Russia! I glanced up --- the Statue of Liberty! (717-718)

Here the departure scene is clearly recognizable as the inversion of an arrival scene. It is the last, not the first view. The Statue of Liberty accompanying a deportation calls for an exclamation mark—as this passage was so clearly written against the emotional arrival scene that seems highly ideological when seen in this light, making “free America” seem more like Czarist Russia. America is false promises, liberty is not liberty, and the parallel stories of Goldman’s arrival and departure at the Statue make that visually apparent. In fact, her departure story fed on the arrival myth, and seems almost like a film played backwards. This becomes even more sharply clear when one considers the fact that, as heartless immigrant historians have pointed out, Goldman could not have seen the Statue when she arrived, on December 29, 1885, because the pedestal construction was finished only in April 1886, and the Statue dedicated on October 28, 1886. She invented her arrival scene with the Statue of Liberty, perhaps inspired by images like the one I started out with.

Born in Mississippi, Richard Wright had no immigrant arrival scene to make up. Yet when he chose to leave the United States for France (what triggered that was his recognition that for him as an interracially married writer at the peak of his fame it was difficult if not impossible to buy a house even in New York’s most liberal neighborhood), he, too, told an inverted arrival scene in his essay “I Choose Exile” (1948). Describing the shenanigans he had to go through to get the passport that he was for a long time denied and finally succeeding through a shady source to obtain it within an hour, he writes: “I felt relieved when my ship sailed past the Statue of Liberty!” Wright turned the staple of a joyful arrival scene into a joyful departure scene from America. Like Goldman, he used an exclamation mark for emphasis, so as to remind readers that his story does not fall into an expectable tale.
Coda

[Figure 5] The Swedish Emigrant Institute had on display the copy of a quilted carpet that Swedish emigrants produced somewhere in the Midwest. Does the image, used also as cover of a 2011 book, look familiar in any way?

The Statue of Liberty was so new in 1887 that her name, though already shortened from the official *Liberty Enlightening the World*, had not yet become such a household word that “Statue” would need to be capitalized in connection with “of Liberty”: *Leslie’s Weekly* had a lowercase “statue” with an uppercase “Liberty.”

However, it is possible that *Leslie’s Weekly* was among the very first widely read visual and textual representations of the Statue that associated the Statue explicitly with a welcome to immigrants, only nine months after the dedication, an occasion at which one would have looked in vain for such an interpretation. As the (inverted) Swedish echo demonstrates and as several representations in the manner of *Leslie’s Weekly* suggest, the image that was possibly created and published to offset the bad news about the collision of the *Britannic* may have been a trendsetting one: one that contributed to the reorientation of the meaning assigned to the Statue from celebrating Franco-American friendship as the alliance of two democracies, France having contributed the Statue and America, finally, the pedestal. It may thus be plausible to say that on July 2, 1887 the illustration in Leslie’s articulated the new meaning of the Statue to a wide public, to become dominant and woven into the myth of America.

Perhaps the scene Saki and I imagined three decades ago as an antidote to the myth of America is being reenacted en masse in Europe these days, where, without a recognizable immigration policy migrants are indeed welcomed—behind bars and fences. With all the critique of the myth of America one wishes for a myth of Europe as an arrival point for migrants, not just as a place of detention and deportation. A pan-European welcome symbolism, how ever kitschy and ideological, might still seem preferable to the chaotic status quo.
NOTES


2 At http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/97502086/. Illus. in AP2.L52 1881 (Case Y) [P&P]. John Lowe selected the image as the theme of the MELUS conference, where it appeared on posters and served as cover image of the conference program.

3 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kEXjjogVM3E 8:56 – 10:14.


5 Il sonno non vuole venire, tante cose mi si accavalavano una sopra l'altra nel cervello e chiusi gli occhi per vederle meglio, la prima inanzi l'amara partenza; il treno che doveva portarmi a Parigi il Bastimento, il mare, l'America del Nord coi suoi tesori, la gran baia di New York grande metropoli, La colosale statua della liberta che con il suo braccio destro in alto stringe con la mano una gran torccia acesa, simbolo di protenzione e di liberta a tutti i popoli; e troneggia maestosa in mezzo al mare sull'entrata del porto. [Antonio De Piero. L'isola della quarantine [1922]. Le avventure di un manovale friulano nei primi decenni delle grandi emigrazioni. Firenze: Giunti, 1994.] Quoted in Serra, Value of Worthless Lives.


8 “Ed’a li imbarcate su Lagrande Nave holipnic della compagnia inglese white star line che dopo 5 giorni di traversata siscarico A new york il 5 maggio del 1914, difronte alia Statua della LIBERTA’ eddella Fratellanza umana?” America! America! (1983), 111. Quoted in Serra, Value of Worthless Lives, who adds an excellent comment on how the question mark challenges the assertion of human brotherhood.