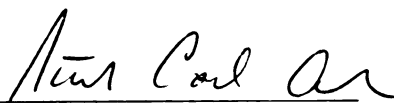


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BARTRAM, BRACKENRIDGE, PARKMAN:
THE EMERGENCE OF ROMANTIC TRAVEL NARRATIVE ON THE
AMERICAN FRONTIER

By

Stephen A. Gaertner

A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

2002

ABSTRACT

BARTRAM, BRACKENRIDGE, PARKMAN: THE EMERGENCE OF ROMANTIC TRAVEL NARRATIVE ON THE AMERICAN FRONTIER

By

Stephen A. Gaertner

The evolution of the travel narrative on the American Frontier chronicles American culture's encounter with the wilderness of the late 18th and early 19th centuries: it evidences a change in historical and aesthetic sensibility that displays the emerging Romantic consciousness in the United States. To be sure, American Romanticism inherits much from the European Romantics, particularly in regards to its affinity for the picturesque beauty and sublimity of the natural, uncultivated landscape, as well as its deeper, more nostalgic understanding of history. However, where American Romanticism specifically differs, as in the Frontier travel narrative, is in respect to the *form* of its nostalgia: in Europe, most Romantics lament the loss of a distant, often Medieval past; in 19th century America, writers are subject to a nostalgia of *immanence*, that is, the foreknowledge of impending, irrevocable change in their natural environment, e. g. the disappearance of the Frontier and, to a large extent, its native inhabitants and their culture. Though one can see the beginnings of this nostalgic sentiment in Brackenridge's *Views of Louisiana*, it is in Parkman's *Oregon Trail* that Romantic nostalgia reaches a far greater maturity. The Frontier Travel narratives of William Bartram, Henry Marie Brackenridge and Francis Parkman chronicle the emergence of this distinctively American Romantic nostalgia.

For G. P. G.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Edward Watts and especially Dr. Stephen Arch for their overall guidance, support, and, in particular, their assistance during the research phase of this project. Needless to say, without their help, this project would never have been possible.

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BARTRAM, BRACKENRIDGE, PARKMAN: THE EMERGENCE OF ROMANTIC TRAVEL NARRATIVE ON THE AMERICAN FRONTIER

In 1904, over a decade after the “disappearance” of the American Frontier, Henry James returned to the United States after twenty years of living abroad. What he found in the country of his birth in many respects appalled him: a nation that had exchanged culture for commodification, history for an obtuse present, and interiority for industry and urbanization. While touring the New England countryside, he examines the sublime “prospect” of an abandoned, dilapidated family farm, lamenting the ultimate ruin of a vision of an American identity, an American *society*, which had years since ceased to exist. In *The American Scene* he writes:

The history was there in its degree These scenes of old, hard New England effort, defeated by the soil and the climate and reclaimed by nature and time—the crumbled, lonely chimney-stack, the overgrown threshold, the dried up well, the cart-track vague and lost—these seemed the only notes to interfere, in their meagreness, with the queer *other*, the larger, eloquence that one kept reading into the picture. Even the wild legend, immediately local, of the Indian who, having, a hundred years ago, murdered a husbandman, was pursued, by roused avengers to the topmost peak of the Chocura Mountain, and thence, to escape, to his leap into the abyss—even so sharp an echo of a definite far-off past, enriching the effect of an admirable slivered summit . . . , spent itself in the mere idleness of the indiscriminated, tangled actual . . . these things put you, so far as you were preoccupied with the human history of places, into a mood in which

appreciation became a positive wantonness. (15-16)

What is important to note in this passage is that James brings to bear a linear, almost *epic* conception of history in his description of the landscape, a sense which might best be characterized as Romantic *nostalgia*, the “echo of a definite far-off past” that “enriches” the picturesque scene before him.¹ James sees a past moment in American history which has faded from time forever, much like the American Indians of the Frontier, a “prospect” doomed never to return to human sight.

Scenes of Romantic “nostalgia” can be observed throughout the geographical space that was once the American Frontier, each adding to the immense chronicle of physical as well as cultural change which characterize the historical narrative of Western “civilization’s” subjugation of an entire continent. Through these scenes one can mark the “progression” of the Frontier and the experiences of its inhabitants/explorers as the pioneering juggernaut pushed its boundaries further and further west, until the Frontier’s virtual disappearance in 1890.² However, to mark the evolution of the American landscape in purely chronological, geographical and demographic terms is to omit, arguably, a far more profound transformation that occurred in American letters. As the American population migrated west, exploring and settling the Frontier, an evolution in literary and historical sensibility also occurred: indeed, the two phenomena are inextricably linked. American travel narratives of the then Frontier show that as the Frontier advanced, so did the American historical consciousness, for as many writers experienced the changes that the ever-moving Frontier simultaneously engendered and represented in American society, the “reasonable” 18th century notion of history as a rigidly structured world which essentially remains unchanged, “static,” as it were, now

proved ultimately *unreasonable*, woefully inadequate and philosophically ill-equipped to explain the changes taking place throughout the United States in the early and middle 19th century.

In reading the travel narratives of the American Frontier, one can discern a pronounced metamorphosis of rhetoric from the late 18th century to the middle 19th century. In particular, what one comes to observe is a different historical sensibility with regards to the authors' responses to the Frontier environment (landscape, inhabitants, etc.): the emergence of a Romantic "nostalgia" which increasingly "narrativizes" its subject matter in written, first-hand accounts. For the purposes of this essay, then, William Bartram's *Travels* (published 1791) will serve as an 18th century example with which to contrast two later Frontier narratives, Henry Marie Brackenridge's *Views of Louisiana* (1814) and Francis Parkman's *Oregon Trail* (1847), two works that, by degrees, reveal the emergence of a "nostalgic" historical awareness.³

I

Norman Hampson describes the Enlightenment's conception of history as a system as a "cyclical pessimism" (232) where

the pageant of history was the continual re-enactment of the same drama in different costumes. For the writers of the Enlightenment the things that changed were of much more significance since they regulated man's life in this world, which constituted the whole field of their enquiries.

Nevertheless, for them . . . the theme of history was a dogmatic constant. The vehicle of change, human reason, was itself unchanging, and progress consisted of the extension of reason's empire rather than the evolution of

‘reason’ itself. (234)

Additionally, Lore Metzger asserts that the Enlightenment’s view of historical movement or “progress” was such that “[18th century] philosophers, theologians, and poets . . . had come to believe in a theory of human progress, even though they envisioned progress as not necessarily proceeding in a straight line but as involving setbacks or backward spirals as part of the forward thrust toward perfectibility” (9). Clearly, such a view is contrary to the Hegelian notion of historical “progress” as it came to be accepted during the 19th century, for such chronological motion as described by Metzger is not “progress” at all, at least not in a linear sense.⁴ More important, however, is that this model ultimately implies an inherent lack of human agency on the macro-historical level, progress being subject to “backward spirals” in spite of human endeavor to the contrary. Bartram himself gives evidence of such a retrogressive conception of history in *Travels*:

thus in the moral system, which we [humankind] have planned for our conduct, as a ladder whereby to mount to the summit of terrestrial glory and happiness, and from whence we perhaps meditated our flight to heaven itself, at the very moment when we vainly imagine ourselves to have attained its point, some unforeseen accident intervenes, and surprises us; the chain is violently shaken, we quit our hold and fall: the well contrived system at once becomes chaos; every idea of happiness recedes; the splendor of glory darkens, and at length totally disappears . . . all is deranged, and the flattering scene passes quite away, a gloomy cloud pervades the understanding . . . we see our progress retarded, and our best intentions frustrated. (33)

“Setbacks” in the historical progress of humankind are for Bartram quite inevitable, as well as “frustrating.” Furthermore, the belief in historical “setbacks” carries with it the notion of redundancy or repetition, in a manner lessening the sense of any given historical “moment” being unique or “fleeting.” Bartram continues: “But let us wait and rely on our God, who in due time will shine forth in brightness, dissipate the envious cloud, and reveal to us how finite and circumscribed is human power, when assuming to itself independent wisdom” (33). One may gather from this that, in addition to revealing human limitation (and historical impotence), the “Divine Author” ultimately will reveal (or *re-reveal*) His plan if humankind is but patient and devoted; and human “progress” may then resume where the regressive “chaos” left off. History, in essence, is destined to repeat itself.

This particular historical sensibility is not lost on the chroniclers of the time, specifically those composing Frontier travel narratives in the late 18th century, whose aim was not to fashion an “epic” rendering of human history, but rather “to inform their readers” and “to help the reader understand the nature of the American continent” (Medeiros 195, 197). Of William Bartram’s *Travels* in particular, Patricia M. Medeiros writes that Bartram “rarely allows his artistic self to gain control over the scientific and religious selves” (203), for as she correctly points out with regards to the introduction to *Travels*, Bartram’s self-stated motives revolved primarily around “the scientist’s ‘restless spirit of curiosity’ and the practical goal of finding ‘useful’ ‘productions of nature,’ combined with the religious impulse to worship the Creator of these ‘productions’” (203). This inquisitiveness to find the most reasonable “uses” for, and thus methods of, improving the natural “productions” of the landscape is entirely consistent with

Enlightenment thought. John Locke writes:

God, when He gave the world in common to all mankind, commanded man also to labor, and the penury of his condition required it of him. God and his reason commanded him to subdue the earth, *i. e.*, improve it for the benefit of life . . . but since He gave it them for their benefit, and the greatest conveniences of life they were capable to draw from it, it cannot be supposed He meant it should always remain common and uncultivated. He gave it to the use of the industrious and rational. (398-99)

As Medeiros argues, 18th century Frontier narratives like Bartram's *Travels* "appealed to a sense of pride of ownership and a sense of collective responsibility for the proper *use* of the land. While they did not explicitly call for a revolution or the formation of an American nation, these works contained . . . an understanding of and a pride in the physical aspects of the continent . . . and a call for collective action to develop the land for the benefit of its inhabitants" (196, emphasis added). Bartram writes: "O Sovereign Lord! since it has pleased thee to endue man with power, and pre-eminence, here on earth, and establish his dominion over all creatures, may we look up to thee, that our understanding may be so illuminated with wisdom and our hearts warmed and animated" (65). This notion of humankind properly "establishing dominion" throughout the world is the particular object of works such as Bartram's *Travels*. Eighteenth-century writers had little "use" for a "Romanticized" narrative (such as one dealing with the radical historical implications of an American "revolution"): indeed, to do so in their eyes would be nothing more than "useless" vanity and fancifulness, both discrediting their scientific observations and distracting the reader from the primary, *practical* purposes of the texts.

In short, as George Dekker asserts, for “Eighteenth-century thinkers . . . the narrative mode of presentation was not essential to historiography” (31), and in the case of Bartram, the field of *natural* history proves no exception.

Despite the attempts of some scholars to categorize William Bartram as a “proto-Romantic” due to his apparent advocacy of humankind living in Edenic “harmony” with the beautiful wonder of nature, Bartram’s *Travels* is in fact concerned with the “useful” descriptions of the soil, plants, animals, and inhabitants of the American southeast as they may contribute to the natural “improvement” of the landscape. His travel narrative is squarely in the genre of 18th century “natural history”.⁵ Relatively early in *Travels*, Bartram remarks: “I arrived at the seat of the Hon. B. Andrews, Esq I spent the evening very agreeably, and the day following . . . I viewed with pleasure this gentleman’s exemplary *improvements* in agriculture; particularly in the growth of rice, and in his machines for shelling that valuable grain” (7, emphasis added). Additionally, as he surveys a portion of what is presently northeastern Florida, Bartram writes:

This vast plain together with the forests contiguous to it, if permitted (by the Siminoles who are sovereigns of these realms) to be in possession and under the culture of industrious planters and mechanicks, would in a little time exhibit other scenes than it does at present . . . for by the arts of agriculture and commerce, almost every desirable thing in life might be produced and made plentiful here, and thereby establish a rich, populous and delightful region. (148)

Bartram does not endeavor in these passages to ponder the Romantic beauty of the southern landscapes, but rather maintains an “objective” air of practical, “useful”

analysis. In addition to his attentiveness to the potential for the improvement of the land, Bartram reinforces his grounding in the *present*. Absent is any Romantic or quasi-nostalgic reflection that such development or “improvement” of the land by white settlers will necessarily spell the destruction of the native “Siminole” (Seminole) nation and culture. Of Bartram’s method, Pamela Regis states: “Bartram reports his movements as he travels, but this narrative remains a mere frame for the description. It fails to provide a middle ground between the impersonal facts of natural history and the psychologically immediate sensations of Burkean aesthetics [i.e., the sublime and the beautiful]” (41-42). Ultimately, then, “Bartram’s entire method was one of seeing and observing” (Regis 65) in a spirit of curiosity and “usefulness.” Regis also asserts that “the natural historical entry, list, and essay” in *Travels* “define space at the expense of time: they suspend narrative” (60). Herein lies the key to properly understanding Bartram’s mode of writing, for in its commitment to “useful” observation and description, the *temporal* aspect of narrative is naturally suspended, in a sense “dehistoricizing” the (con)text for the reader. With regard to Bartram’s style, Regis writes:

In between the parenthetical narrative statements we read about the . . . soil, artifacts . . . , plants, and animals. In these passages, particularly in the lists of plants with their Linnaean names, the temporal element present in the narrative drops out, and we are presented with a list located in space, but no longer in time. As an observer moving through time, Bartram disappears Time suspends before the calling of the *eternal* Linnaean names. The *static*, curiously still descriptions partake of the verbless nature of the Linnaean names themselves. The reader reconstitutes the

scene, but does so in the historyless “now” that is a consequence of the Linnaean rhetoric. (61, emphasis added)

The “now” is ever-present in the very form of *Travels*: Bartram occasionally switches, as if unaware of the change, from the past to the present tense. For Bartram and his contemporaries, the rigidly structured order of the world, the “Great Chain of Being,” as it were, is fundamentally ahistorical: indeed, humankind can increase its “useful” knowledge of this order for the purposes of practical “improvement” in the present, but in the end, the world itself as well as the divinely ordained structure which governs it remain essentially unchanged.⁶

In this respect, then, one can understand why Bartram and the explorers/natural historians of his time did not display the sentimentality of Romantic nostalgia as it would evolve in the Frontier travel narratives of later generations. For an 18th century traveler such as Bartram, the future does not materialize at the *expense* of a lost, ideal past or a threatened present, but rather as the natural and positive *fulfillment* of the divinely ordained, cultivated “improvement” of humankind. Bartram writes:

Next day we passed over part of the great and beautiful Alachua Savanna, whose exuberant green meadows, with the fertile hills which immediately encircle it, would if peopled and cultivated after the civilized countries of Europe . . . at a moderate estimation, accommodate in the happiest manner, above one hundred thousand human inhabitants, besides millions of domestic animals; and I make no doubt this place will at some future day be one of the most populous and delightful seats on earth. (158)

In this passage Bartram indulges in an altogether Lockean vision, one which he

punctuates with the most positive of terms. Of course, the 21st century reader will note that such a vision omits to mention the profound, irrevocable effect that such a populous settlement would have upon not only the rugged, natural landscape, decimating its “sublime beauty,” but also the civilization/culture of the indigenous “inhabitants,” the American Indians. However, for natural historians of Bartram’s era such a consideration on an epic scale was beyond their scope: in their eyes, an ancient (and primitive) culture was not being lost, but, rather, the maximum, beneficial utilization of the land was being gained, ultimately for the benefit of all people, both whites and American Indians. In short, change, even on the largest scale, did not necessitate in the 18th century the feeling of nostalgia that it did for the Romantics, for as with the long-since-vanished builders of the “mount” artifacts which Bartram frequently encounters, all civilizations, even the most advanced, ultimately pass into oblivion, whence the cycle of divine “progress” may begin anew.

One area in particular where Bartram’s 18th century sensibility can be perceived is in his treatment of American Indians in *Travels*. Bartram’s rhetoric does not reflect the extreme racism and cultural hostility that some Frontier travel narratives exhibit, but rather provides a favorable description of American Indians in certain sections of *Travels*. Some critics have erroneously pointed to this representation as evidence of a budding Romanticism present in Bartram’s writing: to do so is to overstate the case. For one thing, Regis rightly asserts that “Bartram represents native Americans with exactly the same rhetoric he has been using to represent the plants and animals he encounters on his trip” (73). She writes: “[Bartram’s] method for describing [native Americans] was first formulated to describe plants and animals that were clearly not of the same species as the

describer. A tree is clearly Other. So is a bird. Transfer the method used to describe the tree or bird to another human being, and he becomes Other, too” (76). Indeed, Bartram repeatedly refers to groupings of related specimens of flora and fauna as “tribes” (171) in the text, as well as likening American Indian society to those of ants and bees (313). Still, what is especially important to understand here is that by utilizing such a mode of scientific description with regards to American Indians, Bartram ultimately “dehistoricizes” them as well, in a sense removing them from a narrative framework and placing them in the same “static,” ahistorical descriptive category as southeastern American *flora* and *fauna*. In short, Regis writes that for travelers/authors of Bartram’s time,

Natural historical representation presents America at its most characteristic—its unique plants, animals, peoples, and scenes—and as outside of time. American seems new; it is a place where events have not intruded. Native Americans are subsumed under this natural historical description, becoming entries on a list, links on a chain. The rhetoric of this description denies them any history, individual or cultural, because that rhetoric did not include a way to represent time. (25)

Thus, regarding the “noble savage,” as he occasionally refers to the American Indian, Bartram could feel no Romantic “nostalgia” for his threatened, vanished, or lost *history*, particularly seeing as that “in the eyes of the eighteenth century, a people without writing could not have a history” (Regis 37). Bartram’s disregard for any valuable, cohesive cultural history that American Indians might possess is reinforced still further by his notion that the native peoples of the American southeast (for whom Bartram did, in his

own limited way, have a high regard) might some day be “desirous of becoming united with” Western culture, though clearly at the expense of their own: for a natural historian of Bartram’s era, nothing could be more “natural” than for a people such as the American Indians to wish to “improve” upon themselves, that is, to move up the “Great Chain of Being.” For the 18th century natural historian, the mere preservation of a “primitive” native culture as a valuable end in and of itself would be deemed ridiculous, if not altogether irresponsible, on the part of those “fortunates” to whom God had endowed “a due sense of charity, that we [that is, Europeans of the “civilized” world] may be enabled to do [God’s] will, and perform our duty towards those submitted to our service, and protection, and be merciful to them even as we hope for mercy” (Bartram 65). Naturally, such “duty” to the American Indians under the “protection” of the white settlers would include sharing the advantages of European culture and technology which might reasonably contribute to the beneficial “improvement” of the indigenous populations.

Bartram’s reaction to the ruined “mount” structures left behind by the “ancients” of the American southeast is telling. His unimaginative and rather abbreviated discussion regarding these peculiar structures clearly indicates a lack of concern for the cultural history of Native Americans. In one instance, Bartram’s greatest interest with regard to a certain one of these “mounts” lies chiefly in the fact that the soil with which it was constructed appeared so “fertile and productive” that the corn planted on it “yielded above one hundred bushels in one season” (206), the potential of the soil here being clearly more interesting to Bartram than the unique artifact itself. Later, encountering a similar structure, Bartram remarks in a slightly more inquisitive manner: “This monument, simple as it is, may be worthy of the observations of a traveller, since it

naturally excites at least the following queries: for what purpose was it designed? Its great antiquity and incorruptibility—what method or machines they employed to bring it to the spot, and how they raised it erect?” (288). Again, Bartram consistently returns to the themes of practicality and “usefulness,” and, not surprisingly, it is with such queries that his discussion of the particular “monument” essentially ends. Finally, in the conclusion of *Travels*, Bartram writes: “To conclude this subject concerning the monuments of the Americans, I deem it necessary to observe as my opinion, that none of them that I have seen discover the least signs of the arts, sciences, or architecture of the Europeans or other inhabitants of the old world” (332). In short, as Regis affirms, without such a connection and without any available explanatory written record, these artifacts, despite their curiosity and “magnificence,” are for Bartram ultimately devoid of history, as well as any perceptible, practical value.⁷

What separates Bartram most from his Romantic/nostalgic successors is his profound indifference, in a greater historical sense, to the fate of American Indian. The reason why Bartram neglects to anticipate anywhere within the text of *Travels* the inevitable demise of American Indian civilization at the hands of white settlers is that he does not perceive the *divorce* between Western culture and the American Indian culture in the same light as do those travelers of a later, more Romantic sensibility. When he likens American Indians to the Ancient Greeks and Romans (248), he is merely identifying their civilization with that of Europeans at an earlier stage of development. In the minds of Bartram and his 18th century contemporaries, American Indian culture is not something that can be “lost,” for it is fundamentally akin to European civilization. The white “subjugation” of the New World and its indigenous inhabitants ultimately

represents a “natural,” divinely ordained refinement or “cultivation” of a sibling society, rather than the complete and utter annihilation of a thriving and “unique” culture. Indeed, Bartram remarks of the “Chactaw” (Choctaw) Indians that “[t]hey are to be most ingenious and industrious husbandmen, having large plantations, or country farms, where they employ much of their time in agricultural *improvements* [italics mine], after the manner of the white people; by which means their territories are more generally *cultivated* [italics mine], and better inhabited than any other Indian republic that we know of” (329). Contrary to the nostalgic idea of whites permanently extinguishing American Indian culture, proper European refinements tend to *improve* indigenous societies.

II

A little over a generation after William Bartram completed *Travels*, the American Frontier had moved still farther west. Concurrently, a profound change in literary sensibility which had recently emerged in the Old World now began to enter the New: Romanticism.⁸ Regarding the origin and the effect of Romanticism for early 19th century historians, David Levin writes:

[New England historians] read not only Scott and Cooper but Wordsworth, Coleridge and Byron Like so many lines in intellectual history, the lines leading to the sources of these historical ideas crossed in many directions, and different New Englanders held different lines. Some led directly to Germany, but more led to France and England For all those minds informed by these lines the idea of “literary” history included new assumptions about the value and meaning of the Past, about the proper subjects for historical work, about the function of history, and

about proper emphasis within the historical work. The [19th century]
historian was a *romantic* man of letters. (6-7, emphasis added)

The result of this Romantic influence was the development of actual *narratives* (that is, texts which emphasized a sequential “plot”) in respect to written histories and experiences. Nineteenth century writers/historians also now “concentrated on literary technique, ‘interest,’ and effect not only because they had been literary men before they became historians, but also because they believed that the re-creation of the Past requires imaginative and literary skill” (Levin 9). These writers steered away from the “erudite compilation” and “intricate research” that characterized the work of their 18th century predecessors, and sought to create narratives that would be “entertaining” and “novel,” as well as useful (Levin 10). Likewise, American letters both from and pertaining to the American Frontier also began to experience a profound, though incremental, transformation in both narrative tone and structure: the purely descriptive mode of a “timeless present,” as had been the “useful” standard by and large for 18th century travel narratives, now was increasingly being supplemented by a greater *historical* awareness, which necessarily led to a more “narrativized” account of an author’s experiences, thoughts and observations. On the development of American historical letters in the early 19th century, Levin writes:

[t]he subject [of the text] had to be an interesting *narrative*, on a ‘grand theme,’ in which a varied group of remarkable, vigorous characters acted heroically on the largest possible stage. The grand theme involved the origins of a nation (preferably, in some way, America) . . . the conquest of a continent, or all of these. It included, if possible, some ‘poetic’—that is,

melancholy—incidents. The scenery had to include something of the picturesque, and as much of the sublime as possible. (11, emphasis added)

As with any historical “subject,” then, the “prospect” of the American Frontier, its landscape and inhabitants, became part of a larger story or *chronology* of events, in which the whole notion of historical “progress” acquired a far greater sense of depth and permanence. Ultimately, this metamorphosis in narrative method can be linked directly to the early influence of European Romanticism.

Indeed, the physical relics of a long and rich cultural history were staples for the early English Romantics as they poetically depicted the “picturesque” pastoral landscapes of their ancient land. Christopher Mulvey writes: “The European landscape gave token of the past and it received its enriching and Romantic dimension from History” (231). He adds that “the Gothic ruin was as essential a part of the English picturesque landscape as the Classical ruin was part of the Claudian ideal landscape” (255). Mulvey also states that, in the 19th century, “the American writer brought to the English landscape tradition a heightened sense of the past, heightened by an intense sense of *loss*” (257, emphasis added). However, for Romantics and travelers of the 19th century, “the United States was not a *historical country*” (Mulvey 255), at least not according to Old World sensibility, for “[u]nlike European landscapes, few of those in America had associations with art, literature, legend, history, and none possessed even the vestiges of castellated ruins or deserted abbeys . . . visually, at least, America was very much a country without a past” (Foster 16, 18). Nevertheless, as Mulvey correctly argues, this increased *Romantic* sense of historical perspective was not lost on American writers of the 19th century. Edward

Halsey Foster writes: “The beautiful, the sublime, the picturesque, historical and literary associations, promises for the future—these are the central terms and ideas which crowd the rhetoric of most nineteenth century descriptions of the American landscape” (19): not surprisingly, Frontier travel narratives of the period prove no exception regarding this Romantic influence, for as Levin writes, “[t]he [19th century] New England historian was conditioned by the very attitude toward the Past that one can find in almost any literary young American’s letters home from Europe during the early years of the nineteenth century—by the inclination to wallow in sentiment at the sight of ruins” (7). The propensity to “wallow in sentiment” in viewing such “ruins” of the past is to indulge in Romantic *nostalgia*. Levin then adds: “In the ancient natural scenery, the vanished Aztec and Inca dynasties and architectural ruins, or the relics of the French empire in North America, Bancroft, Prescott, and Parkman found the same opportunities for imaginative contemplation of the Past that Motley restricted to the Old World” (8). Therefore, if America did not “have” a history as such, then it would be up to such “nostalgic” writers/historians to fashion one.

Still, what the early 19th century American landscape, particularly that of the Frontier, lacked in regards to a Romanticized “history,” it arguably was able to compensate for with the raw, sublime grandeur of “uncultivated” nature: “far from being a liability, wilderness was actually an American asset” (Nash 67). As a result, the budding Romantic sensibility present in the Frontier travel narratives of the early 1800s tended to focus to a great extent on the beautiful and sublime “prospect” of the untamed “wilderness,” for as Foster writes, “American identity in the Romantic period depended heavily on the American setting—the wilderness, which was popularly associated with

virtue and good” (xii). Without question, affection for the wilderness was part and parcel of the American Romantic sensibility, Roderick Nash asserting that “[t]he concept of the sublime and picturesque led the way by enlisting aesthetics in wild country’s behalf while deism associated nature and religion. Combined with primitivistic idealization of a life closer to nature, these ideas fed the Romantic movement which had far-reaching implications for wilderness” (44). Nash also writes that “[t]he kind of nature Byron had in mind was wilderness, and his work climaxed European Romanticism’s century-long achievement of creating an intellectual framework in which it could be favorably portrayed. The first Americans who appreciated wild country relied heavily on this tradition and vocabulary in articulating their ideas” (50). Mulvey argues that, for Romantic travelers, “the American landscape gave promise of the future and received its enriching and Romantic dimension from Progress” (231). What is especially important to note here is the Romantic *link* between the landscape and a greater sense of history or historical “progress.” David Levin also discusses the importance of a linear “progress” in relation to the physical space of the landscape for the 19th century writer/historian. He writes:

[t]he basic assumption [for the 19th century American historian] was human progress Human progress had proceeded westward, from the Middle East to North America. And all along the way, whether they knew it or not, the people of the vanguard had carried with them a new principle: Christianity in the “German woods,” nationality in the Iberian peninsula, the Reformation in the Netherlands and England, Democracy . . . in the American Colonies. In the grand design of Providence the victories of

these principles were the most meaningful advances in history. (27)

In this respect, then, the westward movement of the American Frontier in the early 19th century embodied this notion of humankind's historical "progress" for the Romantic writer/historian.

It is in regards to the American landscape, in particular, to the wilderness of the Frontier, that one encounters Romantic *nostalgia*. Foster writes: "At times it seems as if 19th century Americans envisioned for their country a future in which little or no sublime or picturesque wilderness remained" (45). As early as 1836, Thomas Cole declared that an "[i]ndifference to wilderness . . . was symptomatic of the 'meagre utilitarianism' of the age. The landscape already revealed the 'ravages of the axe,' and no end appeared in sight In only 'a few short years' the wilderness would vanish" (Nash 97).

"Washington Irving also deplored the elimination of the wilderness from the American landscape In Irving's estimation, the advantages of having such a primeval resource far outweighed the loss to civilization in lumber and other raw materials" (Nash 98).

Nineteenth-century American Frontier travelers/authors might not have had the same "ancient" history that "nostalgic" English writers of the Romantic period were able to draw from, yet they were ultimately confronted with the "prospects" of a rapidly changing present as well as an uncertain future with regard to the western expanses of Frontier wilderness and their inhabitants.

Of course, as mentioned earlier, this shift to a Romantic historical sensibility within Frontier travel narratives was incremental: such a profound metamorphosis did not occur all at once. The beginnings of this metamorphosis can be seen in Henry Marie Brackenridge's *Views of Louisiana*, a text which exhibits signs of a Romantic/historical

influence, anticipating Romantic travel narratives to come, but which also shares characteristics with Frontier accounts of the latter 18th century, such as Bartram's *Travels*. Like Bartram, Brackenridge endeavors, first and foremost, to "usefully" describe the landscape, giving impersonal descriptions of the soil, the vegetation, the animals, the native inhabitants, the minerals, and other topographical features which might be practically employed by future travelers or settlers of the Louisiana Territory. Though with far less rigor or specificity than Bartram (Brackenridge was *not* a natural historian), Brackenridge adopts Bartram's 18th century "cataloguing" technique, listing in groups the different native "tribes," rivers, villages, and minerals together with their most basic descriptions, the result being that as a narrator, Brackenridge remains to a large extent personally *removed* from the "narrative" (as he calls it in his introduction) while he focuses primarily on his various observations and speculations with regard to the land. The narrative itself is temporally suspended.

Brackenridge shares the 18th century, "Lockean" view of the uncultivated landscape, that is, that it is the duty of humankind to subdue and make proper, productive "use" of the land as per God's intention. Brackenridge writes:

Fifty thousand acres of the finest land, are under the eye at once, and yet on all this space, there is but one little cultivated spot to be seen! When the eyes are gratified, with the survey of this beautiful scene, the mind naturally expatiates on the *improvements* of which it is susceptible, and creative fancy, adorns it, with happy dwellings and richly *cultivated* fields. The situation in the vicinity of these great rivers, the fertility of the soil, a garden spot, must one day yield nourishment to a multitude of beings.

(110, emphasis added)

The “beauty” which Brackenridge sees in the wild landscape is closely associated with his favorable appraisal of its future potential for productive human “improvement and cultivation.” Brackenridge then later observes that

[t]he most pleasant part of Louisiana, when we take into consideration the comforts and conveniences of life, is that which is called the *Coast*, and proves to us what may be done by the art of man, even in those parts which nature has left rude and unsightly. It affords one of the strongest arguments in favor of civilization Would it be too much to say, that this improvement and cultivation of the face of nature, was the condition on which the Creator gave to the human race the lordship of the earth! Even the garden of Eden required the fostering care of Adam and his partner. (173)

Again, like Bartram (and Locke), Brackenridge regards the untamed land as something that, first and foremost, must be subdued and “cultivated.” The “labor and ingenuity” of man is *naturally* suited to this task, the land itself being a gift from God the Creator.

Nevertheless, there are also several notable instances of departure from 18th century thought present within this text. Though *Views* clearly does not embrace the action-oriented narrative form of later, more Romantic travel accounts, one sees within the text a deeper, increasingly “narrativized” (that is, quasi-Hegelian) conception of historical “progress.” Unlike Bartram, who launches almost immediately into a multitude of detailed descriptions, Brackenridge painstakingly utilizes the first few chapters of *Views* to construct for the reader a rather detailed and precise historical framework as a

background for the Louisiana Territory which he is about to describe, initiating his *chronological* overview even as far back as the earliest French and Spanish explorers and settlers in the region. In this way, Brackenridge uses the past history of the region to give the reader a greater sense of a larger historical *narrative* already in play, especially as it may directly relate to the scenes he presently discusses. Furthermore, the fact that Brackenridge endeavors to create this greater awareness of history with respect to the land serves as an indication that the transatlantic influence of the English Romantics, particularly concerning the importance of historical dimension in regards to the natural, “picturesque” landscape, is already beginning to manifest itself in American travel letters by the second decade of the 19th century. Though, as Mulvey stated, America was regarded as a land “without history,” at least in the traditional European sense, Brackenridge nevertheless attempts to convey a deeper notion of “American” history that is, to a significant degree, *connected* with that of the Old World.

In addition, the considerable amount of space that Brackenridge dedicates at the conclusion of *Views* to fathoming the “lost” history of American Indian societies also displays the emergence of a fuller, more Romantic sense of history at the time of his writing. Bartram, by way of contrast, refers to the mound structures of the American Indian “ancients” only in passing, often concluding his brief discussion of such artifacts with the comment that the “use” of these ruins is ultimately unknown: he does not endeavor to elaborate or speculate on their historical significance, for such a fanciful, speculative liberty would obviously not be consistent with the “useful” purposes of his work. In this respect, then, Brackenridge represents a clear departure from the Enlightenment mentality of his predecessors. Brackenridge writes:

I need make no apology for devoting a chapter to a subject [American Indian “antiquities”], which has been dignified by the pens of Mr. Jefferson, Mr. Barton, and a Bishop Madison. Yet, with all possible deference to these respectable names, I cannot but think their theories founded on a very imperfect acquaintance with these remains: having never themselves, visited any but the least considerable, and but few having been described by others with accuracy. The subject is still new, and I know of none which opens a wider field for interesting and amusing speculation. (181)

Brackenridge makes no appeal to the potential utility of such a study, referring to it merely as an “interesting and amusing speculation,” while additionally noting the limited nature of such endeavors on the part of his late-Enlightenment forbears. He uses his discussion of ancient American Indian ruins to raise the possibility of pre-Columbian America having, as it were, a greater scope of *history*, even similar to that of the Old World:

In the wanderings of fancy, I have sometimes conceived this hemisphere, like the other, to have experienced the genial ray of civilization, and to have been inhabited by a numerous, polite, and enlightened people. Why may not great revolutions have been experienced in America? . . . When the eye of Europe first beheld her, did she appear but lately to have sprung from the deep? No . . . she was inhabited by thousands of Indians, possessing different languages, manners, and appearances. Grant then, that America may have existed a few thousand years; the same causes

prevailing, like effects will be produced; the same revolutions as have been known in the old world may have taken place here. (193, 194-95)

Nevertheless, one should also note here that Brackenridge's greater awareness of (American) history is tempered still by the 18th century's "cyclical" sensibility: "[b]efore the invention of letters, there would be a constant succession of advances to civilization, and of relapses to barbarism" (195). Here, as is consistent with 18th century historical thought, Brackenridge seems to reject the notion of any civilization enduring in perpetuity. However, perhaps even more important, on this subject of history and "letters" Brackenridge asserts earlier in the chapter that "[i]t is only since the invention of letters that we can form a well grounded hope of the *permanency* of human institutions, of the *certainty* of history, and of the uninterrupted *progress* of improvements. Had this noble invention been unknown, how many of our useful arts would have been lost during that night of barbarism, called the dark ages!" (192, emphasis added). This mention of "progress" and "permanence" in the historical sense is key, for though Brackenridge does fall back on the 18th century historical discourse of Humboldt, he here appears to embrace the concept of historical progression in a manner which is more consistent with 19th century Hegelian thought: indeed, if history, due to the advent and increased proliferation of "letters" in the Western world, has somehow shifted from the motion of *revolution* (in the cyclical sense of the term) to a more progressive and permanent *evolution* in Brackenridge's thinking, then one can see how, as with Romantic authors, Brackenridge might display some propensity for Romantic *nostalgia* in his travel writing. One may look upon his fascination with ancient American Indian ruins in the Louisiana Territory as not merely a passing "fancy," but perhaps as an indication of Brackenridge's

increasingly *nostalgic* awareness of the potential “linearity” of historical motion, and with it, the inescapable scope and sublime “permanence” of change.

Throughout the text of *Views* there are instances which demonstrate that Brackenridge was grappling with a sense of historic nostalgia on the Frontier that by and large was beyond the intellectual scope of his 18th century precursors, such as Bartram or Jefferson. For instance, Brackenridge endeavors to note the disappearance of the buffalo, the alligator, the “pecanne” tree and certain American Indian tribes (such as the Natchez) as a direct result of increased Euro-American settlement in the Mississippi region, and the consequent “recession” of the Frontier. Still, perhaps a better example in *Views* of what one may term Romantic nostalgia is to be found in Brackenridge’s discourse on the original creole settlers of Louisiana, which he describes in a rather condescending though markedly affectionate tone. He writes: “Ambition soared far hence, for here there was no prey. Judges, codes of law, and prisons, were of little use, where such simplicity of manners prevailed, and where every one knew how to confide in his neighbor. In such a state of things, to what end is learning and science? . . . These inhabitants were as remarkable for their tame and peaceable disposition, as the natives of France are for the reverse” (134). One might note here that his favorable description of the creoles has a Romanticized tone, especially in that, to contrast his remarks with Enlightenment sensibility, he sees a simple yet contented and well-ordered community which appears to function the *better* for not having all of the knowledge and refinements of a supposedly more “cultivated” society. Thus, with perhaps more than a hint of melancholy, Brackenridge remarks that this creole society in its present state, manners, and dress, will not endure for very much longer in the wake of the growing tide of Anglo-American

settlers in the region, stating that “[in] their persons [the creoles], they are well-formed, of an agreeable pleasant countenance; indicating cheerfulness and serenity These manners will soon cease to exist, but in remembrance and description: every thing has changed. The American costume is generally introduced” (137). Brackenridge further asserts, “[t]he present [American] government appears to be operating a general change [amongst the creoles] Upon the whole, the American manners, and even language, begin to predominate. The young men have already been formed by our government, and those growing up will know no other. A singular change has taken place” (139).

Certainly, such observations are consistent with Brackenridge’s larger conception of history. His closing remarks on this particular subject of change give the strongest indication of a sense of Romantic nostalgia. Brackenridge writes: “If I am asked, whether the ancient inhabitants [the creoles] are more contented, or happy, under the new order of things, or have reason to be so, I should consider the question a difficult, and answer it with hesitation. It is not easy to know the secret sentiments of men, and happiness is a relative term. It is true, I have heard murmurings against the present [American] government, and something like sorrowing after that of Spain” (143). Such reflection displays an evident breach with 18th century thought, for Brackenridge resists the notion that the practical “improvements” that obviously come with increased Anglo-American influence in the region (the “new order of things”) necessarily lead to a higher degree of happiness or contentment. Brackenridge further explains that

[t]he chief advantages which accrued from the change of government, may be summed up in a few words a greater reward was offered to industry and enterprise; specie became more abundant, and merchandise

cheaper.—Landed property was greatly enhanced in value. In opposition, it may be said, that formerly [the creoles] were more content, had less anxiety; there was more cordiality and friendship, living in the utmost harmony, with scarcely any clashing interests. This perhaps, is not unlike the notions of old people, who believe that in their early days every thing was more happily ordered. (145)

More important, however, is the fact that Brackenridge does not end the present discussion of vanishing creole culture on this more formal, distanced note, but rather endeavors to personally *identify* with such feelings of Romantic nostalgia:

[t]he idea of their becoming extinct, by dissolving before a people of a different race, and of losing their *moeurs cheries*, might excite unhappy sensations Are not the customs and manners of our fathers, and of our own youth, dear to us all? Would it not fill our hearts with bitterness, to see them vanish as a dream? Sentiments like these, doubtless, sometimes steal into their hearts. They awake, and their HOME has disappeared. (145)

Ultimately, Brackenridge puts his own conflicted mind to rest by concluding that such changes, for better or worse, do inevitably occur as part of the movement of history. Nevertheless, the simple fact that Brackenridge struggles with the issue of nostalgia to such an extent shows a distinct evolution in historical thought, especially in regards to life on the American Frontier.

One can also observe a Romantic shift in Brackenridge's narrative with regard to his emotional response to the natural beauty and grandeur of the land itself, its sublimity

and picturesque aspect, as well as in his “Wordsworthian” sense of the *pastoral*. He writes: “Those delightful spots where the beauty and variety of landscape, might challenge the fancy of the poet, invite to the pastoral life. How admirably suited to that interesting animal, the sheep, are those clean smooth meadows, of a surface infinitely varied by hill and dale, covered with a short sweet grass intermixed with thousands of the most beautiful flowers, undeformed by a single weed!” (34). Later, Brackenridge describes the landscape in the vicinity of St. Genevieve as “romantic and picturesque” (108), then goes on to recount the emotional impact of the natural scenery, an effect which, for Brackenridge, defies verbal description: “To those who have never seen any of these prairies, it is very difficult to convey any just idea of them Every sense was delighted, and every faculty awakened. After gazing for an hour I still continued to experience an unsatiated delight, in contemplating the rich and magnificent scene . . . there is but one cultivated spot to be seen!” (110). In fact, throughout the text Brackenridge marks repeatedly the “beauty” and emotionally “pleasing” aspect of the uncultivated landscape, and the “cheering” effect that such has on the traveler, scenes “which sooth the mind, or inspire with lively and pleasing emotions” (170). Especially important, though, is the fact that Brackenridge is, at least in some instances, able to divorce the *natural*, rugged beauty of the landscape from its “useful” or cultivated potential, experiencing the sublimity of nature as well as its beauty on a purely emotional, or, as the Romantics might say, *spiritual* level.

In this respect, then, Brackenridge is more given to classical literary allusions than Bartram in attempting to convey an accurate *impression*, rather than merely objective description, of the scenery. Brackenridge reflects:

I have been often delighted in my solitary walks, to trace this rivulet to its sources. Three miles from town, but within view, amongst a few tall oaks, it rises in four or five silver fountains, within short distances of each other: presenting a picture to the fancy of the poet, or the pencil of the painter. I have fancied myself for a moment on classic ground, and beheld the Naiads pouring the stream from their urns. (122)

Naturally, one should recall that such Romantic descriptions are entirely consistent with Brackenridge's aims as he discusses them in the introduction to *Views*, for there he writes of the traveler's account, stating that "[w]hen in the form of narrative, this species of composition has all the attractions of Romance, combined with the usefulness of truth. I have always pursued the book of travels with peculiar delight, no matter how awkward its style, or humble the adventurer" (6). Brackenridge then later remarks that "[t]o become a botanist, a mineralogist, or geologist, requires long and undivided attention. I have therefore been compelled to content myself with admiring merely the face of nature, without attempting to analyze, or seek out her hidden character" (7). In these passages one may see the most striking contrast between Bartram and Brackenridge, for here Brackenridge all but freely admits that his work serves just as well the purposes of enjoyment as it does those of the "usefulness of truth." He also states that the "hidden character" of nature is *not* his primary object (as it might have been in the latter 18th century), but rather, as the text often bears out, aesthetic (and ultimately Romantic) description. Overall, this increased focus on the visual, panoramic beauty of the natural scenery, as well as a noticeably more developed "narrative" style in conjunction with a greater awareness of history makes Brackenridge's *Views of Louisiana* comparable with

the more Romantic Frontier travel narratives of the mid 19th century.

III

With the beginning of the serial publication of Francis Parkman's *Oregon Trail* in 1847, the Frontier travel narrative reached its Romantic fulfillment. Though Parkman's text does not lack for detail, gone are the lengthy and static catalogued descriptions of flora, fauna and soil that by and large characterize travel accounts of Bartram's era. Parkman's intention is to give a rigorous, though more accessible, portrait of life and scenery on the American Frontier, "chiefly with a view of observing the Indian character" (140). Parkman also refers to his Western travels as "a tour of curiosity and amusement" (1), a purpose which clearly contrasts with the aims of a traveler/writer such as Bartram, who, as a student of the late Enlightenment, frames all of his endeavors within the context of a collective, scientific utility. Additionally, Parkman does not write "outside of time," that is, the structure of the narrative, much like that of a novel, has a distinct chronological framework, a "plot," as it were, with a concrete beginning, middle, and end: in this manner, then, the text aptly lends itself to its initial serialization in *Knickerbocker Magazine*, a publishing circumstance which, in and of itself, gives indication of the "Romanticization" of such a narrative for the purposes of popular reading among a wider, more mainstream audience, rather than strictly targeting learned scholars or "natural historians." However, it is the tone and sentiment within the work itself which gives Parkman's "novelesque" *Oregon Trail* its distinctive Romantic flavor, in direct contrast to the "use"-oriented travel narrative of the latter 1700's. Roderick Nash asserts that in *Oregon Trail* Parkman gives "wilderness the Romantic interpretation in history that Bryant had given it in poetry, Cooper in fiction, and Cole in art" (99).

Parkman's link with James Fenimore Cooper is especially significant, for not only does it explain some of the more immediate influences of American Romanticism in his narrative, but it also connects him with the Romantic tradition of Sir Walter Scott, whose "understanding of the dynamics of history was influenced . . . by the . . . tremors of an international 'Romantic' revolution (or revival) in literature" (Dekker 8). Dekker writes: "In . . . Parkman's masterpieces we can see how the great Romantic historians assimilated and disciplined Scott's historicism . . . and his narrative techniques in works of history which are also major works of art" (30). One can thus begin to understand Parkman's infatuation with Cooper's novels, for as Dekker also asserts, Cooper was also one of Scott's 19th century "disciples" (61).⁹

According to Nash, Francis Parkman, a native of Boston, was infatuated with Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*, being particularly interested, as was Thoreau, in the fusion of wilderness and civilization, both in regards to the land as well as in man himself, Cooper's fictitious Natty Bumppo representing to the Parkman the ideal hybrid of the two extremes (94). To be sure, such thought is consistent with Parkman's Romantic tendencies, for as David Morse writes, "America's Romantic historians, William Prescott and Francis Parkman, celebrated excessive heroes from the past, the pioneer discovers and explorers, who seemed to have ambitions and personalities commensurate with the scale of these uncharted continents" (7). This in part explains Parkman's Romantic fascination with the rugged Frontiersman figure, such as his hunting/traveling companion Henry Chatillon in *Oregon Trail*, who arguably embodies for Parkman in actuality, as Natty Bumppo does in fiction, the perfect combination of wild and civilized influences. Parkman writes:

The prairies had been his school; he could neither read nor write, but he had a natural refinement and delicacy of mind, such as is rare even in women. His manly face was a mirror of uprightness, simplicity, and kindness of heart; he had, moreover, a keen perception of character, and a tact that would preserve him from flagrant error in any society. Henry had not the restless energy of an Anglo-American. He was content to take things as he found them His bravery was as much celebrated in the mountains as his skill in hunting He was a proof of what unaided nature will sometimes do. I have never, in the city or in the wilderness, met a better man than my true-hearted friend, Henry Chatillon. (17-18)

It should also be noted that Parkman appears to regard the effect of the natural wilderness environment as a desirable alternative to the cultivation of more “civilized” society, which for the Romantics of the 19th century was laden with moral, spiritual, and aesthetic pitfalls.

Parkman’s deeper sense of historical perspective is also evident in *Oregon Trail*, particularly in regard to Romantic nostalgia, a feeling which is arguably all-too-appropriate with regards to the rapidly retreating Frontier of the 1840s. Nash explains: “[f]or the Bostonian Francis Parkman, Jr. sadness at the disappearance of wilderness stemmed from personal tastes combined with a keen sense of historical process” (98). Nash also adds that “[a]s an historian Parkman was especially sensitive to change; as a lover of wilderness he deplored the effects of civilization in North America Among its casualties were the Indian, the Buffalo, and the Frontiersman,” in addition to the wilderness landscape itself (99). In expressing such sentiments, Parkman clearly echoes

the lament of Thomas Cole on the same subject. Upon viewing a large group of settlers pouring West across the Frontier, Parkman characteristically remarks in *Oregon Trail*: “a long train of emigrants with their heavy wagons was crossing the creek, and dragging on in slow procession by the encampment of the [Indians] whom they and their descendants, in the space of a century, are to sweep from the face of the earth” (112). He then later remarks that

[g]reat changes are at hand in that [wilderness] region. With the stream of emigration to Oregon and California, the buffalo will dwindle away, and the large wandering communities who depend on them for support must be broken and scattered. The Indians will soon be abased by whiskey and overawed by military posts; so that within a few years the traveller may pass in tolerable security through their country. Its danger and its charm will have disappeared together. (234)

Though Parkman in no manner considered American Indians to be the equals of Anglo-Americans, he did value their presence and that of their unmolested culture as an integral part of the rugged, Romantic beauty of the Frontier wilderness, in conjunction with the picturesqueness and natural sublimity of the scenery itself. He writes: “the Kansas Indians, who adorned with all their finery, were proceeding homeward at a round pace . . . they made a very striking and picturesque feature in the forest landscape” (7). Parkman then repeats this sentiment much later, commenting at greater length that “[t]he scene in itself was grand and imposing, but with the savage multitude, the armed warriors, the naked children, the gayly apparelled girls, pouring impetuously down the heights, it would have formed a noble subject for a painter, and only the pen of a Scott could have

done it justice in description” (337). Parkman’s grander sense of historical progression allows for Romantic nostalgia, for unlike 18th century travelers such as William Bartram, Parkman keenly realizes that American Indian societies, like the untamed American wilderness, will not endure for very much longer in their original, “natural” conditions. David Levin writes: “Parkman, of course, already knew before setting out for the West that the Indians’ way of life was doomed. His entire book, like many others of the time—from James Fenimore Cooper’s romances to Parkman’s own later histories—is steeped in nostalgia for a primeval world that is fated to change drastically He must see the Indians before their way of life vanishes” (“Francis Parkman’s *The Oregon Trail*” 226). As a result, Parkman, being thoroughly engrossed in the “Romance” of the Frontier experience, is overjoyed at the prospect of witnessing first hand an Indian “war party,” despite the physical danger and obvious misery that such a conflict among Indian nations would portend:

Here their warlike rites were to be celebrated with more than ordinary solemnity, and a thousand warriors, as it was said, were set out for the enemy’s country I was greatly rejoiced to hear it. I had come into the country chiefly with a view of observing the Indian character. To accomplish my purpose it was necessary to live in the midst of them, and become, as it were, one of them. I proposed to join a village, and make myself an inmate of one of their lodges. (140)

Parkman later admits that in these designs, “my philanthropy was no match for my curiosity, and I was vexed at the possibility that after all I might lose the rare opportunity of seeing the ceremonies of war” (158-59). Despite the fact that he is eventually thwarted

in his desire to see such “ceremonies,” Parkman is faithful to his design of describing the “Indian character,” though his characterization is marked by Romantic assumptions and stereotypes gathered from popularized “Frontier” accounts, histories, and especially novels (such as those by Cooper), which were widely circulated throughout New England in the mid 1800's. Nevertheless, Parkman’s “pictorial skill” as a writer “helps [him] give his human pictures a depth not merely visual but also historical” (Levin, “Francis Parkman’s *The Oregon Trail*” 229), even though such “pictures” may indeed be imperfect. Additionally, Levin writes that “[t]he pictures of migrant Indian villages have the same strong historical quality, but here Parkman does not need to comment so explicitly on their symbolic meaning Throughout his description of Indian customs and manners, the suddenness of their arrival and departure, with imagery of swarms, reinforces our sense of their impermanence” (“Francis Parkman’s *The Oregon Trail*” 230). If nothing else, historical *depth*, especially in the sense of irrevocable, linear “progress” in time and space, is central to Parkman’s narrative.

As might be expected, Parkman’s Romantic predisposition also evidences itself in his response to the natural beauty and sublimity of the rugged landscape, scenery which he frequently refers to as “picturesque.” Early in his Western travels, he remarks: “It was a mild, calm spring day; a day when one is more disposed to musing and revery than to action, and the softest part of his nature is apt to gain the upper hand. I rode in advance of the party, as we passed through the bushes, and, as a nook of green grass offered a strong temptation, I dismounted and lay down there. All the trees and saplings were in flower, or budding into fresh leaf” (14). Further on, Parkman also reflects on having “contented myself with admiring the calm beauty of the sunset, — for the river, eddying

swiftly in deep purple shadows between the impending woods, formed a wild but tranquilizing scene” (21-22). As an educated “Easterner” in the 1840s, Parkman was exposed to the Romantic poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge, and thus also is understandably taken aback by the vast, empty “wastes” of the prairie “desert,” such sublime views clearly contrasting to a great extent with the delicate scenes of rural/pastoral beauty favored by the Romantics:

Should any of my readers ever be impelled to visit the prairies . . . I can assure him that he need not think to enter at once upon the paradise of his imagination The intervening country, the wide and fertile belt of that extends for several hundred miles beyond the extreme frontier, will probably answer tolerably well to his preconceived ideas of the prairie; for this it is from which picturesque tourists, painters, poets, and novelists, who have seldom penetrated farther, have derived their conceptions of the whole region. (40)

Parkman himself laments those large tracts of “wasteland” which do not offer the same Romantic “prospect” of the New England wood or country pasture. As Edward Foster explains, “[Parkman’s] frequent criticisms of . . . Western landscapes reflect the standards of his native Boston; the reader is always aware that Parkman was an outsider, a visitor who brought with him a Harvard education and the manners of Boston. Much as he claimed to love the wilderness, it is clear that Parkman could never have been comfortable spending his life outside the civilized world” (41). In short, Parkman’s New England upbringing had infused him with a certain “bookish” Romantic sensibility which reflected the popularized “myth” of the American Frontier that was often incompatible

with the actual reality of his experiences on the Frontier west of the Mississippi. Again, Foster writes:

[Parkman] was accustomed, of course, to the scenery of the East—the Adirondacks, the White Mountains, and so forth—and in contrast, the Western landscapes which he saw seemed to offer little. He could appreciate landscape which met his criteria for, say, the beautiful or the picturesque, but generally he found the parched, arid landscapes of the Great Plains unpleasant or disagreeable The prairies, sections which were under cultivation by settlers from the East, pleased him visually . . . for they conformed to his sense of the beautiful or the pastoral. (41)

Though Foster's assessment of Parkman's negative reaction in *Oregon Trail* to portions of the rugged Western landscape is overstated, it does significantly underscore the great extent to which Parkman's Romantic sensibility, though admittedly based on erroneous, popularized myth, influences his thought and thus his writing in response to sublime prospect of uncultivated wilderness beyond the Frontier.¹⁰ Additionally, regardless of whether or not Parkman is pleased or disappointed by the wild prairies of the West, one should note that, unlike Bartram and Brackenridge, Parkman is totally unconcerned with speculating on any potential useful "improvements" that might be undertaken with regard to the landscape, for he appears content solely with unscientific, aesthetic description. If anything, as stated earlier, Francis Parkman, like Thomas Cole and William Bryant, fears for the ultimate destruction of the uncultivated wilderness and its native American Indian culture in the name of progress or "improvement," though he freely admits that such an end is all but inevitable.

This sentiment might be best epitomized by Parkman's Romanticized description of the old buffalo which he encounters, while hunting on the plains, towards the conclusion of the narrative. Parkman writes:

He was a grim old veteran. His loves and his battles were over for that season, and now, gaunt and war-worn, he had withdrawn from the herd to graze by himself and recruit his exhausted strength He looked like some grizzly old ruffian grown grey in blood and violence, and scowling on all the world from his misanthropic seclusion. The old savage looked up when I first approached, and gave me a fierce stare . . . his short thick horns were blunted and split to the very roots in his various battles, and across his nose and forehead were two or three large white scars, which gave him a grim . . . appearance I felt greatly inclined to come to terms with him At length, he seemed to have abandoned any hostile design. (449-50)

In addition to appreciating the dramatic, poetic diction that Parkman uses to create this noble portrait of the ancient buffalo, the reader should also consider what the image itself represents in the context of Parkman's Romantic nostalgia. Indeed, the old buffalo, as he is described, is in essence a metaphor for (the immanent fate of) the Frontier wilderness as well as its inhabitants, the terms "savage" and "fierce" often being employed by Parkman to describe American Indians. Furthermore, the ravaged countenance of "exhausted strength" that the buffalo presents, one acquired through "blood, battle and violence," is symbolic of the greater narrative of conflict and destruction which the history of the American Frontier embodied even by the mid-1840s: whether entirely

conscious of this parallel or not, Parkman, well-armed with Romantic sensibility, paints a stark and sobering picture in this respect. Also important to note is the sense of (historical) finality which Parkman gives to the old buffalo's aspect; his "loves and battles" being now concluded, his hostility "abandoned," nothing then remains but his "misanthropic" solitude, a historically sublime "prospect" which still further parallels the fate of the American Indians in the West. In light of this particular description, then, perhaps it is Parkman's strong sense of Romantic nostalgia that causes him to initially hesitate in shooting the old buffalo: however, it is arguably his equally strong notion of progressive (historical) *inevitability* which prompts Parkman to eventually kill him (450).

Francis Parkman's nostalgia for the disappearing wilderness of the Frontier is due not only to the advent of a Hegelian philosophy of history and the increased proliferation of Romantic sensibility in Europe as well as in the United States, but also to the fundamental change in the historical context of America and the Frontier overall: according to Levin, "[a]mong all the motley characters in *The Oregon Trail*, Parkman is almost unique in his capacity to understand the historical significance of his experience" ("*Francis Parkman's The Oregon Trail*" 233). To be sure, the American Frontier of the 1840s, unlike that of Bartram's or even Brackenridge's day, had, like the endangered grey wolves of today, to a large extent ceased to be something to be feared and subjugated, but rather preserved and cherished. In short, one could argue that in Parkman's time, American writers could safely *afford* the sentimentality of such Romantic nostalgia, for by this juncture most Americans had come to realize that the fate of the Frontier wilderness and its American Indian inhabitants had been irrevocably sealed: Parkman himself, before his death in 1893, would live to witness the end of the American Frontier,

and with it, the end of a unique moment in the history of American letters. Edwin Fussel writes:

During the 1850's and 1860's the figurative frontier and the teleological West were drained of expressive value, and disappeared from literary currency. The West exerted serious imaginative impact in the United States only so long as it survived in real potentiality; the winning of the actual West brought the Westward Movement of American writing to a natural and inevitable end a few years after the closing of the frontier. (24)

Be this as it may, one might also argue, especially when considering the “literary currency” of Romantic nostalgia in itself, that the story of the American Frontier, such as it might be framed in the exploring traveler’s writings, can only, like any other “story,” become a true *narrative* when its foregone, (ill?-)fated conclusion is in sight.

NOTES

¹ I am regarding nostalgia, in this context, as a “historical emotion” which is often experienced by the “romantic traveler” of the 19th century and beyond. It is also related to a linear conception of historical “progress,” in that “[n]ostalgia, like progress, is dependent on the modern conception of unrepeatable and irreversible time.” For more on this particular view of nostalgia, see Boym, 3-32.

² Admittedly, the term “Frontier” (or even reference to “the West”) is ambiguous, for such terms can refer to a direction, to a physical space, or to the “cutting edge for [civilization’s westward] progress” in 19th century America. For the purposes of this essay, the term “Frontier” is used to denote the unsettled region, by and large uncultivated and little explored by European Americans, of the far South and Western Louisiana territories in the late 18th century and West of the Mississippi in the mid 19th century. For the literary significance of the word “Frontier,” see Fussell, 3-25.

³ The link between Romanticism and the emergence of the nostalgic historical “narrative” in America of the 19th century has been documented, especially in regards to the American landscape and the post-Enlightenment notion of “progress.” See Levin, *History as Romantic Art*, 3-45; and Dekker, 73-98.

⁴ On the Enlightenment and Romantic views on the historical process, specifically regarding the notion of “progress,” see White, 45-80; and Hampson, 232-50.

⁵ The fact that Bartram’s writings appealed to early Romantics, such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, is a phenomenon that, in and of itself, is insufficient reason to associate him with “early romanticism”, as Medeiros unfortunately does. Additionally, his appreciation and even awe of the rugged beauty of raw nature is not peculiar to him

among natural historians of the late 18th century.

⁶ For a poetic statement of the 18th century's "Great Chain of Being," see Pope.

⁷ A comparable 18th century, "pre-anthropological" description/discussion of a southeastern Indian mound can be found in Jefferson, 208-212.

⁸ Romanticism is being employed in this context with an emphasis on its reaction against the Enlightenment particularly in regards to the Romantic appreciation for the picturesque beauty of the natural landscape and its spiritual impact on the individual, rather than on its "usefulness" or potential for improvement. Additionally, the term "Romantic" is also used here with respect to the "melancholy" (or nostalgic) reflection on the past, which characterizes Romantic narratives, including histories. For more on Romanticism, see Murfin and Ray, 345-353; and Butler, 1-68, 155-187.

⁹ For more on the connections between Scott, Cooper and the development of the American "historical romance," see Dekker, 29-72.

¹⁰ Parkman's negative reaction to the barren prairie should in no way detract from his status as a Romantic historian: if anything, it reinforces it. Parkman's exposure to Cooper naturally strengthened the Romantic myth-conception of the Frontier wilderness in those who read him in the first half of the 19th century. See Fussel, 27-68.

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