

Cooper's Pioneer: Breaking the Chain of Representation

Hans Löfgren, University of Gothenburg

Abstract

In Cooper's *Pioneers*, the transition from "national literature" and a realist epistemology of representation toward a Romantic imaginary and increasingly individualized politics is linked to the decline of liberal political philosophy and to the loss of landed property as the political basis of society. While the dominant narrative reconciles two families, healing the breach between colonial and post-revolutionary society, displacing Indian claims, and re-legitimizing land ownership, a tragic epilogue—the regressive departure of the pioneer toward a new frontier—opens up a Romantic sub-narrative of desire. A complementary psychosexual narrative and discourse relocates the origin, so deliberately theorized in this novel in terms of natural property rights, in oedipal problematics. It is a regressive move which, paradoxically, also constructs the post-Enlightenment subject.

The position that the works of James Fenimore Cooper hold in the American literary canon has been considerably weakened during the past few decades. To an earlier generation of Cooper scholars, eminently represented by the American literary historian Robert E. Spiller, Cooper was a writer who shaped a characteristically American view of nature and the frontier—key features in American national mythology. Evidently the interest in this mythology has declined, and, subsequently, the perceived literary merit of Cooper's works. Postcolonial perspectives have exposed the oppressive aspects of his nationalism, in effect relegating his historical novels and romances to a secondary status in the canon.¹ Yet Cooper's declining reputation can be viewed in terms of a more distant origin since, as Jonathan Arac has shown, the interest in literature as a bearer of national history comes to an end in Cooper's time.² Against this broader background, the literary offenses that already

¹ See, for example, Nadesan Permaul's "James Fenimore Cooper and the American National Myth" and Ezra F. Tawil's "Romancing History: *The Pioneers* and the Problem of Slavery."

² "The major narrative form that preceded literary narrative in the United States, and also succeeded it, was what I call *national narrative*" (16). What Arac calls

2 Hans Löfgren

Mark Twain exposed are compensated by the cognitive value that, paradoxically, emerges out of the problematics of literary form. Our distance from Cooper's historical moment, as evidenced in the waning appeal of national history and mythology, allows a text such as his first and most realistic historical novel to be inscribed with new value. If the historical theme of *The Pioneers* has lost its ideological urgency, and thus also some of its literary charm, this novel nevertheless preserves a sense of historical crisis. In my reading, it throws fundamental aspects of cultural variation into sharper relief by means of its very resistance to them, thus revealing how the past is also the history of the present.

The claim on our interest that *The Pioneers* may still powerfully exert derives not only from its representation of a stage when the frontier recedes westward from the Eastern seaboard of the United States, but also from the way that its ambivalent form enacts a historical shift from one social formation and sensibility to another. In the shift from Neo-classical form and comic emplotment to Romantic form and tragic emplotment lies the fundamental historicity of this novel. By means of its generic confusion and conflicted act of literary composition, *The Pioneers* inscribes another history than that of its thematic representation. Though we may experience *The Pioneers* as dated if we regard its former canonical status to have relied more heavily on ideological than aesthetic merits (a distinction which of course not everyone would accept), we might still read its lack of plot resolution, for all of its drive toward wish fulfillment, as characteristic of our own time. In this sense, the historicity of the text lies not in a remote past but in a literary gesture which perpetually impinges on and supports the present. Within the performance of a certain reading one may discover,

“hypercanonization” and the consequent nationalizing of literary narrative involves the “psychologization of politics.” “Cooper’s national narrative was grounded from its words on up in claims that were no longer representable aesthetically or politically to Twain and many of his contemporaries. National narratives held a positive understanding of the course of American history, and they believed it was a responsibility of culturally ambitious and important narrative not only to show but also to make explicit this understanding. Literary narratives denied any such responsibility” (29).

experientially as it were, the historical rupture that is one essential condition of the present.

In Cooper's *Pioneers*, the transition from "national literature" (Arac) and a realist epistemology of representation, toward a Romantic imaginary and increasingly individualized politics, is linked to the decline of liberal political philosophy and to the loss of landed property as the political basis of society. While the opening scene of *The Pioneers* dramatizes a conflict over property rights, the story may be said to originate in the mythologizing of property in the state of civilization as having its basis in natural property. Already on the title page, Cooper gives us a clue as to the importance that origins are going to have in *The Pioneers*, with the subtitle "A Tale of the Sources of the Susquehanna." The reference to the origins of the river gives a sense of an intention to delve into the heart of nature, to go upstream beyond the settlements of civilization to their natural sources. The figure of geographical exploration, combined with the reference to a "tale," gives the impression that the literary enterprise is going to have a certain scientific character.

The origins which we will encounter in this tale, however, will more radically take on cultural than geographical and physical forms. Indeed, the curious double ending of the novel, both comic and tragic, is likely to cause the reader to reconsider the meaning of the central conflict in the opening scene of the novel, which pits different property claims against each other. The comedy of the marriage celebration gives way to the tragic displacement of the man who bases his claims on natural right. While the narrative of Elizabeth Temple and Oliver Effingham reconciles two families, healing the breach between colonial and post-revolutionary society, displacing Indian claims, and re-legitimizing land ownership, the inevitable departure for the new frontier of the first and archetypal white pioneer, the Leatherstocking, suggests that the marriage celebration still leaves something to be desired. I will return to this point and an alternative plotting of desire after tracing the novel's argument about property rights.³

³ My method is a combination of marxist and psychoanalytical approaches which considers neither to be sufficient in itself. *The Pioneers* can be read in terms of economic concepts such as mode of production and social class, but

4 *Hans Löfgren*

The ostensible Indian claim

Though the American industrial revolution followed the British, the transformation of land into a commodity was a dominant historical feature in both countries at the beginning of the nineteenth century. But the great difference, as E. J. Hobsbawm has observed, was that the “Northern American solution [to the problem of economic transformation] depended on the unique fact of the virtually unlimited supply of free land, and the absence of all relics of feudal relations or traditional peasant collectivism” (182). In America, it was the claim of the native Indians to the land rather than the claim of a hereditary aristocracy which posed an obstacle to bourgeois expansion. But the obstacle was slight, Hobsbawm argues, because the “view of society which regarded individual perfectly alienable property not merely as the only rational but the only natural arrangement” made the expropriation of land from the Indians seem “as moral as it was profitable” (183).

What are we then to make of the concern of a James Fenimore Cooper with the passing of the Indians from the landscape of the old Northwest, his sense of the problematic transition from natural to civil law, and his attacks on the new middle class? Isn't there an explicitly moral concern there, and a resistance to the commodification of land? It certainly seems that way, and much of what has been written about Cooper's fiction has been predicated on such a view. I will argue, however, that Hobsbawm's view of the uniqueness of American history is essentially correct as applied to Cooper, while the apparent departures from it indicate political and ideological dimensions, both reflected and produced in Cooper's literary texts, which are significant in themselves also.

Cooper's relative sympathy with the Indians, largely a retrospective, literary creation which follows the elimination of the Indian threat from

equally in terms of oedipal issues and the narration of desire. The double method consists in identifying two parallel narrative thematics, while the narrative of property is analyzed first and at some length, then briefly revised in the analysis of desire. The double method is intended to restore a certain value to an aesthetically deflated *The Pioneers* through the interpretation of literary form as both symptomatic of social change and creative response.

New York by several decades,⁴ plays the role in his fiction of justifying the wealth and privilege of the landed gentry against the ascendancy of the new middle class. Cooper was destined to fail in this attempt, as we know today, but he succeeded, in spite of himself, in contributing to the very society whose emergence he wanted to restrain. We can see in *The Pioneers* the effect of Cooper's attempt to inscribe his own position as an individual, privileged subject within an allegedly universal space of political representation. In failing to extend eighteenth century concepts of both political and literary representation into the nineteenth century, Cooper produced the very splitting of the personal and political which he wanted to avoid, the formation of an abstract political space external to the individual which then became the space of imagination and ideology.

The argument embodied in the plot of *The Pioneers* (1823) is relatively straightforward on the surface—though as we shall later see, it is indeed a covertly complex and important argument, in spite of the novel's being styled a "Descriptive Tale". Judge Temple, owner of a large tract of land in upstate New York, is placed in a difficult position, both as proprietor and judge, in the opening scene of the novel. He quarrels with Natty Bumppo, a pioneer who has lived on what is now Temple's land since it was a frontier, over the rightful claim to a deer on which both men have fired. The Leatherstocking, as Cooper's popular character is also called, grumbles that "might often makes right here". But the dispute as to which of the two bullets lodged in the buck has effectively made the kill reaches a more intense level when a young man, Oliver Edwards, steps out from behind a tree and demonstrates that Temple's bullet has struck him in the shoulder.

The rest of the novel is essentially an elaboration of this scene. Bumppo continues to assert his natural right to hunt on the land, in defiance of the laws which Judge Temple has brought with him and which specify a restricted hunting season. Edwards continues to act with resentment against the Judge, though his motive is not clear: is it because of the wound, or because Edwards too, claims a natural right to the land,

⁴ "[B]y 1790, the Six Nations of Iroquois had surrendered their hunting grounds in central New York to the white man, and its remnants had either joined their brothers in the west or agreed to re-settlement on reservations within the state" (Pickering 9). The Indian Removal Act was passed by Congress in 1830.

6 Hans Löfgren

based on his relation to Chingachgook and an ostensible Indian ancestry? The conflict eventually escalates to a break in personal relations between Edwards and the Judge, and to the exchange of gunfire between Bumpo and the representatives of the law. Natty has escaped from jail after a conviction on hunting deer out of season, and is also suspected of illegally carrying on a mining operation on Temple's land. It turns out, however, that the Leatherstocking was concealing a person, not precious minerals, in the cave which he has been defending. This person, who comes out of the cave in order to put a stop to the violent conflict, is Major Effingham, father of the man who was Temple's partner in commerce prior to the War of Independence, and whose land Temple then acquired by purchase after their confiscation, in the absence of his friend Effingham. Other revelations then ensue, bringing about the reconciliation of all parties. The only sad note is that Natty has to accept that his old home in the wilderness has vanished, as he leaves Templeton for the new frontier on the great prairies.

Interpretations of these events and the political themes they signify still adhere generally to Robert E. Spiller's 1964 formulation:

The three theories of the relationship of property rights to social stability—the Tory view held by young Oliver, the democratic view held by Judge Temple, and the view of primitive rights held by Indian John—supply the ideological background for this novel and are directly drawn by Cooper from his earliest experience. They were also to remain with him as an unsolved social and political problem and as the theme of all his serious writing. The central conflict in this novel between Judge Temple and the Leatherstocking is based on this difference in social theory, and the reconciliation of the Judge with the young Oliver is testimony to Cooper's fundamentally conservative leanings, which he carried—albeit as a Democrat rather than as a Federalist like his father—right through the equalitarian era of Jackson and down almost to the eve of the Civil War. (440)

There is no doubt that the central conflict in the novel, in terms of its dramatic emphasis, is just as Spiller describes it, between Tory, democrat, and Indian.⁵ As we shall see however, the "primitive" position

⁵ In terms of political philosophy, it is also possible to see the conflict in terms of a pre-capitalist use-right theory of property versus a capitalist exclusive right theory. As Nan Goodman points out in her essay on *The Pioneers*, Cooper gives Temple the upper hand in this conflict, but the plot also turns on the

attributed to the Indian is a product of liberal political philosophy, a piece of mythology which conceals the presence of another, displaced position in the conflict—that of the new middle class. Besides, there is evidence that Coopers' early commitment to Federalist and Republican figures was far more important than his Jacksonian sympathies⁶. To note that the "democrat" has Federalist leanings is to open up the possibility that the conflict with Jacksonian democrats, representing an emergent middle class, can reach troubling dimensions.

Judge Temple occupies the middle position between the aristocratic view of inheritance and the liberal view of natural rights, which enables him to prevail in the final moment of reconciliation. As Spiller also notes, however, the theme of property remained an unsolved problem which occupied Cooper throughout his career. How is it possible that this theme should be a central and permanent concern for Cooper, when we consider that his early works already justify a specific resolution of the conflict over property, that this justification did not change essentially during his career, and especially, that Cooper did not have to answer either to the Tory or the primitive claim to property?

As I have already suggested: because the conflict Cooper thematizes in *The Pioneers* is a displacement from his actual life. This displacement is obliquely inscribed in his works, undercutting the attempt at resolution and reconstituting the real conflict from which it springs. But the conflict is reconstituted in a new form: the impossibility of maintaining the individual subject in the political space represented by land produces simultaneously the closure and the splitting of this space, the privatization of this space and its separation from emergent political relations. Consequently, the problem then arises of reinserting the privatized subject within a new political space, the abstract institutional space of the bourgeois state. This reinsertion of the subject now takes the form of the class struggle characteristic of bourgeois society, and it is within this struggle that Cooper's narrative strategy is reinscribed.

In itself, this narrative strategy consists in the reversal of two relations: an initial, though tenuous, link of Judge Temple with the petty

modification of a purely capitalist concept of property and a market economy (Goodman 5).

⁶ This point is based on Pickering's account in "Cooper's Otsego Heritage."

bourgeois, Richard Jones, and an equally tenuous separation from the aristocrat, Effingham. A somewhat reformed Judge Temple prevails at the end of the novel because his conflict with the Leatherstocking is defused by a revelation which, though it seems to reconcile all parties, favors the Judge. But even before this point, the Judge has approached Natty Bumppo's philosophy, and begun to differ from his cousin Richard Jones's materialistic attitude to nature. He has done so directly in his condemnation of hunting practices which amount to wholesale and indiscriminate slaughter, as sharply contrasted with Natty's reverent and sparing use of nature. And he has done so indirectly in his gratitude and admiration for the man who has saved his daughter's life. But the Judge is still ranged on the side of Sheriff Jones and his men until the very end. Though Jones's accusation that Natty is illegally mining Temple's land is more a reflection of Jones's interests than of anything in Natty's character, the Judge's suspicion has overtaken his good sense.

Eventually this suspicion, however, gives way as Richard Jones's accusation becomes increasingly transparent and rebounds on him, thus preparing for the final reconciliation. When Jones and his men try to recapture Natty after his jail-break (in which he was assisted by Elizabeth Temple), attacking his fortified position in the cave which is believed to be an illegal mine, no possibility of a peaceful and even-handed resolution seems possible. To be sure, the novel's conclusion is a piece of *deus ex machina*. Major Effingham's emergence out of the cave introduces an element from a miraculously revived past rather than from the troublesome present. The immediate effect of his appearance is to bring to light the true identity of Oliver Edwards, who is actually Edward Effingham, while the ultimate effect is to justify Temple's claim to the land, the legitimacy of laws which protect his property and govern its use.

Through a series of character associations, a chain of displacements, the justice of the Judge's position is established. It is revealed that Major Effingham bought the land from the Indians, and, as if to dispel our doubts about this purchase, we are informed that he was made an honorary member of the tribe. Judge Temple is shown to have behaved industriously and responsibly in managing his friend Effingham's land, when his genteel friend disdained to engage in commerce; Temple behaved morally and legally in acquiring ownership of this same land after the War of Independence, which saw the two friends fighting on

opposites sides, then the Loyalist property confiscated; and even then, Temple tried to find the lost Effingham, to restore him to his possessions. When we add that Temple gives half of his land to the third generation Effingham, and then his daughter's hand in marriage (thus also the other half of the property); when we also add that the Leatherstocking has a relation to the Effinghams, not only through his recent association with Edward, but in having been a personal servant to the Major; and when we finally add that the last claimant of the Indian tribe, Chingachgook, has recently died, shortly followed by Major Effingham, another potential or former claimant, then the unbroken connection between Temple and the original and natural owner, indeed a "man in the state of nature," is firmly established.

Only two claimants remain: the first, Edward, is incorporated into Temple's position through marriage. As Janet E. Dean argues in "The Marriage Plot and National Myth in *The Pioneers*," the revelation that "Oliver", who was rumored to have Indian ancestry, is actually an Effingham, attempts to establish a pure American lineage and property claim:

The death of Chingachgook, truly the last of the Mohicans, heralds the death of the "Indian" in Oliver/Edward. With all Indian claims eradicated or explained away, white possession of frontier property is secured. (Dean 18)

The marriage between Edward and Elizabeth thus consummates a "national myth" in which claims are made simultaneously to land and to woman in a symbolic enactment of Indian removal. Similarly, the second claimant who remains, the Leatherstocking, is also displaced, though less violently. The revelation of the Temple-Effingham connection has defused the conflict, and made any further claims by Natty impossible.

The new claimant

Yet one more claimant remains, though he is so far displaced by the center stage position of the Effinghams as to be virtually ignored—Richard Jones. We are briefly told that Sheriff Jones was so humiliated by the evidence that Natty and his friends were not in fact mining for precious metals that he did not give the Judge any more trouble for a long time. Significantly, gold and silver are what Richard suspects the

10 *Hans Löfgren*

others of stealing, because they are the most precious commodity for him and his class—not a practical commodity, but the basis of money itself, the commodity par excellence.

The most significant effect of the revelation plot's conclusion is the final separation of Temple from the commercial interests of Richard Jones and the rendering ineffective of the latter. The reconciliation that is the culmination of the plot also results, indirectly, in an act of exclusion which undercuts the sense of resolution. The Indians, the Effinghams, the pioneer—these are not really threats to Temple or the author he represents (Temple is based on Cooper's father).⁷ It is rather Richard and a money economy, the overturning of personal by commodity relations, and their consequent loss of social and political influence, that Temple and his class have to fear.⁸ Temple's view of the land is, of course, not blind to economic development, but it is a view which implies constraints that are foreign to Richard and which, in fact, leave him out of the picture. For Temple, the preference of coal over precious metals as a valuable resource is characteristic; his view of economic development implies an extension, not a transformation, of existing social and political relations:

The mind of Judge Temple, at all times comprehensive, had received from his peculiar occupations a bias to look far into futurity in his speculations on the improvements that posterity were to make in his lands. To his eye, where others saw

⁷ “As a narrative recreating life in a central New York village during its first years of settlement, *The Pioneers* must be regarded as the author's attempt to come to grips with the memory of his father, Judge William Cooper, the pioneer who brought civilization to ‘The Sources of the Susquehanna.’ Cooper was justifiably proud of his father's achievement and of the village which bore his name” (Pickering 12). Cooper's own disclaimer, however, suggests the extent to which it is the character type, as representing a political position, rather than a personal portrait, that dominates the characterization of Judge Temple: “There is not a particle of distinctive resemblance between the personal history of Judge Temple and that of my father; so far as I know any thing of the latter” (Cooper, qtd. in Pickering 17).

⁸ See McWilliams on Cooper's involvement in land disputes. McWilliams also comments on the improbability of the fictional resolution of property conflict in *The Pioneers*.

nothing but a wilderness, towns, manufactories, bridges, canals, mines, and all the other resources of an old country were constantly presenting themselves, though his good sense suppressed in some degree the exhibition of these expectations. (306)

Judge Temple's ideal is a society where economic development is restrained by rational foresight based on a consideration for posterity.

It is an ideal which certainly differs from that of the European landholding nobility, for they, as the lumberjack and maple sugar producer Jack Kirby observes, let the resources of their land stand unimproved and unused. But in Temple's view, a Kirby, or a Richard Jones—the social classes ranged below him—are by necessity motivated by a personal gain which would put no check on the exploitation of natural resources, ultimately destroying the land and spoiling it for posterity. Temple is therefore represented as the kind of man who could oversee the transition from the frontier to “civilization,” from an agrarian society to a society of moderate industrial development. It is a difficult job, characterized by the gravest moral responsibility, and so one theme in the novel is the Judge's moral education. He must prove capable of detaching himself from the perspective of a Richard Jones, and controlling this class of men, as well as being able to respect the conservationist values of a Natty Bumppo. Most importantly, he must provide for the transfer, not only of his wealth, but also his responsibility and position of influence, to an equally responsible posterity. Ideally, such a posterity would be an extension of the Judge himself, and so it is in *The Pioneers*: the descendants of the original property owners consolidate an estate through marriage, like the members of two noble families forming an advantageous alliance—or perhaps more like two characters in a fairy tale. As Nancy C. Shour's analysis of Cooper's landscapes suggests, this involves the transfer of a cultural inheritance in the broadest sense, where land has a symbolic and aesthetic value deriving from the past, as well as an economic value:

Cooper's landscapes invoke not the optimistic, limitless possibilities of the American future, but serve as a record of the past, a record whose “meaning” and whose history must be passed from generation to generation, as illustrated by the development of Elizabeth Temple into the type of citizen-historian who becomes the custodian of cultural memory. [. . . she is a] model of the daughter as the “heir” to historical memory and the poignant mirroring of this inheritance in Cooper's own daughter and heir, Susan Fenimore Cooper. (2)

The marriage of Elizabeth Temple and Edward Effingham is the synthesis of the double signification which nature, or land, carries in this novel (and generally in Cooper's fiction). In one sense, it is obvious that Richard Jones is dead wrong about Natty Bumppo and his friends: they are not in fact concealing a mining operation in the cave, but Major Effingham, whose presence they construe, wrongly as it turns out, to be a challenge to Judge Temple. In another sense, what is concealed here within the land itself is actually its wealth, inscribed with the Judge's title. The Major was the person who acquired the land from the Indians, passing it on to his son, from whom it again was transferred, with the help of the war with Great Britain, to Marmaduke Temple. The land—Temple's land, confirmed here as a form of private property insulated from the consolidation of wealth under industrial capitalism—signifies both a personal relation, as under feudalism, and raw materials convertible into commodities, as under capitalism.

The differentiation of Temple and Jones is therefore concurrent with the identification of feudal and bourgeois, though this is an identification which is symbolic, marked by the absence of the thing itself. The function of the revelation plot is to establish for Temple the other, feudal connection to the land, separating him from Richard Jones and the class he represents. This differentiation can only occur if the Judge comes to represent traditional authority, his friend Effingham, who originally was "hiding in his bosom," not in the management of commerce as before, but socially. The reconciliation with the Effinghams is in fact significant insofar as the Major now dies—or dies again, one is tempted to say, after his miraculous resurrection. And this disappearance of Effingham, symbol of civilized refinement, significantly coincides with that of the "last" Indian, symbol of natural nobility and original ownership as "man in the state of nature." Finally, the Leatherstocking, link between nature and civilization and strongest white representative of the state of nature, departs also—at least some distance westward.

By the removal of these figures, which are ranged as a great chain of being premised on natural rights, the Judge comes to displace Natty Bumppo and is thereby constituted as the representative character of a new stage of society, the civilized man who administers the political justice of a republic based on natural principles. Temple becomes the central character of the new society of Templemore just as Natty, the pioneer, was the central character of the frontier. Natty is the link

between nature and civilization, participating in both worlds, but Judge Temple is a synthesis of the two, a representation of nature in the civilized state. This is the liberal mythology by which Temple is made secure in both his private property and his political influence. In this context it is important to realize, however, that just as property is not reducible to the concept of capital or commodities, the political relation is not wholly a bourgeois one. Natty provides a link between nature and civilization not only in the frontier stage of society but also in the stage of American society prior to the revolution. The Leatherstocking is the democratic prototype. Judge Temple is consequently not merely the civilized man who represents natural justice, but the bourgeois who represents the nobility, in the sense of substituting for its absence. The aristocratic position is revealed in this narrative as Major Effingham steps out of the cave, only to be made absent again, the representation of an absence, embodied by Judge Temple.

The failure of wish fulfillment

But why does Natty not wholly vanish from the scene? Why do we simply have his displacement to a new frontier? Why indeed does Cooper return to the Leatherstocking tales later in his career, even after he has already written of Natty's death in *The Prairie*? Because the resolution, in the form of the reconciliation of the feudal and the bourgeois, the marriage of Edward Effingham and Elizabeth Temple, is impossible. It is already the symptom of the loss Cooper fears, a simple wish fulfillment which only succeeds in displacing the object of desire. This is why the resolution of the novel also involves the departure of the Leatherstocking. The escape to the frontier and into nature is also an escape back in time, a historical regression to a social formation in which the economic and political relations which are being undermined in the 1820's were still stable.

In classical liberal philosophy, the function of the myth of the state of nature is to reduce the difference between nature and civilization, to naturalize bourgeois politics as it contests the landed nobility. In Cooper's America, however, this historical situation has already changed, and besides, the confrontation between feudal and bourgeois interests is initially much weaker. The logic of *The Pioneers* demands that Judge Temple be linked to the natural and original property owner.

Only this link can put a stop to the rule of force that must prevail in the absence of political legitimacy. One might think that the link between Temple and the Leatherstocking, as pioneer and representative of a natural subsistence economy, could establish Temple's rightful claim.⁹ The central conflict in the novel, however, is not as it literally appears, between subsistence economy and a "system of organized and rationalized surplus production" (Buchholz 99-100). The conflict lies rather between the landed gentry and the emergent power of a new middle class, more specifically, between landowners and tenants. Thus the Leatherstocking figures in *The Pioneers* as the natural man on which liberal philosophy built its concepts of natural right and private property, but this symbol is evidently no longer a sufficient source of legitimization. Only the revelation of Major Effingham, with his ties to the Indian as well as to Natty Bumppo, makes it possible to resolve the conflict without force. By this means, Cooper endows the mythical natural man with new content, a content which not only legitimizes bourgeois private property, but which also serves the purpose of defending it against the claims of the new middle class.

Ultimately, however, the content of this new original figure cannot be contained within the form of Temple's character as it comes to replace the Leatherstocking. As Eric J. Sundquist remarks, when Cooper returns to the fictional Templeton in *Home as Found*, the Judge no longer occupies the key "middle position" (2). But there is evidence that this middle is hollow already in *The Pioneers*, and therefore the displacements it makes possible are suspect. Though Cooper makes the process of displacement from primitive to aristocratic to democratic quite explicit, the process cannot ultimately find closure in the wish fulfillment which condenses bourgeois and feudal images. The process continues in

⁹ "In the dramatic climax of *The Pioneers*, however, Natty clearly represents one of the opposed social forces which determine the conflict. This is a result of the nature of the conflict itself—that between a primeval, subsistence mode of production closely tied to the cycles of abundance and scarcity in the material world, and a 'secondary' system of organized and rationalized surplus production, based on class exploitation. [. . .] because of the sensitivity of the question of ownership of the land, subsistence production could not be represented principally by an Indian in *The Pioneers*" (Buchholz 99-100).

the nostalgic and sentimental portrayal of the Leatherstocking's departure, in the projection of the resolution backward in time and the evocation of loss. The marriage is based on the identification of bourgeois and feudal as these represent two forms of social relation, but the novel itself undercuts this closure in the chain of representation, with the tragic, or at least sentimental, investment in the Leatherstocking's departure. Natty must be invented to make Temple possible, to justify his position, only then to be displaced. It is an identification of the representing subject, the writer, with the represented subject, the idealized protagonist, which could only be contradictory, resulting in the splitting of the self-objectified subject and a displacement of the object of desire, failing to be possessed either through mythical/legal justification or in the marriage which represents the culmination of this justification.

This displacement, however, is not indefinite, because it crosses a historical limit. The regression to the frontier which represents an absent past transforms itself into the progression toward the future. The marriage of the Effingham and Temple families symbolically insists that political relations are still representations of the individual subject, a subject whose social being and centeredness is established with the connection to the land. But the individual subject in *The Pioneers* undergoes a new historical transformation, a new splitting, right before our eyes. The effort to recapture a lost political relation, based on economic relations and a form of property which no longer exist, actually involves the relative detachment of the individual subject from the political. The move to the mythologized frontier and the age of classical liberalism entails the individualization of what has ceased to function as a collective relation. Man in the state of nature as an Enlightenment political category undergoes a transformation into the psychological and ideological category of the Romantic self that finds its unity in nature, a nature now conceived, not as the basis of a rational civilization, but as an imaginary domain distinct from the artificial form of society.

Cooper has correctly been labeled a reactionary, but that label is best justified by reference to two works published in 1848, the political catechism entitled *The American Democrat* and the novel *Home as Found*, which argue and illustrate the theory that a social aristocracy can be married to a political democracy. In the books which followed Cooper's hostile reception by a radicalized Jacksonian democracy on the

return from his seven-year stay in Europe, the tension between a Temple and the Leatherstocking, or a Richard Jones, is gone. The embodiment of the natural aristocrat by the democratic gentleman is then no longer portrayed as problematic, and the ambitious middle class figure merely an object of satire, with no kinship acknowledged.

Still, Cooper's political wish fulfillment has its exemplary character, simply by its stubborn refusal of a destructive historical change, combined with a relative persistence in the face of repressive temptations. At least, in early works like *The Pioneers*, where the undermining of the landed gentry of New York through new legislation was only a threat, not yet the reality of the 1840's, it is evident that self-interest is not the only motive.¹⁰ The heavy-handed and ideologically transparent marriage of the feudal legacy and the bourgeois is after all not satisfactory; it is more the quest for a vanishing ideal than it is an effective protection of privilege. The desire recontained within the forced comedic resolution of marriage is released in the displacement of the pioneering Leatherstocking, who seeks a new beginning on the frontier, thus figuring as an early type of what R. W. B. Lewis has called the American Adam. A twentieth-century literary institution that at times has served to validate national destiny, at time focused a critique of American exceptionalism,¹¹ its appearance in the present context is profoundly ambivalent.

The alternative end of desire

Ironically, perhaps, the resurrection of Adam in his American form constructs a new, more individualized form of desire. As suggested at the beginning of this essay, the second, alternative ending of *The Pioneers* implies a second beginning, and thus an entirely different plot trajectory. While the beginning of the story which concerns property rights has its origin in the disruption of the natural state of property, narratively

¹⁰ See Dixon Ryan Fox, *The Decline of Aristocracy in the Politics of New York, 1801-1840*.

¹¹ *The American Adam* was a central text in American Studies at least through the 1970s.

speaking, and in the political ascendancy of a new middle class, historically speaking, the narrative of desire concerns that lack which arises in the disruption from the maternal. With respect to this beginning, the marriage of Elizabeth and Edward is one form of restoration of the object of desire, and the imaginary pursuit of a feminized nature by the apparently celibate Leatherstocking is another. From this perspective of an alternate story of desire, the wound that Oliver receives in the novel's opening scene comes to symbolize the oedipal wounding of the son by the father—a castration—and the cave in which Colonel Effingham is hidden comes to represent a womb, evidently the symbolic return of the otherwise absent mother. The origin, so deliberately theorized in this novel in terms of natural property rights and the first premise of rational thought, returns, in this alternative and complementary reading that proceeds from the Leatherstocking's epilogue, as located in a pre-oedipal, imaginary, relation.

The wounding of Edward (Oliver), who is to marry Elizabeth, by Elizabeth's father thus symbolizes a psychosexual wound that is healed by marriage. In this sense Edward bears not only the oedipal symptom but also the wound of separation from the mother, a wound which is also associated with the rift between the two families, divided by the revolutionary war. By extension, the division between the families therefore also has an oedipal character. The rift between Judge Temple and Colonel Effingham anticipates Edward's wound, which, in that sense, is only a repetition of a prior state of affairs. Finally, the wound is repeated in the act of hunting: the expression of manhood in the attempt to dominate nature results in the wounding of another man.

In the figure of Judge Temple and Templeton we find a strong idealization of Cooper's father and his Cooperstown, but the idealization, in this psychosexual reading, conceals an ambivalence. The subjection to the order of the father and the marriage that perfectly assumes the paternal legacy fails to satisfy. One could say that the problem with political wish fulfillment is simply its impracticality, but beyond this there is also the problematic restraint of desire, the libidinal inhibition that arrested political development also implies. In the works of Jane Austen, Cooper's first literary model, the remarkable coincidence of propertied and amorous interests still has some credibility, but in Cooper it does not. While Austen can insist on the freedom of individual desire, only to reinscribe it within a system of class interest, a similar attempt in

Cooper fails more conspicuously. At the same time, however, this failure to reinscribe desire is also the success of desire in itself as essentially irrepressible. Thus the Leatherstocking's journey westward in pursuit of the receding frontier holds its compensatory satisfaction.

One lasting value of Cooper's work, therefore, lies in its exposure of the fall into the Romantic imaginary as a historical event, within the narrative act of mythologizing history. Facing insurmountable obstacles, Cooper's political wish fulfillment becomes a self-defeating attempt to prevent the separation of the subject and the political that only serves to repeat that separation in displaced form. The resistance to the commodification of personal relations and the fragmentation of the political thus anticipate the ideological transformation of these relations, and the destruction of the last feudal remnants of personal dependence, under bourgeois hegemony. Feudal relations now assume a radically internalized afterlife in literary romances which register individual alienation, even as the subject is installed within an abstract and increasingly autonomous political system. In the future of the free and creative Romantic self, the Leatherstocking, having died on the vanishing frontier, will soon be reborn, not in entire forgetfulness, but in idealized intimations of his past social lives.

References

- Arac, Jonathan. 1992. "Nationalism, Hypercanonization, and Huckleberry Finn." *Boundary 2* 19.1: 14-33. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Buchholz, Douglas. 1989. "Landownership and Representation of Social Conflict in *The Pioneers*." Ed. George A. Test. *James Fenimore Cooper: His Country and His Art, Papers from the Bicentennial Conference, State University College of New York*. <<http://www.oneonta.edu/cooper/articles/suny/1989suny-buchholz.html>>. 94-102.
- Dean, Janet E. 1996. "The Marriage Plot and National Myth in *The Pioneers*." *Arizona Quarterly* 52.4: 1-29.
- Fox, Dixon Ryan. 1919. *The Decline of Aristocracy in the Politics of New York, 1801-1840*. New York: Harper and Row, 1965.

- Goodman, Nan. 1993. "A Clear Showing: The Problem of Fault in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Pioneers*." *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 49.2: 1-22.
- Hobsbawm, Eric J. 1962. *The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789-1848*. London : Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- McWilliams, John. 1972. *Political Justice in a Republic: James Fenimore Cooper's America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Permaul, Nadesan . "James Fenimore Cooper and the American National Myth." James Fenimore Cooper Society Miscellaneous Papers, vol. 23, pp. 9-17, June 2006.
- Pickering, James H. 1979. "Cooper's Otsego Heritage: The Sources of *The Pioneers*". Ed. George A. Test. *James Fenimore Cooper: His Country and His Art, Papers from the 1979 Conference at State University College of New York*. <<http://www.oneonta.edu/cooper/articles/suny/1979suny-pickering.html>>.
- Shour, Nancy C. 1998. "Heirs to the Wild and Distant Past: Landscape and Historiography in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Pioneers*." <<http://www.oneonta.edu/cooper/articles/ala/1998ala-shour.html>>.
- Spiller, Robert E. 1964. "Afterword." James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pioneers*. New York: New American Library. 437-44.
- Sundquist, Eric J. 1979. *Home as Found: Authority and Genealogy in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP.
- Tawil, Ezra F. 1997. "Romancing History: The Pioneers and the Problem of Slavery." *James Fenimore Cooper: His Country and His Art*, vol. 11, pp. 98-101.