"Manifest Ambivalence": James Fenimore Cooper, the American Romance, and the Metahistories of Hegel and Herder

Steven Frye
Antelope Valley College

Follow this and additional works at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kentucky-review

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kentucky-review/vol14/iss2/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Kentucky Libraries at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Kentucky Review by an authorized editor of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu.
"Manifest Ambivalence": James Fenimore Cooper, the American Romance, and the Metahistories of Hegel and Herder

Steven Frye

Throughout the early nineteenth century, the romance in America was largely derivative in nature. In *The American Historical Romance*, George Dekker argues that figures such as Cooper and Simms relied heavily upon the generic model established by Sir Walter Scott in the Waverley novels. Cooper’s work was the first important American manifestation of this tradition. Dekker writes: “For it was Sir Walter Scott who created both the genre as we know it” along with “an immense international market” and “writers of all levels of talent, all degrees of artistic and moral seriousness, could find models in the books that Cooper wrote at the onset of the tradition” (Dekker 1987, 1). The Waverley-model as defined by Scott was firmly rooted in the romance tradition, and those who modified it to fit American settings, according to Dekker, developed specific theories of the romance that were consistent with Scott’s generic scheme and in general were in line with his attitude toward historical process and the relationship between history and art. As the tradition developed, formal patterns became more codified. The genre was particularly pertinent to a developing nation that was carving a “civilization” out of a wilderness. American progressivism and expansionist philosophy drew its sustenance in part from a dramatic portrayal in historical romance. Dekker suggests that the first romancers in America were generally sympathetic to American expansionism, subscribing most often to a Whig politics. Most biographical sources suggest that Cooper was generally progressive in social philosophy, possessing attitudes toward historical process that were for the most part consistent with American expansionism. In general, his works display no deliberate questioning of the social and political issues of the time. Unlike the romancers of the 1850’s, writers like Hawthorne and Melville, Cooper makes no conscious attempt to use the romance to explore issues of doubt and ambiguity regarding issues of epistemology and metaphysics. Nor does he attempt to deal with
historical and political matters through the use of complicated and carefully wrought dialogic frames that preserve indeterminacy and perspectivity. However, upon close examination, his romances reflect a rather tortured ambivalence to progressivist politics and, on matters of historical theory, they break down and display a Bakhtinian "dialogism," reflecting specifically the historiographic perspectives of Johann Gottfried Herder and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.

Cooper employs no formal literary techniques, such as the ambiguous gothic, the grotesque, or the arabesque, that would lead us to conclude that dialogism emanates from authorial intent. Rather, romances such as The Last of the Mohicans and The Prairie embody a form of dialogism that develops as a result of the inherent nature of novelistic discourse as it is influenced by social conflict. In contrast to the aesthetically dialogized texts of Hawthorne and Melville, works such as Twice-Told Tales, The Scarlet Letter, The House of the Seven Gables, Moby-Dick, The Piazza Tales, and The Confidence Man, which embody dialogism through specific structural devices, authorial frames, and inserted genres, Cooper’s dialogized romances embody polyvalence through the perspective of an omniscient narrator, the voices of individual characters, through the ideological configuration of mythic figures such as Hawkeye, Chingachgook, and Uncas, and through the often ambiguous resolution of plot.

All these elements interact and lead to romances that display multiple perspectives that relate specifically to philosophically based theories of history. As Bakhtin suggests, the structure of the novel in general results in dialogue through the multiple voices of characters, narrators, other narrative components such as epistolary correspondence and symbolic or metaphorical systems. These narrative features cause novelistic discourse to manifest some form of dialogism, as the various voices of cultural context interpenetrate the texts. Although Cooper’s romances reflect an unintended dialogism, the conscious political perspectives of the author (as implied in theoretical pronouncements such as Cooper’s 1855 Preface to the Leatherstocking Tales) results in the deliberate creation of a cultural mythos. As a result, Cooper’s romances, particularly The Last of the Mohicans, contains a multifaceted amalgam of voices that speak to the issue of historical process, while at the same time constituting an affirmative national mythos that retains an influence even until today. In order to understand the process by
which ideas are dialogized in Cooper’s works, one must first identify the historical and ideological influences that characterized his time. This essay will therefore 1) explore the relationship between European philosophies of history, the evolution of American national mythology, and the emerging idea of manifest destiny, and 2) analyze how these multiple and often contradictory notions become incorporated dialogically in some of Cooper’s most important romances.

Affirmative Mythogenesis and Manifest Destiny

American national mythology at its inception was of course a product of the profound social and cultural changes that defined the early nineteenth century in America. During this time vastly more simplified versions of Enlightenment stadialism and Hegelian historiography become manifest in historical fiction. Central to the ideological structure of Cooper’s romances is the concept of “manifest destiny,” a phrase first used in 1840 by John L. O’Sullivan, editor of the Democratic Review. Sullivan argued that in America the Anglo-Saxon race had advanced westward in such a way that “nothing short of the hand of Omnipotence can force it to recede” (O’Sullivan 1840, 87). Employing a neo-Biblical rhetoric, Sullivan combined westward expansionist thinking, democracy, and the notion of divine providence into a social philosophy: “To no other has been committed the ark of man’s hopes.... Surely we cannot fail of success in such a cause!” (87). Manifest destiny as a term was then adopted by historians, political rhetoricians, and writers in the 1840’s to explain and justify continental expansion in the United States.

The phrase represented not only the expressed ideology of political parties, but also a pervasive national sentiment that had been developing for decades. In the Introduction to a series of essays collected in 1968 under the title Manifest Destiny, Norman Graebner argues that the phrase implied a divine mission: “The United States was destined by the will of Heaven to become a country of political and territorial eminence” (Graebner 1968, xv). Founded on the Puritan concept of providential history and reinforced by a collective belief in the value of democratic government, manifest destiny suggested that Americans had a right and obligation to extend “freedom” and “democracy” to the edges of the continent. As Graebner writes: “Americans... viewed...
their political system with a messianic consciousness, convinced that they held the future of republican government in their hands" (xviii). In 1844, the Pennsylvania Democrat James Buchanan declared that "Providence has given to the American people a great and important mission... to spread the blessings of Christian liberty and laws from one end to the other of this immense continent" (Buchanan 1844, 380).

The doctrine of manifest destiny drew its moral justification from a number of sources: from the fervent revolutionary nationalism of the late eighteenth century, from the popular doctrines of Jeffersonian and Jacksonian democracy, from a sense of providential mission inherited from the Puritans, and from the religious fervor inherent in Christianity itself. As the vanguard of Christian culture, unburdened by the past abuses of European institutions, America was seen as the ultimate expression of the true Christian spirit, the historical manifestation of a grand biblical teleology. Frederick Merk states in *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History: A Reinterpretation*, "A sense of mission to redeem the Old World by high example was generated in pioneers of idealistic spirit on their arrival in the New World. It was generated by the potentialities of a new earth for building a new Heaven" (Merk 1970, 3). Merk argues that the religiosity of the Puritans merged with eighteenth and nineteenth-century political discourse to produce the doctrine of manifest destiny. Again, the concept was multifaceted. In *Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansionism in American History*, Albert K. Weinberg states that "The Ideology of American expansionism is a motley body of justificatory doctrines. It comprises metaphysical dogmas of a providential mission and quasi-scientific 'laws' of national development, conceptions of national right and ideals of social duty, legal rationalizations and appeals to 'the higher law,' aims of extending freedom and designs of extending benevolent absolutism" (Weinberg 1935, 3). These multiple sources lead to a rather multifaceted doctrine that derived itself from religious, philosophical, ethical, and political perspectives.

The reliance on metaphysics and science, on both divine and natural law, and on the ethic of democratic government, points to a telling linkage between the providential assumptions of manifest destiny and both Hegelian and Enlightenment-based stadialist historiography. Facing a presumably "civilized" society, the "savage" and "barbarian" regions of the West were irremediably
destined, according to stadialist theory, to concede to the advance of the European white. Early expansionist rhetoric drew its justification from the “natural laws” that governed historical development as defined by Enlightenment stadialists. One can also see that manifest destiny was a result of a Hegelian historiography. The concept of “American Mission” certainly owed its roots to the Puritans, but it drew significant philosophical support from Hegel’s notion of the dialectic and cultural evolution through the concept of an evolving World-Spirit and Self-Realizing Idea. Graebner’s reference in his 1968 collection to “the will of Heaven,” Buchanan’s evocation of “the blessings of Christian liberty,” and Weinberg’s reference to “providential mission” all attest to the peculiarly Christian element present in the concept of manifest destiny. But pioneer figures of American progressivism such as Jefferson emphasized the political dimension in the ideological scheme. The doctrine of manifest destiny was equally predicated on the assumption that American democracy represented an ultimate “synthesis” in advanced political thought. From the point of view of these early framers of American democracy, the “Idea” of individual liberty, which was born in antiquity, had evolved dialectically through various permutations in Europe throughout the ages. In America it achieved its final expression. The concept of manifest destiny assumed that the evolutionary process would complete itself and history would end in America, since it was there that God intended humanity and the World to realize its ultimate social, political, and spiritual form. As a nation, America was destined to expand westward and to usher in this historical and cultural apotheosis. In 1805, Hegel had delivered Lectures on the History of Philosophy, in 1822 Lectures on the Philosophy of History, and in 1820 Philosophy of Fine Art. These ideas were disseminated among members of the American intelligentsia, where they found fertile ground in a culture evolved from Calvinism, with its sense of special mission, and conditioned by the existence of a vast frontier. This reinterpretation and modification of Hegel resulted in a poetic project that strongly influenced James Fenimore Cooper. Central to this project is the act of affirmative mythogenesis. In Regeneration Through Violence, Richard Slotkin defines a mythology as “a complex of narratives that dramatizes the world vision and historical sense of a people or culture, reducing centuries of experience into a constellation of compelling metaphors” (Slotkin 1973, 6). Mythogenesis is the generation of these narratives, which
in part involves the idealization of characters, the creation of figures that embody widespread ideas and beliefs. The actual creation of fully realized mythic figures who are the pure representation of a cohesive set of values can be called *affirmative mythogenesis*, a form of myth creation central to Cooper's romances. This process appears clearly in characters such as Uncas, Chingachgook, and Hawkeye. In Cooper's works, the mythic personages created display internally the ideology of manifest destiny (though they also contain a poeticized recognition of the virtues of select Native Americans). These affirmative myths appear initially as monological constructs that represent a cohesive set of beliefs, and if we view progressivist historiography as a singular ideological entity, these early romances appear monological also. But "linear and progressive" historical thinking has many forms, and these early romances reflect an unintentional dialogism that manifests various permutations of Enlightenment stadialist and Hegelian historiography.

**Hegel, Herder, and The Last of the Mohicans**

Twentieth-century scholars have focused on Cooper's role as American mythmaker, and many of their studies address Cooper's politics and his position on westward expansionism and manifest destiny. *The Leatherstocking Tales* have been viewed as central examples of affirmative mythogenesis in American literature, and the creation of these myths is bound inextricably to various assumptions about the nature of historical change. Critics such as Richard Chase, Henry Nash Smith, R. W. B. Lewis, and Richard Slotkin all argue that the Leatherstocking series articulates an emerging myth of America as a pre-lapsarian space, one that embodies perennial innocence and independence from the burdens of time and the European past. William P. Kelly suggests that these critics point to Cooper's "sharpening sense of American mythos," because the Leatherstocking series "progressively articulates a yearning myth of American innocence, eternal youth, and freedom from the restraints of time and society" (Kelly 1985, 359). In one sense, Cooper's role as mythmaker is undeniable, since his evocation of the "wilderness" as mythic realm taps into central patterns in the mythopoeic consciousness of Western culture. As R. W. B. Lewis asserts: "If there was a fictional Adamic hero unambiguously treated — celebrated in his very Adamism — it
was the hero of Cooper’s *The Deerslayer*: a self-reliant young man who does seem to have sprung from nowhere and whose characteristic pose, to employ Tocqueville’s words, was the solitary stance in the presence of Nature and God” (Lewis 1955, 91).

The Leatherstocking figure as Adamic innocent becomes rather more complicated when all of *The Leatherstocking Tales* are considered. In Natty Bumppo, however, we have a carefully crafted representation of a heroic ideal placed in the simultaneously historical yet mythologically articulated American frontier landscape. This myth embodies the notion of American exceptionalism that of course informs expansionist philosophy and the progressivist thinking of manifest destiny. This myth is discussed D. H. Lawrence’s *Studies in Classic American Literature*. Lawrence sees Cooper as an important figure in the romance tradition that evolved out of the American Renaissance. Richard Chase recounts Lawrence’s reading, arguing that he viewed Cooper’s characters as a set of peculiarly American myths. Chase writes: “he [Lawrence] saw in Natty Bumppo, Chingachgook, and their associates in the *Leatherstocking Tales*, a new product of the poetic imagination. He saw that although the ‘American Scott’ was influenced by the Waverley novels, he was an original, and his real descendants were not American Bulwer-Lyttons and American Stevensons but such writers as Melville” (Chase 1957, 44). Lawrence generously places Cooper in the company of America’s most renowned and studied romancers. But the mythos that begins with the Leatherstocking figure transcends the literary hierarchies of “high” and “low.” As Henry Nash Smith states, “the character of Leatherstocking is by far the most important symbol of the national experience of adventure across the continent” (Smith 1950, 61). This character became a trademark of American popular culture, appearing in dime novel westerns with figures such as Seth Jones and Deadwood Dick, appearing also through the public yet fictionalized personas of Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill Hickock. The resonance of this mythic hero in the nineteenth century is indicative of widespread cultural perceptions regarding the nation’s political agenda, particularly in relation to the doctrine of manifest destiny. Cooper’s affirmative myths thus embody certain assumptions regarding the nature of historical change.

The role of Leatherstocking as the triumphant “American” overseer of an idealized Edenic space suggests that the historical destiny of the American continent is to cast off the past and to
realize the possibilities of Man before the Fall. America in some sense represented for Cooper the realization of a glorious historical continuum. Kelly attempts to characterize Cooper’s historiographic view:

The historical perspective that informs both *The Pioneers* and *The Last of the Mohicans* is a familiar one to students of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century British thought. Cooper’s faith in reasoned progress; his conception of historical change as a process of a dialectical growth; his commitment to balance, order, and moderation; and his celebration of cultural achievement closely link the first two volumes of *The Leatherstocking Tales* to the traditions of Enlightenment historiography, particularly as it is reflected in the fiction of Sir Walter Scott and the philosophy of the Common Sense school. (Kelly 1985, 361)

Without question, Cooper subscribed to some form of progress oriented historiography. But critics disagree on the type or linearity of that view. Chase, Lewis, Smith, and Slotkin argue that Cooper’s evocation of the landscape as mythic space and the hero as Adamic innocent indicates that America represents for Cooper the possibility of transcendence, that in America, history may proceed toward some hitherto unrealized cultural, political, and spiritual form. These assumptions inform the ideological components of manifest destiny, and this doctrine implies elements of an Hegelian historiography. Together these views of historical development assert that the progress of society involves a dialectical movement of cultural generation and degeneration, one that ultimately results in the realization of World-Spirit and Self-Realizing Idea. But much Enlightenment historiography rejects the notion of an “end” to history. Certain stadialists implicitly accepted a metaphysical and Christian centered teleology. But others did not, suggesting instead that cultures cycle “naturally” through a series of stages. George Dekker argues that Scottish Common Sense philosophers saw history evolving from savagery, through civilization, to an over-civilized mercantile stage. He further suggests that these philosophers saw the movement to mercantilism as a degeneration, a step toward ultimate dissolution. These stage-oriented “cycle” historiographies share much in common with Hegel, since both theories were to some degree linear and progressive. But both
diverge from each other in the sense that Hegel implies a transcendental or idealist component. The question then becomes this—Where does Cooper’s historiographic view lie in this scheme?

Like Kelly, George Dekker asserts that Cooper drew his influence primarily from the Enlightenment “cycle” theorists. But this view is noticeably different than the one implied by Chase, Smith, Lewis, and Slotkin, who suggest that Cooper presents a clearly affirmative view of American historical destiny. Allen M. Axelrad takes issue with Chase and others, suggesting that “Cooper uses Leatherstocking as an instrument through which to blast the mythic configuration he represents in the culture at large” (Axelrad 1982, 195). By reading The Leatherstocking Tales chronologically according the Natty Bumppo’s life rather than by date of publication, and by noting Natty’s final position in The Prairie, Axelrad suggests that the Leatherstocking figure proceeds toward degeneration, cynicism, and death in the face of an advancing civilization, rather than toward the transcendental mythic self-realization implied by Chase and others (who seem, without saying so, to read Cooper’s Tales as conforming to a Hegelian model). From Axelrad’s point of view, “the weight of history impinges upon and finally destroys the mythic possibility contained in the Leatherstocking,” since the embittered Natty Bumppo recedes into the wilderness and dies bereft of community and national allegiance (Axelrad 1982, 196). The inevitable cycle of historical change triumphs over and destroys the Adamic innocent.

Axelrad’s analysis is of course based upon a reading of the texts in chronological sequence. He gives no reason why one should not read the texts as Cooper wrote them. It seems reasonable to assume that Cooper’s historiographic view changed with time, and while Axelrad’s assertion is compelling, it hinges upon the assumption that Cooper possessed a fully realized and intentional historiographic vision over the eighteen year period in which the romances were written. This assumption seems at best questionable. Still, Axelrad’s analysis, coupled with the detailed account of the historiographic assumptions of the Waverley-model provided by Dekker, suggests that Cooper was at least influenced by a stadialist progressive cycle-oriented historiography. In various texts, Cooper held both stadialist “cycle” and Hegelian views simultaneously, and in his romances the voice and point of view of more than one historiographic perspective appears. This dialogism...
is reflected in Cooper's development of character and in a certain vague ambivalence on the issue of historical progress that appears in the ambiguous resolution of plot. Terence Martin suggests that while the surface narrative of *The Last of the Mohicans* encourages the reader to sympathize with certain characters, a closer look at the actions and the symbolic import of character reveals a more enigmatic view of expansionist politics. Later in *The Deerslayer*, Natty Bumppo is described as peaceful and merciful, and while he is capable of destruction, his true "gifts" are those of benevolence and self-sacrifice. But the Natty Bumppo that Cooper had represented previously in *The Last of the Mohicans* is "at times violent, at times aloof, at times almost soured by life. And Chingachgook is the canny and ferocious Great Serpent of the Mohicans, who lies coiled on the warpath and strikes terror in the hearts of his enemies" (Martin 1992, 53). Martin argues that, through character, *The Last of the Mohicans* displays a dramatic and tortured ambivalence regarding progressivist philosophy, resulting in an unconscious dialogism that is revealed in the almost contradictory relationships between author, narrator, and character as they relate to the politics of expansionism and manifest destiny. Natty engages in acts that "Cooper would come to deplore," (Martin 1992, 52), and Cooper's selection of historical materials suggests that he recognized the validity of other points of view. Although his enactment of the historical romance necessitates a stadialist historiography that as George Dekker notes is "cautiously progressivist in social philosophy" (Dekker 1987, 42), Cooper creates a dialogized text involving three somewhat contradictory voices: one that is critical of expansionism; the other a "guardedly progressive" voice of an Enlightenment stadialism specific to Herder; and the third the perspective of a powerful Hegelian historiography that supports progressivist doctrine and manifest destiny.

These historiographic voices appear most clearly in *The Last of the Mohicans* through the character of Hawkeye. Dekker argues that Hawkeye represents the savage stage in an Enlightenment stadialist model because he is for the most part nomadic. Strictly speaking this is valid, but it seems rather more plausible that Hawkeye embodies in mythic terms the virtues of all stages, since he is a white man who identifies himself as such, yet he is also a nomad originally raised by the Delaware. He reflects the savage, the barbarian, and the civilized man simultaneously. Still, he
ultimately identifies himself with his “white gifts,” and in so doing reveals the most dominant historiographic perspective present in *The Last of the Mohicans*, the voice of Johann Gottfried Herder.

Enlightenment and stadialist historiography is heterogeneous in nature, and thinkers such as Smith, Fergusen, Herder, Vico, and others express at times somewhat divergent points of view. Herder recasts the cosmic determinism of other periods into a more worldly, Enlightenment based context. In *Iden zur Philosophie der Menschengeschichte*, Herder suggests a pre-Darwinian system of nature in which the physical world functions as a matrix within which discrete organisms become transformed into higher forms, participating in an evolutionary process that leads to higher and higher levels of physical complexity. Within the context of historiography, Herder posits an explicitly teleological model, suggesting that human societies evolve “naturally” to higher and more complex forms. Herder makes no attempt to characterize mankind as a whole, or to posit a fixed, transcultural, or transgeographical “human nature.” From Herder’s point of view, human nature is instead a result of environmental conditions, and different peoples in different geographical locales will possess divergent “natures.”

This theory is expressed through Hawkeye, who he continually refers to his “white gifts” as he establishes throughout the narrative the distinction between white man’s “nature” and Indian “nature.” While it may be assumed by Cooper’s audience in the nineteenth century that the white man is superior to the Native American, Hawkeye makes no explicit reference to his superiority; he merely explores differences. His references to these varied “gifts” are too numerous to cite completely, yet they pervade Hawkeye’s speeches throughout the romance. Hawkeye begins first by observing certain commonalities in behavior. At one point, he compliments Chingachgook for possessing a quality normally associated with whites alone:

> There is reason in an Indian, though nature has made him with a red skin! said the white man, shaking his head like one on whom such an appeal to justice was not thrown away (Cooper 1826, 22).

Cooper’s respect for the Native American and his ambivalence to progress becomes apparent. Hawkeye then begins to posit...
cultural difference by making an explicit distinction between white and red: “What might be right and proper in a redskin, may be sinful in a man who has not even the cross of blood to plead his ignorance” (76). Here Hawkeye associates white civilization with Christianity, and he alludes to the notion that, through religion, European culture represents a higher and more developed form of human “nature.” Hawkeye links these divergent natures to environment and experience. Referring to the task of night watch, he states that “the eyes of a white man are too heavy and too blind for such a watch as this! The Mohican is our sentinel, therefore let us sleep” (30). The Mohicans have been conditioned by environment not only to withstand long periods without rest, but to see under circumstances the white man cannot.

The Indian nature is conditioned by life in the wilderness. In referring to the fact that Heyward can’t see an approaching canoe, Hawkeye states, “Do you see it... Now what would you account that spot were you left alone to white experience to find your way through the wilderness” (Cooper 1826, 219). The characteristics that distinguish the white man’s nature are often associated with a moral sensibility linked to Christianity. It is inconsistent with white man’s gifts to take scalps or to kill without necessity, since the spirit of Christianity is integral to the white European. Hawkeye suggests that “Revenge is an Indian feeling” and in satisfying it the red man makes use of talents particular to his nature. The white man will kill, but he will do so in a manner specific to his “gifts.” Hawkeye continues: “this much I will say — here, in the face of Heaven, and with the power of the Lord so manifest in the howling wilderness. ... there is one rifle shall play its part. ... I leave the tomahawk and the knife to such as have a natural gift to use them” (190). Hawkeye not only links himself to Christianity, but also to a more advanced form of military culture, while suggesting that the use of certain weapons are “natural” only to those who exist as members of a more barbaric phase of human development. In this way, the voice of Hawkeye explicitly expresses the dominant characteristics of Herder’s evolutionary naturalism. Although the Native American deserves the respect of the white, he represents a less complex form of human social development and is historically destined to yield to the advancing white civilization.

The Christian element in the voice of Hawkeye suggests the particular way in which progressivist historiography gives way to Hegel and manifest destiny. Hegel saw history as a dramatic,
totalizing, and systematic progression of events along a preordained historical continuum. History for Hegel was the record of the developing World-Spirit revealed through the existence of a World-Process and a Self-Realizing Idea. Christianity was central to this process, since the realization of history was synonymous with the ultimate redemption of mankind through the Second Coming of Christ. Drawing his influence from Kant, Schiller, Schelling, and Fichte, Hegel located the historical process in the teleological evolution of the human mind, which revealed itself in the development of human reason and moral sensibility. At a cultural level, this process of development occurs dialectically, as ideas arise and become manifest in cultures that function in opposition to other cultures and are later synthesized into new social formations. History therefore involves the generation, degeneration, and regeneration of cultural forms, traditions, and metaphysical systems, features that are realized historically in the triumph of Christianity and the end of history.

This Hegelian view comes into play in *The Last of the Mohicans* through Cooper's version of the romance genre. Cooper transcendentals the historical conflict between the forces of progress and reaction by lifting his characters out of the merely social sphere, reconstituting them in realm of myth. Characters such as Hawkeye, Chingachgook, Uncas, and Cora exist not merely as human agents within the tale, but as symbolic figures that represent the virtues associated with whole civilizations and races. Cora possesses all the "exquisite proportions" that the narrator first associates with Alice, a "dazzling complexion, fair golden hair, and bright blue eyes." Yet, she is "rather fuller and more mature than her companion" (Cooper 1826, 9). This idealized and peculiarly European image of female beauty derives a symbolic meaning from the virtues that Cora represents in the tale: bravery, courage, selflessness, and love, virtues that are demonstrated in Cora's ultimate act of self-sacrifice. Chingachgook and Uncas contrast sharply with Cora. The narrator describes Chingachgook in idealized terms: "His body, which was nearly naked, presented a terrific emblem of death. . . . the expanded chest, full formed limbs, and grave countenance of a warrior, would denote that he had reached the vigor of his days, though no symptoms of decay appeared to have weakened his manhood" (21). This "naked" warrior and his son clearly manifest strength, "vigor," and "manhood," and they function as idealized images of the Native American.
American. The white man Hawkeye appears in “moccasins” that are “ornamented after the gay fashion of the natives,” and “a pouch and horn complete his accoutrements, though a rifle of great length ... leaned against a neighboring sapling” (22). His dress and manner reflect a combination of European and Native American characteristics, and in person he becomes the archetypal frontiersman, defined in large part by the rifle, the white man’s implement of destruction.

With the characters thus mythologized, Cooper enacts the historical conflict, not merely in social and political terms, but in quasi-religious terms. The distributional sequence of plot results in the death of Magua, who symbolically represents the darkest and most brutal aspect of Native American culture. But in the historiographic continuum that leads inevitably to civilization, Uncas must die also, and in the process of this conflict, white civilization must suffer through Cora. Presiding over the frontier is Chingachgook, the last aging Delaware. With him is his compatriot Hawkeye, who while critical of certain aspects of “civilization” nevertheless represents the vanguard of white European expansionism. The essential tenets of Hegelian historiography are represented in the text as Cooper enacts in symbolic terms the evolution of World-Spirit and Self-Realizing Idea. Both the best and the worst of native American peoples give rise through a dialectical process to American civilization. This civilization is the realization of the dialectical process Hegel describes in *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, one that began in Europe and will achieve its ultimate form on the American continent. Hawkeye is of course the final symbol, since he retains his “white gifts” while absorbing and synthesizing his many Indian characteristics. In Hegelian terms (as ultimately expressed in the doctrine of manifest destiny) it is the fate of Native American culture to give way to white expansionism and a new “American” culture.

Of course, this rather emotionally charged Hegelianism is not the only perspective present in the text. *The Last of the Mohicans*, as Terence Martin notes, displays ambivalence. Hawkeye himself, on numerous occasions, gives voice to a certain skepticism regarding the value of European civilization, stating that “I am willing to own that my people have many ways, of which, as an honest man I can’t approve” (Cooper 1826, 23). In the historical frame that opens the tale, the narrator begins with a critique of European culture, stating that Europe upheld a “cold and selfish policy”
toward the Indians of the Americas. The narrator is critical of the French “plans of annoyance,” and their “restless enterprise,” of the “imbecility” of the British military leaders and the “proud elevation” of the British aristocracy (2). Through characters such as Hawkeye, Chingachgook, and Uncas, *The Last of the Mohicans* participates in the creation of affirmative myths of significant symbolic meaning. Contrary to their original intent as affirmative myths, these emerging cultural icons portray both faith and skepticism toward manifest destiny. The integrational nature of the romance, the voice of narrator, the voices and symbolic import of mythic characters, leads to a romance that portrays a number of cultural voices that speak to the issue of historiographic theory and progressivist social philosophy. A generalized Enlightenment historiography, Herder’s naturalism, and Hegelian historiographic idealism all find voice in Cooper’s second Leatherstocking Tale. In this way, the myth evoked in *Last of the Mohicans* represents sets of historiographic perspectives that function in cultural dialogue.

Metahistorical elements appear most explicitly in *The Last of the Mohicans*. But ambivalence and cultural dialogicism is clearly a central feature in *The Prairie* (1827). *The Prairie* was written shortly after *The Last of the Mohicans*, but the relationship between the two texts does not suggest that the author’s political and historiographic conscience develops over time toward an increasing skepticism of American expansionist doctrine. Cooper often “deplores” the violence associated with white civilization, but at times he glamorizes and supports it. The Leatherstocking sequence was of course written out of chronological order. Natty Bumppo’s life is traced through *The Deerslayer* (1841), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), *The Pathfinder* (1840), *The Pioneers* (1823), and finally *The Prairie* (1827). Read in chronological sequence, it appears that Cooper becomes more and more skeptical of progressivist doctrine. But if we take the romances in the order that Cooper wrote them, we see the author alternating between faith and skepticism in regard to manifest destiny and linear and progressive theories of history. This ambivalence reaches its height in *The Prairie*, the third romance in the order written.

*The Prairie* maintains the basic framework of the American historical romance as George Dekker identifies it, pitting the forces of progress against those of reaction in the characters of Natty Bumppo, Ishmael Bush, Abiram White, Dr. Obed Battins, and Duncan Uncas Heyward. Although in *The Last of the Mohicans* an
ambivalence regarding manifest destiny begins to appear, there is no sense that Cooper intends to foreground this doubt as theme. The text remains dialogized as the competing culture specific points of view interpenetrate Cooper’s novelistic discourse. In *The Prairie*, however, Cooper begins to foreground carefully his conflicted feelings in the romance, and while he does not use any elaborate structural and generic techniques such as the gothic, the grotesque, and the arabesque, he does begin to anticipate the aesthetic dialogism of Hawthorne and Melville. As in *The Last of the Mohicans*, Cooper implicitly embodies in the romance the various competing theories of history in the form of character. But the associations are shifted, altered from their status in *The Last of the Mohicans*. In *Mohicans*, Hawkeye is a heroic figure who manifests traits of many stages in the stadialist model, and ultimately he is the vanguard of the advancing white. In *The Prairie*, he in fact retreats from that civilization. George Dekker points to Natty Bumppo’s nomadic existence, aligning him with the “savage” stage. Although Natty represents symbolically no specific theory of history, his tragic state as the decaying frontiersman suggests that he now stands firmly in opposition to the settling, mercantile, agrarian impulses of white civilization. Natty immediately confronts both Ishmael Bush and his brother-in-law, Abiram White. Bush is a rather complicated character, neither entirely antagonistic nor sympathetic. The leader of an emigrant family, he clearly represents the advancing white culture. As a representative of this movement, he is portrayed as strong, forthright, and tenacious, but also as cruel, greedy, and self-serving. Abiram White is all of these negative characteristics and more, and he ultimately proves to be a murderer. Bush and White reflect the darker and more brutal aspects of European civilization; the firmly Hegelian view, the sympathy toward the ideology of manifest destiny present in *The Last of the Mohicans*, is clearly called into question. This criticism of the advancing white is further supported by the comic character of Dr. Obed Battins. A naturalist, a representative of the “scientific” community, Battins is ultimately crippled and dumbfounded by the reality of nature. His subject of analysis, the thing he “classifies,” finally overpowers him. Through Battins, Cooper lampoons the perhaps egotistical Enlightenment assumption that Man may control, conquer, and understand the natural world, and Battins also functions as a character who points to the dark and unheroic aspect of white civilization.
But *The Prairie* is not simply a critical monologue on the evils of European culture. Cooper maintains the heroic ideal in the figure of Duncan Uncas Heyward. Heyward’s purpose is to rescue his lady love, Dona Inez de Certavallos, and in so doing he engages in courageous acts of self-sacrifice. Cooper preserves in its full form the chivalric ideal as it appears in medieval romance, and that ideal is still seen as representative of white European civilization.

Heyward is a military man, whose purpose is ostensibly to protect and preserve the American imperial project. In *The Prairie*, Cooper creates a romance that places the darker aspects of white civilization in stark contrast to this heroic ideal. At the same time, the author removes Natty Bumppo, the primary icon and vanguard of white civilization, from the symbolic frame of historiographic reference he occupied in *The Last of the Mohicans*, making him a firm reactionary, a savage who will die among the Sioux and the Pawnee. *The Prairie* is ambivalent and dialogical as it relates to the issue of historical progress. Although Cooper returns to more optative representations of the white hero in *The Pathfinder* (1840) and *The Deerslayer* (1841), it is clear that his historical romances are dialogized narratives that foreground multiple, often conflicting theories of history. The Leatherstocking sequence as a whole foregrounds issue of history in dialogical terms, but both *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Prairie* embody the competing amalgamation of culture-specific assumptions about the nature of historical change that typified American culture in the early nineteenth century.

**Notes**

1C. Hugh Holman, “The Influence of Scott and Cooper on Simms,” rpt. in *The Roots of Southern Writing*. Holman’s analysis represents the first major study dealing with the influence of the Waverley novels on the American romance tradition. Much criticism of historical romance in America is based in part upon Holman’s work, including Dekker’s *The American Historical Romance*.

2See David M. Potter, “The Historian’s Use of Nationalism and Vice Versa.” The editor of the volume identifies this piece as “perhaps David Potter’s best known essay.” Potter explores the primary purpose of history writing, suggesting that “the historian is concerned with human beings” but “he does not deal with them as individuals. . . . he deals with them as groups” (61). Potter explores changing definitions of nationality since this concept has been used continually as a means of classifying and exploring human “groups.” Potter’s ideas are useful perhaps in an exploration of the historical project of the historical romancer.
For a detailed discussion and application of Bakhtin's concept of the dialogic in the American romance tradition, see G. R. Thompson, "Romantic Arabesque, Contemporary Theory, and Postmodernism: The Example of Poe's Narrative." See also Thompson's The Art of Authorial Presence: Hawthorne's Provincial Tales. Again, Thompson clarifies the notion of intentionality as it relates to dialogism, forming the basis for the distinction between cultural and aesthetic dialogism.

Cooper's tales can be seen as emblematic of certain cultural values of the nineteenth century, of an emerging national mythos rather than as a reliable history. The historical accuracy of The Leatherstocking Tales have been criticized on a number of grounds. In particular, historians have pointed to historical inaccuracies that appear in The Last of the Mohicans. These scholars charge Cooper with deliberately reconstructing and misrepresenting the historical chronicle for political and ideological purposes. Through Native American characters such as Chingachgook, Uncas, and Magua, Cooper suggests that the Delaware peoples, the Mohegans, who were a noble and relatively peaceful tribe, constituted a comparatively advanced form of agrarian civilization. Cooper contrasts the Mohegans with the Iroquois (Mengue in the Delaware tongue) whom he represents as savage, thieving, and violent. Cooper implies that the Delaware were tricked by the Iroquois into laying down their defenses and taking up the subordinate status of "women" in relation to the Six Nations of the Iroquois. Many subsequent accounts of Native American history contradict this representation, suggesting that among other tribes the Delaware were in fact conquered rather than "tricked" by the Iroquois in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Six Nations of the Iroquois established a dominant political position over a region of land that extended westward to the shores of Lake Ontario. In the complexities of their agrarian economies and social and political organization, in their development and use of military power, the Six Nations of the Iroquois (which included the Seneca, Cayuga, Onanoga, Onieda, Mohawk, and Tuscarora) represented the most developed and civilized of Native American tribes. In spite of this representation of Delaware and Iroquois, Cooper seemed at least originally convinced of the truth of his account. In the 1826 Preface to The Last of the Mohicans, he lays claim to historical accuracy:

There is a well-authenticated and disgraceful history of the means by which the Dutch on one side and the Mengue on the other, succeeded in persuading the Lenape to lay aside their arms, trusting their defense entirely to the latter, and becoming, in short, in the figurative language of the natives "women"... From that moment may be dated the downfall of the greatest and most civilized of Indian nations.

The process by which the Delaware were convinced to concede seems rather scanty from this account, and one wonders why Cooper left his materials unquestioned. One answer to this mystery lies in part in Gregory Lansing Paine's essay "The Indians of The Leatherstocking Tales." Paine
establishes John G. Heckewelder's *An Account of the History, Manners, and Customs* of the Indian Nations as Cooper's primary historical reference for the Leatherstocking Tales. Here Cooper encountered the idea of the stark opposition of noble Delawares and the savage and ignoble Iroquois. Paine argues that although other perhaps contradictory accounts existed in Cooper's time, Heckewelder's work had achieved acclaim and critical validation shortly before Cooper began writing the Leatherstocking Tales. But in *History and Myth in American Fiction: 1823-1852*, Robert Clark takes exception to Paine's account, suggesting instead that Cooper was aware not only of other contradictory accounts, but of their validity. Clark points out that publication of *The Last of the Mohicans* touched off a concerted attack on both Heckewelder’s History and Cooper’s use of it. In 1814, Cooper’s own associate DeWitt Clinton, the Governor of New York State, had published an essay on the Iroquois that was considered a thoroughly accurate and detailed historical chronicle. Clinton’s account contradicted Heckewelder’s view, and Clark asserts that given the intimacy of Cooper’s association with Clinton (Cooper served under him) Cooper would have been well aware of his own misuse of historical data. Clark suggests that Cooper’s deliberate preference was motivated by the politics of expansionism and manifest destiny. The westward movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were dependent in large part upon the assumption that higher forms of civilization have a valid (perhaps divinely granted) historical claim upon unsettled lands. If the western regions of the territories were occupied by a “barbaric” and “savage” people, then expansionism was a valid project. But if the Iroquois were as civilized as Clinton’s account claims, the expansionist ideology loses much of its validity. Clark in fact argues that “Cooper’s representation of the Iroquois as the most savage of Indians ... results from two factors: the need to repress knowledge of their cultural attainments so that the ideology of expansionism may remain unquestioned, and from the desire to remove them from their homelands so that the patriarchal estate would appear to have been a wilderness before the arrival of the white man.”

Clark’s view is based in large part on a psychoanalytic account of mythogenesis, wherein the transformation of history into myth involves “the reconciliation and satisfaction of repressed desire.” His account of the ambiguities and complexities that existed among the historical accounts in Cooper’s time is rather telling and important. But Cooper’s attempt at affirmative mythogenesis precludes the possibility of a deliberately enacted set of factual or thematic ambiguities, and the Waverley-model itself depends upon the romance containing some solid historical chronicle. Perhaps Cooper’s preference for Heckewelder had little to do with conscious or unconscious ideological assumptions, and more to do with both the requirements of genre and the practicalities of the marketplace. Cooper selects for his source an account that is popular and fresh in the public mind, and with it constructs a tale that presents the Native American as “beau ideal.” Cooper’s selection of Heckewelder’s version may simply owe itself to factors such as these. Clearly, the validity of both accounts was open to question.

"For a study dealing with the significance of Cooper in the American romance tradition, see Geoffrey Rans, *Cooper’s Leather-Stocking Novels: A Secular Reading*. Rans provides a sweeping and comprehensive analysis of Cooper’s Leatherstocking series, motivated by the assumption that, while Cooper’s place in American literary history is “secure,” he is “not yet thoroughly read.” Citing a number of respectable colleagues in American literary studies, Rans points to the fact that many critics have not analyzed Cooper with the same rigor as figures such as Faulkner, Melville, and Hawthorne. Rans recognizes the “flaws” in Cooper’s work that account for this phenomenon, but he argues as Vernon Parrington did in 1927, that there is a deceptive complexity inherent in the Leatherstocking series as a whole. Cooper critics have often asserted this position, but for some reason these notions have not taken root. Rans culls together and synthesizes various perspectives on Cooper: new critical formalist, generic, psychoanalytical, biographical, symbolic, historical, and phenomenological. In doing so, he suggests that critics need not elevate Cooper as artist to the level of Melville or Hawthorne to appreciate his contribution to the development of romance in America.

"See Dekker’s *The American Historical Romance*, Chapter Three, “Historical Romance and the Stadialist Model of Progress.” 73-98. Dekker derives much of his discussion of stadialism from Ralph Meek’s *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*.

"George Dekker, *James Fenimore Cooper: The Novelist*. This study is essential reading for any contemporary Cooper scholar. Dekker provides detailed readings of both major and minor works, including *The Last of the Mohicans, The Wept of Wish-Ton-Wish, The Water Witch, The Heidenmauer, and The Headman*. In doing so, he begins a detailed exploration of a set of ideas that will form the basis of his work in *The American Historical Romance* and he re-establishes Cooper’s role in the American literary tradition. Like most Cooper scholars, Dekker feels obligated to answer critics who disparage Cooper on aesthetic grounds. He does so by pointing out that while Cooper’s texts individually do not lend themselves to the kind of critical endeavor as those of Hawthorne, Melville, and Faulkner, his work is nevertheless indispensable to an understanding of the development of the American novel.

"As mythological yet human representations of historical conflict, these characters provide a more dialogized, textured, multi-dimensional, and thematically ambiguous representation of history than would be permitted through a narrative dominated by chronicle primarily. As the “barbarians” become human in Chingachgook and Uncas, as the demise of barbarian cultures is expressed dramatically in Uncas’ death, the validity of white expansionism becomes at least questionable. In this way, the romance provides, as Raymond Williams would suggest, a dialogized negotiation between the “social reality” of the early eighteenth century (as expressed in
the physical evocation of place) and the "social experience" of the early nineteenth century (as it appears in the conflicts revolving around American progressivism). See Raymond Williams, *The English Novel From Dickens to Lawrence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

10 See Heinz Ickstadt, "Instructing the American Democrat: Cooper and the Concept of Popular Fiction in Jacksonian America," in *James Fenimore Cooper: New Critical Essays*, ed. Robert Clark. This article explores the linkage between Cooper's "popular" and "bourgeois" fiction and the ideology of American democracy. Ickstadt, like many, points to the existence and expansionist ideology in Cooper's work. This article, of course, significantly reduces Cooper's ideological view and fails to acknowledge the ambiguity and dialogical complexity in Cooper's fiction. But Ickstadt at least clarifies the influence of Jeffersonian and Jacksonian democracy and Enlightenment political ideology as it appears in Cooper's romances.

11 The character traits and actions that appear in the tale can be described in narratological terms as indicative in nature. Again, Barthes refers to "psychological indices concerning the characters, data regarding their identity, notations of atmosphere and so on." The psychological features and physical details that make up these mythic characters function as narrative indices insofar as they are ancillary to the main action. But they are central to any interpretation of the symbolic or allegorical import of character. The psychological characteristics of these mythic figures are not complex, since their expressed beliefs, actions, and mental states — Hawkeye's adherence to Christianity, Chingachgook's defense of his people, Uncas' heroic sacrifice — reflect the virtues, vices, and belief structures integral to the cultures they represent. They derive their identity from these traits, and through visual appearance, speech patterns, and described mannerisms they evoke the 'atmosphere' of place specific to the historical moment in question. As affirmative myths, the way in which they are described and the actions they undertake do not always contribute to the distributional sequence of plot. But the descriptions, actions, and beliefs that inform their characters "indicate" the central elements of the historical conflict in question. Heyward is the advancing white, Chingachgook and Uncas are the heroic yet receding barbarians, and Hawkeye is the symbolic synthesis of both cultures, representing the generation of a new white "American" heroic ideal. These elements are reinforced by the distributional sequence of plot, and as characters these figures suggest all of the values and beliefs that contribute to this historical conflict. The massacre is in a sense ancillary, since it involved a war between two groups of European peoples.

Works Cited


53 FRYE