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Encounters with the American Prairie:  
Realism, Idealism, and the Search for the Authentic Plains in the Nineteenth Century

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of Literature and Language  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts in English

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by  
Jacob L. Vines  
May 2015

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Keywords: James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving, Margaret Fuller,  
Hudson River School, Great Plains

## ABSTRACT

Encounters with the American Prairie:

Realism, Idealism, and the Search for the Authentic Plains in the Nineteenth Century

by

Jacob L. Vines

The Great Plains are prevalent among the literature of the nineteenth century, but receive hardly a single representation among the landscapes of the Hudson River School. This is certainly surprising; the public was teeming with interest in the Midwest and yet the principal landscape painters who aimed to represent and idealize a burgeoning America offered hardly a glance past the Mississippi River. This geographical silence is the result of a tension between idealistic and empirical representations of the land, one echoed in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Prairie*, Washington Irving's *A Tour on the Prairies*, and Margaret Fuller's *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843*. Margaret Fuller's more physical and intimate Transcendentalism unifies this tension in a manner that heralds the rise of the Luminists and the plains-scapes of Worthington Whittredge.

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A project of this size and scope is not dreamed in an evening. Looking back upon my graduate career, I can sense the hints of this project brewing as early as my first semester. Somewhere within will be found the insights of each instructor I have been fortunate enough to meet. First and foremost, I am indebted to Dr. Mark Holland for his contagious and passionate approach to literature of the nineteenth century as well as his direction and continuous encouragement. Dr. Michael Cody's careful considerations of the portrayals of nature in the era are appropriated here. Dr. Tess Lloyd has forever impacted my understanding of the relationship between place and person, the central concern of this project. I would also like to thank Dr. Scott Honeycutt for his open-door policy and his willingness to discuss my thesis in so many unplanned meetings. Finally, I owe more than gratitude to my wife, whose empathetic and patient heart is a constant source of encouragement to those around her.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Barbara Novak begins her *American Painting in the Nineteenth Century* with a discussion of the early American portraitist John Singleton Copley in which is outlined a significant tension in his works. Novak argues that Copley's paintings are conflicted between an empirical, object-seeking eye and an idealist artistic formula inherited from the European style. The thing-oriented, spontaneous composition in Copley's portraits of Nathaniel Hurd and Paul Revere reveal an affinity for the empirical, but elements of compositional formula demonstrated in pieces like *Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Izard* interrupt the spirited physicality in even his most empirical studies. This disharmony is perhaps best exemplified in the lower third of *Paul Revere*, where the attention to reflection gives a moving luminosity to the silver tea kettle and a solidity to the grained table, but this luminosity is muted by the dull, flat, weightless shape of a bulbous pillow beneath Revere's forearm. The tension between the empirical and the ideal is not merely Copley's, but is manifest almost universally in the masterpieces of painters (and, I will also include, writers) throughout America's nineteenth century, carrying within it numerous implications regarding personal, spiritual and national identities. Novak explains,

Holding out a Utopian dream of access to the noble superiority of the Grand Style, [the style] lured abroad many other Americans—West, Trumbull, Vanderlyn, Morse, Allston, Cole—in search of a heroic ideal they could not find or did not see at home, creating schisms in their works that caused them to paint like children of divorced parents—as indeed they were—with visiting rights on one side of the ocean or the other. (*American Painting* 4)



Despite this desire to work within the mode of those grand compositions, these artists were, at the same time, fascinated by what was physical and individual, particular rather than formulaic. Novak argues that “the need to grasp reality, to ascertain the physical *thereness* of things seems to be a necessary component of the American experience” (*American Painting* 7). The metaphysical, religious, and idealist ideologies of late eighteenth-century England were still resonating throughout the early republic, and yet those ideals seemed utterly incapable of facing the unprecedented magnitude and rawness of the wilderness—the physical *thereness*—discovered in the New World. The American experience of the late-eighteenth and nineteenth century partially revolved around these competing visions of the wilderness; the artistic endeavors of the era—among them the works of Thomas Cole, Asher Durand, James Fenimore Cooper, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Washington Irving, Martin Johnson Heade, Margaret Fuller, Walt Whitman, Nathaniel Hawthorne—acted as imaginative spaces in which this tension was explored incessantly. Art (including literature) in America became a mediating center between man, nature and God in which man’s relationship to both nature and the divine were displayed, discovered, discussed, and (by the end of the nineteenth century) doubted.

Therefore, the American nineteenth century can be understood as a perpetual grappling with the reality of the physical world and the tensions implied by its powerful presence. This individual and national grappling with nature and the divine was the source of and perpetuated by the emergence of the Hudson River School in the 1820s and 1830s, a school of painting that sought to capture the spirit of nature (and nation) in the portrayal of distinctly American (but not always American) landscapes. But what, exactly, the spirit of nature entailed was not a universal given among these artists. Moreover, this elusive spirit of nature carried many implications for

American society—spiritual and national. Angela Miller explains the wavering balance between landscape and nation when she writes,

By adopting conventions associated with the older European tradition of the heroic landscape, American artists transformed their place-specific materials into nature scenes that carried national associations. For Americans who positioned themselves at the vanguard of history, what was national was universal. The national landscape signaled a collective identity that was both unmistakably American and fit to be the heir of the ages. . . . Committed to an identifiably New World image yet faced with a profusion of actual landscape forms, they sought a formula with which to balance the demands of place-specific landscapes with those of national meaning. (“Everywhere” 207-8)

The Hudson River painters stood at the apex of an emerging society trying to understand itself; therefore, the tension between idealist and empirical portrayals of nature must also belong to and participate in a national discussion of the potential national identities at hand, especially the complicated relationship between the social and the individual. This in itself is simply another expression of the tension between conflicting idealist and empirical drives. All generalized claims of social identity appear as abstractions from the individual and the specific; thus, Novak’s problem is merely restated in other terms.

The tension between the part and the whole, the individual and the social, and (particularly important as the antebellum era would erupt into war) the regional and the national was embodied in the paintings of the Hudson River School. The more idealized, highly compositional works of Thomas Cole became just as much a part of landscape painting as Asher

Durand's particularizing vision. Cole was unconcerned with the specificity of individual plant species so much as composition and form, while Durand instructed young painters,

If your subject be a tree, observe particularly wherein it differs from those of other species: in the first place, the termination of its foliage, best seen when relieved on the sky, whether pointed or rounded, drooping or springing upward; next mark the character of its trunk and branches, the manner in which the latter shoot off from the parent stem, their direction, curves, and angles. Every kind of tree has its traits of individuality. . . . By this course you will obtain knowledge of that natural variety of form so essential to protect you against frequent repetition and monotony. (qtd. in J. Durand 213)

This is not to say that Durand was unconcerned with the composition of a landscape, but only that his vision demanded a sense of the physical individuality of things while Cole's vision often obscured the particular by appeal to the ideal, the romantic—to those European formulas. This bifurcation in the Hudson River School is present from its inception, and is highly suggestive of the implied tensions between all things whole and all things individual. This is a tension that drives deep into American conscience, perhaps derived from similar tensions inherent in the (sometimes oxymoronic) philosophy of Democratic Republicanism.

This complex relationship was certainly not limited to the school of landscape painting, as nineteenth-century writers were grappling with similar tensions. A good deal of this project involves the exploration of this bifurcation in antebellum literature, analyzing James Fenimore Cooper's *The Prairie*, Washington Irving's *A Tour on the Prairies*, and Margaret Fuller's *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843*. Much of Cooper's work wrestles with this tension; Joel Porte insightfully suggests that the central question of Cooper's Leatherstocking tales is: "[H]ow can

humans at once be wild and heavenly?” (11). Indeed, Cooper adopts and attempts to appropriate the form of the romance novel throughout his works because

he tried, however imperfectly, to define and explain certain ‘mythic’ aspects of the American experience—call them crises or, perhaps better, cruxes—that could not be dealt with in the realistic novel as he knew it, with its attention limited mainly to detailed description and analysis of the motions and motives of (usually) polite society. (Porte 8)

But the appropriation of the romance is problematic precisely because it requires the wild to appear heroic, and the heroic is itself associated, as Henry Nash Smith points out in *Virgin Land*, with nobility and genteel society (215-6). Thus, the wild is made romantic only when it is abstracted and civilized. Therefore, we see a kindred dissonance between Cooper’s and Thomas Cole’s mythicizing.

This dissonance heavily impacted antebellum travel narratives as well, an immensely popular genre whose form depended upon the emphasis of the physical rather than the ideal. At times, the desire to idealize the wilderness of the New World and the desire to portray the empirical character of the wilderness would coalesce into conflicting descriptions in these narratives. James Hall was one of the premier travel writers of the Midwest in the early nineteenth century. Throughout the early 1820s, Hall published letters and accounts of his travels beyond the Alleghenies in the magazine *Port Folio*. In one of his letters, Hall describes the condition of life as a trapper in language that sometimes veils the real with idealistic tropes. His description portrays the life of the trapper as an actual manifestation of a detached European romanticism. What in Europe was “marvelously incredible” is in America “daily and hourly reduced to practice.” He writes,

That which the novelist [of Robinson Crusoe] deemed barely possible, and which has always been considered as marvelously incredible by a portion of his readers, is not daily and hourly reduced to practice in our western forests. Here may be found many a Crusoe, clad in skins, and contentedly keeping ‘bachelor’s hall’ in the wild woods, unblessed by the smile of beauty, uncheered by the voice of humanity—without even a ‘man Friday’ for company, and ignorant of the busy world, its cares, its pleasures, or its comforts. (*Letters from the West* 294)

The “wild woods” transform into a “bachelor’s hall,” forming columns out of trees and luxury out of the primitive. But all of the romantic language seems at odds with an image of a man “unblessed by the smile of beauty,” ignorant of the pleasures of the world. There is at once an awe for the wilderness that the trapper embodies and inhabits, and a hesitancy to accept the primitive condition of his way of life.

Hall’s descriptions of Midwestern scenery embody this disharmony in an interesting way; he oscillates between language that relies heavily on an empirical eye and a preference for abstracting terminology. Describing the Ohio valley, Hall notes that

[t]he Ohio has not the sprightly, fanciful wildness of the Niagara, the St. Lawrence, or the Susquehanna, whose impetuous torrents, rushing over beds of rocks, or dashing against the jutting cliffs, arrest the ear by their murmurs, and delight the eye with their eccentric wanderings. Neither is it like the Hudson, margined at one spot by the meadow and the village, and overhung at another by threatening precipices and stupendous mountains. It has a wild, solemn, silent sweetness, peculiar to itself. (*Letters from the West* 82)

I cannot but hear Durand's advice, written a decade later, in the particularizing of this description. Hall insists that the Ohio is something in its own right; here he, as Margaret Fuller will put it later, "look[s] at it by its own standard" (*Summer on the Lakes* 22). Implied is the recognition of a unique place, a recognition that is turned on its head by what immediately follows. Whether the notion of wildness and the hint of sublimity in the last sentence of the above quotation spawned in Hall's mind the romantic is, of course, unverifiable, but the particularizing eye dissolves into the abstracting language that follows:

The noble stream, clear, smooth, and unruffled, swept onward with regular majestic force. Continually changing its course, as it rolls from vale to vale, it always winds with dignity, and avoiding those acute angles, which are observable in less powerful streams, sweeps round in graceful bends, as if disdainful of the opposition to which nature forces it to submit. On each side rise the romantic hills, piled on each other to a tremendous height; and between them, are deep, abrupt, silent glens, which at a distance seem inaccessible to the human foot; while the whole is covered with timber of a gigantic size, and a luxuriant foliage of the deepest hues. Throughout this scene there is a pleasing solitariness, that speaks peace to the mind, and invites the fancy to soar abroad, among the tranquil haunts of meditation. (*Letters from the West* 82-3)

Even when Hall insists that the Ohio River does not twist at angles "which are observable in less powerful streams," nothing could be less empirical than the description of the river as "noble," "graceful," "majestic," and proceeding with "dignity." Coupled with the "romantic hills," and the various emphases on their "gigantic" scale, these abstractions show that Hall's mind is no longer

steeping in the physical detail of the Ohio River, but is indeed soaring abroad rather than rooted below—abroad in two ways: into the abstract and across the Atlantic.

The most troubling conflict in Hall’s letters—for his career, at least—is an aversion to the source of the forms to which he is indebted. After positive responses to his letters in *Port Folio*, Hall was convinced that his work might receive more attention were the letters collected and published in a single volume. He sought out a London publisher, hoping to gain a wider audience. In his biography of Hall, John T. Flanagan describes what followed:

When Hall handed over his manuscript it was with the understanding that the book should appear anonymously. . . . When the firm of Henry Colburn finally published the book in London in 1828 it bore the following title: *Letters from the West; Containing Sketches of Scenery, Manners, and Customs; and Anecdotes Connected with the First Settlements of the Western Sections of the United States*. By Judge James Hall. Not only had the author’s name been added, with his title prefixed, but the sprightly work that had begun as innocuous travel letters was suddenly transformed into a formal analysis of western life. Hall was immensely embarrassed, the more so as English reviews pounced upon his anti-British bias, but he was helpless. (87)

Hall certainly carried an “anti-British bias”; in honesty, “bias” may be too modest a term. His disgust for the British way of life is evident in a number of sardonic meanderings throughout *Letters of the West*. I cannot help but include a certain passage—partially for humor’s sake. On the shores of the Ohio River, Hall’s party encounters a violent storm. Hall seizes an opportunity to jab at a perceived sentimentalism in English decorum:

If I were an *English traveller*, I should consider myself fully authorised, under these circumstances, to note down, that “the climate of this country is dreadfully tempestuous, and the waves of the Ohio as boisterous as those of the Gulph Stream;” but as the wind sometimes blows on the coasts of the Atlantic and the rain sometimes falls in England, I am rather inclined to think that as an *American traveller*, it is safest not to notice this as a peculiarity—for, in the latter character, it will be expected of me that I shall tell the truth, though the former would not have imposed any such obligation. (178)

Given that these words were published under Hall’s name *in London*, perhaps Flanagan’s choice of the word “embarrassment” to describe Hall’s reaction is also a bit modest. But I do not include this passage merely to evoke a laugh; Hall’s biting criticism demonstrates a lack in self-awareness on Hall’s part. As we have seen, Hall is certainly not above inserting a little sentimentality into his truth-telling. He appeals to the romantic image of Robinson Crusoe as an index for the Missouri trapper. He appropriates distinctly British romantic forms and terminology into an American vision just as he undermines those very forms. As Hall’s career expanded, he began to compose fictional works in the form of the romance, eventually establishing a reputation as the romancer of the West.

This points to a fascinating blindness in Hall—based upon a nationalistic prejudice—that can easily be extrapolated to many of his contemporaries; at the very least, it points to the interconnected weave of unsettled identities in the era. American writers were seeking to romanticize through European forms a wilderness that seemed to defy abstraction just as they were struggling to define the wilderness as something separate from those European forms. Therefore, as should be obvious by now, the question of national identity was weaved into the



tension between modes of the ideal and modes of the real in antebellum America. Thus, this project will occasionally touch upon the spiritual dialogue of the era, socio-economic conflicts, and discussions of national identity as it explores artistic representations of nature, as it is impossible to loosen the knit that intertwines them. More specifically, this project will examine the way that the conflict between the abstract and the physical in painting and literature in antebellum America was expressed in artists' relationships to a particular stretch of the wilderness: the Great Plains. I will argue that the Great Plains act as a measure of the conflict between the ideal and empirical, an imaginative and authentic arena where the forms of man confront the raw emptiness of the rolling prairie, a landscape that refuses to succumb to those alien romantic forms.

### *The Great Plains*

I mention Hall's work here not only to demonstrate the ways that the tension between idealism and empiricism was mapped onto the wilderness, but also to depict the connection between westward expansion and the increasing intensity of this tension. As more and more travelers left for the west, the Great Plains became a prominent character in this artistic conundrum.

Henry Nash Smith's seminal *Virgin Land* (1950) discusses competing visions of the prairies in a chapter that has largely shaped subsequent scholarship. He refers to these competing visions of the plains as The Great American Desert and the Garden of the World. Smith explains the myth of the Great American Desert:

The conception of the Great Plains that had prevailed generally in this country during the first half of the nineteenth century did full justice to, if indeed it did not

grossly exaggerate, the aridity which settlers encountered there after the Civil War. The existence of an uninhabitable desert east of the Rocky Mountains had first been announced to the American public in 1810, when Zebulon M. Pike published the journal of his expedition across the plains to the upper Rio Grande Valley. His assertion that the vast treeless plains were a sterile waste like the sandy deserts of Africa was an impressive warning to the prophets of continuous westward advance of the agricultural frontier. Americans were used to judging the fertility of new land by the kind of trees growing on it; a treeless area of any sort seemed so anomalous that settlers were long reluctant to move out upon the fertile and well-watered prairies of Illinois. (175)

Eventually, Smith argues, the desert myth was countered by another after the Civil War, an alternative vision promoted in part by appeals to the language of manifest destiny, but also by a rush of reports from settlers in the Midwest and surveyors of the Pacific railroad that the soil was in fact rich and rainfall was increasing with each season (a statement which would also prove to be untrue). The development of this counter-myth was soon fulfilled in the vision of the plains as the Garden of the World, where the commercial and agricultural potential of the plains were just as exaggerated as claims of aridity and infertility had been decades earlier.

Studies since Smith have largely reinforced the conflict between the two visions in the century, but a few scholars have disagreed with Smith's description of a clear transition from one myth to the other. An article by John L. Allen published in *Great Plains Quarterly* criticized Smith's model as far too simplistic, arguing instead that the rivaling myths are present throughout the entire century, and that erecting a popular vision out of simultaneous models in any era of the century reduces complexity to excessive simplicity. Rather, "Perhaps the central

and most important fact we can learn from an examination of the prevalent attitudes toward the plains in the nineteenth century is that these views have always been subjective” (217). He explains:

The mind is like a mirror that reflects what it perceives; the nature and appearance of the reflected image is determined by the conditions of the mirror—whether it is cracked, warped, spotted, or otherwise modified by both collective and personal experience. All images—and this is particularly true of regional images or patterns of belief about the nature and content of a definable area—are distorted and discolored by the quality of the minds in which they have been lodged. (209)

Allen suggests a dialectical continuum rather than a clear transition spanning pre- and post- Civil War culture. Both Allen and Smith utilize two different methods and arrive at two different narratives, but at the base of both narratives is a conflict between the myth of the Great American Desert and the Garden of the World. And yet, as Allen writes, both conceptions ignore “the presence of a considerable array of data to the contrary” because “the Great Plains themselves do not constitute a unified or homogenous region: in terms of geographic reality, some areas are more gardenlike while others are more desertlike” (208, 209).

I would venture to argue that this conflict between garden and desert imagery was often embodied in single pieces of literature. Consider, for example, the first few lines of William Cullen Bryant’s “The Prairies”:

These are the Gardens of the Desert, these  
The unshorn fields, boundless and beautiful,  
For which the speech of England has no name—  
The Prairies. I behold them for the first,

And my heart swells, while the dilated sight

Takes in the encircling vastness. (1-6)

The prairies are both garden and desert in Bryant's poem. There is beauty found in their boundlessness and their vastness. Bryant insightfully recognizes that the English forms he has brought with him cannot capture the prairie's essence. He attempts to create some analogue to European tropes by comparing the prairies to the ocean, "with all his rounded billows fixed" (9); however, even that analogue collapses, as it fails to capture the breezes that "toss the golden and the flame-like flowers" (16). Bryant is keenly aware of the point I shall attempt to make in this thesis: that the plains repeatedly refuse to submit to the forms man attempts to impose upon it. The very fact that, as Allen has pointed out, both the Garden and Desert myths fail to capture the authenticity of the prairies demonstrates the difficulty that early artists and explorers encountered in comprehending the prairies.

Any scholar who studies the artistic portrayal of the American prairies between 1803, the year of the Louisiana Purchase, and 1860 will discover their silence. The prairies are prevalent among the literature in the period, as we have seen. But the prairies are not represented among the numerous landscapes of the Hudson River School. This is certainly surprising; the public was teeming with interest in and aspiration for the expanses of the Midwest, and was clearly invested in a conflict of vision regarding the Midwest, and yet the principal landscape painters who aimed to represent and idealize a burgeoning America offered hardly a glance towards the Midwest. While the literature of the period had begun wrestling with the plains early in the century, the Hudson River School would not see a significant landscapist paint the plains until the rise of the Luminists in the 1860s, particularly in a number of landscapes by Worthington Whittredge.

In a sense, the silence of the plains in landscape painting can be explained by the supposed prevalence of the desert myth, a myth that kept polite society unwilling to patronize a painting of a geographical region so often compared to the flat wastelands of the African deserts, and a myth that also withheld those Catskill painters from recognizing something aesthetically worthwhile in the vastness of the plains. Allen's criticism would rightly characterize this narrative as an oversimplification, but this narrative might also be the reason why few scholars have addressed the silence of the plains in a period so taken with dreams of westward expansion. I am convinced that the artistic portrayal of the plains as a desert in, say, Cooper's *The Prairie* is connected to his romantic enterprise. Or rather, I see his tendency towards idealizing, his desire for the universal, as influencing his ability to recognize an aesthetic in the empirical authenticity of the plains. The same can be said for Thomas Cole, whose romantic formulas were more easily appropriated onto a landscape with objects to organize on the canvas; but a relatively treeless, mountainless, expanse on the other side of the Mississippi held no objects to organize, no forms to explore. The prairie would require an appreciation of the empirical that the romantic strand of the Hudson River School would not produce in its first generation. This is not to say that the silence of the plains in Cole and the misrepresentation of the plains in Cooper were not at all influenced by the desert myth, but only that the desert mentality is directly connected to a romantic vision that belongs uniquely to Cole and Cooper. Even as I attempt in this project to trace out the hesitancy to recognize an aesthetic beauty in the plains, the reader must remember the incredible interconnectedness of these issues in antebellum America. As Hayden White reminds us, "It is frequently forgotten or, when remembered, denied that no given set of events attested by the historical record comprises a story manifestly finished and complete. This is as true as the events that comprise the individual as it is of an institution, a nation, or a whole

people” (1720). I will attempt to portray the relationship between the ideal, the real, and portrayals (or lack thereof) of the Great Plains in this essay; however, I must share the conviction that I will, despite my best efforts, inevitably provide an incomplete narrative.

The following chapter will examine the tension between the ideal and real in both Thomas Cole and James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Prairie*, arguing that the tendency towards forms made the plains incompatible with Cole’s vision and complicated Cooper’s portrayal of the prairie. The third chapter will explore Washington Irving’s travelogue, *A Tour on the Prairies*, to depict the development of a particularizing eye that seems to appropriate Asher Durand in written form. Though, both artists’ attachment to forms that separate the ideal and physical produce a still complicated relationship to the plains for Irving and correlate to the continued silence of the plains throughout Durand’s works. In the fourth chapter, the ideal and the real will be united in the emergence of Transcendentalism, particularly the more physical brand embodied by Margaret Fuller’s *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843*. This unification will finally offer the plains a welcoming eye in a number of Luminist landscapes of the 1860s. Only after the ideal, the romantic, is weaved into the empirical will the plains find a poet.

### *Concerning Theory*

The unique Transcendentalist mixture of realism and idealism has been called by numerous scholars the first truly American philosophy. The modern and post-modern scholar is hesitant to embrace this as a truth, for “America” does not signify an objective thing, but rather a narrative construction. In fact, my own work here may be charged as participating in these constructive kinds of projects. But a tendency to de-solidify all things in the post-modern state of criticism seems to me to limit the capacity of language to a verbal and cognitive process of

solidification. This reading of language, in my opinion, explains part of its capacity, but it misses something that my research here, I hope, demonstrates: the reality, the physicality, the power, and the voice of the land that speaks through a text. Many words were spent describing the land in the nineteenth century, and those descriptions, as I have already shown in this introduction, can often be easily recognized as solidifying enterprises. However, I am hesitant to assert that the text does not carry with it some hint of the authentic external it seeks to relate. This is why Cooper's landscapes, as many scholars have noted, impress the mind more than any other element of his stories: something real, even if constructed, speaks.

We must consider Transcendentalism in this light, as well. Transcendentalism was not merely a reaction to the ideologies of the Unitarian church, was not only, as Perry Miller quite famously argues, an American philosophy with roots that stretch as far back as the rigorous Puritans. Rather, the Transcendentalist blend of realism and idealism was first and foremost a response to the natural world around them. I certainly do not assume too much in asserting that the wilderness encountered by early America, wilderness which thrived beyond the Alleghenies and Mississippi River well into the twentieth century, was simply unprecedented. The wilderness was so varied, new, and overwhelming that the intellectual baggage of the early republic and beyond was complicated and denied by the character of the *real* land beyond the borders of civilization. The land demanded a new perspective, and the emergence of Transcendentalism answered the demands of the Rockies, Appalachia, and the Great Plains all. Therefore, I want to boldly assert that there *is* something characteristically American in the Transcendentalist ethic: that physical reality which it seeks to (and just as often fails to) describe and comprehend.

American history revolves around interactions with the physical world, and developments in intellectual thought throughout the nineteenth century can be largely explained as

developments in relationships with the character of the land. It is no coincidence that Hawthorne's most common and powerful symbol is the wild forest, nor should it be surprising that Melville's Ishmael finds (or tries to find) so much truth in the sea and the white whale. That his *Pierre* deconstructs that romantic portrayal of nature is the result of Melville's grappling with the character of nature and identity. The regional literature movements of the later century are a direct response to the notion that one's land and one's community are influential in the creation of an individual. And the social realist movements that follow are premised upon a connection between social structure and a Darwinian world. The land itself acts as an index for this intellectual development throughout the century, as intellectuals and writers commonly look to it for validation. Having knowledge of this fact is necessary, absolutely necessary, in studying the literature of the era. It may be the case that landscape paintings, travel journals, and novels are themselves constructions built to serve various nationalistic and spiritual aims; in rendering their experience with the natural world into language, these writers may often construct an unnatural world in its place. However, as scholars, we should open ourselves to the voice of the authentic land within the text, not so much in deconstruction but in faithful observation to its subtle presence there. There is an intimate connection with the external that, as Fuller so beautifully demonstrates, can be enveloped in language itself. This project aims to explore the struggle of the plains to find that faithful observer.



## CHAPTER 2

### THE EARLY ROMANTIC DILEMMA:

#### COLE'S COMPOSITIONS AND COOPER'S DESERT PRAIRIE

That Thomas Cole and James Fenimore Cooper are connected in numerous ways is certainly not revelatory knowledge. As artists of both literary and visual media were still sparse in the early part of the century—much of the country was preoccupied with attempts at political and economic self-discovery—an artistic haven of sorts began to dig its roots into New York. By the time Cooper commissioned his exclusive Bread and Cheese Club, New York had developed into a bustling artistic scene. As comically pretentious as the “Bread and Cheese Club” sounds to modern ears, its prestigious membership included an impressive caliber of artists, which itself is a testament to the political and artistic significance of Cooper. Among these members were William Dunlap, Asher B. Durand, John Wesley Jarvis, Samuel F. B. Morse, Henry Inman, Robert W. Weir, John Vanderlyn, and William Cullen Bryant (Beard 481). In order to illustrate Cooper's connection to the visual arts of the period, James F. Beard observes that the large majority of members were artists rather than writers and all were driven by a similar vision, “the discovery of hitherto unsuspected values in American life and landscape, a discovery which brought the arts close together” (481). Cooper's bread and cheese-mates were driven to formulate a national identity through the arts, and were convinced that this national identity was inscribed onto the native landscape of this, their New World.

In 1825, Thomas Cole burst onto the New York scene, and his presence would drastically impact the course of American painting. Cole was an aspiring painter who had just returned from a trip up the Hudson early that year; his journey produced a number of sketches of scenery, sketches which were soon developed into a series of landscape compositions. A short piece in the

*New York Evening Post* in November 1825 explains what followed in such delightful and suggestive language that I cannot restrain myself from including the full piece here.

About a month ago, Mr. Cole, a young man from the interior of Pennsylvania, placed three landscapes in the hands of Mr. Colman, a picture dealer in this city, for sale, hoping to obtain twenty dollars a piece for them. There they remained unnoticed by the Macaenases who purchased Guido's and Raphael's, and Titian's, of the manufacture of every manufacturing town in Europe, & there they might have remained, if an artist, who had placed himself some of his own productions in the hands of Mr. Colman, had not gone to inquire for the proceeds. On casting his eyes upon one of the pictures by Mr. Cole, he exclaimed, "Where did this come from!" and continued gazing, almost incapable of understanding the answer. When informed that what he saw was the work of a young man, untutored and unknown, he immediately purchased the picture for twenty-five dollars, the price Mr. Colman had prevailed upon the painter to affix to his work, adding, "Mr. Colman, keep the money due me, and take the balance. If I could, sir, I would add to it. What I now purchase for 25 dollars I would not part with for 25 guineas. I am delighted, and at the same time mortified. This youth has done at once, and without instruction, what I cannot do after 50 years' practice." This honorable testimony to the merits of genius of Mr. Cole was from Col. Trumbull.

Col. Trumbull immediately mentioned his purchase to another artist [whom we now know was William Dunlap (Parry 26)], and in the highest terms of eulogism. That artist waited at the Colonel's rooms while the picture was sent for, and immediately exclaimed, "This is beyond the expectation you had raised."

After gazing with wonder and delight, he hastened to see the remaining two, purchased one, and left the other only for lack of money. He carried this in hand to the rooms of Col. Trumbull, where two other artists [one of which was Durand (Parry 26)], of the first rank in the city, were in waiting. The result was, that the four went immediately to the picture dealer's: one of the last mentioned artists bought the remaining landscape; all left their cards for Mr. Cole, whose modesty had not permitted him to introduce himself to the artists of the city; and all have expressed but one sentiment of admiration and pleasure, at the talent which is thus brought to light.

These pictures will now be seen with delight by those who visit our Academy, and they will be astonished when they compare them with the works of the first European masters, in the Gallery, to find that an American boy, comparatively speaking, for such truly is a man of twenty-two, has equaled those works which have been the boast of Europe and the admiration of ages. (2)

The piece is signed anonymously as "American," but scholarship has unearthed that it was written by Cooper's bread-mate, William Dunlap (Parry 24). This article, one of the first means of exposure for the young Cole, defined the public's expectations. In Cole, Dunlap sees an American rival to the European greats, a long-awaited American master of the canvas that would validate the American landscape. The writer declares that Cole's gift was instinctual, untrained, and nonetheless equal even to ancient painters. In his descriptions of the other pieces found in Mr. Colman's store, Dunlap hints at a lack of originality in European reproductions (which saturated the American art market in the early century), a lack of authenticity, and a staleness in

taste of those patrons who dote upon them. This staleness is, of course, the opposite of the ingenuity of Cole's pictures—a new style for a New World.

Unfortunately, Dunlap's laudatory language gets so lost in excitement that it exaggerates important details about the young painter. Elwood C. Parry notes, "Born in Bolton-le-Moors, Lancashire, England, in 1801, [Cole] had not emigrated to the United States with his family until 1818, and it is now known that he did not take the legal steps to become an American citizen until 1834" (26). Not only that, but the writer drastically exaggerated Cole's untutored past. Parry writes that Cole's "development as a landscape specialist hardly took place in an educational vacuum. Most recently in Philadelphia from the end of 1823 through the spring of 1825, Cole would have had ample opportunity to study old master paintings . . . at the Pennsylvania Academy" (26). Cole was also nearing twenty-five in November of 1825. In truth, a three-year exaggeration is nothing to scoff at; but when considered alongside the hyperbole of the piece as a whole, we can see through Dunlap's language the desperation with which the public sought an American master. One can only imagine Cooper's excitement when William Dunlap, Asher Durand, and John Trumbull each heralded a new young talent, and, as imagination would have it, Cole was soon a member of the Bread and Cheese Club.

Dunlap's article so emphatically identifies Cole as an American native in an attempt to make Cole's narrative one of American legend. (Dunlap might as well have been describing the young Benjamin Franklin.) But in doing so, he incidentally sowed the seeds of Cole's undoing. Cole did not consider himself a native American artist—or rather he did not consider his art characteristically American. Cole was influenced by the European greats, and his attachment to composition and romantic formula hindered his ability to answer the demands of the public. Novak writes that "Cole, the dreamer, the arch-romantic who preferred to paint Arcadian

compositions . . . found himself an idealist in a world that demanded a more discreet blend of the real with the ideal” (*American Painting* 49). This was the concoction for a “paradox,” as Novak calls it in *Nature and Culture*: “though considered the country’s leading landscapist, [Cole] had difficulty in securing commissions” (17), especially for his allegorical cycles like *The Voyage of Life* and *The Course of Empire*.

For Cole, these allegories were exhibitions of the artistic imagination at its best, but the public craved veracity. Veracity had, in some ways, become an essential element of the American experience. Novak notes that Cole “complained bitterly that the American public wanted ‘things not thoughts,’ and he was right. At the base of Cole’s ideal allegories was an essential abstraction far beyond an age tied to the naturalistic and nationalistic as well as to an enduring need for the palpable” (*American Painting* 49). A telling account of this tension can be found in Cole’s letters of 1826. A Baltimore collector, Robert Gilmor, Jr., offered some (unsought) advice to Cole. Gilmor praised the early landscapes of Thomas Doughty in order to demonstrate the path which Cole should emulate. He opined that Doughty’s

pictures were pleasing, because the scene was real, the foliage varied and unmannered and the broken ground and rocks and masses had the very impress of being after originals and not ideals. . . . I prefer real American scenes to compositions, leaving the distribution of light, choice of atmosphere and clouds, and in short all that is to render its natural effect as pleasing and spirited as the artist can feel permitted to do, without violation of its truth. (qtd. in Novak, *American Painting* 46)

This, of course, rubbed Cole the wrong way. His irritation seeps through his reply.

I really do not conceive that compositions are so liable to be failures as you suppose. . . . If I am not misinformed, the first pictures which have been produced, both historical and landscapes, have been compositions, certainly the best antique statues are compositions; Raphael's pictures, those of all the great painters are something more than mere imitations of nature as they found it. . . . If the Imagination is shackled and nothing is described but what we see, seldom will anything truly great be produced. (qtd. in Novak, *American Painting* 46)

The defensive tone, suggested in padded language like, "If I am not misinformed," and "I really do not conceive," veils his frustration with Gilmore rather thinly. More to the point, though, Cole's reply demonstrates that he considered himself part of the same artistic tradition which the American public had destined him to challenge.

As much as Cole thought of himself as a Romantic in the line of Claude Lorrain and Salvator Rosa, he was certainly not unconcerned with veracity in his landscapes. Though, veracity meant something different to Cole than to his detail-oriented countrymen, hinted at above when he describes an authentic transcription of nature as "shackling" the imagination. In a letter written in London in 1830, during Cole's European tour, he described a tendency towards compositional concerns in more painterly language, appealing to paintings of Claude, Poussin, and Salvator Rosa—paintings fresh on his eyes in London—for justification.

In subjects of a quiet character it is proper, it appears to me, to introduce much detail. When we view the lovely scenes of nature, the eye runs about from one object of beauty to another; it delights in the minute as well as in the vast. In the terrible and grand, when the mind is astonished, the eye does not dwell upon the minute, but seizes the whole. In the forest, during an hour of tempest, it is not the

bough playing in the wind, but the whole mass stooping to the blast that absorbs the attention: the detail, however fine, is comparatively unobserved. In a picture of such a subject *detail* should not attract the eye, but *the whole*. It should be, in this case, the aim of the artist to impress *the spirit of the entire scene* (my emphasis, here) upon the mind of the beholder. Detail, however, ought not to be neglected in the grandest subject. A picture without detail is a mere sketch. The finest scene in the world, one most fitted to awaken sensations of the sublime, is made up of minutest parts. These ought all to be given, but *so* given as to render them subordinate, and ministrative to the one effect. In confirmation of this doctrine I have only to appeal to Claude, G. Poussin, and Salvator Rosa. (qtd. in Noble 117)

While Cole is dedicated to detail, detail itself is only relevant insofar as it bolsters “the spirit of the entire scene.” Cole was more interested in forming on the canvas a *spirit* of nature than a replication of it, and veracity—truth-telling—implied the truth behind the landscape rather than the truth of it. Beard mentions a letter written by Cooper, no less, to Cole’s biographer a year after Cole’s death, that best explains the principle of the Romantic landscape. Cooper wrote that nature “should be the substratum of all that is poetical. But the superstructure should be no servile copy. The poet and the painter are permitted to give the beau ideal of this nature and he who makes it the most attractive while he maintains the best likeness, is the highest artist” (qtd. in Beard 489). For nature is not simply beautiful for what it is, but artistic renderings draw out what is ultimately beautiful within it, what Beard describes as “a religious, patriotic, and ethical idealism which transcended the immediate aspects” of nature (493). There was a religious, moral

imperative written onto the landscape like the Hebrew letters inscribed onto the distant mountains of Cole's *The Oxbow* (Baigell 137-8).<sup>1</sup>

Cole's method was collaborative with the desire to portray the *beau ideal* of the landscape. His general method of composition was to compile a canvas from plein-air sketches long after an immediate experience with the sketched object. Novak includes one of Cole's letters in her *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century* in which he explains the benefit of this method. He writes that he sought to

get the objects of nature, sky, rocks, trees, etc., as strongly impressed on his mind as possible, and by looking intently on an object for twenty minutes I can go to my room and paint it with much more truth than I could if I employed several hours on the spot. By this means I become more intimately acquainted with the characteristic spirit of nature than I could otherwise do. (49)

Again, Cole appeals to that "spirit of nature" he aims to capture in his work. He relies on a memory of the *experience* of the object rather than exact representational detail. This resulted in landscapes that were highly composed to represent the *beau ideal* and the morality within a scene—an ideal that was accessible, for Cole, by rendering raw experience through a romantic formula that all too often seemed imposed upon the landscape rather than sourced within it.

I aim to demonstrate here Cole's consistent tendency towards idealism by showing that his mastery of composition comes at the cost of the empirical. I will then explore Cole's *The Course of Empire* to argue that this Romantic sensibility created in Cole a paradoxical relationship with the nationalism at the heart of the era. I will then extend the analysis to Cooper's *The Prairie* to explore its expressions of similar concerns regarding the American future, and will argue that these concerns are also sourced in Cooper's Romantic tendency.



There, we shall see that Cooper's iteration of the paradox is perfectly displayed in his ambivalent portrayal of Natty Bumppo and the prairies. Finally, I will briefly return to Cole at the end of the chapter to consider the silence of the prairies in his extensive collection of landscapes, arguing that the Romantic expectations of landscape at the heart of his philosophy restrained him from recognizing an aesthetic beauty in the prairies.

*Composition and Empiricism in Cole's Views and Visions*

Novak explains that

Cole tended to dispose nature's parts according to an *a priori* sense of composition. Using and re-using Salvator's gnarled trees and Claude's coulisses and glittering ponds, he deftly imposed details of American scenery upon formulae derived from earlier prototypes, or upon his own favorite compositional schema, which he would repeat whether the locale were the Catskills or the White Mountains. (*American Painting* 51)

Hints of Rosa's trees and Claude's coulisse effects are evident in the earliest of Cole's landscapes. His 1826 *Falls of the Kaaterskill* exhibits his attachment to these romantic formulas. In the lower foreground is a twisted and mangled tree encircled by blasted branches, boughs only just shattered by the departing storm. The trees on the sides of the canvas encroach inward to create a coulisse effect, framing the extended view. Other characteristics of Rosa's art influence Cole, particularly Rosa's thick and violent chiaroscuro. The sunlight in *Falls of the Kaaterskill* dances in a checkering light through the remaining mist and clouds, illuminating the tip of the lower falls as well as the miniature Native American figure standing on its precipice. The light blends smoothly but quickly into the abysmal shadow between the upper and lower falls and

around the blasted tree. This technique was essential to the meaning of Cole's landscapes, and appears among numerous paintings from the well-known *The Oxbow* (1836) to his allegorical *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden* (1827) and 1846 *Evening in Arcady*.

As *Falls of the Kaaterskill* demonstrates, Cole's landscape is always allegorical and moral in meaning, even when the scene is an actual view; the individual details and the painterly techniques support the larger meaning of the canvas. The chiaroscuro serves as what Donald A. Ringe refers to as a "symbolic function" (351), where the contrast calls forth the coexistence of lightness and darkness—along with the myriad of connotations those words entail—in nature. Furthermore, the lively tones of spring and summer meld into the autumn of the middle landscape, which then fades into the darkness and barrenness of the gnarled tree and muted rocks. The canvas flows from an image of life downward to an image of death, and it is thus no coincidence that the lone figure on the precipice inhabits the colorful space between. The departing storm is a common theme of Cole's paintings, a feature that emphasizes the transience of nature and the hope to be found in its passing.

All of these elements highlight a preference for composition which subordinates a devotion to the details of the canvas. For Cole, it is irrelevant that the species of the blasted tree is indeterminable, or that the abyss between the upper and lower shelf is far too exaggerated, or that the raised perspective should place the painter in a position to view the small pool below the upper falls despite the shadow; the unlikeliness of the rich, verdant forest hanging beside such bold autumnal colors contemporaneously and the plastic posture of the figure is not of importance. But Cole's compositional techniques are so even-handed and subtle that the landscape, while composed, attains a level of verisimilitude. The viewer hardly notices that the painting is dependent upon a cross of diagonal lines. One begins in the mist of the upper left of

the canvas and is completed in the twisted branches of the barren tree. The curtain of light sweeps upward from the bottom left and intersects the other diagonal just at the brink of the lower falls. Cole directs the eye with these lines so masterfully that the formula of the canvas disappears. Nonetheless, it is present, and it is the composition rather than the detail in the individual objects that creates the beauty of the view.

We could extend the same discussion to numerous other paintings from Cole's early years. The chiaroscuro, picturesque (yet inauthentic) falls, and gnarled trees in *The Clove, Catskills* (1827) bear a similar style, as does *Lake with Dead Trees* (1825), the prominent *View of Monte Video, Seat of Daniel Wadsworth, Esq.* (1828), and *View in the White Mountains* (1827). Each of these pieces preference the meaning, the composition as a whole, over authentic representations of individual objects. But let us move past Cole's "views" and into Cole's "visions," for there we see the most characteristic expression of Cole's romanticism. Consider the allegorical imagery of *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*. Each of Cole's romantic techniques is represented here, and the moral overlay of the piece coincides with his compositional techniques as a whole. The chiaroscuro is the technique of good and evil, the sunlight tickling the colors of Eden, and emphasizing the shadow beyond. In Eden are crystalline mountains, pristine valleys, and a tropical paradise. Two swans rest in the tranquil foreground, and distant waterfalls trickle down the faded cliffs. The light merges into a divine expulsion, the two figures walking worriedly towards the approaching darkness. One of Cole's storms frames a violent volcanic eruption, the cliffs are stippled with Cole's blasted trees, the wind from the expulsion threaten to shatter their trunks, and a wolf devours a killed deer in the lower foreground (perhaps this is one of the deer that prance along the water's edge in *Lake with Dead*

*Trees*). And yet the same worries apply: even in the imagined landscape, the composition is preferred over the detail of the individual objects.

The techniques become the symbols of Cole's landscapes, and those tropes carry their romantic burdens even into those prospects and vistas. Cole was well aware of the low status of the landscape in the European artistic hierarchy. But, seeking to equal (not necessarily rival) those European masters, he appropriated the Romantic onto the landscape, attempting to elevate the landscape style. Those European masters had frequently handled the Biblical Eden, among them the fifteenth-century Italian artist Masaccio in his similarly titled *Expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden* (c. 1425). Masaccio's fresco emphasizes the human element of the expulsion, but Cole recasts the myth as a landscape painting, the figures of Adam and Eve hardly recognizable in the magnitude of the landscape. For Cole, the landscape itself carried the substance of myth, morality, and meaning. This assumption would serve as the foundation for many of Cole's pieces throughout his career—*The Tempter* (1843), *Prometheus Bound* (1847), *Angels Ministering to Christ in the Wilderness* (1843), *The Angel Appearing to the Shepherds* (1833-4). Despite all of these revisions to the romantic formulae, Cole considered himself a member of the European Romantic tradition, a painter of compositions and imagination, and a devotee to the moral truths held within nature.

One cannot ignore that this romantic interpretation of the wilderness held significant implications for national identity, and we might be tempted to argue that Cole was driven to validate the landscape genre for nationalistic reasons. Rather, Cole's attempts to legitimize the landscape genre were attempts to legitimize America *as a part of* the romantic tradition, not to define America as an isolate from that tradition. After all, America was not populated with ancient structures and ruins of antiquity that were significant in the European expression of

sublimity and beauty. Instead, America had the wilderness, vast mountain ranges, unspoiled forests. Throughout his career, Cole's romantic allegiance restrained him from simple patriotism; his embrace of the romantic pastoral hindered his ability to embrace American progress.

*The Impossible Pastoral: The Cautionary Allegory of The Course of Empire*

For many of the early American romantic artists, the Edenesque was equivalent to the pastoral, the spatial and allegorical union of art (the substance of civilization) and the wilderness. Leo Marx, in his seminal *The Machine in the Garden*, explains the pastoral in his discussion of one of the earliest presentations of the ideal, Virgil's eclogues:

This ideal pasture has two vulnerable borders; one separates it from Rome, the other from the encroaching marshland. It is a place where Tityrus is spared the deprivations and anxieties associated with both the city and the wilderness.

Although he is free of the repressions entailed by a complex civilization, he is not prey to the violent uncertainties of nature. His mind is cultivated and his instinct gratified. Living in an oasis of rural pleasure, he enjoys the best of both worlds—the sophisticated order of art and the simple spontaneity of nature. (22)

The utopic pastoral, then, is defined as a mediating space between the city and the wilderness, and Cole (and the Hudson River movement as a whole) was deeply drawn to its appeal. In *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*, the perspective is turned away from the approaching darkness towards the unrecoverable Eden. Deep in the obscurity of the painting's misty gaze is an unobtrusive settlement by the sea, the utopia of mediated space. Cole repeats this link between Eden and the pastoral time and again, such as in *The Garden of Eden* (1828). Here, some of the wilderness is cleared, but only enough for the unoffending figures to inhabit. This is

the pastoral ideal—but Cole’s idealism would be tempered in the 1830s with the revelation that this ideal is impossible to realize. During this period, Cole seemed to realize that the pastoral is necessarily transitory, a marginal space between the fading wilderness and the ensuing order of civilization. Cole was torn by this paradox, and these tensions would produce his most prominent landscape series, *The Course of Empire* (1836). This attachment to the pastoral mode bolstered a philosophical pendulum which kept Cole swinging from a patriotic sensibility to a hatred of American progress.

Thomas Cole suggests much about his dissatisfaction with the state of American society in his “Essay on American Scenery,” published in the 1836 volume of *The American Monthly Magazine*. He writes,

It would seem unnecessary to those who can see and feel, for me to expatiate on the loveliness of verdant fields, the sublimity of lofty mountains, or the varied magnificence of the sky; but that the number of those who seek enjoyment in such sources is comparatively small. From the indifference with which the multitude regard the beauties of nature, it might be inferred that she had been unnecessarily lavish in adorning this world for beings who take no pleasure in its adornment.

Who in grovelling pursuits forget their glorious heritage. (2)

This lament translucently veils a deep-seated malaise regarding the condition of the nation. Cole found a direct connection between an appreciation of nature and the individual’s moral uprightness and divinity. An indifference to “the beauties of nature” translated into a diminished sense of what is ultimately good and divine. Cole is frightened by an America which “in groveling pursuits” forgets those beauties.

Cole's "Essay on American Scenery" was composed just as he was finishing *The Course of Empire*. He had begun the series three years earlier, in 1833, under the patronage of Luman Reed. During the development of *The Course of Empire*, Cole slowly awakened to the paradoxical truth at the heart of the pastoral landscape. Albert Boime explains that Cole seemed to grasp the tension that codified much of early American experience, that is, "the notion of futurity and progress, which is the hallmark of the American dream but which in the realization induces reflections on decadence and destruction" (7). Boime continues,

Cole decried the disappearance of the wilderness and the interposition of the mercantile mentality between human beings and nature. . . . Hence, the losing game played by the Americans: on the one hand, their conditions for success depended on the razing of the wilderness and the cultivation of a splendid civilization, while with each inch of cultivated soil a little piece of their innocence disappeared. (7-8)

Indeed, this tension between the love of progress and the love of the wilderness is embodied in much of Cole's work. *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow* (1836) offers a grand view of a skyline extending without obstruction into the horizon. In the middle ground is an agrarian landscape, farmers' huts freckled across the divided fields. Small stacks of smoke billow against the softly rolling hills—this is a flourishing community, a community whose existence depends upon the diminishing of the wilderness. However, Cole contextualizes this agrarian landscape within the wilderness on all sides, what has been interpreted as an attempt to recast the progress of civilization as simply another mode of nature. *The Oxbow* seems, as Simon Schama suggests, "to make the industry and enterprise an undisturbing presence in the American arcadia" (367). Perhaps this is Cole's

attempt to—forgive the cliché—have his cake and eat it too; after all, as Boime points out, “he profited from the mercantile mentality as one of the poets who sanctified the soil. Indeed, it was his ability to encode in his landscape the idea of futurity and progress that made his work so saleable” (8).

Cole is quite aware of this tension, and speaks to it specifically in his “Essay on American Scenery”:

I cannot but express my sorrow that the beauty of such landscapes are quickly passing away—the ravages of the axe are daily increasing—the most noble scenes are made desolate, and oftentimes with a wantonness and barbarism scarcely credible in a civilized nation. The wayside is becoming shadeless, and another generation will behold spots, now rife with beauty, desecrated by what is called improvement; which, as yet, generally destroys Nature's beauty without substituting that of Art. (12)

But he does not end there; he goes on to clarify that “[t]his is a regret rather than a complaint; such is the road society has to travel” (12). While this statement seems to support a nationalistic narrative, we cannot assume that Cole’s recognition of the inevitability of the destruction of wilderness in the consummation of civilization equates to a love for American progress. Rather, his statement that “such is the road society has to travel” is one made in reluctance. In a letter to Luman Reed, during the composition of *The Course of Empire*, Cole writes, “They are cutting down all the trees in the beautiful valley on which I have looked so often with a loving eye. This throws quite a gloom over my spring anticipations. Tell this to Durand—not that I wish to give him pain, but that I want him to join with me in maledictions on all dollar-godded utilitarians” (qtd. in Noble 217). However, Cole was too conflicted to allow himself to appear so obstinate.



The very next day, he wrote again to Reed clarifying that his “‘maledictions’ are gentle ones,” largely because he had learned that “some of the trees will be saved yet. Thank them for that” (qtd. in Noble 218). Cole bitingly laments, “If I live to be old enough, I may sit down under some bush, the last left in the utilitarian world, and feel thankful that intellect in its march has spared one vestige of the ancient forest for me to die by” (qtd. in Noble 218). Cole was not ignorant of the contradiction between American progress and the “nation from nature” myth that shaped early American nationalism; though he recognized that the expansion of society required the loss of wilderness, he was forever uncomfortable with the future he saw in America’s “materially driven democracy” (Miller 24).

Angela Miller points out that “much of the scholarship on American art and culture has encouraged a tendency to approach Cole through the retrospective myth of his role in fathering a national school of landscape” (*Empire* 4), but this attribution of scholars is a bit misguided. Later landscape painters certainly thought of Cole as the founder of their artistic approach, but they “largely ignored his own philosophic argument with the nationalism that was such a key element in the landscape art of midcentury” (*Empire* 4). Cole was not interested in “placing nature in the service of social or collective motives” (*Empire* 4) of the expansionist drive; he was too influenced by a Romantic sensibility to interpret nature as merely the property of American progress. Therefore, attributing the founding of the Hudson River movement to Cole might be a bit presumptuous. Rather, Cole seems to straddle the romantic tradition (of which he considered himself a part) and the romantic nationalism which read a national identity within the American landscape. His romantic sympathies removed him from the nationalistic narrative and, ultimately, gave birth to *The Course of Empire*, which Miller appropriately describes as “a

pessimistic reading of America's imperial ambitions and a series deeply implicated in the political and social milieu of the 1830s" (*Empire* 4).

It is a daunting, disconcerting task to structure a linear discussion on a series of paintings so dependent upon each other for interpretation. In viewing a series as vast and interconnected as *The Course of Empire*, the eye does not remain upon one canvas for too long. Rather, the viewer oscillates between a detailed and a detached view. In this sense, the eye of the viewer is analogous to the brush of the painter. In images so vast, not an inch of the canvas unmastered, the painter and viewer must always move in only to step away. It is this revolution characteristic of both artistic creation and artistic experience that demands the attribution of the epic—the cycle of motion and detachment. Critics from Cooper to Noble referred to the cycle as an epic, and the term is surely fitting. Each possible perspective in *The Course of Empire* embodies this oscillating experience. Cole's eye must revolve between these layers of perspectives, and so must the viewer's. Therefore, my discussion of these pictures will not attempt to erect a fence in such an open range; rather, it too will revolve.

One of the first impressions of *The Course of Empire* is the brilliancy of *Consummation*. Its immensity grabs the viewer's attention, the reflection of the Roman forums leaping out of the canvas. As the largest piece of the original installation in Luman Reed's posthumous 1836 exhibition, it was at the center of both the installation and the viewer's line of sight. The second element to catch the attention of the viewer is the paralleled outermost canvases. The beheaded, chiseled sculpture of *Destruction* has its arm extended at the exact angle of the escarpment in *The Savage State*; the hunter in *The Savage State* and sculpture in *Destruction* are in mirrored positions. The smoke and fog of the morning in *The Savage State* parallels the collection of thunderclouds and ravaging fires in *Destruction*. The foreshortened line of sight driving from the

right side of the canvas in *The Savage State* is echoed in the same line of sight of the Roman colonnade on the right side of *Destruction*. In the foreground of *Destruction*, an invading soldier is tossing a woman into the troubled bay, while an injured deer occupies the same canvas space in *The Savage State*, leaping across a creek in the opposite direction in an attempt to escape from hunters in pursuit. The primary object in *The Pastoral State* is a swelling tree on the right of the canvas teeming with verdant life. The structure is flipped in *Desolation*, where the primary standing object is a lone Roman column overgrown with ivy—the fulfilment of the stumped tree on the far left of *The Pastoral State*. The open prospect on the left of *The Pastoral State* is mirrored in the open emptiness on the right in *Desolation*. *Consummation* erects structures on both sides of the canvas—Minerva looking towards the bronze warriors above the celebrated conqueror, and the large Doric temple, its pediment overlooking the bay.

Numerous early critics were amazed at the vastness of scale, the busy canvases, and the unity of vision throughout. One critic remarked, “It required the attributes of a poet and a philosopher” to compose such a masterful piece, and “displays . . . a familiarity with the history of nations” (qtd. in Howat 37). The pieces are a narrative, embodying the rise and fall of an imagined civilization that, in its consummation, looks much like ancient Rome. But we must begin at the beginning, and so our eyes move towards *The Savage State*, where the rising sun shines dimly against the distant rocky cliff. Our eyes are drawn to the other two lighted areas of the canvas. On the left, a hunter chases a deer, a symbol of the savagery embodied in the swiftly moving scene. The fog, twisting away in the wind of the sea, creates an impression of swift movement, a metonym of the transience that embodies the entire cycle. On the right, a group of Native Americans (remember, this is an imagined landscape) perform a ritual dance. The thick

chiaroscuro emboldens the savagery, but it also adds to that sensation of transition which pushes us to the next piece.

*The Pastoral State* is much calmer, much steadier, than its predecessor. The greens consume the canvas; this is spring—the season of birth and the promise of coming consummation. The druidic temple in the distance echoes the ritualistic fire of *The Savage State*, appropriating that symbol of ceremony into the natural imagery of the pastoral. This is the era in which music and art begins, the age in which the classical philosophers discover geometry—an allusion to the coming Plato. The community has discovered the promise of agriculture, and the violence of the hunting scene in *The Savage State* is supplanted by the domestication of sheep and horses and the domestication of the land. The threat of savagery is not gone, however; it is still present in the figure of a soldier resting against the edge of a hill. *The Pastoral State* is the romantic ideal, where Cole's sympathies lie. Man and nature are not at odds as in *The Savage State*, but are unified and collaborative. Yet something ominous rests in that stumped tree on the left side of the canvas, something that explodes into the desolation of nature within the *Consummation* of civilization.

*Consummation* is the pinnacle of the series; here, we are at the precipice between rise and decline. The scene is celebratory, the conqueror welcomed into the city as the sun rests directly above them. This is the consummation of justice, of peace, of art, beauty, and luxury—but it is not without savagery. The red-robed conqueror, shrouded with the color of blood, appropriates the soldier at rest in *The Pastoral State*. I want to argue that there is a dual reading to this piece hinted at in the homographic similarities between consummation and consumption.

*Consummation* presents a flourishing, burgeoning society, but this consummative empire consumes far too much: this consummation exists upon the condition of perpetual savagery.

Minerva, goddess of war, stares at the bronze statues of soldiers which herald the conqueror. This empire is an empire of peace made possible by its warriors and imperialistic aims. But, most importantly, this consummation has consumed nature—entirely consumed nature. Even the escarpment hardly peeks from behind the roman columns, and the climb up it is decorated with yet more walls and columns. In the foreground, a handful of potted plants decorate a scene of luxury, while a colonnade in the distance veils sparse Roman gardens. All has been domesticated. All has been dominated.

We can see the fulfilment of both *The Pastoral State* and *The Savage State* in *Consummation*, just as we can see the savage roots in *Consummation* that prophesy the empire's decline in *Destruction*—the conqueror will become the conquered. Therefore, invaders rush into the city, slain bodies lying around them. The sky is tickled orange with the flames of destruction. There is no place for reason or justice in this scene, only violence and mayhem: the soldier's head is shattered on the ground but he still stands, shield in hand. Nature itself echoes the destruction as a tempest stirs in the sky, ambiguously symbolizing both the approbation of the conquering party—nature's revenge—and a bitter ambivalence to the successor of this empire. The bridge that once carried the conqueror carries citizens to their deaths; that same bridge stands shorn in the finality of *Desolation*.

*Desolation* is perhaps the most captivating of the series, its power derived not only from the sheer magnificence of the scene, but also from its place in the series. The incredible motion that has charged each previous scene is cut off, and nature begins to reassert its steady and stable claim. In 1846, Cole published prose descriptions of *The Course of Empire* in both *American Monthly Magazine* and *The Knickerbocker*. His description of *Desolation* is far better than I could compose—one can hear Cole the poet in it:

The sun has just set, the moon ascends the twilight sky over the ocean, near the place where the sun rose in the first picture. Daylight fades away, and the shades of evening steal over the shattered and ivy-grown ruins of that once proud city. A lonely column stands near the foreground, on whose capitol, which is illumined by the last rays of the departed sun, a heron has built her nest. . . . But, though man and his works have perished, the steep promontory, with its insulated rock, still rears against the sky unmoved, unchanged. Violence and time have crumbled the works of man, and art is again resolving into elemental nature. The gorgeous pageant has passed—the roar of the battle has ceased—the multitude has sunk in the dust—the empire is extinct. (“Cole’s Pictures . . .” 630)

Louis Noble writes of the series, “The great truth to which all leads, ‘the moral of the strain,’ is the final nothingness of man” (228). But we also cannot forget that nature persists while civilization and mankind will end. The moral is not only that mankind is impermanent, but that even the “insulated rock” delicately perched upon the distant cliff will outlast the greatest of man’s achievements. Man, in *The Course of Empire*, is meaninglessly insignificant.

Just before the unveiling of *Course of Empire*, Cole wrote to Luman Reed, “Will you excuse me if I say, I am afraid that you will be disappointed in the reception and notice my pictures will receive from the public, let them be exhibited to ever so good advantage? . . . Very few will understand the scheme of them,—the philosophy there may be in them” (qtd. in Noble 217). I have to smile at the charming modesty of Cole’s admission—there *may be* philosophy in the series. However, Cole’s fears were not ungrounded. Many early critics admired the pictures for their careful technique and vastness, but failed to grasp Cole’s philosophy, his caution. The *New-York Mirror* published a commentary in November of 1836 that, as Elwood C. Parry

describes, led “to a particularly American conclusion that destruction and desolation would never happen here because of the unique combination of freedom, progress and the love of God on this side of the Atlantic” (186). The critic writes,

The painter has given a sublimity to nature by representing her *unmoved and the same* during all the changes of man’s progress. His conception is beautiful and poetick. He has accomplished his object; which was to show what *has been* the history of empires and of man. Will it always be so? Philosophy and religion forbid! Although such as the painter has delineated it, the fate of individuals *has been*, still the progress of the species is continued, and will be continued, in the road to greater and *greater* perfection. When the lust to destroy shall cease, and the arts and sciences, and the ambition to excel in all good shall characterize man, instead of the pride of triumph, or the desire of conquests, then will the empire of love be permanent. (qtd. in Parry 186)

This critic’s interpretation is exactly the kind Cole feared. While the critic lauds *The Course of Empire* for its “sublimity,” praising even the poetry found within, it is quite a leap from the omen of *Desolation* to the possibility of “the empire of love.” In Cole’s 1844 essay, “Sicilian Scenery and Antiquities,” he responds directly to this commentary, writing, “Others, for mere popularity or applause of the day, minister with adroitness the sweet though poisonous morsel for which our vanity and self-love are open-mouthed; which (to carry on the simile,) [sic] puffs us up with the comfortable notion that we are superior in every respect to all other nations, ancient or modern” (243). This exchange reinforces an important element of *The Course of Empire*: its subject, while an imaginative appropriation of various landscapes, figures, and Roman art and myth, is *not* merely imaginary—it is symbolic of America. The critic for the *New-York Mirror* recognizes the

cautionary implications for America in *Course of Empire* just as he attempts to dismiss them because they run counter to the myth of Manifest Destiny.

Boime points to the tension surrounding Cole's cycle when he writes that "American writers and landscapists lamented 'the axe of civilization' and the 'ignorance and folly' that daily destroyed the garden, at the same time they were generating metaphors and pictorial systems proclaiming the course of empire" (3). Though, Boime's choice of the word "proclaiming" takes more than a few liberties in relation to a character like Cole. It is evident, as we have seen, that the intent of Cole's pieces was not always extrapolated by the public. At the very least, Cole's condemnation was transformed into tones of imperial expansion. Nonetheless, one cannot deny that "it was [Cole's] ability," intentional or unintentional, "to encode in his landscape the idea of futurity and progress that made his work so saleable" (8), and that it is certainly possible that Cole and the Hudson River painters "participated in the very system they condemned and projected it symbolically in their work" (5). But Boime, again, overstates his case. Boime's research suggests the difficulty in reading the moral inherent in the landscape, but it is certainly reductive to suggest that Cole participated, willingly, in the system Boime condemns.<sup>2</sup> *The Course of Empire's* appropriation of Roman architecture within *Consummation* implies a kinship between Cole's empire and the newfound American empire. But, the detached objectivity of the picture, the epic distance of *Consummation*, denies any positive nationalistic reading of the picture. Cole is forever aware of the potential—and perhaps inevitability—of America's destruction. In "Sicilian Scenery and Antiquities," Cole writes, "We see that nations have sprung from obscurity, risen to glory, and decayed. Their rise has in general been marked by virtue; their decadence by vice, vanity, and licentiousness. Let us beware!" (244). This concern underscores *The Course of Empire*, and his ominous conclusion—"Let us beware!"—implies that Cole



recognizes in the America around him the resurrection of that same vice, vanity, and licentiousness that caused the demise of these ancient nations. Though Cole expresses an anti-nationalistic vision in *The Course of Empire*, the series is not absent of a moral recommendation. After all, Cole writes that the rise of these nations “has in general been marked by virtue,” and there is a virtuous vision of community in the rising action of *The Pastoral or Arcadian State*. That said, it is clear that Cole considers America well past *The Pastoral State*; rather, he places America in the position of *Consummation*, wherein America, as he suggests in “Essay on American Scenery,” is far too indifferent to nature. Cole’s fears for America are grounded in this indifference, the absentminded quickness with which industry decimates the wilderness, with which the pastoral is abandoned. *The Pastoral State* offers a vision of a civilization that utilizes local natural resources without the utter destruction of nature in *Consummation*, though the thick foliage of *The Savage State* has been removed and a blasted tree lingers on the canvas.

However, Cole’s portrayal is even more complicated, because he recognizes that even *The Pastoral State* is a transitional state. Despite the fact that the picture provides the ideal relationship between civilization and nature, it is fated to develop into *Consummation*. But, Cole’s message is not paralysis and inaction in the face of civilization’s finitude. Furthermore, its vision is not a contrast to a Christian “empire of love,” as the critic from the *New-York Mirror* suggests, but it is a vision of the cosmic cycle of birth and death from which the American empire is no exception. Cole aims to encourage the appropriation of pastoral values in order to stunt the speed of America’s collapse by stunting the speed of America’s development. The American Empire must not consume nature voraciously in its consummation.

*The Romantic Desert and the Unrefined Hero: Paralyzing Ambivalence in Cooper's The Prairie*

Donald A. Ringe claims that “Cole is probably the closest to Cooper in artistic imagination. Essentially, Cooper and Cole were both moralists, who, not content merely with the accurate presentation of the external scene, sought to convey through the use of landscape a moral theme of universal application” (“James Fenimore Cooper” 27). This is not to say that there were no differences between their artistic visions, for there were certainly political and artistic divergences. But the frequency of their artistic collaborations demonstrate that even they were not unaware of their kindred spirits. Cole was so taken with *The Last of the Mohicans* that he depicted no less than two scenes from the novel—*Cora Kneeling at the Feet of Tamemund* (1827) and *Landscape with Figures: Scene from The Last of the Mohicans* (1826). Cooper’s *The Crater; or, Vulcan’s Peak* (1847) was inspired by Cole’s *Course of Empire*, which Cooper lauded as “a great epic poem” (qtd. in Noble 224). Cooper went on to praise Cole as an artist:

As a mere artist, Claude Lorrain was the superior of Cole. This arose from advantages of position. As a poet, Cole was as much before Claude as Shakspeare [sic] is before Pope. I know of no painter whose works manifest such high poetic feeling as those of Cole. Mind struggles through all he attempts, and mind accompanied by that impulsive feeling of beauty and sublimity that denote genius.

(qtd. in Noble 224-5)

Cooper commissioned a scene from *The Prairie* in 1828, partly, as Beard explains, “to signalize their imaginative kinship, and also to bring the work of the American artist before discriminating foreign patrons” (286). I will discuss this picture in detail elsewhere, but what is notably relevant here are Cooper’s aims: to signalize an artistic kinship and to introduce Cole to *foreign* patrons.

Both Cole and Cooper were still on positive terms with foreign nations, a similarity produced by both artists' adherence to the romantic forms so connected with European sensibilities.<sup>3</sup>

If there is a distinct difference in Cole's paintings and Cooper's *The Prairie*—for our scope here is limited to this novel—it is in the intensity of their tensions. Cole's pictures present paradoxes and attempts to unify philosophical contradictions with varied success. Cooper's *The Prairie* embodies Cole's romantic dilemma and complicates it further, for Cooper's sociality (as opposed to Cole's tendency towards solitude) increased his attachment to social strata. The romantic was not only artistic for Cooper, but it held numerous political implications, implications which often contradicted Cooper's own political stances. This disharmony lies at the center of *The Prairie*, painting almost each element of the novel with ambivalence—especially the prairie itself.

*The Prairie* is Cooper's third novel starring his unrefined hero, Leatherstocking; by all accounts, *The Prairie* was meant to be Leatherstocking's heroic farewell. In *The Prairie*, the protagonist of *The Pioneers* and *The Last of the Mohicans* is well into his ninth decade of life. However, like many of Cooper's tales, the very setting of the novel is so alive that it can often be thought of as the central character. There is some quality of Cooper's landscapes that are so vivid and moving that they loiter in the mind. Francis Parkman described this effect when he wrote of Cooper's settings that their "virtue consists in their fidelity, in the strength with which they impress themselves on the mind, and the strange tenacity with which they cling to the memory" ("The Works" 149). Cooper is certainly a painter of landscapes, dependent upon words rather than oils and brushes, his eye always—like Cole's—at an aesthetic distance from the scene he depicts. This impression in Cooper is perfectly represented in the miniscule figures of Cole's *Cora Kneeling at the Feet of Tamenund*, in which the landscape dominates the scene and defines

the moral by contextualizing the human narrative. In *The Prairie*, the old trapper—the only name Cooper’s hero is given in the novel—has been pushed out of the forests of the east by the “sounds of axes, and the crash of falling trees” (903) into the “comparative desert” (881) of the prairie. Those axes are the recurring symbol of America’s unbridled expansion, analogous to Cole’s own abhorrence of them in his “Essay on American Scenery” and letters to Luman Reed. In this basic exposition of Natty’s migration, however, the geographical embodiment of Cooper’s romantic tension is evident: the prairie must be at once picturesque and a cautionary, treeless wasteland. It must come alive, and yet be a lifeless, uninhabitable desert.

In understanding Cooper’s treatment of the plains, it is necessary to point out that Cooper did not once venture past the Mississippi. In fact, Cooper began *The Prairie* in 1826 in America, but the majority of it was written in a Louis XIV salon in Paris (Flanagan, “Authenticity” 99). This is not to say, however, that Cooper was ignorant of or disinterested in the plains; he never would have written about a landscape that did not capture his imagination. Rather, Cooper was indirectly introduced to the plains through various travel journals and the like. Scholars have discovered two primary sources of Cooper’s understanding of the prairie: Biddle and Allen’s *The History of the Expedition under the Command of Captains Lewis and Clark* and, perhaps most significantly, Edwin James’s *An Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains; Undertaken in the Years 1819 and ’20... Under the Command of Major Stephen H. Long* (Valtiala 127). Nalle Valtiala finds that James’s account “provided [Cooper] with the basic facts of prairie—or plains—existence; it may even largely have set the tone for Cooper’s tale” (127). Whatever Cooper’s sources were, it is evident that Cooper’s imagination took quite a few liberties in shaping the novel’s landscape. John T. Flanagan is one of the most significant scholars to deconstruct Cooper’s imaginative portrayal of the prairies. He points out that

“practically every reviewer or critic who knew anything about the West from personal experience asserted that the novel lacked authenticity” (101). Lewis Cass challenged Cooper’s laconic portrayal of the Native Americans and the embellished inaccuracies in their figurative expressions. James Hall “remarked that despite some admirable scenes the book was obviously written by one completely ignorant of western life” (Flanagan, “Authenticity” 101). Francis Parkman, after Cooper’s death, wrote that “[t]he pictures of scenery are less true to nature than in the previous volumes, and seem to indicate that Cooper had little or no personal acquaintance with the remoter parts of the West” (Parkman 157). Perhaps one could argue—as John T. Frederick has—that Cooper’s portrayal of the Indians and the depiction of the plains were written “as he found it recorded in the best-accredited of firsthand reports” (1017). One might also argue that it is unfair to fault Cooper for errors in authenticity when he was ignorant of the actual character of the plains. Cooper himself was not a little irritated with this unwelcome criticism. In a later edition, he attached a Preface which responded (and insulted) these critics dependent, as Cole said, on “things rather than thoughts”:

There is however to be found in the following pages an occasional departure from strict historical veracity which it may be well to mention. . . . It was enough for [the author’s] purpose that the picture should possess the general features of the original. In the shading, attitude, and disposition of the figure a little liberty has been taken. Even this brief explanation would have been spared, did not the author know that there was a certain class of ‘learned Thebans,’ who are just as fit to read any thing which depends for its success on the imagination, as they are to write it. (881)

I do not consider myself among those “learned Thebans.” I am merely interested in the ways that Cooper failed, for his exaggerations of the landscape—the emergence of a “single, naked, and ragged rock” (973), the scattered groves and thickets among the desert, the inflated oceanic swells—align with the assumptions of landscape composition that are so fundamental to Cole and the European romantic. It is as if Cooper’s ignorance of the prairie allowed him to work fully upon his imagination and, in doing so, revealed the formulas behind his landscape tableaux.

Allen M. Axelrad discusses various hints of Gothic sensibility in Cooper’s landscapes, especially the Mountain and the Forest Gothic. While my project here does not directly deal with representations of the Gothic, his description is quite suggestive. He argues that the “Mountain Gothic emphasizes the rugged *verticality* of the rocky terrain. It is a ragged landscape, marked by dramatic peaks and chasms” (137, my emphasis). I think that Axelrad is on to something, here, for the romantic sensibility of Cole and Cooper seems to be caught up in staggering verticality. It is in the chasms of *The Last of the Mohicans* that the magnificence underlying sublimity can be found, just as Cole’s landscapes are so often composed with verticality in mind. The perspective in *The Oxbow* is positioned well above the landscape, as is *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*, *Falls of the Kaaterskill*, and a plethora of other pieces. Given that the experience of the picturesque for Cooper and Cole was so vertically oriented, it is no surprise that the horizontal expanses of the prairies would not offer anything to the compositional eye of Cooper but “monotonous rolling” (973). Therefore Cooper must play with the vertical, and into the vast “monotony” of the prairie, he inserts trees and thickets stretching to the horizon on the banks of tributaries. Ishmael and his family set up camp early in the novel in the midst of a grove of trees, Asa is murdered beside a thicket and his body is stashed within, Natty and his troupe hide from the Sioux in a thicket, and so on. Cooper, though, seems to forget the presence of these trees at

times.<sup>4</sup> Just before he unveils the magnanimous rock, he is particularly focused on the prairie's nakedness, perhaps because the sublimity of the rocky summit he is about to construct is dependent upon absolute contrast:

Beneath, the wind swept across the wild and naked Prairies, with a violence that is seldom witnessed, in any section of the continent less open. It would have been easy to have imagined, in the ages of Fable, that the god of the winds had permitted his subordinate agents to escape from their den, and that they now rioted, in wantonness, across wastes, where neither tree, nor work of man, nor mountain, nor obstacle of any sort opposed itself to their gambols. (973)

But as Cooper begins to place a massive rock in the prairies, notice how the scene shifts from an absolute flatness to a riverside forest in miniature. The horizontal is uprooted by the vertical, most importantly, in a single structure in the prairie:

Amid the monotonous rolling of the Prairies, a single, naked, and ragged rock arose, on the margin of a little water course, which found its way, after winding a vast distance through the plains, into one of the numerous tributaries of the Father of Rivers. A swale of low land, lay near the base of the eminence, and as it was still fringed with a thicket of alders and sumack [sic], it bore the signs of having once nurtured a feeble growth of wood. The trees themselves, had been transferred, however, to the summit and crags of the neighboring rocks. On this elevation, the signs of man to which this allusion just made applies were to be found. (973-4)

Axelrad argues that this is an expression of the Mountain Gothic, the verticality protruding quite suddenly out of the monotony of prairies. Finally, Cooper has a romantic landscape in his hands;

during one evening scene upon the rock, Cooper even states, “A painter would gladly have seized the moment” (1014). There is no painter there to seize the moment, and so Cooper gives the reader a romantic vision. Utilizing the romantic format we have seen thus far, he distances the perspective far from the rock upon which Ishmael Bush and his kin have set up camp, a distance from which the verticality can be properly appreciated:

The reader will remember that the citadel of Ishmael, stood insulated, lofty, ragged, and nearly inaccessible. A bright, flashing fire, that was burning on the centre of its summit, and around which the busy groupe was clustered, lent it the appearance of some tall Pharos, placed in the centre of the deserts, to light such adventurers through their broad wastes. The flashing flame, gleamed from one sun burnt countenance to another, exhibiting every variety of expression, from the juvenile simplicity of the children, mingled as it was with a shade of the wildness peculiar to their semi-barbarous lives, to the dull and immovable apathy that dwelt on the features of the squatter, when unexcited. Occasionally a gust of wind, would fan the embers, and as a brighter light shot upward, the little solitary tent, was seen, as it were suspended in the gloom of the upper air. All beyond was enveloped as usual at that hour in an impenetrable body of darkness. (1014)

The entire scene gleams in its composition, and we see many of Cole’s tendencies arise. First, of course, the fabrication of a magnanimous rock in the midst of the prairies is fundamental to Cooper’s attempt to compose a sublime scene, and that composition requires not only verticality, but a distanced eye nearly unbiased to the scene (though, Cooper cannot help but inject a bias into the descriptions of the loathsome Bushes). Second, the scene draws heavily on chiaroscuro. Donald A. Ringe has argued that chiaroscuro is essential to Cooper’s works, *The Prairie* among



them, as the epic contrasts of light and shadow are symbolized in the romantic vision (“Chiaroscuro” 351). Ultimately, Cooper is painting a somewhat Gothic scene reminiscent of Salvator Rosa, one that carries the message of wildness and wilderness characteristic of Cooper’s prairie.

Nevius argues in *Cooper’s Landscapes* that Cooper took an unprecedented risk in *The Prairie*:

Where, in short, there would be for the landscape painter no commanding feature, no natural or artificial accessory to intercept the eye, and, for the fictional landscapist, no landmark which he could utilize as a base of operations, so to speak, and with reference to which he could order spatially his sequence of pursuits, escapes, Sioux raids, buffalo stampedes, and prairie fires. Cooper is willing, however, to play fast and loose with geological probability. (14)

Cooper plays “fast and loose with geological probability” by placing a magnificent rock amidst the desert prairies. Nevius is certainly correct to state that the absence of commanding features would make the prairie uninteresting for the landscape painter; interestingly enough, Cooper erects his own commanding feature amidst the plains. This object is necessary for the orientation of the reader; Nevius writes, “In the absence of a compass Ishmael’s citadel provides a gauge of distance and direction” (15). Cooper constantly keeps the citadel in view, and it is only by orienting the reader around the citadel that the reader, for example, is able to follow Natty and his troupe’s movements following the rescue of Inez and Ellen. Moreover, Mahtoree and the group’s evasion of Ishmael in their dash for the rock retains its visual clarity only because the rock is in sight of the reader. This is a technique that Cole also uses to orient his viewers in his landscape series, as Donald A. Ringe has shown: “In each picture of a series, one easily

recognizable object stands out to identify the scene and provide a point of orientation for the observer” (“James Fenimore Cooper” 28). Cooper’s massive rock amidst the prairies is equivalent to Cole’s crag in *The Course of Empire*: a necessary detail by which the viewer and/or reader can be oriented while the sheer distinctiveness of the feature creates the impression of sublimity.

This emphasis on verticality, on the commanding feature, is essential to Albert Boime’s readings of nineteenth-century landscape paintings. In *The Magisterial Gaze*, Boime argues that “the elevated point of view signified mastery over the land” and “the symbolic connection between the disciplined focus that submitted the vast reaches of the wilderness to an omniscient gaze and the larger national will to power in the form of Manifest Destiny” (x). Moreover, these “views from the summit metaphorically undercut the past and blazed a trail into the wilderness” (5), so that power, control and mastery of the future were all implicated in the mountain prospects of Cole and the Hudson River painters. Interestingly, the titanic protrusion in the prairie is connected to this “magisterial gaze,” for on it the Bushes are able to establish some kind of (short-lived) mastery of the dangers around them. The extended vision afforded by the elevation allows the identification of incoming parties. However, the gaze from the Ismael’s citadel is not at all burdened with positive expansionist implications. We have already seen that Cole’s Romantic leanings qualify Boime’s theories a bit, and it is likewise clear that the aesthetic distance which Cooper commands both spatially and as a narrator in *The Prairie* is not connected with domination of the landscape as much as it is connected to the insignificance of man in eternity.

Cooper requires the prairie to be a proper venue for a romance, especially one suitable to the death of his romantic hero. The romance must have a romantic setting, and Cooper’s strand

of romanticism requires an unveiled moral in the landscape. Beard argues that “the dominant tone is established by the image of the vast, endlessly rolling seas of grass. [Cooper’s] symbolic intention in bringing Leatherstocking here to die was his feeling that ‘Illimitable space is the best prototype of eternity’” (492). On the prairie—or at least as Cooper imagines it—is the expression of eternity, an expression which recasts again and again the insignificance of mankind through the narrator’s eye. When Cooper pulls the reader’s eye back from the citadel, elevates it, and paints a picture of the beacon of oceanic<sup>5</sup> prairies, the image is one that contextualizes the pursuits of man as ultimately futile, a sentiment which Natty expresses time and time again. With age, he has come to recognize that pursuits of heroism are just as insignificant as his infinitesimally small presence on the prairie. This is part of Cooper’s point in choosing the prairies for Natty’s farewell. Natty’s age has whittled away his heroic ego, and his gathered wisdom has propelled him into philosophies that bend towards the fatalistic. The excitement of Natty’s former life has been reduced to the monotonous simplicity of the prairie. Cooper attempts to portray something romantic and heroic in that very simplicity, but *The Prairie* ultimately demonstrates that Cooper is just as uncomfortable with Natty’s simplicity as he is the prairie’s.

Cooper’s attempts to construct a romantic landscape in the monotony of the prairies result in conflicting, nearly contradicting, perspectives of them. For Cooper assumes an alternate symbolic reading of the prairies. They are described as a “desert” in the novel more than forty times and their nakedness is emphasized nearly fifty. The prairies are called “wastes” a dozen times, and “bleak” another handful. Of course, Cooper’s reading of the prairies as a “desert” is in line with many of his contemporaries, but his understanding of the emptiness of the prairies is rich with aesthetic and moral implications. The fact is that while Cooper desired to give the

prairies a romantic sensibility by imposing formulas of landscape painting upon it, he was aesthetically underwhelmed, to choose a modest phrase, with the authentic prairies. Early twentieth-century critic Vernon Louis Parrington goes as far as to suggest that Cooper hated the prairies (232), a statement that assumes too much but points to the aesthetic conflict in *The Prairie*. Indeed, an aesthetic disgust is the assumption of much of Cooper's symbolization of the prairie, for he uses the flatness and "monotony" of the prairie as a caution for the axes of civilization. Natty has "come into these plains to escape the sound of the axe, for, here, surely the choppers can never follow" because there are no trees to chop. Henry Nash Smith even argues that Cooper conjures up a particular grove of trees just so Ishmael's sons can chop them down, demonstrating that the aesthetic waste of the prairies is the logical outcome of the overbearing axe of civilization and the hatred these axe-handlers have for the innocent beauty of nature (220). Natty tells the Bushes that he "often think[s] the Lord has placed this barren belt of Prairie, behind the States, to warn men to what their folly may yet bring the land!" (903). Parrington sums up this displeasing reading of the prairie in the novel quite well when he writes,

On the frontier, the middle ground between nature and civilization, Cooper's spirits flagged. He had no love for the stumpy clearings, the slovenly cabins, the shiftless squatters; the raw devastation of the ax grieved him and he breathes contentedly only after he has left the last scars behind and is in the deep woods beyond the smell of rum. Such a man obviously was unfitted to write a just account of the frontier as it straggled westward. (232)

The operative function of the prairies here is that they are inherently lacking in aesthetic beauty, yet this sentiment runs directly counter to Cooper's attempts to instill a romantic sensibility in

the prairie, to read an expression of divinity within it. Cooper's ambivalence towards the prairie paralyzes its symbolic function.

Natty himself is subject to Cooper's ambivalence in the novel. Cooper has difficulty reconciling the image of Natty as the youthful romantic hero and the dwindling, simplistic, uneducated, unrefined old man. This tension simultaneously asserts the power of the idealized hero just as it points to the impossibility of the hero's sustainability, a dichotomy evident from Natty's mythicized first appearance in the novel:

The sun had fallen below the crest of the nearest wave of the prairie, leaving the usual rich and glowing train on its track. In the centre of this flood of fiery light, a human form appeared, drawn against the gilded background, as distinctly, and seemingly as palpable, as though it would come within the grasp of any extended hand. The figure was colossal; the attitude musing and melancholy, and the situation directly in the route of the travellers. But imbedded, as it was, in its setting of garish light, it was impossible to distinguish its just proportions or true character.

The effect of such a spectacle was instantaneous and powerful. The man in front of the emigrants came to a stand, and remained gazing at the mysterious object, with a dull interest, that soon quickened into superstitious awe. (893)

Natty appears on the prairies and in the novel encircled in a halo of light. The chiaroscuro effect of the scene, as Ringe has identified, becomes elemental to Natty's presentation as "colossal," as larger than life ("Chiaroscuro" 351). The romantic figure is displayed in its pure ideal, so wonderful and mysterious that the onlookers were unable to "distinguish its just proportions or

true character.” But, the sun soon sets, and in the place of the idealized figure appears a more mediocre image.

In place of the brightness, which had dazzled the eye, a gray and more sober light had succeeded, and, as the setting lost its brilliancy, the proportions of the fanciful form became less exaggerated, and finally distinct. . . .

A frame that had endured the hardships of more than eighty seasons, was not qualified to awaken apprehension in the breast of one as powerful as the emigrant. Notwithstanding his years, and his look of emaciation, if not of suffering, there was that about this solitary being however, which said that time, and not disease, had laid his hand heavily on him. His form had withered, but it was not wasted. The sinews and muscles, which had once denoted great strength, though shrunken, were still visible; and his whole figure had attained an appearance of induration, which, if it were not for the well-known frailty of humanity, would have seemed to bid defiance to the further approach of decay.

(895)<sup>6</sup>

Natty’s idealized character diminishes significantly as the scene changes, but whether that romantic image disappears is difficult to say. That romantic sensibility may still be present beneath the shrunken “sinews and muscles,” Natty effectively internalizing his heroism despite the fact that his physical appearance is bland and frail. Yet it is equally possible that the romantic sensibility dissipates entirely and is replaced by a dwindling hero, which, as Ringe argues, seems to be the ultimate aim, as the death of Natty—his melting back into the sun—“marks his defeat, for although he maintains his relation to nature and to God to the very end, his death implies the passing as well of his view of the world” (“Man and Nature” 323). What is evident in these

scenes is that Cooper is attempting to rectify two conflicting images: the romantic hero and the unrefined old man, idealized man and empirical man.

Cooper clings to that romantic conception because his own sociality requires it. Henry Nash Smith explains that

Cooper, a consistent and explicit conservative in social theory despite his carefully limited endorsement of political democracy, was quite willing to acknowledge that refinement and gentility were conceivable only in members of an upper class with enough wealth to guarantee its leisure, and a sufficiently secure social status to give it poise and assurance. The form of the sentimental novel suggested exactly these assumptions. (223)

But the fact that these assumptions lie at the center of the sentimental novel complicates Cooper's attempt to construct Natty as a romantic hero because he is fundamentally lawless, unrefined, uneducated, and not genteel. Robert H. Zoellner has written about the ambivalence in Cooper's portrayal of Leatherstocking, an ambivalence sourced in a tension between "the socially oriented author and the mythic asociality which Natty constantly struggles to personify" (399). I would like to add to Zoellner's interpretation that this tension is fundamental in Cooper's attempts to utilize even the form of the romance for his characters and plots. Later in Cooper's life, the distance between Cooper and Natty would grow, especially as Cooper began to participate more critically in political society:

Much of what he was criticizing in the American people, their anti-intellectuality, their disregard for law, and, most serious, their utter indifference to highly articulated and generally recognized social formulations, had been given vivid personification in Leatherstocking, who had sneered repeatedly at books and

‘larnin’,’ had talked with his mouth full and in bad English, had broken the law and been vociferously unrepentant, and had, from beginning to end, stood as a living denial of the essential goodness of society—any society. (Zoellner 412)

Because Natty did not meet the demands of the proper romantic hero, Cooper introduced what is obviously the most artificial and unbecoming element of the narrative of *The Prairie*: the eighteenth-century style romance of Captain Middleton and Inez—the female manifestation of absolute, ineffable beauty and the confident, charming hero. Natty’s misplacement in the romantic form is evident in what I find to be the strangest scene in the novel. When Middleton, Paul, Ellen, and Inez reluctantly dismiss the old man after their adventures have finished, Natty tells Paul—a character torn between civilization and the wilderness throughout the novel—something that undercuts the philosophies he has fervently espoused. Natty says to Paul, regarding his future life with Ellen,

Much has passed atween us, on the pleasures and respectableness of a life in the woods, or on the borders. I do not, now, mean to say that all you have heard is not true; but different tempers call for different employments. You have taken to your bosom, there, a good and kind child, and it has become your duty to consider her as well as yourself, in setting forth in life. You are a little given to skirting the settlements, but to my poor judgement the girl would be more like a flourishing flower in the sun of a clearing, than in the winds of a Prairie. Therefore forget any thing you may have heard from me, which is nevertheless true, and strive to turn your mind on the ways of the inner country. (1303)

Even the most careless reader can sense Cooper’s confusion here, and sense the patronizing dishonesty in Natty’s restatement that his perspective is “nevertheless true.” But Cooper must



encourage Paul to return to the settlements to complete the romance—and therein lies the thread that I have attempted to draw out in this reading of *The Prairie*. What Cooper demonstrates in *The Prairie* is the difficulty, rather the near impossibility, of mapping European romantic forms onto the prairie. Those forms are unsustainable on the prairie; yet Cooper, though he is disgusted at the westward march of progress, cannot bring himself to shatter the requirements of the romance by denouncing the civilized foundation of Middleton, Inez, Paul, and Ellen. Ultimately, the rawness of the prairie echoes the rawness of Natty Bumppo, and Cooper is forever hesitant to view either in their simple authenticity.

### *Conclusion*

Cooper commissioned Cole to compose a painting of a scene from *The Prairie* in 1828. As far as scholars can tell, this is the only scene beyond the Mississippi River that Cole ever painted, and the painting has been lost. Fortunately, we can piece together from descriptions and reviews what the picture contained. Like Cooper, Cole must have operated from pure imagination, appealing to Cooper's account and other travel accounts for hints of the topography. Beard writes that Charles Wilkes, in a letter,

informed the novelist that it showed Leatherstocking "climbing a hill near the center of the picture . . . beckoning to his companion to follow him." The whole, Wilkes added, was "a kind of cento, composed of real views taken from Nature and well joined together." The sale catalog . . . describes the painting as "A Romantic American valley, with Indians crossing a bridge over a cataract: grand effect of an approaching storm." (487)

We can already see from this description that Cole's eye for verticality resulted in a cataract in the distance and Natty on the summit of a hill. His piece also included a number of trees; Charles Wilkes, after seeing the painting, complained to Cooper about the shape of a couple of trees, but he admits, "I withdrew my objection when he showed me an original sketch from Nature of the very trees" (Beard 489). It is my contention that the lack of verticality in the prairies prevented Cole from seeing an aesthetic beauty there; the plains afforded no "substratum" upon which Cole could employ a poetic imagination, offered nothing to compose but horizontal distances. The idealistic formulas at the center of Cole's works, like in Cooper's *The Prairie*, were simply unfit for the vast and raw flatness of the prairies. By all accounts, Cole's single attempt to portray the prairies devolved into the same visual structures of Cooper's landscapes.

The Mississippi River was the boundary of the unaltered romantic vision; the prairies could never meet the demands of such alienated romantic formulas. Those formulas could not subsume the physical rawness of the plains, prevented Cole and Cooper from encountering beauty in their authenticity. Before the voice of the prairies could be heard, the strict division between idealism and empiricism found in the old romantic forms would need to crumble. We shall witness this crumbling in Irving's *A Tour on the Prairies* and Durand's particularizing landscapes.

## Notes

1. A number of scholars have argued, as I mention in the Introduction, that the attachment to the physical in America was one of the driving distinctions of American Romanticism. Joseph M. DeFalco argues, in addition, that “Cooper’s narrative art followed his nationalistic, political beliefs, however, and did not submit to Burke’s Eurocentric aesthetic imperative, for there are teleological imperatives of plot and character that are given shape and value by an American-born, authorial moral imperative that governs all” (49). Essentially Cooper, and I would add Cole and much of the subsequent Hudson River School, were appropriating notions of the Burkean sublime into a political and religious context, integrating a moral presumption into the experience of the sublime.
2. This bifurcation between painter and viewer holds many implications for theoretical discussions. The work of Roland Barthes and Stanley Fish come most immediately to mind.
3. Cooper’s appreciation for Europe would grow immensely after his European tour from 1826-1833. At one point, Cooper stated that “picturesque-despising America” could hardly hold a candle to the picturesque views of Switzerland (qtd. in Nevius 58), and argued, much like Cole, that America had no sensibility for the truly sublime. Blake Nevius’s *Cooper’s Landscapes* offers a warning to works of scholarship like my own—at all steps of my analysis, the reader should remember that Cooper’s relationship with America and the wilderness was complicated and incessantly changing.
4. Flanagan is ruthless in his condemnation of Cooper’s topographical inconsistencies, writing, “Needless to say the westerner would not swallow such inaccuracies. When Ishmael is about to pass judgment on the cowering Abiram, he looks out upon ‘the same wide and empty wastes, the same rich and extensive bottoms, and that wild and singular combination of swelling fields and

of nakedness, which gives that region to the appearance of an ancient country, incomprehensibly stripped of its people and their dwellings.’ But, Cooper hastens to add, the characteristic features of the prairies had been interrupted by hillocks, rock masses, and stretches of forest!”

(“Authenticity” 104).

5. Cooper repeatedly calls upon oceanic imagery to draw the prairies, even going so far as to claim, “Indeed so very striking was the resemblance between the water and the land, that, however much the geologist might sneer at so simple a theory, it would have been difficult for a poet not to have felt that the formation of the one had been produced by the subsiding dominion of the other” (892). Here is, perhaps, an attempt to ascribe another European trope onto the prairies, an appropriation which would exaggerate the “rolling” character in Cooper’s portrayal.

6. Scholars have interpreted this series of images in a plethora of ways. Among them, Ringe finds a mythic confrontation here, a confrontation of epic proportions as Natty stands quite literally in the way of Ishmael’s westward migration: “the fate of a nation depends upon which of the two, the conserver or the despoiler of the landscape, shall prevail” (“Chiaroscuro” 351).

(Though Ringe does not mention it, I find a similarity between Achilles’s fiery appearance in *The Iliad* and Natty’s appearance in *The Prairie*.)

## CHAPTER 3

### A ROMANCE IN REVISION:

#### THE SUBVERSIVE PRAIRIES OF WASHINGTON IRVING AND THE SPECIMEN PAINTINGS OF ASHER DURAND

As Cooper and his wearied traveling party were docking into an American port in 1833, their European tour at an end, Washington Irving was recovering from a brief tour on the Oklahoma prairies. An extended stay in the nation's capitol allowed Irving to ruminate on his prairie experiences; after some time, he wrote to his brother Peter that the tour had begun to assume "a proper tone and grouping in my mind, and to take a tinge from my imagination" (qtd. in Kime, "The Author" 239). His *A Tour on the Prairies* arose out of these considerations, and was published in 1834 to generally positive reviews, as Martha Dula's research has shown. *A Tour* was Irving's first work published after a seventeen-year absence from America. The narrative represented Irving's attempt to reestablish himself as a bonafide American artist returning to his native soil. It is more than fitting, then, that Irving sought to deal with what was arguably America's chief concern: the western frontier.

For the most part, original reviewers received *A Tour* as a sentimental interpretation of America's frontier, an embodiment of American possibility, and a representation of the artistic potential of the nation and the nation's wilderness. Dula notes that American critics were lost in the sentiment of the narrative, that one reviewer declared

the American father, who can afford it, and does not buy a copy of Mr. Irving's book, does not deserve that his sons should prefer his fireside to the bar-room . . . or that his daughters should prefer to pass their leisure hours in maidenly seclusion and the improvement of their minds, rather than to flaunt on the

sidewalks by day, and pursue by night an eternal round of tasteless dissipation.

(qtd. in Dula 70)

Ultimately, it was the romantic sensibility which Irving allowed to infuse *A Tour* that produced such a positive response.<sup>1</sup> One reviewer in the *North American Review* summarized this response when he wrote, “It can scarcely be called a book of travels, for there is too much painting of manners, and scenery, and too little statistics; — it is not a romance, for it is all true. It is a sort of sentimental journey, a romantic excursion, in which nearly all the elements of several different kinds of writing are beautifully and faithfully blended into a production of *sui generis*” (qtd. in Dula 68). He goes as far as to thank Irving “for turning those poor barbarous steppes into a classical land” (qtd. in Dula 70), but his difficulty in prescribing a genre unknowingly demonstrates the sections of the narrative which drew his and his fellow critics’s attentions. Irving appealed to a romantic, a “classical,” sensibility to describe much of his experience on the prairies, rehashing tropes which, in truth, sometimes went further from authenticity than Cooper’s own fictional romantic appropriations. Irving describes the group of Osages which he encounters at Fort Gibson as having “fine Roman countenances” (21); Beatte is given features “not unlike those of Napoleon” (25); a young Swiss count who accompanies him is cast as a type of Telemachus (13); hunting is portrayed as the heroic play so common to romance and the epic, and so on. Irving’s romantic imagination constructed quite a different account of the west than the majority of travel accounts in the period, one remarkably unscientific, emotive, and subjective.

Scholarly treatment of *A Tour on the Prairies* echoed these early reviews well into the 1970s, albeit those echoes were transposed into a minor key. These critics consistently focused on the romantic elements of *A Tour on the Prairies* in a critical manner, assuming that the

narrative was defined by Irving's romantic renderings of the American wilderness. Many of these same critics read those romantic allusions as Irving's repeated failure to pen the frontier. But these scholars failed to sense what one early reviewer expressed in one of the few negative reviews of *A Tour*. This critic wrote in *Fraser's*, as Dula summarizes, that

the opening of the book [was] "very fine," but felt that the "strain" was not continued and, indeed, recurred "but rarely." This particular reviewer felt that Irving was writing with a definite "want of soul." He had the sense that Irving had "written about the prairies and their wild sports with that degree of knowledge, and after that fashion wherewith a very clever young lady or a heavy sterner philosopher." (73)

Despite the fact that the reviewer suggests a preference for that poetic, romantic sensibility, he observes that Irving's treatment of the prairie significantly changes throughout the account. Those romantic elements of *A Tour* are not abstracted to the entire account in this reviewer's reading. It would not be until Wayne R. Kime's groundbreaking article, "The Completeness of Washington Irving's *A Tour on the Prairies*," that this development within *A Tour* would be explored in a scholarly manner. Kime correctly argues that the allusions critics so quickly recall are quite rare in the book, that "almost without exception these fillips of style appear only in the first one-third of *A Tour*" (56). He continues,

I take exception to this hostile reaction, however; not merely because it too hastily holds up a few isolated sentences as supposedly revealing the nature of the whole work, but rather because it fails even to consider the work as a formal or thematic whole. Discounting Irving's explicitly stated aim of describing an encounter

between himself and the West, it ignores the contributive function of the offensive comparisons and allusions in the development of the book. (56)

Kime's defense of *A Tour* inspired a number of scholars to approach the book, finally, as a proper work of literature. Their reconsiderations, however, resulted in differing and sometimes conflicting interpretations, highlighting the extent of the tensions within the account. William Bedford Clark, for example, has argued that Irving allows the West to win, sending "the would-be torchbearers of law and order—peace, progress, and prosperity—scurrying back to Fort Gibson" (336). For Clark, Irving challenges the myth of westward expansion by rendering it into a quixotic inversion. Guy Reynolds gives more attention to the political nature of Irving's text, and does not give so much authority to the wilderness as Clark. Reynolds rests upon the Turnerian frontier thesis to demonstrate the tension between settlement and wilderness in the book, arguing that the text "presents a more complex, layered, and even ambiguous image of what America stands for" (93) and the feasibility of expansion. A review of the scholarship on the narrative reveals that the primary difficulty in approaching *A Tour on the Prairies* is determining the amount of power the wilderness possesses in the narrative, and determining Irving's place within the ambivalence.

I will argue here that Irving is dedicated to both a romantic narrative as well as an authentic narrative which undercuts the romance of *A Tour on the Prairies*. On the prairies, the heroic act of hunting becomes barbaric slaughter. The romantic, vast, and featureless distance becomes dangerous and threatening. The concept of the noble savage is usurped by direct observation and experience. The myth of adventure in the wilderness is undercut by the toilsome manner of life the wilderness demands. At each of these turns, Irving deconstructs the romantic myths he appropriates, bespeaking a determination to respond to the prairies not as a romantic,



sensationalized frontier, but as a landscape with an inherent character that subverts the romance Irving seeks.<sup>2</sup> I will argue that this subversion of the romantic also characterizes many of the landscape paintings of Asher B. Durand, the Hudson River School's leading figure following Cole. Both Irving and Durand still attach themselves to romantic idealizations, but *A Tour on the Prairies* and Durand's landscapes reveal a series of quiet revisions. In these revisions, we can see both the crumbling away of Cole's and Cooper's alienating idealism and the early construction of a kind of American Romanticism in which the ideal and the real are unified.

### *The Romantic Text and the Subversive Subtext in A Tour On The Prairies*

Studies of Irving's *A Tour on the Prairies*—since Kime's work, at least—have consistently implied a dual narrative in the text, but no one, as far as I know, has considered the conflicting narratives of *A Tour* as the result of its multiple layers of text. On the explicit level, Irving's romantic persona speaks. Here, Irving compares a “sunny landscape [to] the golden tone of one of the landscapes of Claude Lorraine [sic]” (73), or relates a “crest of broken rocks” to “the ruin of some Moorish castle,” naming the hill “Cliff Castle” (106). But underneath this layer are the authentic experiences and actual landscapes which Irving often bludgeons in his attempt to impose a romantic system. As the narrative progresses, the subtext begins to filter upwards, and at times is able to overtake the romantic narrative entirely. In those instances, the subversive nature of the subtext is evident. There are countless times in the narrative at which a sensitive reader will encounter this latent subversive subtext, but the subtext breaks into the explicit text only a few times. These textual breaches form the most powerful and memorable moments of the narrative; among them are the breaking of Beatte's captured horse, Irving's encounter with Beatte's history and person, Irving's diatribe against the romanticized Native American, the

dangerous loneliness of the prairie when Irving is lost, Irving's final encounter with a wild horse. Irving's narrator is unusually subjective, rendering even romantic eulogies in tones of transience and estimation that undercut the narrator's certainty. Therefore, the reader of *A Tour* must approach the literal text with a skeptical eye.

Only through the retrospective lens of Irving's Introduction to *A Tour on the Prairies* did he consider his tour as lacking adventure or wonder, writing that the book is

a simple narrative of every day occurrences; such as happen to every one who travels the prairies. I have no wonders to describe, nor any moving accidents by flood or field to narrate; and as to those who look for a marvelous or adventurous story at my hands, I can only reply in the words of [George Canning's] weary knife-grinder: "Story! God bless you, I have none to tell, sir." (9)

Irving is already engaged in undercutting his own narrative, stressing the simplicity of his experiences. Of course, the opening chapter of *A Tour* demonstrates quite clearly that Irving and his companions did not cross the Mississippi River with simple anticipations. Henry Leavitt Ellsworth, the Commissioner, is portrayed in heroic language: dutifully abandoning his place in civilization "to mount his steed, shoulder his rifle, and mingle among stark hunters, backwoodsmen, and naked savages on the trackless wilds of the Far West" (12). Charles Latrobe—Irving's "Mr. L"—is painted in similar language, as is his "Telemachus," the Swiss Count (13). Even Tonish, the "French creole" who serves throughout as a kind of comic figure, is given a sentimental type—"a kind of Gil Blas of the frontiers" (13). The travelers are filled with heroic excitement, their expectations of the prairie not a little reminiscent of Cooper's own romances:

Indeed, the imagination of the young Count had become completely excited on the subject. The grand scenery and wild habits of the prairies had set his spirits madding, and the stories that little Tonish told him of Indian braves and Indian beauties, of hunting buffaloes and catching wild horses, had set him all agog for a dash into savage life. He was a bold and hard rider, and longed to be scouring the hunting grounds. It was amusing to hear his youthful anticipations of all that he was to see, and do, and enjoy, when mingling among the Indians and participating in their hardy adventures; and it was still more amusing to listen to the gasconadings of little Tonish, who volunteered to be his faithful squire in all his perilous undertakes; to teach him how to catch the wild horse, bring down the buffalo, and win the smiles of Indian princesses;—“And if we can only get sight of a prairie on fire!” said the young Count—“By Gar, I’ll set one on fire myself!” cried the little Frenchman. (15)

This early passage, which fittingly closes the opening chapter, is perhaps the first expression of the subversive theme that will recur throughout the narrative. The excitement of the journey is expressed in the romantic dressings of adventure, of hunting, of conquest, and even of romantic pursuits. Irving himself shares in these romantic constructions, as his earlier descriptions of these characters verify. Nonetheless, a distance between Irving and these excitements is suggested by the phrases, “It was amusing to hear...” and “It was amusing to listen...,” just as “gasconadings” and “hardy” point to the hyperbole in the excitement. In Irving’s distancing, his disapprobation of the romantic hyperbole of Tonish and the Count is implied and the dual texts of the narrative are introduced. The text simultaneously suggests the validity of their romancing as well as the naiveté of viewing such toilsome and terrifying acts in light and commending language. Irving

himself is somewhere between the two, operating on the romantic level just as the subversive elements tinge the romantic with, as Clark has written, quixotic feeling (337).

The quixotic nature of the text is reinforced as the expectations of the group are repeatedly circumvented. Irving begins the second chapter with an assertion that, as Linda Steele has shown, defines much of the first fourth of the book: “The anticipations of a young man are prone to meet with disappointment” (16). For example, early in the narrative, the Count decides to take a party into the wilderness alone, despite warnings from other men that they “were about to throw themselves loose in the wilderness, with no other guides, guards, or attendants, than a young ignorant half-breed, and a still younger Indian” (35). The Count ignores the warnings, for nothing “could restrain the romantic ardor of the Count for a campaign of buffalo hunting with the Osages, and he had a game spirit that seemed always stimulated by the idea of danger” (36). That evening, as Irving and the rest of the troupe were setting up camp, the Count and his party were seen straggling back. Irving writes, “A short experiment had convinced them of the toil and difficulty of inexperienced travelers like themselves making their way through the wilderness with such a train of horses, and such slender attendance” (37). The romance of adventure is denied by the wilderness of the prairies, recasting the romantic excursion into a naïveté oblivious to the danger in its fulfilment.

Once the group joins the rangers, the comic inversion of romance in the narrative is multiplied. The romanticized hunting quickly transforms into indulgent waste. Clark correctly quips, “The rangers wage a veritable war against the environment they are supposed to reconnoiter. Even in hostile territory, where gunfire threatens to attract unwanted attention, they break from the line of march and shoot at practically everything that moves” (340), missing their targets more often than they succeed. All manner of living things are victim to their waste: bees,

trees, deer, buffalo, turkey, prairie dogs, a skunk, an owl. At one point, eighteen turkeys are killed on a whim, and the rangers abandon the “carnage” there to chase four buffalo; after killing one, Irving says of the event that he “felt somewhat ashamed of the butchery that had effected it” (143-5). Irving is perhaps more aware of the wastefulness of the troupe during the moments that he stops to describe abandoned camps. Consider not only the images but the tone of one of these descriptions towards the end of the narrative.

About ten o'clock, we began our march. I loitered in the rear of the troop as it forded the turbid brook and defiled through the labyrinths of the forest. I always felt disposed to linger until the last straggler disappeared among the trees and the distant note of the bugle died upon the ear, that I might behold the wilderness relapsing into silence and solitude. In the present instance, the deserted scene of our late bustling encampment had a forlorn and desolate appearance. The surrounding forest had been in many places trampled into a quagmire. Trees felled and partly hewn in pieces, and scattered in huge fragments; tent-poles stripped of their covering; smouldering fires, with great morsels of roasted venison and buffalo meat, standing in wooden spits before them, hacked and slashed by the knives of hungry hunters; while around were strewed the hides, the horns, the antlers, and bones of buffaloes and deer, with uncooked joints, and unplucked turkeys, left behind with that reckless improvidence and wastefulness which young hunters are apt to indulge when in a neighborhood where game abounds. In the meantime a score or two of turkey-buzzards, or vultures, were already on the wing, wheeling their magnificent flight high in the air, and

preparing for a descent upon the camp as soon as it should be abandoned. (169-70)

Irving senses an excessive savagery in the “unplucked turkeys,” the uneaten food—the scene of plenty has transformed into a scene of desolation. This is a landscape not of promise, but of poison: pieces of animals strewn around the camp, left for the buzzards. Irving has transformed the heroic feast into barbaric savagery, a sentiment repeated earlier at the close of “A Bee Hunt.” Just after the rangers have decimated a number of trees for the honey discovered inside, an act which inspires sympathy for the bees in Irving, he writes,

We now abandoned the place, leaving much honey in the hollow of the tree. “It will be cleared off by varmint,” said one of the rangers. “What vermin?” asked I. “Oh, bears, and skunks, and raccoons, and ‘possums. The bears is the knowingest varmint for finding out a bee-tree in the world. They’ll gnaw for days together at the trunk till they make a hole big enough to get in their paws, and then they’ll haul out honey, bees and all.” (54)

Of course, the irony here is lost on the ranger—the rangers’ actions are practically indistinguishable from the “vermin” who follow behind them. The distinction between civilized man and brute savage is, to borrow Clark’s phrase, comically inverted, and the romantic heroism which is fused into the rangers’ actions becomes naïve, childish, and barbaric.

Irving does not only witness the falling away of romantic notions, he experiences it personally in a number of ways. I have already mentioned that in his first encounters with Osage Indians, Irving echoes the rote descriptions of the noble savage. They are described as having “fine Roman countenances” (21), and are depicted in all of their garb as “noble bronze figures” (22). His first encounter with French-Osage Pierre Beatte, to whom Irving often refers as “the

half-breed,” is riddled with unbecoming allusions. Irving, still appealing to those foreign tropes, remarks that his features were “shaped not unlike those of Napoleon,” and that “the dusky greenish hue of his complexion, aided his resemblance to an old bronze bust I had seen of the Emperor” (25). Beatte is described in the manner of Cooper’s Indians, as “cold and laconic” (25), and Irving is uncomfortable in his presence, writing, “I would gladly have dispensed with the services of Pierre Beatte” (25).

However, Irving’s next encounter with an Osage Indian is much different. When the group chances upon a settler, an “old Lycurgus, or rather Draco, of the frontier” (33), the settler interrogates them under the suspicion that a local Osage Indian had stolen his horse. The quixotic elements breach into the text as the band

beheld our raw-boned, hard-winking, hard-riding knight-errant of the frontier, descending the slope of a hill, followed by his companion in arms. As he drew near to us, the gauntness of his figure and ruefulness of his aspect reminded me of the description of the hero of La Mancha, and he was equally bent on affairs of doughty enterprise, being about to penetrate the thickets of the perilous swamp, within which the enemy lay ensconced. (32)

Of course, the old settler is mistaken, as his horse had merely tramped off during the evening into an Osage camp, and the “enemy” he pursues, a young Osage scout, emerges from the woods to return his wandering horse. The settler, a version of Cooper’s own Ishmael, is not satisfied and demands justice be treated upon the young scout. The Commissioner’s group, on the other hand, is taken with the young scout, especially the Count, who offers him a position in his party. The youth accepts the Count’s offer: “tempted . . . with the prospect of a safe range over the buffalo prairies and the promise of a new blanket, he turned his bridle, left the swamp and the

encampment of his friends behind him, and set off to follow the Count in his wanderings” (34). Irving launches upon a romantic rumination about the young scout, a romancing which Irving does not allow to pass unqualified.

This youth, with his rifle, his blanket, and his horse, was ready at a moment's warning to rove the world; he carried all his worldly effects with him, and in the absence of artificial wants, possessed the great secret of personal freedom. We of society are slaves, not so much to others as to ourselves; our superfluities are the chains that bind us, impeding every movement of our bodies and thwarting every impulse of our souls. Such, at least, were my speculations at the time. (34)

Irving constructs a highly idealized image of prairie life, implying that it is the embodiment of ultimate freedom, of which the young scout becomes a symbol. Just as this symbol is constructed—and, truthfully, Irving's rhetorical embellishments imbue the image with a certain power—he qualifies it in a manner that subverts it. The subtext breaches in that final sentence, foreshadowing that Irving shall soon discover that this understanding of prairie life, and its symbol in the young scout, is far from authentic.

His further experiences with the Osages reveal the illegitimacy of romantic portrayals of the Indians. Cooper cannot be far from Irving's mind when he writes,

In fact, the Indians that I have had an opportunity of seeing in real life are quite different from those described in poetry. They are by no means the stoics that they are represented; taciturn, unbending, without a tear or a smile. Taciturn they are, it is true, when in company with white men, whose good-will they distrust, and whose language they do not understand; but the white man is equally taciturn under like circumstances. When the Indians are among themselves, however,



there cannot be greater gossips. Half their time is taken up in talking over their adventures in war and hunting, and in telling whimsical stories. They are great mimics and buffoons, also, and entertain themselves excessively at the expense of the whites with whom they have associated, and who have supposed them impressed with profound respect for their grandeur and dignity. (44)

To make it explicitly clear that the issue is in romantic portrayals of Indian life, he closes this criticism with one of the most insightful and significant statements of the entire narrative: “As far as I can judge, the Indian of poetical fiction is like the shepherd of pastoral romance, a mere personification of imaginary attributes” (45). Irving, here, undercuts his own portrayal of the Osage Indians from the beginning of the narrative, and the authentic Osage Indian is portrayed without the conceptual baggage of the noble savage. Irving recognizes the Osage Indians as human, as flesh and blood rather than living romantic metaphors.

These realizations affect Irving’s relationship with Beatte in a similar manner. As the narrative progresses, Beatte becomes more and more human to Irving. Kime argues, “By the time of the buffalo hunt, Irving portrays himself as having achieved a certain intimacy with Beatte and a better understanding of him as an individual” (“The Completeness” 62). On a few occasions, Irving enters into conversation with Beatte regarding his past, and these tales produce a kind of sympathy in Irving that underlines the invalidity of his former descriptions. Irving’s gradual, fragile friendship with Beatte mirrors his incrementally growing recognition of authentic prairie life. Near the end of the narrative, Beatte encounters a bear and comes away wounded and shaken. He captures Irving’s attention in his injured state, and the impression he leaves upon the writer is heavy:

Though ordinarily a fellow of undaunted spirit, and above all hardship, yet he now sat down by the fire, gloomy and dejected, and for once gave way to repining. Though in the prime of life, and of a robust frame, and apparently iron constitution, yet, by his own account, he was little better than a mere wreck. He was, in fact, a living monument of the hardships of a wild frontier life. Baring his left arm, he showed it warped and contracted by a former attack of rheumatism; a malady with which the Indians are often afflicted; for their exposure to the vicissitudes of the elements does not produce that perfect hardihood and insensibility to the changes of the seasons that many are apt to imagine. He bore the scars of various maims and bruises; some received in hunting, some in Indian warfare. His right arm had been broken by a fall from his horse; at another time his steed had fallen with him, and crushed his left leg. (161)

Beatte becomes the living symbol of authentic life on the prairies, replacing for Irving the image of the young Osage scout in all his freedom. The polished “Roman” appearance of the young Osage as he dismounts (32), the “naked bust [that] would have furnished a model for a statuary” (32), that “would have formed studies for a painter” (39), are as cut off from the reality of prairie life as the romantic allusions Irving imposes onto it. Rather, Irving’s embrace of Beatte’s hardened, raw body signifies his recognition that the prairies are themselves hardened and raw. In this wilderness which Irving inhabits, the prairie is supreme, and it will dominate man with more force than mankind can possibly, in their dreams of civilization, impose upon it.

It is significant that Irving writes that the romantic Indian is “like the shepherd of pastoral romance, a mere personification of imaginary attributes” (45) for two reasons. First, as we have just seen, it demonstrates Irving’s increasing awareness of the authenticity of the prairie, and it

allows the subversive subtext to revise Irving's romantic sentiments. Second, not only is the romanticized Indian described as an imaginary being, but the substance of pastoral romance is recognized as an imaginary dream. And yet Irving often appeals to pastoral imagery to portray the landscape. While Irving explores a different region of the Midwest than Cooper's *The Prairie*, an area more varied than the Platte region, we see his eye often drawn to elements of the landscape that echo the European romantic tropes employed by Cole and Cooper. Irving is particularly attracted to the views offered at their river crossings, as the areas surrounding the rivers tend to offer wooded areas and larger gradations in topography. Irving's impression of the pastoral is particularly strong as he pauses by the Red Fork:

We now came once more in sight of the Red Fork, winding its turbid course between well-wooded hills, and through a vast and magnificent landscape. The prairies bordering on the rivers are always varied in this way with woodland, so beautifully interspersed as to appear to have been laid out by the hand of taste; and they only want here and there a village spire, the battlements of a castle, or the turrets of an old family mansion rising from among the trees, to rival the most ornamented scenery of Europe. (108)

One can almost see Thomas Cole's *Landscape, the Seat of Mr. Featherstonhaugh in the Distance* (1826) in Irving's description; except, his coloring has a more distinctly European tone. It is certainly true, as Kris Lackey has written, that Irving's use of romantic imagery allowed an "objective correlative for the awe he wanted his readers to share as he beheld the grand prairie of the American West" (44). Irving's attraction to the rivers is perhaps a function of this correlative, as the romantic forms are well-equipped to handle the sublimity of the river landscapes. Thus, his allusion to the landscapes of Claude to describe a river scene, a scene that reproduces the

romantic tendency towards verticality so characteristic of Cole and Cooper, should not come as a surprise:

The river scenery at this place was beautifully diversified, presenting long, shining reaches, bordered by willows and cotton-wood trees; rich bottoms, with lofty forests; among which towered enormous plane trees, and the distance was closed in by high promontories. The foliage had a yellow autumnal tint, which gave to the sunny landscape the golden tone of one of the landscapes of Claude Lorraine [sic]. (73)

But Lackey fails to recognize that these romantic constructions are only part of Irving's narrative, for Irving undercuts the same romantic landscapes he constructs. When Irving suggests that the pastoral romance is full of nothing but imagination, he subverts the very elements that assemble the aesthetic beauty of both of these scenes.

As Irving moves further west, and encounters grand prairies in the Oklahoma wilderness, this pattern of construction and deconstruction quickens. For example, Irving and his fellow travelers open into a "grand prairie" midway through the narrative. Irving is excited to encounter one of the "characteristic scenes of the Far West," an "immense extent of grassy, undulating, or, as it is termed, rolling country, with here and there a clump of trees" (106). Irving lingers on these images for a moment; then, as if the vastness of the prairies was itself not enough to establish a beautiful scene, he focuses on a hill upon which lies "a singular crest of broken rocks, resembling a ruined fortress. It reminded me of the ruin of some Moorish castle, crowning a height in the midst of a lonely Spanish landscape" (106). Irving, again, does not allow this romantic image to remain untainted. The image becomes complicated; pay close attention to the

way that Irving constructs a Claudian view and then, with a single phrase, subverts it by an appeal to the facts that have created that view:

The weather was verging into that serene but somewhat arid season called the Indian Summer. There was a smoky haze in the atmosphere that tempered the brightness of the sunshine into a golden tint, softening the features of the landscape, and giving a vagueness to the outlines of distant objects. This haziness was daily increasing, and was attributed to the burning of distant prairies by the Indian hunting parties. (107)

The beautiful landscape is deconstructed by the threat involved in a life on the prairies; the prairie fires that were part of Tonish's romantic excitement in the opening chapter become threatening symbols in their actual manifestations. As soon as Irving encounters the vastness of the prairie, the narrative introduces a sensation that has been relatively silent until this point: fear.

Once Irving is engaged as a participant in the prairies, rather than a distanced onlooker, the vastness and featurelessness of the prairies transform into a vehicle of danger rather than sublimity. Near the end of the narrative, Irving departs from the group in the chase of a buffalo. After a long pursuit, the beast escapes Irving by tossing itself down a ravine which Irving and his horse cannot overcome. He finds himself a long way from his companions, lost in the wilderness. Suddenly, the romantic landscape becomes something much more real. I include this significant passage below in its entirety:

Nothing now remained but to turn my steed and rejoin my companions. Here at first was some little difficulty. The ardor of the chase had betrayed me into a long, heedless gallop. I now found myself in the midst of a lonely waste, in which the

prospect was bounded by undulating swells of land, naked and uniform, where, from the deficiency of landmarks and distinct features, an inexperienced man may become bewildered, and lose his way as readily as in the wastes of the ocean. The day, too, was overcast, so that I could not guide myself by the sun; my only mode was to retrace the track my horse had made in coming, though this I would often lose sight of, where the ground was covered with parched herbage.

To one unaccustomed to it, there is something inexpressibly lonely in the solitude of a prairie. The loneliness of a forest seems nothing to it. There the view is shut in by trees, and the imagination is left free to picture some livelier scene beyond. But here we have an immense extent of landscape without a sign of human existence. We have the consciousness of being far, far beyond the bounds of human habitation; we feel as if moving in the midst of a desert world. As my horse lagged slowly back over the scenes of our late scamper, and the delirium of the chase had passed away, I was peculiarly sensible to these circumstances. The silence of the waste was now and then broken by the cry of a distant flock of pelicans, stalking like spectres about a shallow pool; sometimes by the sinister croaking of a raven in the air, while occasionally a scoundrel wolf would scour off from before me: and, having attained a safe distance, would sit down and howl and whine with tones that gave a dreariness to the surrounding solitude. (175-6)

Irving encounters a prairie that is far beyond his control; he is powerless and terrified in its emptiness. He recognizes that the experience of wilderness in the forest is entirely different from the wilderness of the prairie. In the forest, the comfort of humanity can be imagined nearby. However, the prairie denies imagination with the cold, hard fact of loneliness, of emptiness, of

insignificance. The landscape of the prairie subverts the romantic—it is too wild, too raw, too factual for Irving’s romantic imagination to handle with verisimilitude.

Irving’s subversion of the romantic culminates in the climax of the narrative, breaching through the text just at the pinnacle of *A Tour*. It is clear from the beginning that Irving, while distanced from the exaggerations of Tonish and the Count, shares their anticipation for hunting the buffalo. After a number of hunting excursions, the writer-turned-hunter comes close enough to lodge a mortal pistol ball into a buffalo. Irving’s exciting, quick scene, infused with the heroic thrill of the chase, slows down as he witnesses the downed buffalo, which “lay there struggling in mortal agony, while the rest of the herd kept on their headlong career across the prairie” (178). What follows is not the joy of the fulfilled hunt, but shame, guilt, and horror:

Dismounting, I now fettered my horse to prevent his straying, and advanced to contemplate my victim. I am nothing of a sportsman; I had been prompted to this unwonted exploit by the magnitude of the game, and the excitement of an adventurous chase. Now that the excitement was over, I could not but look with commiseration upon the poor animal that lay struggling and bleeding at my feet. His very size and importance, which had before inspired me with eagerness, now increased my compunction. It seemed as if I had inflicted pain in proportion to the bulk of my victim, and as if there were a hundred-fold greater waste of life than there would have been in the destruction of an animal of inferior size.

To add to these after-qualms of conscience, the poor animal lingered in his agony. He had evidently received a mortal wound, but death might be long in coming. It would not do to leave him here to be torn piecemeal, while yet alive, by the wolves that had already snuffed his blood, and were skulking and howling

at a distance, and waiting for my departure; and by the ravens that were flapping about, croaking dismally in the air. It became now an act of mercy to give him his quietus, and put him out of his misery. I primed one of the pistols, therefore, and advanced close up to the buffalo. To inflict a wound thus in cool blood, I found a totally different thing from firing in the heat of the chase. Taking aim, however, just behind the fore-shoulder, my pistol for once proved true; the ball must have passed through the heart, for the animal gave one convulsive throw and expired.

(178-9)

The heroic hunt is transformed into a barbaric act, pointing again to the quixotic enterprise at the heart of the narrative. Irving's tone here is not satirical, and his narrator is not distanced from the scene. He is a participant in the wilderness, and this experience creates in him a discomfort with the wildness demanded of the prairies. Earlier in the narrative, Irving remarks, "I found my ravenous and sanguinary propensities daily growing stronger upon the prairies" (90). Though, at that point in the journey, the savagery was still comfortably imaginary, and burdened with romantic associations. As with the numerous other romantic allusions, once they are incarnated into the physical, the savagery is too much for Irving to bear—the prairie demands a kind of wildness that refuses to be sublimated into an alien romantic system.

Irving's experiences create in him an awareness and a respect for the wilderness; however, his experiences also suggest that the prairie demands a savage life inherently opposed to all forms of civilization. This is suggested in a scene towards the end of the narrative in which Irving and Beatte encounter one last wild horse. By this point in the narrative, the travelers have nearly completed the circuit. The prairie life has decimated them: provisions are fearfully short, game is scarce, storms have weakened their spirits, the horses are weary and underfed. On this



journey home, Beatte and Irving spot a “fine black horse” in a meadow. Throughout the narrative, Irving has often shown a fascination in the nature of the wild horse. He watches with sadness the dejection of the wild horse that Beatte has captured and begun to break (120-2). He is infatuated with the playfulness of the horses in the wild, as opposed to the docility of the broken horses in the civilized world. Here, Beatte, failing to capture the horse with a lariat, dismounts and lifts his rifle to “crease” the horse, a practice that involves shooting the horse on the top of the neck so that it is stunned until the hunter can run upon it and bind its legs. More often, creasing resulted in death rather than subjugation. Irving “felt a throb of anxiety for the safety of the noble animal, and called out to Beatte to desist” (199); Beatte did not desist, but his bullet missed the horse and “the coal-black steed dash[ed] off unharmed into the forest” (199). Irving has come to recognize a kind of beauty in wildness, represented by his admiration of the “noble” (199), but wild, steed. The scene stands for something much larger, though: the impossibility of mankind’s domination over the wild prairies.

Thus, as Clark argues, the West wins, sending Irving and the rangers back to civilization famished and worn. What is left at the end of *A Tour on the Prairies* is a strict bifurcation between the prairies—the uninhabitable wilderness—and civilization. Irving is quite sensitive to the prairies, sensing an inherent identity in them that seems to transcend the romantic system of value, but his dedication to the romantic restrains him from understanding the beauty he eventually recognizes in the wildness. We see in *A Tour on the Prairies* the alienated romance crumbling away, unable to account for the unprecedented reality encountered there. This movement from Cooper to Irving is similar to the movement from Cole to his artistic successor, Asher Durand. In his particularizing landscapes, which seek to capture the individual nature of each object, we see Cole’s preference for pure imagination challenged and revised.

*Asher Durand and Thomas Cole: Kindred Spirits?*

While Thomas Cole was rising into fame as America's leading landscape painter in the late 1820s, Durand was already a recognized expert in engraving, producing pieces from banknotes to portraits and landscapes (Novak, *American Painting* 61). Durand, possibly under the influence of Cole, began to experiment with landscape painting in the early 1830s, and within a few years was widely recognized as one of the best landscape painters in the nation, second only to Cole. While Cole's influence is certainly detectable in Durand's landscapes, Durand brought a different methodology and philosophy to the American landscape painting. Novak describes Durand's contribution:

He approached painting as an outdoor sportsman might, and it is precisely in this approach that his importance lies. For Durand was one of the first Hudson River men who was able, by temperament and inclination, to surrender the Claudian-derived cliché in his landscape compositions, and to assume a plein-air objectivity in which the inherent components of landscape determined design, while *weather* determined properties of atmosphere and light. (*American Painting* 62)

Whereas Cole sought carefully constructed compositions which relied on form and shape rather than detail, Durand approached landscape painting with the assumption that the individual details *create* the composition. Atmosphere and light were not determined by romantic compositional formula, but rather set by the transient nature of light in the actual landscape.

For Durand, this thirst for authenticity resulted in what many scholars have referred to as a "particularizing" style, a style that seems to reify the inherent identities of individual objects rather than impose a romanticized, idealized identity upon them. As H. Daniel Peck argues, Durand repeatedly asserts "the efficacy of inductive procedures and, in turn, [rejects] deductive

schematic approaches that falsify nature by predetermining its character” (695). In a series of letters published in *The Crayon*, the leading artistic journal of the period, Durrand offered instruction to young painters exploring the landscape style. His advice for these painters affirms the identity of individual objects, prioritizing accuracy over idealized compositions.

If your subject be a tree, observe particularly wherein it differs from those of other species: in the first place, the termination of its foliage, best seen when relieved on the sky, whether pointed or rounded, drooping or springing upward; next mark the character of its trunk and branches, the manner in which the latter shoot off from the parent stem, their direction, curves, and angles. Every kind of tree has its traits of individuality. . . . By this course you will obtain knowledge of that natural variety of form so essential to protect you against frequent repetition and monotony. (qtd. in J. Durand 213)

Durand emphasizes the importance of an authentic representation, down to the species of the individual tree. His aesthetic justification for this attachment to the real is implied when he writes that an attention to detail will produce a varied canvas rather than mere repetition of stock objects—again, the actual landscape should form the composition rather than the composition create the landscape. While Durand admired Cole, it is difficult to read such a statement without sensing the manner in which these ideas subvert some of Cole’s standard tropes: an artist who treasures variety and authenticity will surely tire of the blasted trees, the vast cataracts, the morally-tinged chiaroscuro, and the passing storms that recur throughout the majority of Cole’s works.

Therefore, Durand’s eye would not be attracted, as was Cole’s, to infinite distances, to thick chiaroscuro, and verticality. Rather, Durand was, as Peck has written, “devoted to the

‘lovely feature,’ to the part rather than the whole, and this devotion involved an implicit belief in the *sufficiency* of the partial view” (695). This reveals a fascinating paradox, and one that certainly links Durand’s paintings to Irving’s *A Tour on the Prairies*: in his landscapes, attempts to portray the land more objectively ended up validating the subjectivity of a transient view, which in turn pushed Durand deeper into concerns about objectivity. Durand preferred plein-air studies to landscapes constructed from memory, a practice which required a simultaneous awareness of the painter’s subjectivity and the objectivity of the land. As Novak has argued, these dual pursuits gave Durand a “proto-Impressionist” quality unprecedented in American landscape painting.<sup>3</sup>

The trend towards the partial landscape and the lovely feature is evident in Durand’s *In the Woods* (1855), in which the horizon is hardly visible through the thick forest and the haze beyond. But the beauty of the painting is not dependent in the least upon scale, not even upon the height of the trees, or the extreme thickness of the woods. The beauty of the painting comes directly from Durand’s particularizing eye, in the incredible variety of tree species and wildlife which the artist is able to render authentically on the canvas. The light in the canvas does not intrude in extremes of chiaroscuro, but gently and evenly slips along the stream and highlights the whites of the bent tree on its bank. This piece is generally recognized as one of Durand’s most successful, as a near perfect embodiment of his painting philosophy. But I cannot help but see a subtle subversion of Cole’s gnarled trees in the barren tree on the far left of the canvas and the shattered trunk strewn about the scene. While this is certainly Cole’s trope, Durand’s employment carries none of Cole’s meaning, and the beauty of the blasted trunk is derived not from the ominous moral within, but from authentic subtleties of nature.

This subtle subversion occurs again in what is probably my favorite of Durand's paintings—*The Beeches* (1845). Here, Durand allows much of Cole's influence in the distant horizon, the restrained chiaroscuro, and the blatant appeal to the pastoral romance in the shepherd and his flock. But notice how the foliage in the middle plane is much less detailed, much less defined, than the trees and various plants in the foreground, representing a kind of transitional enterprise from the detailed foreground to the composed distances. Ultimately, it is this foreground that defines the image for Durand, particularly the two beech trees that are so accurately painted that they seem to demand the viewer's attention more than the distant landscape, the shepherd, and the Claudian lighting. Should Cole have attempted such a piece, the perspective would have been raised, less intimate and more distanced, the angle of vision twisted so that the opening through which the shepherd and his flock travel would instill a more defined coulisse effect. *The Beeches* especially reminds me of *A Tour on the Prairies*, as it simultaneously constructs a romantic image and undercuts that romantic image in preference of a more nuanced physicality.

I cannot but recognize a similar tension in *Kindred Spirits* (1849), despite the fact that the painting was intended to commemorate Cole just after his death in 1849. *Kindred Spirits* portrays Thomas Cole and William Cullen Bryant overlooking a romantic landscape; and yet, the horizon that has so visibly caught the eye of Cole and Bryant is cut off from the viewer. Durand demonstrates a knowledge of Cole's techniques: if Cole were to paint the landscape of *Kindred Spirits*, the perspective would likely be from the ledge he is standing on, a ledge that provides just enough distance from the scene to comfortably be adapted to Cole's techniques. Moreover, the emphasis of Cole's painting would be on the distant reaches just out of view of Durand's perspective. In Durand's portrayal, however, there is a detailed and intimate foreground, much

more authentic and intimate than Cole would have felt comfortable with. And this is exactly Durand's revision to Cole's techniques: he pulls the perspective down, focuses on intimate portrayals of nearby specimen. Even Durand's honorary blasted trees in the lower foreground adopt an intimacy that overwhelms any moral imperative behind their collapse.

Though I have been portraying Durand as something of a specimen painter, it is important to remember that Durand did not entirely abandon Cole's romantic sensibility. As Novak points out, "Until his death, he continued to produce the cliché compositions for which the Hudson River artists have been both famed and damned up to present" (*American Painting* 62). Angela Miller argues that scholars have made too much of Durand's empirical pieces in her *The Empire of the Eye*:

Much has been made of the midcentury movement away from Colean compositional methods and into a more empiricist approach to nature, which gave far greater value to the isolated fact. Yet this has not always been understood for what it was—a transition away from Cole's artistic emphasis on the overall structure of knowledge as a cultural inheritance and the necessity of policing individual sensation. It would be a mistake to suggest, however, that empiricism held the day. As Durand's 'Letter's on Landscape Painting' made clear, study from nature—the careful record of natural particularities—was merely the first stage in the evolution of the final artistic product. The natural facts registered in the plein-air study from nature were, like individual identity, accorded their own discrete authority. At the same time, the full measure of meaning accorded to isolated facts rested in their placement within a larger composition, just as the full measure of an individual's meaning was only realized through alliances with

others of similar interest in loose institutional networks. Landscape now had to balance the insistence of individual facts against the competing claims of other facts as well as the requirements of artistic order, which still demanded the intervention of imagination as a superintending faculty. (74)

While Miller is certainly correct that the individual identity of the objects depend upon their compositional placement, surely it is clear when viewing some of these compositions that Durand was not as gifted as Cole in disguising his compositional elements in verisimilitude. For example, the bough that curves around the upper canvas in *Kindred Spirits* too conveniently frames a view, and too predictably completes a distinct oval shape begun by the cliff on the right of the canvas. This is clearly a composed view in which the romantic aim of the canvas—commemoration of the father of American landscape painting—overtakes Durand's tendency towards authenticity. Peck focuses on the many instances of doubling in the painting to tell a similar story:

The pervasive doubling in *Kindred Spirits*—two figures, two birds, the splayed conifers at the lower right (their twinned shape echoed by trees directly about them), and the mirrored, pedestal-like promontories on each side of the divide—has many possible meanings. But one of them surely has to do with the relationship of Durand and Cole. The point of intersection of the trunks of the two large trees arching toward the center from the left is almost obscured by leaves, suggesting the intertwining of careers. But these trunks, though twinned in size and shape, are of different species. Like other doublings in the picture, they represent emancipation and individuation, and dramatize the distinctiveness of Durand's visions. The bird flying away in the distance has been taken as a symbol

of Cole's departing spirit (Buff 10), but when seen in relation to the one rapidly approaching by the cliff, their combined imagery may also signify a changing of the guard and a new vision of landscape. (704)

In *Kindred Spirits*, Durand is, at the least, vividly aware of both his indebtedness to and his difference from Cole; the piece simultaneously reads as a romancing of Cole's influence and an assertion of Durand's original and detail-oriented vision.

The same difficulty in compositional formula can be seen in other allegorical works, such as *The Morning of Life* (1840) and *Progress* (1853), both of which appropriate Cole's romantic sensibility in pastoral imagery. *Progress*, commissioned by a railroad executive, is particularly interesting, as Cole's hesitancy to produce pieces with nationalistic biases has been abandoned in Durand's allegory. The composition adheres to Boime's progressive pattern: wilderness in the foreground, pastoral in the middle landscape, and the implication of civilization's extension into the horizon—fitting for a railroad executive in the 1850s. The chiaroscuro in the piece, rather than serving a moral or religious imperative, serves a nationalistic one, as the Indians and the wilderness they represent stand in shadow, while the sunlight illuminates the civilization on the shore. All of the scene revolves around westward expansion. Durand's allegories prove to be much less complex than Cole's, thus Boime's comments are near the mark—but it is not in these nationalistic allegories that Durand was able to produce the plein-air studies, like *In the Woods*, which invert Cole's preference for the ideal. It was this inversion that would modify Cole's idealism to produce a more direct connection between the ideal and real.



### *Conclusion*

Irving's *A Tour on the Prairies* and Durand's plein-air studies represent a romanticism in the process of revision. Irving carries into the prairies romantic preconceptions that are repeatedly subverted by his experiences there. By the end of the narrative, he recognizes an inherent identity in plains, acknowledges something distinct there, and leaves it—as Irving's romantic assumptions require—as something other. But there is not a rejection of the beauty of the prairies in Irving's narrative; rather, Irving's brush with the wild horse at the end of the narrative symbolizes the tone and substance of Irving's parting with the prairies. They leave each other like an amicable, mutual parting of two ill-suited friends.

Durand's transitional position produced in him a simultaneous dedication to Cole's romanticism and to his own preference for authenticity. That Colean part of him might have restrained him from finding an aesthetic beauty in the flatlands beyond the Mississippi; though, it is a bit shocking that the specimen painter in him did not demand his own tour of the prairies. Whatever the case, Durand's brush would not depict a prairie scene throughout his career. As with Cole, Durand would largely remain in the Catskills and the Adirondacks. However, Durand's movement towards objectivity began an aesthetic dialogue about subjectivity that would develop under the influence of the Transcendentalists into a new style of landscape painting, Luminism. These Luminist painters would become the first of the Hudson River painters to find an aesthetic beauty in the vast reaches of the authentic prairie, attempting to, as Margaret Fuller writes, to “look at it by its own standard” (22).

## Notes

1. American critics were not the only kind infatuated with *A Tour*, as “British critics too looked at *A Tour on the Prairies* as an expression of the American literary potential” (Dula 70).
2. Much of my argument here is informed by Kime’s scholarship and the work of various scholars who answered Kime’s implicit call to revisit Irving’s narrative, particularly those who have allowed the wilderness and authenticity of the prairie to breathe through the text, Linda Steele and William Bedford Clark.
3. This movement towards subjectivity will be fulfilled in Fuller’s *Summer on the Lakes*, where the narrative is overtly aware of the manner in which subjectivity and objectivity blend. The same blending occurs in the hidden brush stroke of the Luminist style, emphasizing an objectivity that dallies with the subjective viewer.

## CHAPTER 4

### FAITHFUL OBSERVERS OF THE PRAIRIES:

#### FULLER'S *SUMMER ON THE LAKES* AND THE LUMINIST PLAINS-SCAPES OF WORTHINGTON WHITTREDGE

Not a year after the 1835 publication of *A Tour on the Prairies*, Ralph Waldo Emerson published his groundbreaking exposition of Transcendentalism, *Nature*. In the book, Emerson presents a romanticism which strips away the foreign, alienating elements so common to Cooper and Cole in favor of a romantic vision which views the physical world as “part or particle” (8) of the divine. He argues that Nature is emblematic, that every “natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture” (24). *Nature*, while certainly seminal and revolutionary, must not only be read as an expression of Emerson’s values, but as an expression of the local and national ideologies surrounding him. It is certainly true that, as Lawrence Buell has written, Transcendentalism “had its origins in the cultural milieu from which the movement arose, namely Boston Unitarianism” (18); however, Transcendentalism is significant on a national level because it attempted to unify the tension in American experience that I have laid out in this project: the ideal and the empirical. In Emerson’s brief explanation above, we can see an attempt on his part to combine these two impulses. That is, while each fact is a symbol of a spiritual fact, the spiritual fact is only recognized in its physical manifestation. Transcendentalism joined the real and ideal in a manner that embraces the paradox at the center of human existence, a paradox that is even “part or particle” of the fundamental American principles of democracy and natural law. Thus,

Transcendentalism is the culmination of the tensions in Cole, Cooper, Irving, and Durand, and is a system of thought which embodied the assumptions and energy of the principles of America.

Therefore, the philosophical position was directly connected to a nationalistic project, as made abundantly clear by a number of Emerson's essays regarding American experience, such as "The American Scholar" and "The Poet." But while this American Romanticism carried nationalistic implications, those principles in European Romanticism which were so closely tied to aristocratic social structures were eviscerated from its substance. Fuller, for example, was quite aware that the language of Britain produced numerous difficulties in the representation of American life. She argues in her essay, "American Literature,"

We use [England's] language, and receive, in torrents, the influence of her thought, yet it is, in many respects, uncongenial and injurious to our constitution. What suits Great Britain, with her insular position and consequent need to concentrate and intensify her life, her limited monarchy, and spirit of trade, does not suit a mixed race, continually enriched with new blood from other stocks the most unlike that of our first descent, with ample field and verge enough to range in and leave every impulse free, and abundant opportunity to develop a genius, wide and full as our rivers, flowery, luxuriant and impassioned as our vast prairies, rooted in strength as the rocks on which the Puritan father landed. (123-4)

Rather, the redirected emphasis on factuality, on thingness (even if Emerson occasionally slipped into a Platonic kind of idealism), created the desire for a beauty expressed not only in pleasance but in American variety: notice that Fuller's chief metaphors above are sourced in the land. Within this transcendentalist union is an appreciation of the simplicity and self-reliance of Natty

Bumppo without the burden of the European romantic forms which restrained Cooper from that same recognition; and yet, within the same system of thought is a recognition of the existence of the formal underpinnings (or over-pinnings) of being. It is a system that inherits while it resists a Lockean empiricism, and cherishes while it revolts against a Platonic idealism.

However, it is a bit hasty to conclude that the tension between idealism and realism had been resolved in Transcendentalism. Rather, the principle transcendentalist characters—Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller—each produced a unique blend of this paradox. Their varieties in belief were not an expression of revolt against the duality at its center, but were rather disagreements in emphasis. Emerson clung tightly to the idealistic thrust of his philosophies, arguing at one point in *Nature*:

[W]hat difference does it make, whether Orion is up there in heaven, or some god paints the image in the firmament of the soul? The relations of parts and the end of the whole remaining the same, what is the difference, whether the land and sea interact, and world revolve and intermingle without number or end—deep yawning and deep, and galaxy balancing galaxy, throughout absolute space—or whether, without relations of time and space, the same appearances are inscribed in the constant faith of man? (45)

But Emerson's embrace of the charge of idealism would not resonate with the practicality found in Thoreau's *Walden*, a practicality which H. Daniel Peck has insightfully connected to the empiricism of Asher Durand. Margaret Fuller would be uncomfortable with either of these emphases, instead preferring a kind of egalitarian vision in which the empirical and ideal were co-equal realities. Interestingly enough, Fuller's particular version of Transcendentalism—one that was mystical, physical, spiritual, national, idealistic, and maybe, as Emerson once described

it, a little pagan—is at the center of her first book, a travel narrative (of sorts), *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843*. I will argue in this chapter that Fuller’s approach created in her narrative one of the first attempts at discovering and representing artistically an aesthetic beauty in the authentic prairies. I will then present a parallel character in painterly form, Thomas Worthington Whittredge, whose dalliance with Luminism, a later style of the Hudson River painters which assumes a transcendentalist philosophy, would produce the first Hudson River landscapes of the prairies, a region which Whittredge found more beautiful than the mountains of the Catskills and Rockies.

#### *Ways of Seeing and Ways of Being in Summer on the Lakes*

By the time Margaret Fuller left New England for a tour of the Great Lakes Region in 1843, she was already a prominent figure in the Bostonian intellectual and Transcendentalist community. Fuller had edited *The Dial* since 1840, published various translations of significant texts, and had just completed her controversial feminist exposition, “The Great Lawsuit. Man *versus* Men. Woman *versus* Women,” in *The Dial* in July of 1843. Fuller was known for her Conversations, classes for intellectual Bostonian women which revolved around deep and pressing philosophical inquiries. She was taken with the transcendentalist philosophy, and considered Emerson a mentor of hers; however, Fuller was clearly aware from the beginning of her involvement in the transcendentalist community of an element of experience that Emerson’s more idealistic form of transcendentalism rejected. Buell has explained that Transcendentalism emerged as a revolt against the Lockean assertion that empiricism is the only legitimate ground of knowledge (4). Emerson himself asserted as much in another early essay, “The Transcendentalist,” arguing, “The materialist insists on facts, on history, on the force of

circumstances and the animal wants of man; the idealist on the power of Thought and of Will, on inspiration, on miracle, on individual culture” (81). And yet Emerson seemed to notice that Fuller was not entirely aligned with this idealistic philosophy; he wrote in her *Memoirs*, “It soon became evident that there was somewhat a little pagan about her” (“Concord” 219). “Pagan” is a wonderful word choice, here, implying a mystical bent but also an affirmation of physicality and emotional presence. Fuller was too engaged with the senses, with the material, the physical, the mystical, to accept the assertion that the material world around her was a mere foil for transcendence.

It is out of this confliction that Fuller’s *Summer on the Lakes* emerges; for within, Fuller, perhaps for the first time, explicitly explores and presents her unique form of American Romanticism, a form which attempts to shuffle off the alienating idealism of Emerson and embrace the empirical reality around her. As Susan Belasco Smith has written,

*Summer on the Lakes* was written near the end of two important episodes in Fuller’s life: her residence in New England and her intense but disintegrating apprenticeship with Emerson. . . . [T]he differences that emerged between Emerson and Fuller might well have been the result of a fundamental clash between their world views. . . . Fuller, still under Emerson’s influence but increasingly attuned to the “force of circumstances” operating in her own life, was beginning to find Emerson’s idealism too removed from the “facts” to be an effective guiding principle and missing what she would later call the “liberal air of all the zones.” (“*Summer*” 201)

More so than Emerson and Thoreau, Fuller was able to articulate a mode of Transcendentalism that united soul and body in a manner that embraced the paradoxical nature of the union and

reified the material world around her. As Smith has phrased it, Fuller's position would "avoid the excesses of materialism on the one hand and the sterility of the ideal on the other" ("*Summer*" 201). This philosophical complexity at the heart of *Summer* is the reason why so many early critics (and even more recent critics) have had difficulty classifying it. It is a travelogue, but with little emphasis on travel; moreover, its representation of travel tends towards metaphysical wanderings, including tangential stories, original poetry, and even book reviews and translations. This fragmented miscellany led many early reviews to denounce the work entirely; among them (somewhat predictably) was Orestes Bronson, who denounced its "slipshod style," writing that "Miss Fuller seems to us to be wholly deficient in a pure, correct taste, and especially in that tidiness we always look for in woman" (qtd. in Adams 247). Modern critics have reacted, for the most part, differently; for example, Stephen Adams argues that the fragmentary nature of *Summer on the Lakes* fits into the generally fragmentary nature of many Romantic works, emphasizing a "deep unity beneath the surface disjointedness, digressiveness, and fragmentation" (249). Readings of *Summer* have become oriented towards its thematic underpinnings hinted at by correlation and intuition. While Adams is certainly correct in his assessment of the work, I am more drawn to an alternate emphasis that, to my understanding, better defines the project of *Summer on the Lakes*. *Summer* is "an expression of self-discovery" (Introduction ix), as Smith has called it, and this mental excursion is embodied in the narrative's obsession with orientation, with the many ways of seeing a thing. Anne Baker, perhaps, points to the center of *Summer* when she writes, "It is a book in which Fuller carries on an extended conversation with herself about the best ways to see" (61). It is in the context of these myriad perspective angles that Fuller is able to work out her own.



Many scholars have circled this simple axis of the narrative, but few have explicitly stated it. Criticism has tended to focus on drawing out individual tensions in the text without fully recognizing the interconnectedness of all of these tensions. Christine Zwarg and Susan Rosowski have focused on Fuller's feminine reading of gender issues in the Midwest. Anne Baker singles out a tension between nationalism and transcendentalism in *Summer*, focusing on the portrayals of the land. Marcia Noe has even explored a garden-desert tension in Fuller, drawing from Henry Nash Smith. Susan Belasco Smith argues that *Summer* is an assertion of American Romanticism that revolts against the contemporary emergence of empirical excess in British Victorianism, an excess which justified British condescension towards the simplicity of daily life in America. *Summer in the Lakes* is all of these things; gender-oriented readings become a function of qualified transcendentalism and qualified nationalism, which are themselves a function of her unique blend of the real and the ideal. That is its contribution to the transcendentalist sphere: complicating the naiveté of positive certainty in each popular way of seeing in her contemporaries. I urge my reader to remember that my discussion here is fully aware of the incredible variety of the narrative, even as I restrain myself from picking up each of these issues so well-discussed by the above scholars. This varied, conversational scheme is perhaps one of many implications of the visual symbol Fuller establishes for her book: a necklace; towards the end of *Summer*, she writes, "I wish I had a thread long enough to string on it all these beads that take my fancy" (148). A number of scholars have argued that this image emphasizes the fragmentary nature of *Summer on the Lakes*, but the image is also one that combines the mishmash of ideas and perspectives into a collaborative unity that adorns the author. Fuller wears these many ways of seeing, unifying them into a collective perspective strung together in circumambulation, slipped around her neck.

Perhaps the central expression of this theme of seeing is the section of the book which has been the most criticized: the lengthy discussion of the Seeress of Prevorst, a young German woman, Frederica Hauffe, who was declared to possess the “second sight” (87). Interestingly, this discussion was treated as an irrelevant digression in the text by a number of critics and later editors. An edition published after Fuller’s death (by her brother, no less) would excise this chapter entirely, as would Perry Miller’s edition in the mid-twentieth century (Urbanski 146-7). However, if the premise of the book is in fact a manifesto regarding various ways of seeing, this digressive section, located in the exact middle of the narrative, must be, as Marie Mitchell Olesen Urbanski has termed it, “the central jewel” of the narrative. Fuller is aware that many of her readers might immediately react against her inclusion of such a mystical topic; in fact, she must have expected objections from at least three other kinds of readers—the idealist, the empiricist, and the doctrine-oriented religious—as she literally addresses each of these characters via textual representatives before presenting her story. These representative characters are termed “Good Sense,” the empiricist, “Old Church,” the religious, “Free Hope,” a stand-in for Fuller’s own perspective; most significant in this group, however, is the character of “Self-Poise,” a character who quite clearly represents the (self-reliant) Emerson. The brief dialogue is perhaps the most significant portion of the entire narrative, as Fuller explicitly addresses the narrowness, as she sees it, of each of these perspectives, locating her own somewhere between them all.

Good Sense begins by questioning the worth of a higher state of being when

[a]ll around us lies what we neither understand nor use. Our capacities, our instincts for this our present sphere are but half developed. Let us confine ourselves to that till the lesson be learned; let us be completely natural, before we trouble ourselves with the supernatural. I never see any of these things but I long

to get away and lie under a green tree and let the wind blow on me. There is  
marvel and charm enough in that for me. (79)

Fuller responds in a qualified affirmation of the empirical position, declaring that solitary rest under a green tree is good enough for her, as well (79). However, Fuller argues that the reason “our faculties [are so] sharpened to it” is that our faculties are attuned to the experience “by apprehending the infinite results of every day” (79). She clarifies in a statement that perfectly expresses the tedious balance in Fuller’s transcendentalism, “Only the dreamer shall understand realities, though, in truth, his dreaming must not be out of proportion to his waking!” (79). Fuller’s response both embraces the empirical position and qualifies it to remove the unpleasant implications of its excesses.

Old Church argues, in typical Lockean form, that the “Author of all has intended to confine our knowledge within certain boundaries, has given us a short span of time for a certain probation, for which our faculties are adapted. By wild speculation and intemperate curiosity we violate his will and incur dangers, perhaps fatal, consequences” (80). Again, the reliability of the sensory faculties become a problem; however, as Buell has noted, the Lockean empiricism at the center of the popular Unitarian epistemology “to the young Unitarian radicals of the 1820s and 1830s...seemed to cut man off from God” (4). Old Church argues that those faculties are the boundaries of worldly, human existence, and to imagine that one can transcend those faculties into a higher state of being is a dangerous kind of apotheosis. Fuller points out the hypocrisy of the Old Church, for while it may criticize Fuller for attempting to know the divine, it “pretend[s] to settle the origin and nature of sin, the final destiny of souls, and the whole plan of the causal spirit with regard to the term. I think,” she continues, “those who take your view have not

examined themselves, and do not know the ground on which they stand” (80). Fuller again suggests the co-equal importance of the faculties and the aspirations of man, writing,

I acknowledge no limit, set up by man’s opinion as to the capacities of man.

“Care is taken,” I see it, “that the trees grow not up into heaven,” but, to me it seems, the more vigorously they aspire the better: Only let it be a vigorous, not a partial or sickly aspiration. Let not the tree forget its root. (80).

As the ending metaphor suggests, aspiration and faculty must be balanced, a more nuanced position than the straw man erected by Old Church. The aspirant thinker is not “unfitted to obey positive precepts, and perform positive duties” as long as she does not forget her roots (80).

It is here that Emerson’s textual representative enters the discussion, reminding Fuller (or Free Hope) that matter is mere illusion: “When we know that all is in each, and that the ordinary contains the extraordinary, why should we play the baby, and insist upon having the moon for a toy when a tin dish will do as well” (81). Self-Poise also states that Fuller should not be as willing to offer her faith to the “nonsense” of mysticism:

Of our study there should be in proportion two-third of rejection to one of acceptance. And, amid the manifold infatuations and illusions of this world of emotion, a being capable of clear intelligence can do no better service than to hold himself upright, avoid nonsense, and do what chores lie in his way, acknowledging every moment that primal truth, which no fact exhibits, nor, if pressed by too warm a hope, will even indicate. (81).

Fuller is not willing to toy as lightly with Self-Poise as with Old Church and Good Sense, as she begins her response, “Thou art greatly wise, my friend, and ever respected by me.” She continues, “yet I find not in your theory or your scope, room enough for the lyric inspirations, or

the mysterious whispers of life” (81). She disagrees with Self-Poise, explaining, “What is done interests me more than what is thought and supposed. Every fact is impure, but every fact contains in it the juices of life. Every fact is a clod, from which may grow an amaranth or a palm” (81). Fuller’s criticism of Emersonian Transcendentalism is premised upon her attachment to the empirical, upon her desire to keep rooted even in her wildest aspiration. Fuller conceives of the ideal in a manner that affirms the material world around her. Her response to Emerson clarifies this with an analogy that I find supremely rich; as if Fuller were familiar with Boime’s *The Magisterial Gaze*, she challenges Emerson’s notion of the transcendent eyeball, grounds his idealizing abstractions which dwarf the physical world. She writes,

Do you climb the snowy peaks from whence come the streams, where the atmosphere is rare, where you can see the sky nearer, from which you can get a commanding view of the landscape. I see great disadvantages as well as advantages in this dignified position. I had rather walk myself through all kinds of places, even at the risk of being robbed in the forest, half drowned at the ford, and covered with dust in the street.

I would beat with the living heart of the world, and understand all the moods, even the fancies or fantasies, of nature. (82)<sup>1</sup>

Fuller’s co-equal affirmation of the transcendent impulse and the sensitivity to the variety of the “living heart of the world” in all its “moods,” embody a more cohesive unification of the real and the ideal than even Emerson, the canonized father of the movement, is capable of embracing.

Fascinatingly enough, the Seeress of Prevorst fulfills exactly this co-equal vision as she experiences the realm of spirit and soul within physical media. Fuller’s translation of Kerner’s account demonstrates the implied connection between the physical and spiritual involved in the

Seeress's visions: "She makes a distinction between spirit as the pure intelligence; soul, the ideal of this individual man; and nerve-spirit, the dynamic of his temporal existence" (92) But her extraordinary abilities were not charged with a demoniac or evil connotation; Kerner is clear that her character was "one of singular gentleness and grateful piety" (94). Moreover, "a great constitutional impressibility did develop in her brain the germs both of poetic creation and science" (94). Most significant, however, is the young woman's dual vision. Fuller explains, "She also saw different sights in the left from the right eye. In the left, the bodily state of the person; in the right, his real or destined self" (97). These passages explain Fuller's fascination with the Seeress. The young woman embodied the balance sought in Fuller's own position, the balance between a poetic spirit, a state of higher being, and the immediacy of a temporal, sensory existence. Indeed, the story of the Seeress is not a mere digression, but "the central jewel on Fuller's necklace; her vision illuminates what has come before and what follows it" (Urbanski 150). We see in the Seeress what Fuller means when she declares that America needs

no thin Idealist, no coarse Realist, but a man whose eye reads the heavens while his feet step firmly on the ground, and his hands are strong and dexterous for the use of human implements. A man religious, virtuous and sagacious; a man of universal sympathies, but self-possessed; a man who knows the region of emotion, though he is not its slave; a man to whom this world is no mere spectacle, or fleeting shadow, but a great solemn game to be played with good heed, for its stakes are of eternal value. (64)

Fuller's call implies that Emerson, of course, is not this man. She clarifies that this is the case in her responses to *Self-Poise*, when she writes, "Could but a larger intelligence of the vocations of others and a tender sympathy with their individual natures be added, had you more of love, or

more of apprehensive genius, ... you would command my entire reverence” (82). Fuller desires a way of seeing which allows a “full, free life” (82), in which she is free to follow the “mysterious whispers of life” (81), and “beat with living heart of the world” (82). Fuller thirsts for the authentic, believing that the simplicity of factual existence holds within it the nutrients of the ideal. Given this aesthetic unification, it is no wonder that Fuller will be among the first of artists to discover an aesthetic beauty in the vast, horizontal spaces of the prairies.

### *Fuller's Faithful Observations of the Prairies*

As early as the opening pages of *Summer on the Lakes*, Fuller introduces the theme of perspective which defines the rest of the narrative. Her initial impression of Niagara Falls is pre-determined by the various drawings and panorama she has encountered in New England galleries. Therefore, she initially “felt nothing but a quiet satisfaction”; “I knew where to look for everything, and everything looked as I thought it would” (4). The perspective by which a viewer should witness Niagara was already defined for her, and the only thing Fuller had left to do was to inhabit that imposed perspective. But inhabiting this perspective produced no deeper feelings within rather than the underwhelming satisfaction of seeing something familiar: “it looks *well enough*, I felt” (4). The implied problem is that those undoubtedly idealized artistic renderings of Niagara—a common subject of landscapists of both the folk and Hudson River variation—have constructed a proper narrative of seeing which does not arise naturally from the authentic landscape at hand. Thus, Fuller writes, “But all great expressions which, on a superficial survey, seems so easy as well as so simple, furnishes, after a while, to the faithful observer its own standard by which to appreciate it” (4). Her initial “superficial survey” fails because the idealistic renderings which encode her vision do not align with the standard the actual landscape sets. We

can see here, as early as the first pages, Fuller's bind to the actual, the authentic: the standard by which a "faithful observer" must measure a thing is by the standard that the actual thing constructs. This is a mode of transcendentalism in which the ideal form is not imposed upon the immediate world, but the ideal form emerges from that authentic immediacy. Thus, rather than a distanced perspective of Niagara in which the contours and movements can be witnessed at once, the totality of the thing forming a unit, Fuller writes that she prefers "to sit on Table Rock, close to the great fall. There all power of observing details, all separate consciousness, was quite lost" in the overwhelming immediacy of Niagara's power (5). She prefers the immediate experience of nature over Emerson's transparent vision; both are means of perceiving a thing, but whereas Emerson's transcendent vision distances, Fuller's transcendent intimacy draws her in and through.

Fuller includes one other figure in her experience with Niagara, a figure who represents another extreme from which she abstains—the utilitarian ethic justified by the excesses of empiricism. A man walks "close up to the fall, and, after looking at it a moment, with an air as if thinking *how he could best appropriate it to his own use*, he spat into it" (5, my emphasis). Good Sense uses similar language when he says, "All around us lies what we neither understand *nor use*. Our capacities, our instincts for this our present sphere are but half developed" (79, my emphasis). Fuller clarifies by these examples that her connection to the physical is not one of empirical excess that only finds virtue in the utility of a thing; rather, she sits comfortably between the Emersonian and the empirical, finding hints of the ultimate in the individuality of things, an ultimate which subsumes the thing in a manner that bolsters rather than decimates its individual essence.



As Fuller's journey carries her into the prairies, the same perspective which allows her to discover an individual beauty in Niagara allows her to recognize a beauty on the plains—though, this recognition does not arise immediately. At first, Fuller's eyes desire a romantic verticality, depth, and reach which the mountains of rural New England meet so well. One can almost feel Cooper and Cole in her instinctual response:

At first, the prairie seemed to speak of the very desolation of dullness. After sweeping over the vast monotony of the lakes to come to this monotony of land, with all around a limitless horizon,—to walk, and walk, and run, but never climb, oh! It was too dreary for any but a Hollander to bear. How the eye greeted the approach of a sail, or the smoke of a steamboat; it seemed that any thing so animated must come from a better land, where mountains gave religion to the scene. (22)

Fuller's eyes desire verticality; without those perpendicular structures, the land seems desolate and dull, monotonous and dreary. Just as in her experience with Niagara, however, this imposed, romantic perspective is supplanted by an ideal that arises from the physical. She qualifies,

But after I had rode out, and seen the flowers and seen the sun set with that calmness seen only in the prairies, and the cattle wandering slowly home to their homes in the "island groves"—peacefullest of sights—I began to love because I began to know the scene, and shrank no longer from "the encircling vastness."  
(22)

That her emphasis revolves around the importance of *seeing* a thing is suggested in the powerful visual qualities of this passage. Her perspective changes because she is a "faithful observer" that allows her perspective to be shaped by what is seen: she *sees* the flowers, *sees* the sun set, *sees*

the calmness of the prairies, *sees* the cattle wandering home. Finally, in a beautifully poetic pun, she begins “to know the scene.” Fuller explains this in more explicit terms,

It is always thus with the new form of life; we must learn to look at it by its own standard. At first, no doubt my accustomed eye kept saying, if the mind did not, What! no distant mountains? what, no valleys? But after a while I would ascend the roof of the house where we lived, and pass many hours, needing no sight but the moon reigning in the heavens, or starlight falling upon the lake, till all the lights were out in the island grove of men beneath my feet, and felt nearer heaven that there was nothing but this lovely, still reception of the earth; no towering mountains, no deep tree-shadows, nothing but plain earth and water bathed in light. (22)

Susan Belasco Smith writes that “the most literary passages of *Summer on the Lakes* concern Fuller’s fascination with the prairies of Illinois, a scenery that absorbed her and fired her imagination” (xvii). Passages like the above demonstrate the poetry that Fuller is able to produce of the prairies. The stillness and vastness that was so oppressive at first is transformed into the silent, quiet landscape she paints—plain earth and water bathed in light, a horizon where heaven and land flow into each other. Her language does not emulate an alienated romanticism, but finds that transcendent luminosity within the prairies.

This poetry is only awakened, however, because Fuller’s balanced perspective allows the prairie to speak and allows her to hear its voice. Cooper could not hear it—Irving heard it but did not understand it. Fuller is touched by the authentic prairie, and seeks “to look at it by its own standard” rather than a standard she imposes. Interestingly enough, Fuller prefaces her remarks about the prairie landscape with an evaluation of the authenticity of both Cooper’s Indians and

Irving's books. Effectively, she argues what I have expanded upon in this entire project. She calls Cooper's Uncas an "invention" full of "sentiment and of fancy," a "white man's view of a savage hero, who would be far finer in his natural proportions" (21). She claims Irving's works "have a stereotype, second-hand air," as they focus largely on idealistic portrayals rather than authentic portrayals of the Indians and prairie life. However, she makes an exception for what she refers to as "the Tour to the Prairies" (21), suggesting that something about *A Tour on the Prairies* escaped those idealizations. Not a page after this evaluation, she explains her own reaction to the prairies: a reaction that takes the rawness Irving discovers, and allows the romance to grow from it. Consider the following imagery—how native to the landscape it seems, how far from Cooper's towering rock in the desert Fuller brings us:

Beside these brilliant flowers, which gemmed and gilt the grass in a sunny afternoon's drive near the blue lake, between the low oakwood and the narrow beach, stimulated, whether sensuously by the optic nerve, unused to so much gold and crimson with such tender green, or symbolically through some meaning dimly seen in the flowers, I enjoyed a sort of fairyland exultation never felt before, and the first drive amid the flowers gave me anticipation of the beauty of the prairies.

(21)

Though Marcia Noe has recognized Henry Nash Smith's garden-desert paradox in passages like this (6), I do not think the national angle is immediately upon Fuller's mind here. She is enraptured in the novelty of a new world of light opened to her opened eyes—and it is no matter whether that sublimity is the product of a mere sensory response or of a transcendent symbol within. Fuller, like her book, adorns both Irving and Cooper, both Emerson and Locke, and in her adornment she qualifies their excesses so that the varied world that demands a multiplicity of

approaches may receive a multiplicity of witnesses. Like the Seeress of Prevorst, Fuller is more awake to the nuanced inter-connections of beauty, the ideal, and the real because she sees bodies in one eye and sees spirits in the other.

*Fuller's Luminist Corollary: Worthington Whittredge*

The Luminist movement that grew out of the late 1850s was heavily influenced by Transcendentalist thought, particularly the Transcendentalist attachment to light. Emerson writes that “the soul in man is not an organ, but animates and exercises all the organs; is not a function, like the power of memory, of calculation, of comparison, but uses these as hands and feet; is not a faculty, *but a light*” (“The Oversoul” 238, my emphasis). Light was the principal metaphor for the transcendent world; light illuminates and delineates all things, permeates the atmosphere and makes the world visible. The Hudson River painters awakened in the 1850s to the effects of light and atmosphere as never before. We can see this Transcendentalist influence even in a number of Durand’s works; works like *High Point: Shandaken Mountains* (1853) seem to herald the coming Luminist movement embodied in the seascapes of Fitz Henry Lane and Martin Johnson Heade. But this movement is not merely characterized by an attention to light, though they are designated by that connection. Rather, the Luminist movement moves away from the “large, operatic pieces wheeling in their Claudian flats from the wings,” characteristic of Frederick Edwin Church’s massive masterpieces, in favor of “small intimate paintings whose horizontal extensions mimic the format of the huge panoramas” (Novak, *Nature and Culture* 23). The canvases of these Luminist paintings shrink considerably, and often emphasize a horizontality rather than an evenly-proportioned or vertically-oriented canvas. Whereas those massive canvases attempt to replicate the size of their subject in the size of their canvases,

the luminists were able to create intimate canvases in which the potent space derived its amplitude, and often its surreal overtones, from the proportional relations and pull of parts within the picture structure. Entering these contracted spaces, we feel as though, like Alice, we have shrunk to size, to wander through the curiously finite and infinite world of luminist proportion. (Novak, *American Painting* 92)

Rather than emphasizing (and exaggerating) the vast vertical reaches in canvases like Cole's *Falls of the Kaaterskill*, or painting the inner forests to satisfy a desire to portray the authentic like Durand's *In the Woods*, the luminist emphasis on horizontality allowed for a wide-angled magnificence that effectively grounded Cole's distant, floating perspective. Furthermore, the Transcendentalist influence brought a special attention to the horizon, that strangely liminal space in which the physicality of the earth melts into the fluid unity of the heavens.

Compare Lane's *Brace's Rock, Eastern Point* of 1864, or Martin Johnson Heade's *Haystacks on the Newburyport Marshes* of 1862 (which, were it not designated as a Massachusetts landscape, might be mistaken for a prairie landscape) to Cole's *The Oxbow*, or *Landscape with Dead Tree* (1828). Whereas the mountainous reaches of Cole's paintings become a carrier of romantic sublimity and assertive energy, the luminist horizon merges the finite and the infinite so quietly and subtly that the boundary between is difficult to delineate. Furthermore, Cole's often thick brushstrokes are hidden in the luminist works, as the subtle effects of light require an indistinguishable stroke, a glasslike surface through which the luminosity of the landscape can expand. Cole's diagonal and vertical geometries are replaced with a planar recession, veils of light that recede deep into the luminous center. Each of these alterations are quite clearly rooted in the Transcendentalist philosophy, but the visual imperative

of the medium—by its very nature—depends upon an engagement with the physical that seems a bit conflicted with Emerson’s idealism. Rather, the physical is given light that breathes through each glaring, varied detail, in each ripple of water and blade of grass. As Novak explains, luminism is “thus a realism that goes far beyond ‘mere’ realism, to be touched, in some instances, with super-real overtones” (75). Luminism, to my mind, represents Fuller’s thriving yet quiet balance of immersion in the ideal and passionate intimacy with the physical. It is a style that inherits Emerson’s transparent eyeball, but emphasizes the materiality of the seen objects. This luminist emphasis on horizontality, on a quiet simplicity, was prepared to allow the prairie to set its own standard—it only lacked an artist to do so.

H. Daniel Peck has beautifully connected Thoreau to the works of Durand; I would like to suggest another transcendentalist pairing: Fuller and Worthington Whittredge. Whittredge was an Ohio native who was never explicitly dedicated to a certain style of landscape painting. He quips in his journal, “I have tried anything and everything which has struck me as interesting until I am hardly known as the painter of any particular class of landscape” (62). It is shocking, therefore, Whittredge has received so little scholarly attention, as the chronology of his works trace the development from Durand to Luminism, and, later in his career, the development from the Luminist style to the Barbizon appropriations of the late century. He was, for the most part, self-taught, his most formal artistic education being an unofficial apprenticeship under Emanuel Leutze in Düsseldorf (Cibulka 12). He returned to America as the Hudson River School was just on the rise, and quickly took up the study of the style of Durand. He witnessed the works of both Cole and Durand soon after reentry into the country, and his response is quite suggestive:

I may have been a little nervous, I cannot say, but when I looked at Durand’s truly American landscape [*Thanatopsis*], so delicate and refined, such a faithful if in

some parts somber delineation of our own hills and valleys, I confess that tears came to my eyes. I viewed with no less interest the more masterly work of Cole and endeavored to contrast it with the work of ancient and modern landscape painters while the memory of their work was fresh in my mind, and the conclusion that I reached was that few masters of any age had surpassed him in rugged brush work. But he leaned so strongly to allegory, especially in the works before me, and had presented so few objects distinctive of American landscape that his pictures made less impression upon me than the work of Durand. (41)

Whittredge, like Fuller, was always carefully analytical of the age he inhabited; he recognized almost immediately a detachment from thingness in Cole that pushed him towards the style of Durand. Even before his Luminist period, his paintings exhibit a tendency towards stillness and simplicity. As the Luminist style became more defined, Whittredge's preference for simplicity in the landscape painting would predictably draw him into the movement. Fortunately, it was during this period that Whittredge first encountered the plains, for the prairie horizon and horizontality would become a constant inspiration to his transcendentalist imagination.

Whittredge embarked on an artistic excursion into the west in 1865, accepting the invitation of General Pope "to accompany him on a tour of inspection" (45). While other artists who would travel through the Midwest—such as Sanford Gifford and Albert Bierstadt—were desperate for the towering Rocky Mountains, Whittredge was more attracted to the quiet simplicity of the prairies. He writes,

I had never seen the plains or anything like them. They impressed me deeply. I cared more for them than for the mountains, and very few of my western pictures have been produced from sketches made in the mountains, but rather from those

made from the plains with the mountains in the distance. Whoever crossed the plains at that period, notwithstanding its herds of buffalo and flocks of antelope, its wild horses, deer and fleet rabbits, could hardly fail to be impressed with its vastness and silence and the appearance everywhere of an innocent, primitive existence. (45)

Cheryl A. Cibulka notes that Whittredge “questioned the commonly held assumption ‘that all grandeur *must* be measured up and down,’ realizing that few accepted the notion that ‘it might be measured horizontally as on our great Western plains’” (23). His descriptions demonstrate his attraction to the immediate physicality surrounding him, as well as the meaning Whittredge finds within the horizontal landscape. Like Fuller, his transcendental eye reads through the physical world around him, but never ceases to focus on that physical existence. It is precisely this luminist, transcendentalist thirst for simplicity and authenticity which allows him “to look at [the prairie] by its own standard,” and discover a beauty in the flat spaces of the prairies.

Whittredge’s 1865 journey resulted in the first Hudson River landscapes of the Great Plains to grace American galleries. The horizontal emphasis of the luminist style, its attention to gradations of light and silent brushstrokes, drew out the stillness and silence of prairies with more veracity and impact than Lane’s luminist seascapes. The plains responded to a “faithful observer” willing to listen. *A Wagon Train on the Plains, Platte River* would result from this journey, embracing the shifting colors and play of light upon the stretching land. The atmospheric planes extend into the vaguely defined intersection of land and sky. Though *Crossing the Ford, Platte River, Colorado* (1870), one of Whittredge’s most praised landscapes, includes a translucent backdrop of the Rocky Mountains, those mountains are so obscured by atmosphere that they do not demand the viewer’s eye. Rather, it is the bold horizon of the plains,



interrupted by a single cottonwood, that calls the viewer's eye. *Indian Reservation* (1870) so blends the distant mountains into the sky that they are hardly distinguishable from it. Instead, the horizontal line defines the view, as the individual patches of prairie grass and the mirror-like river are portrayed with a detail inspired by Durand. Time and time again, the flatness of the plains defines the image, and any verticality is overrun by the horizon or tempered by the atmosphere: *On the Plains, Colorado* (1872), *Graves of Travellers, Fort Kearny, Nebraska* (1866), *Indian Encampment on the Platte River, Colorado* (1873). There is a kind of compromise in Whittredge's misty mountains and detailed grasses, one that unites not only the ideal and real, but Cole's drastic vertical extremes and Durand's particularizing eye. At times, other painters of the West would carry too much of that excitement for verticality, interested mainly in the Rocky Mountains—Bierstadt and Gifford, for instance. But it is only in this transcendentalist union, this American Romanticism rooted in the real, that the prairies discovered faithful observers in Margaret Fuller and Worthington Whittredge.

### *Conclusion*

In the introduction, I stressed the importance of paying due attention to voice of the land in a text. Hopefully, this project has demonstrated that ignoring the often repressed voice of the land drastically affects interpretations of the text, and often reduces those works to an unbecoming simplicity. The tension between authenticity and idealism that defines landscape portrayals in Cooper, Irving, Cole, and Durand is manageably resolved in the Transcendentalist movement, whose preference for authenticity encouraged artists to engage with the physical world around them, to shuffle off the lingering ideologies of Europe that restrained the landscape, and to accept not only the physical world but the meanings and metaphors to be found within. In the

paintings of Whittredge and the Transcendentalist perspective of Margaret Fuller, the land is given a voice, is allowed to speak, and is heard. Sensuality and natural metaphor unite into an intimate simplicity and quietude. The individuality of each leaf of grass, of each flower on the prairies, asserts its own identity just as it invites our loafing souls.

## Notes

1. As Anne Baker has written, Fuller's use of the phrase "a commanding vision," and her subsequent qualification of that vision, corresponds to the manner in which she qualifies the national drive for westward expansion. The commanding vision is aligned with the utilitarian vision Fuller encounters at Niagara Falls, as well as with the imposing, inauthentic domination implied in the nation's renderings of the Native Americans. Baker writes, "Fuller's encounters with the dominative powers of seeing lead her to question the lofty, controlling prospect that she had seemed to favor in her rendering of the view from 'Eagle's Nest,' and implicitly to turn toward a far more vulnerable position on the ground" (72).

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