

SAVAGISM VERSUS CHRISTIANITY: COOPER WITH IRVING AND PAULDING IN VIEW

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Extrovert Versus Introvert

Two gargantuan maestros of American fiction in the early nineteenth century, Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper apparently had few encounters to make friends with each other, although they were exact contemporaries, their residences located in the same state, New York, and their sojourns in Europe overlapped. In his *Notions of the Americans* Cooper praised Irving for his distinguished quality—humour, but in private he reportedly had only contemptuous remarks to make of Irving, whom he regarded as overpaid for his writings and altogether too flexible in his political allegiances.¹⁾ Irving and Cooper had literary ambitions so contradistinctive that it might be advisable to some extent to give them contrastive labels: extrovert and introvert. The extrovert is the type who makes much of the objective validity, thus being affably flexible in society and ready to accept suggestions given by others, who, in turn, give him a warm and appreciative welcome. The introvert is the one who sets a value on the subjectivity, thus being haughtily egocentric and ready to find fault with others, who, in turn, sometimes give him the cold shoulder. It is perhaps a noteworthy phenomenon in literary history that although the great extrovertive writer is very likely to gain a high reputation and popularity in his time, it is often the great introvertive that is, after the lapse of a certain period of probation, invited into the Hall of Literary Fame, where a pack of the greatest pioneers of the literary frontiers have supposedly been enshrined.

Some episodes will help show the differences between the two masters. It is Walter Scott that advised Irving to turn to the German legends, from which, it has been noted, "Rip Van Winkle," "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," and others in *The Sketch Book* were reproduced. Cooper, too, was visited in Paris by Scott, who came over not to talk literature but "to enlist his help to change the American copyright laws and secure revenue from the

1) Ronald Gottesman et al., *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1979), Vol. 1, p. 655.

American imprints.²⁾ Cooper has been labeled as “American Scott,” but the sobriquet never pleased the proud author, who went so far as to claim that his *The Pilot* was intended to show in part the nautical inaccuracies in Sir Walter Scott’s *The Pirate*.³⁾ Troubled by rumors of his permanent expatriation, the gentle Irving decided to return to America after an absence of seventeen years to please his countrymen, refusing a diplomatic post in Naples. In New York an enthusiastic reception and official dinner in his honor were waiting for him.⁴⁾ One year after Irving’s homecoming, Cooper, too, came back home after seven years of absence. However, sensing a chill in homecoming reception, he declined testimonial dinner in his honor proposed by the Bread and Cheese, an informal social club of New York City, growing out of impromptu meetings by Cooper’s circle of friends.⁵⁾ Later disappointed by the stagnation and mediocrity expanded through the country, he wrote his friend, “Were it not for my family, I should return to Europe, and pass the remainder of my life there.”⁶⁾ It is well known that he soon got involved in a misunderstanding with townspeople over public use of his own property on Lake Otsego, which eventually led him to begin libel suits against major New York Whig editors who had attacked him. One of the most impressive examples showing his egocentricity is perhaps his declaration in the preface to *The Pioneers*, the first of the Leatherstocking Tales, that the work had been written, exclusively, to please himself.⁷⁾ (One hundred years later, William Faulkner, another egocentric, would say the same thing, when beginning to write *The Sound and the Fury*.) Most importantly, for the introverts like Cooper and Faulkner the chances that they will rank among the greatest élite in literary history depend on whether they happen upon basic human situations that will strike a deep instinctive chord in millions of readers.

Heralds of New World: Paulding and Cooper

Until his return in 1832, Irving had been contented to be immersed in the romantic tradition of the Old World, thus harboring no aspiration to open up the possibilities of creating new characters on the soil of the New. Although he had become a young celebrity in New York by the instant success of

2) “Chronology,” *Cooper: The Leatherstocking Tales, Volume I* (The Library of America, 1985), p.1323.

3) *Ibid.*, p.1322.

4) “Chronology,” *Irving: History, Tales and Sketches* (The Library of America, 1983), p.1099.

5) “Chronology,” *Cooper: The Leatherstocking Tales, Volume I*, p.1326.

6) *Ibid.*, p.1326.

7) “Preface,” *The Pioneers*, in *Cooper: The Leatherstocking Tales, Volume I*, p.3.

A History of New York in 1809, he went over the Atlantic in 1815 never to come back until seventeen years later. It is only when his devotion to the legends and histories of Europe, especially of Spain, reached its culmination in the publication of *The Alhambra* in 1832 that at last he happened to catch sight of his native land again and decided to come back. It is of much interest to notice that during the period of Irving's absence, that is, in the late 1810s and 1820s, at least two ambitious native Americans were striving to give life to characters originally born on their own land by repudiating the Walter Scottish romanticism. Thus it is in opposition to the Europe-oriented romantic conventions that James Kirke Paulding, a crony of Irving's and coauthor of *Salmagundi*, and James Fenimore Cooper began to try to break the ice. As early as in 1818, the former presented in *The Backwoodsman*, a long poem, the American archetype of a runaway male, who flies from the oppression of white society to find freedom on the frontier. Paulding also depicted the early settlements established by Europeans in *Koningsmarke*, *the Long Finne* and others. More attention should be paid to him as one of the important pioneers of the New Literature.

Deeply conscious of the spiritual aspirations of life in the frontier settlements and wilderness, Cooper followed suit after Paulding by providing in 1832 *The Pioneers*, which, it must be stressed, should be regarded as the first outstanding milestone in the history of American fiction in terms of creation of the new themes and mythic archetypes, even though it has been pointed out that "the pattern of the seasons and the milieu of a country squirearchy suggest Irving's *Bracebridge Hall*."⁸ (By the way, it is five years later that Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered his "The American Scholar," "our intellectual Declaration of Independence," as Oliver Wendell Holmes called it.) Talking of Irving's influence on Cooper, we should be looking into how closely the advent of *The Pathfinder* (1840) and *The Deerslayer* (1841), the latter part of the Leatherstocking series, coincided with the publication of *A Tour on the Prairies* (1835), *Astoria* (1836), and *Adventures of Captain Bonneville, U. S. A.* (1837), Irving's version of a series of wilderness documents which resulted from his adventurous trip to the Western frontier in 1832. What is worth noticing concerning the inveterate propensity of both the authors is the fact that Cooper's stance over the opposition of savagism and civilization is not very far from Irving's: instinctive repugnance to mixed blood and belief in white supremacy. It is not surprising, it must be added, that that frame of mind can be found almost everywhere in the American novels, even in the latest twen-

8) Leonard Unger et al. (eds.), *American Writers: A Collection of Literary Biographies* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974), Vol. 1, p. 341.

tieth-century novels such as Paul Theroux's *The Mosquito Coast*. So engrained is white racism in the fiction of the United States.

Leatherstocking Tales in Perspective

For openers, interracial marriage is invariably prohibited in all of the series, thus producing dramatic effects on some occasions. In *The Pioneers* Oliver Edwards, a young man who lives with Natty Bumppo and Indian John in a hut in the woods, is not considered marriageable as a white until it has been made clear that he does not have Indian blood. Meanwhile he is treated as belonging to an inferior race in white society particularly by the two young ladies. In *The Prairie*, when the Teton chief Mahtoree declares that Inez and Ellen, captured white ladies, should be his wives although he has already had his Indian wife Tachechana, and waits to have it translated by Natty Bumppo, Ellen proudly interrupts him, "Spare your breath. All that a savage says is not to be repeated before a Christian Lady"⁹⁾ The hero in *The Deerslayer* repeatedly asserts that a white man cannot love a red skinned maiden, and that he holds it wrong to mix colors except in friendship and services.¹⁰⁾ At one of the climaxes the Deerslayer announces that he prefers torture and death to marriage to le Sumac, old widow of a Huron whom he has killed. It is of some interest to remark that it is declared against reason and "natur" for a paleface to wive with the redskin,¹¹⁾ although differently colored people on earth have "only one natur".¹²⁾ Is it too hasty an observation that opposition to mixed blood has resulted from the Puritanic prejudices, in which early Puritans looked down upon the colored people they met as savages in the devil-infested woods? Is it again too reckless an assertion that Christian doctrines are in essence likely to lead to racial segregation?

Even among the Indians Natty Bumppo never fails to claim unnecessarily that he is white. Thus white supremacy over Indian primitivism is both explicit and implicit in all of the Leatherstocking novels. In *The Deerslayer*, the last of the series, in particular, Natty Bumppo is often found showing his superiority of hunting skills over Chingachgook, his Delaware crony. The Deerslayer laughs at the Great Serpent missing the mark with a pistol and shows off his better marksmanship by letting fragments of the mark fly in a dozen directions.¹³⁾ Here, too, the Deerslayer laughs at Chingachgook's ignorance and proudly solves the question in his peculiar manner, when the Indian

9) *The Prairie*, in *Cooper: The Leatherstocking Tales, Volume I*, p. 1210.

10) *The Deerslayer*, in *Cooper: The Leatherstocking Tales, Volume II*, p. 746.

11) *Ibid.*, p. 969.

12) *Ibid.*, p. 921.

13) *Ibid.*, pp. 699-700.

asks him why the sun hides his face when it goes back at night.¹⁴⁾ Natty Bumppo often notes that red men have the red men's gifts and whites whites' gifts, but it is clearly felt that the white men's gifts are regarded as superior to the red skins'.

It is to be acknowledged as Cooper's credit to allow savagery to enlarge the scope of operations on American wild scenes. *The Last of the Mohicans* is "perhaps the most successful, and certainly the most popular, of Cooper's romances," as Robert E. Spiller puts it,¹⁵⁾ for its fatal conflicts of individual and social values culminating in an all-out battle between the Hurons, the "bad" Indians, and the Delawares, the "good," in which the young chiefs on both sides, Magua and Uncas, the last of the Mohicans, died valiantly together with many others. One of the most memorable scenes in *The Prairie* is where Mahtoree, a Teton, and Hard-Heart, a Pawnee who is to be adopted as a son by Natty, fight a fierce duel in the stream, in which the latter turns out a victor by scalping the former, a barbarity that helps effectively to enhance dramatic tension. Scalping is, to be sure, the most strikingly symbolic gift of the Indians. But it must be remembered that it is not only the savages but also whites that do not hesitate to jump at scalping. In *The Deerslayer*, for the purpose of scalping, two white Christians, Tom Hutter and Hurry Harry, accompanied by Chingachgook, assail the Tetons' encampment to no avail, where red women and children are staying. Tom Hutter, proprietor of the Muskrat Castle on the lake, is retaliated by being fatally scalped, one of the most weird executions in the series that haunt the readers' mind. Savageness is, Cooper contends, contained in white civilized Christians as well. Scalping can be considered as the standard by which to assess the degrees of inhumanity in characters, red and white alike. By that standard, Natty alone is exempt from being called "savage" among the major males in *The Deerslayer*.

Natty Bumppo Polarizing Between Savagism and Christianity

It seems in *The Deerslayer*, the last of the series, that the contradiction between savagism and civilization/Christianity is best delineated. To deal with that knotty situation, the author has come up with an ingenious device: creation of Hurry Harry and Hetty Hutter, eccentrics symbolizing respectively excessive white supremacy and excessive Christian doctrines. Hurry Harry seems a parodied racist bigot and Hetty Hutter a travesty of a narrow-and-simple-minded Christian missionary. In other words, the worst part of white

14) *Ibid.*, p. 912.

15) *American Writers: A Collection of Literary Biographies*, Vol.1, p. 341.

bigotry is bestowed to Hurry, and the worst part contained in self-righteousness of Christianity to Hetty, so that, by contrast, the Deerslayer, white and Christian, can enjoy a rather flexible position concerning the vital question of whether to take to savagism or to defend civilization/Christianity. Hurry's racist view: "Here's three colours on 'arth; white, black and red. White is the highest colour, and therefore the best man; black comes next, and is put to live in the neighborhood of the white man, as tolerable and fit to be made use of; and red comes last, which shows that those that made 'em never expected an Indian to be accounted as more than half human."¹⁶⁾ In a word, it is the habit of Hurry's mind to regard all Indians as being only a slight degree removed from the wild beasts that roam the woods.¹⁷⁾ He can sleep on a calm conscience even if he shoots an innocent Indian woman. The same racist view of Hetty's: "The Hurons can't understand the difference between white people and themselves, or they would n't ask Judith and me to go and live in their villages. God has given one country to the red men and another to us. He meant us to live apart. Then mother always said that we should never dwell with any but christians, if possible, and *that* is a reason why we can't go."¹⁸⁾ It must be added that Hetty is given a very simple and weak mind and destined to be killed in a final battle. In comparison with these excessively caricaturized racist Christians, Natty emerges an idealized symbol to represent the better qualities of both Christian and savage life.¹⁹⁾ He is a polarizing entity ready to adhere to savagism when in white society and to take a pride in his white origin and Christian principles when in the wilderness. Despite his complete commitment to savage life, he continues to stress that he is white and Christian. To be sure, his religion is pantheistic. Yet, in the closing scene in *The Prairie*, the dying Natty wishes to die a Christian man, and advises Hard-Heart, his adopted Indian son, to let the God of a white man look on his deeds with friendly eyes.²⁰⁾ For Natty white identity and Christian creed are never to be taken away to the last even in the wilderness.

As for civil law, Natty also shows a polarizing disposition, developing his sense of justice in slow progress into a law-abiding spirit. In *The Pioneers* when accused of killing a deer out of season, Natty stands against Judge Temple, rejecting the social control of individual rights in favor of the laws of the forest and of God as moral absolutes: "Talk not to me of law, Marma-

16) *The Deerslayer*, pp. 527-528.

17) *Ibid.*, p. 803.

18) *Ibid.*, p. 880.

19) "Preface to *The Leather-Stocking Tales*," *The Deerslayer*, p. 491.

20) *The Prairie*, pp. 1311-1313.

duke Temple. Did the beast of the forest mind your laws, when it was thirsty and hungering for the blood of your own child!...I've travelled these mountains when you was no judge,...and I feel as if I had a right and a privilege to travel them ag'in afore I die."²¹⁾ Eventually, though, Natty is put to the public stocks for an hour and ordered to pay 100 dollars as a fine. At the end of the story he goes further into the wilderness, fleeing from the repression of law-enforcing society to set himself free and lawless in the prairie. An interesting thing is, however, that in *The Prairie* the author has presented a curiously contradicted situation, where Ishmael Bush, a lawless squatter in the prairie, stands up as judge to pass sentences to prisoners before him, including Natty the trapper. Later Ishmael the Judge sentences his brother-in-law to death. Ishmael's verdict: "You have slain my first born and according to the laws of God and Man must you die!"²²⁾ The statement suggests that any society or group of men must be controlled by laws made by men. Natty also stands behind Ishmael enforcing a law by helping carry out justice by providing testimony about the killing. At the end of Chapter 32, the squatter and his family are seen pursuing their course towards the settlements, leaving behind "their lawless and semi-barbarous lives."²³⁾ Which also suggests that the author himself was beginning to incline to acceptance of civil law as something useful to control human licentiousness. In *The Deerslayer* the hero appears a stalwart advocate of "a law and a law maker that rule across the whole continent."²⁴⁾ Although there is a possibility that "a law and a law maker" mentioned here might imply "God and the law of God," my impression is that the phrase stands for "a federal law and the Federal Government." It may be relevant to note that federalist Cooper, baffled by quarrels with townspeople and libel suits against New York journalists over public use of Three Mile Point, a picnic ground on Lake Otsego owned by the Cooper family, may have wished to propose implicitly that priority of a federal law should be respected.

"Noble Savage"

The idea of the "noble savage" is said to begin to be talked much about in the early eighteenth-century French high society by noble ladies and libertarians, who extolled the primitivism of savages in the West Indies and the American wilds. After Jean Jacques Rousseau elaborated it in *Emile*, writing,

21) *The Pioneers*, pp. 376-377.

22) *The Prairie*, p. 1287.

23) *Ibid.*, p. 1293.

24) *The Deerslayer*, pp. 507-508.

"Everything is well when it comes fresh from the hands of the Maker," it proved a particularly attractive concept to many writers in the late eighteenth century and during the Romantic period.²⁵⁾ It may easily follow that the nineteenth-century American romanticists might have welcomed this noble-savage idea. The fact is, however, that the writers on the new continent were too well acquainted with the American Indians to idealize the grotesque oddities they saw into something like "noble savages" modified and elaborated *à la* Europe. True, the "good" Indians in the Leatherstocking series, particularly Chingachgook, Uncas, and Hard-Heart, are often referred to as "noble savages," for the sobriquet is so attractive.²⁶⁾ But, in this respect, I would like to agree with Robert E. Spiller, who points out that Cooper's primitivism, in no sense pagan but a complete acceptance of Protestant ethical tradition, has little relationship to that of the "noble savage."²⁷⁾ By that standard of scalping, that I have earlier fixed, all the above "good" Indians can safely be called savages, not noble but bona fide, for none of them recoil from scalping. Cooper was surely suspicious of the complete compatibility of savagery with nobility.

It seems necessary here to indicate that Natty Bumppo, a white Christian who has never to the last identified himself as savage, has wrongly been labeled as "noble savage" in not a few reference books of the history of American literature published in Japanese. All the reference books I referred to that had been published in English have proved to be free from the error.

Conclusion

It is, to be sure, in contempt of the Old-World-oriented Irving that the aspiring Cooper tried to find for the first time the romantic possibilities of the wilderness, thus creating some meritorious mythic archetypes outside civilized society—a solitary Christian man of nature and savages, "good" and "bad." Still, it is observed that Irving and Cooper shared the same views of the Indians—racist and Puritanic, not pagan by any means. The value system Cooper held urged his master character, Natty Bumppo, to assimilate to savage life to the extent that he could aptly be called "an honorary Indian."²⁸⁾ Yet,

25) J. A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1979), Revised Edition, pp. 423-424.

26) "[In *The Deerslayer* Chingachgook] embodies the romantic traits of the 'noble savage.'" Alexander Cowie, *The Rise of the American Novel* (New York: American Book Company, 1951), p. 144.

27) *American Writers: A Collection of Literary Biographies*, Vol. 1, p. 342.

28) David Morse, *American Romanticism, Volume 1, From Cooper to Hawthorne* (Basingstoke, Hampshire, England: Macmillan, 1987), p. 64.

Cooper's racism could not allow him to be completely absorbed in savagism, but to retain for life his white and Christian traits, his vital identity. In the last of the series, *The Deerslayer*, it is pointed out, Natty has become "a symbol of the human values toward which Cooper himself had been reaching."²⁹⁾ It is, then, no wonder that that symbolic figure looks like the author himself idealized, for through the process of amalgamation and distillation Cooper stripped him of almost all the attributes he disliked: savagery like scalping, superstition, excessive white bigotry, and excessive Christian dogma. The Leatherstocking in *The Pioneers*, realistically delineated as an old wretched maverick who flees from the social control by laws of an individual into the lawless wilderness forest, lake, and stream, where he could enjoy the best associations of what is deemed savage, has now been distilled and crystallized into the young Hawkeye in *The Deerslayer*, that possesses little of civilization but its highest principles as they are exhibited in the uneducated, and all of savage life that is not incompatible with these great rules of conduct.³⁰⁾ (29/9/1988)

29) *American Writers: A Collection of Literary Biographies*, Vol. 1, p. 349.

30) "Preface to The Leather-Stocking Tales," *The Deerslayer*, p. 490.