

The Transformation of Place in James Fenimore Cooper's novel The Pioneers

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Abstract

The paper examines the contradictory interpretations and evaluations of the transformation of place in James Fenimore Cooper's novel The Pioneers (1823). The comparison of the extradiegetic frame of the prologue and the diegetic narrative has revealed significant gaps (displacements and erasures) not only in the diegetic narrative but also in the idyllic pastoral prospect of the frame. While most interpretations stress either the subversive impossibility of reconciling the tensions and conflicts of the plot or seeking their resolution at the diegetic level of the text, this paper argues that the reconciliation should be sought outside those two levels, in the space of the reader's mind, where both the displacements and the returns of the displaced are enacted and coexist in the formation of cultural memory.

Keywords: James Fenimore Cooper; The Pioneers, place, transformation, environmental criticism, frame, forest, displacement, prospect, pastoral

1. Introduction

The theme of the transformation of nature and progress in James Fenimore Cooper's novel *The Pioneers* (1823) can be interpreted in surprisingly different, even contradictory ways. Some readers stress the novel's legitimization of the American colonization of the West in the name of social, economic and moral progress and the law.¹ Other readers, from the environmental or mythological perspective, underline the subversive charge of Cooper's writing. The myth school focuses on rituals of manhood outside mainstream society; John Cawelti, echoing Leslie Fiedler (Fiedler xx), finds in Cooper's writing the anti-myth of

“the hero’s flight from civilization, which he comes to recognize as totally destructive of nature and spirit” (Cawelti 151–160). The environmental approach is interested less in social interaction and more in the interaction between the human world and nature; it tends to interpret the process of the transformation of the wilderness as defilement and is interested in the strategies of wilderness conservation and management in the text (Milder 414). Is the structure of the novel really so open and thematically ambivalent as to accommodate seemingly contradictory readings?

The Pioneers is Cooper’s third novel and the first book to introduce Cooper’s most famous character, Natty Bumppo, an intrepid frontiersman. After a novel of manners set in England (*Precaution: A Novel*, 1820) and a historical novel in the manner of Walter Scott (*The Spy; A Tale of the Neutral Ground*, 1821), Cooper moved to a more syncretic form, a formal hybrid that mixes sketches from frontier life with romance and low comedy.² Like *The Spy*, *The Pioneers* became an immediate literary bestseller at the time of its publication and continues to be one of Cooper’s best-loved books, especially for those who are repelled by the adventure elements and graphic violence of *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826).

2. The frame

The novel opens with a prospect of the whole region in its contemporary appearance. The prospect view offers a picture of the American pastoral,³ the American idyll – a cultural landscape of picturesque diversity with cultivated nature (fields and pastures) and scattered settlements.

The mountains are generally arable to the tops, although instances are not wanting, where the sides are jugged with rocks, that aid greatly in giving to the country that romantic and picturesque character which it so eminently possesses. The vales are narrow, rich, and cultivated; with a stream uniformly winding through each. Beautiful and thriving villages are found interspersed along the margins of the small lakes, or situated at those points of the streams which are favorable for manufacturing; and neat and comfortable farms, with every indication of wealth about them, are scattered profusely through the vales, and even to the mountain tops. Roads diverge in every direction from the even and graceful bottoms of the valleys, to the most rugged and intricate passes of the hills. Academies, and minor edifices of learning, meet the eye of the stranger, at every few miles, as he winds his way through this uneven territory; and places for the worship of God, abound with that frequency which characterize a moral and reflecting people, and with that variety of exterior and canonical government which flows from unfettered liberty of conscience. (*The Pioneers* 13)

The idyllic prospect view of the present scene seems to suggest that the past conflicts and problems have been resolved and the countryside has not been devastated by the careless settlers; it has not become a wasteland. However, the prospect view was traditionally used to impose aesthetic order upon the actual scene and to produce a sense of harmony by erasing confusing and disparate details of life.⁴ Shour explains: “The spatial element of prospect allowed a broader ‘view’ to reconcile the extremes of topography, as well as the juxtaposition of settlement and wilderness. This convention diffuses the contradiction and

tension of an immediate point of view by placing it in a large space in which these apparent disharmonies could co-exist" (Shour). This gesture of erasure and the harmonizing organization of large dominant elements (visible from a distance) call into question the missing elements, small or large. There are at least two elements that play a vital role in the plot and that are missing from the prospect picture of the present – human characters and the forest. In fact, I will argue that these two elements are the most essential components of the diegetic fictional world.

The absence of human characters in the picture is in a certain respect understandable; from a far-ranging bird's eye perspective they would be too small to be noticeable, unless they were placed in the foreground of the picture. On the other hand the human presence has a representation here – the appearance of the country (with the exception of the rocky cliffs) is to a large extent the result of human work; the picture paints fields, pastures, roads, farms and public buildings.

The absence of forest or trees in the picture is more unsettling. In the process of literary interpretation it does not matter very much whether such an omission is a mistake, negligence or intention. The forest is the first environment that is introduced to the reader in the novel, and it is the form of nature that is most endangered by the settlers' ruthless and thoughtless exploitation. The reader is naturally curious whether the attempts at conservation of the forest wilderness will succeed or fail, and looks to the frame to provide the answer. The frame, however, shuns a direct answer and indirectly, through the absence of reference, seems to testify to the failure of the conservationist project and exhibits only the success of a transformation of wilderness into agricultural land, a cultural landscape.

As a result, the frame poses the question whether this gap, the absence of human figures and forest wilderness, foreshadows a structural feature of the diegetic narrative, the displacement.

3. The displacement of the wilderness

In spite of the important role of the frame, the main weight of meaning is carried by the diegetic plot (see Genette 228–229). As Philbrick put it, the fictional world of *The Pioneers* is far from being a pastoral idyll: "Looked at closely, the episodes of the novel reveal anything but harmony and loving cooperation in the affairs of men" (69). Although Philbrick refers to the social life of the village of Templeton, his reference can be extended to the natural environment because it is badly affected by human interference and exploitation of its resources.

In the material sense, the wilderness of the region in the novel is the space of three material substances: land, water, and air. The destructive aspect of the advancing colonization is represented through the element of fire and the main tool of the destruction of the forest, the ax. In their pristine state the three elements are rich and plentiful: the land abounds in trees, the water is teeming with fish, and the air is filled with huge flocks of birds. These three resources, however, are growing thin as a result of the reckless exploitation by the settlers. The forest is being cut down and large areas are stripped of trees, the woods no longer abound in game, and even the lake is in danger of being fished out. Cooper shows the destructive conduct of the settlers in three beautifully conceived scenes and several minor snapshots from the life of the village.

The destruction of the forest is demonstrated in a synecdochic manner through the encounter with the giant woodcutter Billy Kirby during the main protagonists' trip to the mountains. Kirby is a good-natured butcher of nature. He enjoys cutting down trees and will not miss the forest.

“Now, I call no country much improved, that is pretty well covered with trees. Stumps are a different thing, for they do not shade the land; and besides, if you dig them, they make a fence that will turn any thing bigger than a hog, being grand for breachy cattle.” (*The Pioneers* 230)

When the traveling party meets him, he is tapping maple trees for their sap and making maple sugar. He does the tapping in a very reckless manner, giving the trees such deep cuts that they will never recover and will soon die. On top of that he is choosing, as he proudly announces, the soundest trees (*The Pioneers* 227).

Judge Temple, the owner of most of the land in the region, is upset by such wasteful conduct but he has no legal measures to stop this destruction.

“It greaves me to witness the extravagance that pervades this country,” said the Judge, “where the settlers trifle with the blessings they might enjoy, with the prodigality of successful adventurers. You are not exempt from the censure yourself, Kirby, for you make dreadful wounds in these trees, where a small incision would effect the same object. I earnestly beg you will remember, that once gone, none living will see their loss remedied.” (*The Pioneers* 229)

The second scene (the element of air) involves the mass shooting of a huge flock of pigeons, organized by the sheriff, Richard Jones, Judge Temple's agile and enterprising cousin. When the settlers finish firing their guns, including a cannon, the land is covered with dead and dying birds (*The Pioneers* 252).

The third scene of mass destruction is set in the element of water and depicts fishing on the lake. Once again the human action gets out of control, and – thanks to modern technology and the efficient organization of the work – so many fish are caught that the community cannot process them and possibly very few fish are left in the lake to reproduce.

The destructive force of the settlers is exemplified most eloquently through the element of fire.⁵ One of the first snapshots offers a view of huge piles of logs, carelessly heaped in front of a house, with huge (excessive) fires burning inside. The firearms of the settlers and their clearings have driven away the game from the region. And the most dramatic event in the plot, the forest fire, in which the two main young protagonists would have perished without the help of old Natty Bumppo, was started by a settler, who carelessly threw away a half-burned torch.

4. Displacement of characters

The destruction of the wilderness is conjoined with the removal and dislocation of the last remaining original inhabitant, Chingachgook, the last of the Native Americans who had lived in the area, and his friend Natty Bumppo, the first white inhabitant of the area.

Chingachgook more or less voluntarily displaces himself into the eternal hunting grounds of his ancestors, while Natty Bumppo, after a conflict with the new order and its law, removes himself further to the west, to avoid clearings and the sounds of axes.

Even though at the end the plot sounds like an elegy for the disappearing wilderness and its inhabitants, both the novel and the frame make it clear that Cooper is not dreaming of a Romantic retreat into the wild and is dedicated to social progress. "Cooper never questions the superiority of the civilized ideal to nature. What he questions is America's faithfulness to that ideal" (Milder 416). To be civilized in the true sense of the word means to show due respect to the past and to nature. For Cooper as a Romantic writer, the wilderness is not an antagonistic environment, as it was for the Puritans (the howling wilderness, full of savage men and savage beasts) (Bradford 60), but it is a wonderful creation of God, and as such, potentially, a temple of God. In *The Deerslayer*, Natty Bumppo's attitude to the wilderness is described in the following words: "...he loved the woods for their freshness, their sublime solitudes, their vastness, and the impress that they everywhere bore of the divine hand of their creator" (*The Deerslayer* 758). Considering the divine aspect of the wilderness, the destruction of the wilderness can be regarded as sacrilege and defilement of God's work.

The destructive power of the settlers does not give much hope for any better future, and considerably weakens the legitimization of the transformation of the wilderness and of social progress. Yet there are forces at work that operate to check the ruthless, reckless, restless energy of the settlers' new world. This counterforce, the force of reason and justice, is represented by the well-meaning but too often erring Judge Temple, his daughter Elizabeth, the dispossessed young gentleman Oliver Effingham, and impersonally, by the new laws. Judge Temple, in spite of several mistakes and blunders, displays a concern for the protection of the natural wealth of America. He is dedicated to the letter of the law and strives for justice.

Even though, unlike her father or Natty Bumppo, Elizabeth does not display any environmental concern, she approaches the wilderness from an aesthetic perspective; she can perceive beauty in the forest. And she is generally compassionate in her heart; she likes to "rule" (her father and her husband) and "manage";⁶ being a true daughter of her enterprising father, she is likely to contribute to the alliance against the wasteful manners of the settlers.

Oliver Effingham, who finally marries Elizabeth Temple, is the grandson of the original owner of the land around Lake Otsego, and the son of Judge Temple's friend and business partner. Though born in America, he was educated in Europe, and so he can bring to America European culture and Romantic sensibility, with its admiration for nature. As an adoptive son of Chingachgook and as a person who lived for a time with Natty Bumppo in his log cabin, he came to understand the wilderness better than the settlers, and is consequently better qualified and more motivated to prevent the destruction of the wilderness.

The framing extradiegetic picture of the pastoral landscape seems to suggest that the post-revolutionary anarchy (the lawless free-for-all so familiar to us) is over and the landscape has been transformed into a carefully managed cultural landscape. Nevertheless, as I have pointed out, this contemporary cultural landscape does not include human figures in the picture and omits references to the element that is dominant in the diegetic narrative, the forest wilderness. And this absence is a gaping absence. It suggests that the

transformation of the wilderness into a cultural landscape did involve the displacement of some essential elements of the physical environment, and seems to indicate that the enlightened land managers have not been fully successful. The diegetic text thus seems to repeat the act of displacement and erasure of the frame.

5. Re-placement

At face value, we could conclude, both the frame and the diegetic narrative seem to legitimize the process of colonization and offer model resolutions of the conflicts. The transformation of the place into a pastoral landscape is made possible through the physical exclusion and displacement of elements of the old order: the hunter Natty becomes a poacher and goes West, while Chingachgook, the last representative of the original owners of the land, conveniently dies, as does Major Effingham, to whom the Delawares had given the land before the revolution for his services. The wilderness, the frame suggests, is gone too. As a result, the affirmation of the westward march of civilization is accompanied by the criticism of the consequences. The absence of human characters and the forest from the frame, and the presence of the signs of civilization (such as buildings and fields), give the impression of the insignificance of the individual in the large, impersonal (semi-natural) movement of history. The individual is invisible in the frame, as is the forest wilderness. The diegetic narrative, in a retrospective, brings both missing elements to the foreground, makes history into a story of individuals, and reveals in the impersonal historical process the complicated and complex work of human agency, where the individual is bound to perish or disappear, but not without a material and mental trace. This trace can be very temporary, like the one pigeon shot by Natty, or of lasting effect, the extermination of the last flocks of pigeons by the settlers. In the space of fiction these material traces leave deep mental traces and shape the cultural memory.

Even though the physical displacement of the wilderness and its inhabitants is presented here as an act of historical necessity, like the dispossession of the Native Americans, the displacement does not bring a complete erasure of the trace. Literature and art are the field that allows the interplay between displacement and re-placement. Cooper has returned from the social margin to the literary center the displaced elements such as the backwoodsmen, Native Americans, exiled loyalists, the forest and forest wildlife. Through the positive embracement of those marginalized elements by the main model protagonists (Judge Temple, Elizabeth Temple and Oliver Effingham), Cooper has made them part of the reader's mental set-up. Though in the diegetic narrative these archaic elements of place are physically gone, they are firmly planted in the reader's mind.

What are the effects of the replacement of the marginalized archaic characters? Rather than a cultural nostalgia they generate a sense of the cultural diversity of America as its important constitutive feature. The marginalized characters represent the importance of an inclusive rather than exclusive concept of America. The new emerging American culture should draw inspiration for its manners and ethical values both from the best of Europe (exemplified in Oliver Effingham, a son of a loyalist) and from the best of the native Americans (Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook), be they white or red.

Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook, besides their cultural meaning, also have a powerful mythopoeic function. Out of all the marginalized figures, they leave the deepest imprint

in the reader's mind and still roam the forests of our imagination. Cooper must have realized this mythopoeic dimension of his writing because he came back to his pair of forest heroes three years later in a prequel, *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826). Their power rests partly in the nostalgic charm of primitivism, and partly in their subversive charge. The charm of primitivism is constituted by the desire for more simple and straightforward forms of thought and conduct, the world of chivalric values and heroic action, and a less wasteful economy that is more respectful to nature. The subversive charge is related to their potential in the plot to challenge the existing social conventions and laws when these laws and conventions clash with feeling or reason. In this respect they are progenitors of future heroes from the margin, including the Western movie heroes.

Conclusion

The surprising displacement of human characters and of the forest wilderness in the frame of the novel and the transformation of the rough frontier into an American pastoral cannot be explained as a mere prolepsis (anticipation) of the result of the notorious westward march of civilization and its consequent displacement of incongruous elements. This is because the diegetic narrative brings the human world to the forefront in a rich diversity and very vividly visualizes the forest wilderness. The diegetic narrative does not, however, stand against the frame only as a challenge to the ideological project of the frame, but at the same time it reiterates its project as well as subversively questioning it. In the human world of the diegetic narrative, the act of displacement (the marginalization of the characters connected with the older modes of life) goes hand in hand with the acknowledgement of their inherent cultural value and symbolic potential. Through the model protagonists, Judge Temple, his daughter Elizabeth and Oliver Effingham, the values of the old worlds of Europe and Native America are asserted, and from the reader's perspective the marginalized and displaced minor protagonists, Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook, assume a symbolic role as heroes of popular culture and become prototypes of subversive heroes in numerous stories of consolidations of the social order. The thematic structure of *The Pioneers* is indeed very open and complex, and allows for both affirmation and subversion.

Notes

¹ McWilliams describes the transformation of the region as “the change from a State of Nature to a State of Civilization” (McWilliams, Jr. 103).

² According to Thomas Philbrick the form of *The Pioneers* combines the techniques of prose fiction and of descriptive poems, such as Thomson's *The Seasons* (Philbrick 61).

³ Henry Nash Smith refers to the ideal of the American pastoral landscape as “the garden of the world” and connects this “master symbol” with a set of metaphors, “expressing fecundity, growth, increase, and the blissful labor in the earth...” (Smith 123). Leo Marx adds to Smith's definition that the pastoral scene “usually is dominated by natural objects: in the foreground a pasture, a twisting brook with cattle grazing nearby, then a clump of elms on a rise in the middle distance and beyond that, way off on the western horizon, a line of dark hills” (Marx 141).

In my opinion, the garden is a rather misleading concept for the American pastoral landscape because we are likely to imagine a vegetable and flower garden with a lawn or a fruit orchard rather than the open agricultural landscape Smith and Marx had in mind. For this reason I prefer the term 'the American pastoral' without any further metaphoric denominations.

⁴ The technique of confrontation of the idyllic present with the turbulent past has a precedent. See Filson 39–62. "Thus we behold Kentucke, lately an howling wilderness, the habitation of savages and wild beasts, become a fruitful field; this region, so favourably distinguished by nature, now become the habitation of civilization" (Filson 39).

⁵ Thomas Philbrick has connected the element of fire and heat with the hot season of summer and carefully traces the imagery of fire throughout the text in order to demonstrate the correspondences between the natural and human world (see Philbrick 73–75).

⁶ Elizabeth says in the epilogue to her husband: "I manage more deeply than you can imagine, sir." (*The Pioneers* 457).

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