



## Precursors of the Western Novel

### I

THE SEMI-ARID REGIONS of the North American continent which lie within the boundaries of the United States and are conventionally referred to as the American West posed a cultural challenge to the westering Anglo-European settlers of which the magnitude has only fairly recently been realized. Only since Walter Prescott Webb's epoch-making study *The Great Plains* (1931) have systematic attempts been made to understand the enormous cultural adaptations made inevitable by the staggering environmental differences between the trans-Mississippi West and the well-watered area east of the Father of Waters. These differences are most obviously seen in terms of the striking contrasts among the inhabitants of both regions: the Horse Indians, though ethnically related to their eastern cousins, are culturally totally divorced from them; differences between the agricultural Pueblo Indians and their eastern agricultural counterparts are more striking than are similarities; the eastern farmer has been metamorphosed into the western rancher; and his prosaic farmhand into the romantic cowboy, "the hired man on horseback," in Eugene Manlove Rhodes's evocative phrase.

Yet these obvious differences, striking and important as they admittedly are, have caused many observers to rush into the tempting but unsound conclusion that the trans-Mississippi American West—especially in its literary reflections—has absolutely nothing to do with that eastern America which preceded, and in a sense produced it. In fact, many of the same factors which drove Americans across the wide Missouri had brought them across the Big Water some centuries before. Horace Greeley's famous remark "Go West, young man, go West" is, from this perspective, only an echo of Bishop Berkeley's almost equally well-known line, "Westward the course of empire takes its way," of a century earlier: and though present residents of California may unthinkingly assume the line was written with their university in mind, in actuality it was written much earlier, in honor of another infant western college—Yale.

In one sense, of course, fascination with the strange and novel is a perennial human trait. The equally reliable tales of humans abducted by gods and spacemen (in some modern versions the two are equated) have probably fascinated *Homo sapiens* since he first learned that a fire was just as

desirable a place to socialize as it was to roast his dinner; but at least in the European imagination these traditional tales had, over the centuries, developed a kind of presumed historicity more or less unique to western society. Prester John had given way to Marco Polo, and the stories “of the cannibals that each other eat, / The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders,” though they may have beguiled Desdemona did not fool Othello for one minute. The reason behind this is not far to seek. One need remember only that that same Renaissance which produced one of the greatest cultural awakenings the West was ever to know produced a scientific revolution as well, of which a disciplined curiosity was its intellectual expression and an age of exploration its technological offshoot. Richard Hakluyt’s *Voyages* (1589–1600) had proved so popular that they had been continued by Samuel Purchas (d. 1626) in several further volumes as *Purchas his Pilgrimes* and imitated by a host of others. The prestigious British Royal Society had been founded in 1660 with the encouragement of navigation and discovery as one of its primary aims, and with the New World as one of its primary targets.

Yet the New World explored by the English was substantially different from the other lands discovered by them, if only because it was not the seat of an older and more sophisticated civilization, but quite the reverse: it was, to their eyes at least, a virgin land on which their destiny might be writ afresh without the hindrances of the past. What chronicle to write on this tabula rasa was the problem, then as now, facing the literary recorder.

In this regard it is important to remark that, although the early colonists might well know what they were fleeing from, there was little agreement concerning what in fact they were fleeing toward. The most articulate view, at least at first, stemmed from the notions of eighteenth-century primitivism, for which Jean Jacques Rousseau was the most widely quoted, though by no means unique, spokesman. Rousseau’s famous remark that man is born free, and yet is everywhere in chains had an obvious political implication: remove man from his chains and he would again be free. Once free, the nobility of his nature would emerge and then, again to quote Bishop Berkeley, “there shall be sung another golden age.”

Perhaps the clearest American spokesman for this view was a transplanted Frenchman, one J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, whose *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) painted an optimistic picture of what man might make of himself in this New World, freed from the artificial restraints imposed on him by a landed gentry, a whimsical aristocracy, and an established church. Although the Letters are not primarily fiction (except perhaps in the sense that Huckleberry Finn uses the term when he claims that Mark Twain told, in *Tom Sawyer*, the truth mostly, except for a few “stretchers”), they do contain fictional elements, most notably in the third letter, signifi-

cantly titled "What Is an American?" This letter contains the story of one Andrew the Hebridean, an imaginary immigrant whose person is the archetype of the American colonizer and whose history is the archetype of the American success story. Thus early in American writing the longing for a new start and the rewards it will bring—two themes of primary importance to subsequent western writing—have become inextricably entwined in American myth.

Yet this optimistic view of the flowering of human destiny in the Garden of the Lord, a new Eden untainted by artificially imposed restraints, though persuasive, by no means carried the day. It rang peculiarly hollow in the ears of the American Puritans, many of whom had selected the infant colonies as a desirable position from which to view the Battle of Armageddon which they presumed to be imminent. In 1741, only forty years prior to Crèvecoeur's *Letters*, Jonathan Edwards in his famous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" had darkly warned that "probably the bigger part of adult persons that ever will be saved, will be brought in now in a little time," a clear prophecy that the end was near. Nor did one have to be of Edwards's millennial persuasion to discover the logical flaw in Rousseau's views: for if man was born free, but is everywhere in chains, who made the chains?

The lines of the debate were clearly drawn and passionately argued throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The prime metaphor in the controversy was "nature," and the debate, which often discussed external nature, equally often concerned itself with two contrary views of human nature. Was man basically a noble creature whose innate goodness was entrapped within a cage of artificial and whimsical social restraints? Or was he, as William Bradford had warned in *Of Plymouth Plantation* (1630), a being whose nature was hopelessly corrupt, and to whom liberty was merely a euphemism for license?

The obvious focus for this debate was the native inhabitant of the New World, the Indian. Was this classic "man in a state of nature" a "noble savage," as good primitivist theory would have it, or was he, as actual contact in the field suggested, merely a savage whose nobility was presumed rather than demonstrated? Mary Rowlandson's extremely successful *Narrative* (1682) of her earlier captivity among the Indians during King Philip's War (1675–76) had established a durable literary genre still popular today, the so-called "captivity narrative" which details the harrowing experiences of white captives among fiendish Native Americans. Timothy Flint, whose first novel *Francis Berrian, or The Mexican Patriot* (1826) can make a good claim to being the first Western ever written, later penned *The Shoshonee Valley: A Romance* (1830) specifically to refute "the wild and pernicious sophism of Rousseau, that the savage is happier, than the social state," a

philosophical position firmly adhered to by the novel's protagonist William Weldon, who discovers the magnitude of his logical error when he and his family are murdered by the supposedly peaceful Shoshoni. By 1830 Flint is working within a well-established tradition, pioneered most successfully by Charles Brockden Brown in *Edgar Huntly; or Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker* (1799), in which the Indians are ruthless and implacable enemies.

Somewhat unfairly, James Fenimore Cooper was viewed by his nineteenth-century compatriots as the primary American literary spokesman for Rousseau's position, and it is not surprising then that many attacks on Rousseau focus on Cooper. Perhaps the best example is Robert Montgomery Bird's excellent novel, now unfortunately generally ignored, *Nick of the Woods or the Jibbenainosay: A Tale of Kentucky* (1837), which is written, he tells us, to set the record straight, for Cooper "had thrown a poetical illusion over the Indian character" by depicting him as "a new style of the beau-ideal." Not so: "in his natural barbaric state" the Indian "is a barbarian," and that's that.

This contrary tradition was from its inception representative of a western rather than an eastern point of view, serving an avowedly political purpose in justifying harsh policies toward the Indian opponents of American westward expansion. The point is interesting in another way as clearly exemplifying a further legacy to modern western American writing—the profound western regional distrust of what Vardis Fisher was much later to call "the Eastern establishment." Even when East and West were both east of the Mississippi, the westerner's sense of himself as markedly different from his eastern compatriots had emerged and was clearly reflected in his writing.

A serious literary argument pitting easterner against westerner erupted very early in American letters. This debate, which is with us yet today, expressed itself primarily in terms of an apparently straightforward question: who, it was asked, was better able to express the facts of western life, the easterner working from book knowledge or the westerner who knew the western experience at first hand? The western position, simplistically stated, was that the eastern writer simply got his facts wrong, and since he knew nothing of the bases of western life could not possibly be expected to say anything sensible about it. As early as 1827, in a review of James Fenimore Cooper's recently published *The Prairie*, Timothy Flint clearly articulates what is to become a perennial western American literary complaint. *The Prairie*, it will be remembered, represents Cooper's one extended literary foray into the Great Plains, an area which Flint knew well, and about which he had written *Francis Berrian* only one year previously. Flint, as an avowed proponent of that progress he feels inevitable when the Great Plains are opened to the benefits of civilization, has little use for the more tragic view of history proposed by Cooper, and the basic thrust of his argu-

ment is that Cooper's profound reservations about the course of "progress" are not well taken. Philosophically, the point is certainly arguable, yet Flint's line of attack is curious. Basically, he dismisses Cooper's argument because Cooper has gotten his facts wrong. "Of all natural scenery," Flint sniffs, "one would think, a prairie the most easy to imagine, without having seen it," but apparently even this simple task is beyond Cooper's abilities. "We shall read him with pleasure only," Flint concludes, "when he selects scenery and subjects, with which he is familiarly conversant." The analogical reasoning behind this line of argument is, though tempting, implicitly misleading; for Flint has adduced, as the sole criterion for literary merit, simple and absolute fidelity to literal fact.

Flint's argument is certainly valid to a degree, and Mark Twain, also writing from a western perspective, is later (1895) to expand it in "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses," justifiably one of his most famous essays. Twain mercilessly exposes what Flint had also noted in another place (1828), that in Cooper's writing "probability is violated at every step." Twain's account of how, in *The Deerslayer*, five of six Indians miss an easy jump into a passing boat must strike a sympathetic chord in any readers who have felt their enjoyment of much western story nullified by the sheer preposterousness of the action. The litany is familiar, and needs no more than brief mention: incredible feats of marksmanship and woodcraft, impossible coincidences, and the like which fill much western fiction can be traced back, in some cases specifically, to eastern misapprehensions about the West in general and to the legacy of Cooper in particular.

At the same time, the case is not so open and shut as Flint and Twain make it appear. The difficulty goes to the heart of the whole concept of western literary "realism," and indeed to a more wide-ranging discussion of the nature of realism in American fiction generally. The question finally comes down to an ambiguity in the American literary experience existing from its origins. Is reality primarily definable in external terms, or is it instead the expression of some kind of internal state? In his 1851 preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*, Nathaniel Hawthorne was to see the dilemma clearly. He, following a nineteenth-century critical commonplace, divided imaginative literature into two types, exemplified by what he called the "Novel" and the "Romance." The novel, he said, aims at "a very minute fidelity . . . to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience." The romance, contrariwise, although it too must present "the truth of the human heart," may "present that truth under circumstances . . . of the writer's own choosing or creation." To the nineteenth-century novelist, one great literary problem becomes that of how to present these two contrary aspects of "the truth of the human heart" within one story, to find a vehicle which combines the reality of factual detail with that other reality

represented by the romance. The magnitude of the problem may be seen in Hawthorne's handling of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), which he prefaces with a long essay, "The Custom House," ostensibly explaining how the manuscript of the romance came into his possession, but actually an attempt to provide a novelistic balance to his romantic story, thus arriving at a fictional truth combining both novelistic and romantic aspects of fiction. Whatever his actual beliefs, Hawthorne liked to adopt the literary stance that the separation of novelistic and romantic elements in his own fiction was not completely fortunate. Each perspective was valid, he would argue, but each by itself incomplete.

To the student of western literature, Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), often mentioned as a kind of frontier novel of the sea, is perhaps more interesting. Melville attempts the same union of these two different aspects of the "truth of the human heart" by combining the romantic story of the monomaniac Captain Ahab's pursuit of the Great White Whale with the novelistic cetology chapters which fill much of the novel. Of particular significance for western story is the fact that in *Moby-Dick* the cetological (novelistic) chapters become less evident as the story progresses, while the (romantic) story of the hunt becomes more important. In one sense, then, *Moby-Dick* represents a penetration through the external world of everyday reality into a realm equally real in another, mythical sense, yet not primarily factual. The Great White Whale may finally be understood only in terms of the contradictory meanings we project upon him.

Something of this penetration through the comfortable surface world we know into a more sinister internal world we only sense is at the "heart of darkness" in many western novels which can superficially be dismissed as blood-and-thunder or pure escape. Mary Rowlandson's *Narrative* of her Indian captivity, mentioned earlier, depends upon precisely this effect of penetration through the comfortable surface to an understanding of that malevolence which lies concealed beneath it. She has, literally and metaphorically, gone West to grow up with the country, and her newly won maturity is achieved only at the price of her loss of innocence. The reality she has discovered in the West is a reality of terror, one which she would just as soon forget. Offhandedly she tells us, after her safe return to her family, "I can remember the time, when I used to sleep quietly without workings in my thoughts, whole nights together, but now it is other ways with me." Her dream of westering has turned into a nightmare.

Penetration through experience, then, rather than travel over it is the perspective romantic western fiction offers which novelistic fiction cannot. It is useless to condemn Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* on the grounds that it is unrealistic, in the sense of being shaky in its factual bases. The point can readily be conceded without denigrating Cooper's genius, for his

purpose in that novel is not primarily to take us on a journey across country; rather the journey takes us finally to an apocalyptic vision of inner space, a vision true to our internal perceptions of reality in which identities merge and things become their opposites rather than to the external world where Mingoes, Delawares, French, and English are easily labeled.

In the last analysis, the most important legacy of earlier American writing to western fiction is one of ambiguity. The great debate which had gone on ever since the first English explorers penetrated into the Great Plains—the debate over whether this new land was the Garden of the Lord or, contrariwise, the Great American Desert—is one to which presumably there is a factual answer. In fact, as Henry Nash Smith pointed out in *Virgin Land* (1950), the answer depends as much on the predispositions one brings to the problem as it does on the alleged facts. Whether what we see is a reflection of the world outside or a projection instead of our inner wishes and, on occasion, hidden fears is a philosophical problem at least as old as the Republic. From its forebears western writing inherits a method of exploring this problem in terms of discussion of a series of profound and unsettling paradoxes. What is the West itself—the Garden of the Lord or the Great American Desert? Who inhabits the West—noble savages or merely savages? Most important of all, what—realistically considered—are the chances for a new start when you bring your old self with you?

## II

This discussion has attempted a brief overview of the very different and often contradictory strands in American culture which were later to develop into the western novel, which even in its earlier and not specifically western forms occupied an important place in American letters. Nevertheless, in any discussion of precursors of the western novel one name, that of James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851), is clearly preeminent.

The biblical statement that a prophet is not without honor save in his own country is nowhere better applied in American letters than to this first great American novelist. While Americans, particularly those of a literary bent, have spent the century and a quarter since his death engaged in red-faced apologies for his work, Europeans have acclaimed him as a serious philosophical novelist. Moreover, while Americans have uniformly regretted Cooper's legacy to subsequent western story as escapist and juvenile, European writers have done him the honor of copying almost slavishly his treatment of American western themes. Indeed, it has only been comparatively recently that the "West" of the European Western has followed its American model from the Mississippi Valley to the Great American Desert. The Europeans may have a point: only the most fanatic Cooper-phobe would seriously claim that the so-called "spaghetti Western" represents a great leap

forward, at least from the standpoint of speculative philosophy, over the model pioneered by Cooper more than a century and a half ago.

Cooper, in common with many subsequent western writers, was not himself a child of the frontier, a fact which has been adduced by unsympathetic readers to explain his alleged lack of ability. Born in Burlington, New Jersey, in 1789, he removed to Cooperstown, New York, in 1790, where his father William Cooper had, five years previously, acquired a patent of thousands of acres of land at the headwaters of the Susquehanna River. The story goes that Cooper's mother, unenthusiastic about the move, was carried bodily from her Burlington home and deposited in the wagon which was to take the family to their new western residence, clutching the infant James in her arms. The specific anecdote may well be apocryphal, though it is clear enough that his mother opposed the move; when coupled with the unsympathetic portrayal of his father (as Judge Temple) and of Cooperstown (Templeton) in *The Pioneers* (1823), the first written of the Leatherstocking Tales, and the fact that Cooper was later to adopt his mother's family name of Fenimore as part of his own, the inference that his mother's skepticism about the West was at least partially Cooper's is inescapable. Indeed, this pull between two contrary sets of values, represented on the one side by civilization and on the other by the wilderness, is basic to Cooper's fictional exploration of the American West, which he sees as a trope of the ironies in the human condition and, more profoundly, as a master metaphor for his ultimately tragic vision of the world.

Cooper drifted into a literary career by chance. Disgusted with a novel he was reading aloud to his wife, he remarked that he could write a better one himself, and when challenged to do so produced *Precaution* (1820), a novel based partially upon Jane Austen's *Persuasion* (1818), whose themes, as well as title, are echoed in Cooper's work. Although *Precaution* is no masterpiece, its modest success encouraged Cooper, who quickly produced three of his best novels which among them surveyed those literary territories he was later to explore at length and ultimately bequeath to subsequent literary investigators: *The Spy* (1821) is a revolutionary war romance; *The Pioneers* (1823), a novel of the frontier; *The Pilot* (1823), a story of the sea. Common to all is the general method of organization: the novelistic territory of each is a symbolic location where two sets of opposed values struggle for domination. In *The Spy*, set in revolutionary Westchester County, New York, this territory is "the neutral ground," contested by both British forces and American rebels; in *The Pilot* a similarly conceived territory, neither land nor sea, is evocatively named "the shoal waters"; and in *The Pioneers* the location is the recently settled Templeton (Cooperstown), a frontier hamlet symbolically located midway between civilization and wilderness.

Let us consider *The Pioneers* in more detail, since it is both the first of Cooper's "western" novels and of his Leatherstocking Tales, on which his subsequent reputation almost entirely depends. *The Pioneers*, though in many respects a flawed novel, is nonetheless a fascinating one, for in it we can watch Cooper, almost unawares, writing himself into the theme which will preoccupy his literary world for nearly twenty years, through four more Leatherstocking Tales—*The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), *The Prairie* (1827), *The Pathfinder* (1840), and *The Deerslayer* (1841)—and a multitude of other novels and shorter works, not all strictly western in their subject matter.

Cooper's first thought in writing *The Pioneers* was obviously satirical. Modeling himself on Hugh Henry Brackenridge's enormously popular recent polemic novel *Modern Chivalry* (published at intervals between 1792 and 1815), Cooper intended to poke none-too-good-humored fun at what he saw as the ridiculous buffoons inhabiting Templeton. All the stock character types are present: the uneducated doctor, the comic-opera Frenchman, the sailor ashore, the drunken Indian, the boorish backwoodsman, and more. Yet soon the fable Cooper tells develops a life of its own, and imparts its own pattern to the sterile caricatures with which he had begun. The drunken Indian is metamorphosed into Chingachgook, the last chief of the Delawares, a once-proud people whose destiny has come to nothing; his funeral speech, modeled upon the famous oration of Chief Logan, remains even today one of the most masterful and moving set pieces in all American western writing. The boorish backwoodsman is transformed, in the course of *The Pioneers*, from a figure of fun originally conceived as the comic "Natty Bumppo," into the dignified "Leatherstocking," the tragic hero of an American myth, trapped by the ironies of "progress" in a world he never made. The general thrust of the novel itself has been altered from relatively superficial satire to a thoughtful investigation of the ironies inherent in the American errand into the wilderness. The tale's master images have become those of spoliation and death. No longer a light-hearted (however heavy-handed) attempt to reform manners through laughter, *The Pioneers* finally echoes Tacitus's somber comment on the brutal Roman conquest of Britain, which might almost serve as the novel's motto: *desertum faciunt et pacem vocant*—they make a desolation, and call it peace.

In order to understand a further dimension of the Leatherstocking Tales, it is important to note one other aspect in Cooper's original conception of his hero: that Natty Bumppo is initially visualized as an old man. Indeed, in none of the Tales except the last is Natty a youthful hero, and his advanced age offers an important clue to Cooper's novelistic craft. For by presenting his spokesman as one more advanced in years than those around him, Cooper is able to introduce a reflective dimension into his story, in which the wisdom of age may (and in candor it should be admitted, far too

often does) comment upon the inchoate and apparently incomprehensible world of the action itself. This combination of the novel of action with the novel of reflection is Cooper's greatest single legacy to subsequent western story, both philosophically and from the point of view of technique. The problem faced by the author of western tales, then as now, has always been how to assimilate the raw materials of a blood-and-thunder story into a novel of some philosophical respectability. Failures to do so have been legion, enough so that their mere enumeration serves in some quarters as a ritualistic denial, in lieu of thoughtful criticism, of even the possibility of a significant literature dealing, as western American literature in part inevitably must, with stories of adventure. Successes, however, are also to be found, and in most of them Cooper's legacy is plain. Though Cooper may presently be without critical honor in his own country, he is not forgotten there except, alas, by those too much at ease in Zion.

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## Bibliographical Note

Although many studies of midwestern life and culture exist, most are primarily of interest to the social historian rather than to the literary critic. The best overview of the development of midwestern literary culture is still William H. Venable's *Beginnings of Literary Culture in the Ohio Valley* (1958), originally published in 1891. Henry Nash Smith's pioneering investigation of the mythic American West, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950), contains many useful insights about the American West generally and a brilliant assessment of the importance of James Fenimore Cooper to subsequent western writing. The literary Indian has been the focus of many studies. Albert Keiser's *The Indian in American Literature* (1933) is still useful, although it should be supplemented with Roy Harvey Pearce's *The Savages of America: A Study of the Indian and the Idea of Civilization* (1953), a brilliant analysis of European cultural attitudes toward Indian

life. Leslie Fiedler's discussions of Indians in *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960) and *The Return of the Vanishing American* (1968) are inevitably thought-provoking, although controversial.

The works of James Hall and Timothy Flint are often hard to find, although good biographical and critical studies exist of both. In addition to Venable (above), the student of Hall should consult John T. Flanagan, *James Hall: Literary Pioneer of the Ohio Valley* (1941) and Randolph C. Randall, *James Hall: Spokesman of the New West* (1964); of Timothy Flint, John E. Kirkpatrick, *Timothy Flint: Pioneer, Missionary, Author, Editor, 1780-1840* (1911) and James K. Folsom, *Timothy Flint* (1965).

James Fenimore Cooper's phenomenally high reputation in nineteenth-century America and his relative neglect in the twentieth have led to a curious anomaly in scholarship dealing with his work. In contrast to the case of most major American writers, critical interpretations of Cooper are better than modern editions of his writing. In view of the lack of any definitive critical edition of Cooper's works, the Leatherstocking Tales are best approached through the one-volume abridgement *The Leatherstocking Saga* (1954), edited with a superb introduction by Allan Nevins. Robert E. Spiller's *Fenimore Cooper: Critic of his Times* (1931) contains the best study of Cooper's social thought. The various essays in M. E. Cunningham, ed., *James Fenimore Cooper: A Re-appraisal* (1954) offer a fascinating study of modern attempts to restore Cooper to literary respectability. Finally, the best short study of Cooper of primarily literary rather than biographical emphasis is Donald A. Ringe's *James Fenimore Cooper* (1962).

Biographies of Cooper are generally of limited value to the literary scholar because of their bias toward justifications of Cooper's thorny and difficult personality and the limitations placed on biographers by nineteenth-century codes of decorum toward "official" biographies. Best is Thomas R. Lounsbury's *James Fenimore Cooper* (1883), to be supplemented by James Grossman's *James Fenimore Cooper* (1949). The 1922 edition of Cooper's *Correspondence* is unsatisfactory; in its place the student should consult the two-volume *Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper* (1960), edited by James F. Beard. Beard is presently engaged in writing Cooper's biography which, upon appearance, should prove definitive. A long-overdue scholarly edition of Cooper's works is presently in progress. The Leatherstocking Tales, together with the four revolutionary war novels and the European travel books will appear shortly, with the rest to follow.

