

LANGUAGE AS ESCAPE: THE LITERATURE OF THE AMERICAN WESTERN TOUR, 1830-1890

In the nineteenth century many travellers and writers viewed the American West as an open-air sanitarium where one went –usually from the East or from Europe– to regain health and vigor. The western climate was described as possessing qualities usually associated with elixirs and tonics. Such claims were not unprecedented: Eastern hot springs and spas had been advertised similarly. What was different about the West was that it was more than a specific spot on the map; it was a state of being. Particular places such as Estes Park, Colorado, had by the mid-nineteenth century gained a reputation for the curative qualities of their air and water; however, what Estes Park and places like it offered in addition to natural resources was an escape from the everyday, a chance for men and women to flee conventionality.

As the locale for an escape from an imprisoned self, the American plains and mountains have always experienced a powerful attraction for writers and travellers. This escape from the everyday was not accomplished without hazard –if not to the adventurer himself or herself, then to the Native Americans who were often the guides into a world of wonders from which they would soon find themselves excluded. In most nineteenth-century travel narratives about trips through the western plains or mountains, Native Americans are confined to the margins of the text: center stage is reserved for the cultured Easterner, Englishman, or titled European through whose eyes we witness the tragedy of a vanishing America.

In this paper I propose to examine the journals of three authors –Washington Irving, Francis Parkman, and Isabella Bird– who lived in or travelled through the western plains and mountains between 1830 and 1890. I selected these writers based on their conformity to the following pattern: each travelled through the West to experience the landscape and its people before both were altered by settlement; each sought either relief from illness or escape from a world perceived as too confining; although strongly and at times positively affected by what they saw, none of them remained permanently in the West. Each was motivated by a different narrative impulse: Irving was the man of letters sketching the landscape; Parkman was a young historian preparing to begin his career; and Bird, the only one to note the lives of western women, based her journal on letters she wrote to her sister in Scotland.

I will begin with Irving's work because it announces many of the themes that characterize the other journals and narratives and it also shows the extent to which the literary imagination can color even the most mundane of details. Irving's *A Tour on the Prairies* (1835) was based on a journey he took in the autumn of 1832 through present-day Missouri, Kansas, and Oklahoma. In April 1832, after a seventeen-year stay in Europe, he

met two of the men who would join him on the tour: Count Albert-Alexandre de Pourtales, from a wealthy Swiss family, and Charles Joseph Latrobe, an educated English gentleman. According to Lee Clark Mitchell, «Latrobe had been hired by the Pourtales family to counsel the young libertine in sowing his wild oats»¹. No matter what his relationship to the young man, the older Latrobe got on with him well and they both became shipboard friends of Irving.

Continuing the friendship in America, they rejoined Irving in Boston after hurriedly leaving New York because of a cholera scare; «the first time», notes George Spaulding in his editor's introduction to Pourtales's journal, «an epidemic of that disease had ever been known on the Western continent»². After a trip to the White Mountains, they went to the Niagara Falls, which Latrobe recorded «is now as hackneyed as Stockgill-Force or Royal Water»³. On a steamer from Niagara Falls to Ashtabula, Ohio, the trio met Henry Leavitt Ellsworth, newly appointed as Indian Commissioner to the western tribes, who invited them to join him in a tour of the Indian country.

In his introduction to *A Tour on the Prairies*, John F. McDermott writes that Irving responded enthusiastically when Ellsworth proposed the trip to Fort Gibson on the Arkansas River. In a letter to his brother, Peter, Irving wrote:

I should have an opportunity of seeing the remnants of those great Indian tribes, which are now about to disappear as independent nations... I should see those fine countries of the far west, while still in a state of pristine wildness, and behold herds of buffalo scouring their native prairies, before they are driven beyond the reach of the civilized tourist (p. xvii)⁴.

By 1832, then, Americans were beginning to realize that the great plains and the nomadic life of the Indian tribes were endangered by the westward push of settlement. There was a sense of urgency about the efforts of Irving and others to capture this evanescent scene. Lee Clark Mitchell observes that mid-nineteenth-century accounts of this region are characterized by «a sense of imminent foreclosure, coupled with the immediate pleasure evoked by the wilderness» (p. 30).

A skilled professional, Irving gave his narrative literary flourishes beyond the reach of most of his contemporary journal writers. At times, however, his literary imagination colors his observations. Take, for example, his portrait of a camp cook, and jack-of-all-trades, Antoine Deshetres, «a kind of Gil Blas of the frontiers, who had passed a scrambling life, sometimes among Indians; sometimes in the employ of traders, missionaries and Indian agents; sometimes mingling with the Osage hunters»⁵. In sharp contrast to

1. See Lee Clark Mitchell, *Witness to a Vanishing America: The Nineteenth-Century Response* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1981) p. 25. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.

2. See George F. Spaulding and Seymour Feiler, eds., *On the Western Tour with Washington Irving: The Journal and Letters of Count of Pourtales* (Norman, Ok.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986), p. 6.

3. For the evolution of Niagara as a tourist attraction and an analysis of the effect that the overdevelopment around the falls had on American thinking about national parks, see John F. Sears, *Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

4. Cf. John Francis McDermott, ed., *Washington Irving, A Tour on the Prairies*, Norman, Ok.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956.

5. See Lee Clark Mitchell, op. cit., p. 30.

Deshetres, we have Pierre Beatte, hired as a guide and hunter: «He was cold and laconic... stated the terms he required for the services of himself and his horse, which we thought rather high, but showed no disposition to abate them, nor any anxiety to secure our employ» (p. 25). Beatte is described as wearing «an old hunting shirt and metasses or leggings, of deer skin, soiled and greased, and almost japanned by constant use» (p. 25). He is a character worthy of Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*. As if this were not enough local color, Irving adds a description of Count de Pourtales' attire:

His dress was a gay Indian hunting frock of dressed deer skin, setting well to the shape, dyed of a beautiful purple, and fancifully embroidered with silks of various colors; as if it had been the work of some Indian beauty, to decorate a favorite chief. With this he wore leathern pantaloons and moccasins, a foraging cap, and a double barrell'd gun slung by a bandoleer across his back (pp. 39-40).

Irving's sketches of his companions are straight out of frontier mythology and storytelling. Here are the talkative braggart, the laconic scout, who proves to be trustworthy, and the dandified young man who dreams of adventure.

The tour itself turns out to be an extended hunting spree. An exact count of the wild turkeys, prairie chickens, deer, elk, bear, and buffalo they kill is impossible to calculate. But this impressive, if gruesome, slaughter is another part of the western legend; it testifies to the plentitude of the place. Amid such plenty, it is easy to feel free. The independent life of the frontier rangers seems to be just the thing for America's youth: «We send our youth abroad to grow luxurious and effeminate in Europe; it seems to me, that a previous tour on the prairies would be more likely to produce that manliness, simplicity, and self-dependence, most in unison with our political institutions» (p. 55).

This from a man nearing fifty who had lived for seventeen years in Europe before he returned to America and took his western tour. Irving is captivated by the idyllic life of the hunting camp:

Indeed I can scarcely conceive a kind of life more calculated to put both mind and body in a healthful tone. A morning's ride of several hours diversified by hunting incidents; an encampment in the afternoon under some noble grove on the borders of a stream; an evening banquet of venison, fresh killed, roasted, or broiled on the coals; turkeys just from the thickets and wild honey from the trees; and all relished with an appetite unknown to the gourmets of the cities (p. 85).

This land is not, however, an easy place in which to reside permanently and Irving's description of Pierre Beatte's rheumatic limbs and scarred body attests to the harshness of life on the frontier. He is «by his own account... little better than a mere wreck... a living monument of the hardships of wild frontier life» (p. 160). Nor does Irving ignore the havoc the rangers leave behind them when they decamp:

...our late bustling encampment had a forlorn and desolate appearance. The surrounding forest had been in many places trampled into a quagmire. Trees felled and partly hewn in pieces... smouldering fires with great morsels of roasted and buffalo meat... hacked and slashed by the knives of the hunters; while around were strewed the hides, the horns, the antlers, and bones of buffaloes and deer, with uncooked joints, and unplucked turkeys, left behind with reckless improvidence (p. 170).

But the lasting impression we derive from Irving's sketch of his month on the prairies is of a healthy life lived among a band of youthful, high spirited hunters amid a land of milk and honey.

Although Francis Parkman's record of his journey west is not so idyllic as Irving's account, there are striking similarities between the two works and their authors⁶. Parkman was a young Easterner in frail health when he set out in the summer of 1846 on his 2000 mile journey. Two years before (1843-44) he had made «the required European tour». I have noted these similarities between Parkman and Irving because, once again, we can detect a familiar pattern at work: an educated Easterner, in poor health, sets out for the West to learn about the land and about himself. The everyday details of Parkman's journey read as if he had Irving's and other traveller's narratives beside him as he wrote. Despite the hardships of prairie life, and Parkman does not idealize the torments of rain, mud, and mosquitoes, much of the journey is a prolonged hunting expedition on which Parkman and his companions shoot at and sometimes manage to kill anything that comes within range.

Like Irving, Parkman peoples his story with colorful western characters; chief among them is Henry Chatillon, a guide who is a cross between Leatherstocking and a courtly French chevalier. In addition to Chatillon, and Parkman's cousin, Quincy Adams Shaw, the party includes a «Captain C., of the British Army», and «Mr. R., an English gentleman»⁷. Predictably, the Captain and Mr. R. get lost at the very start of the trip, journeying in circles until Henry Chatillon sets them straight. Rounding out the party is a Sancho Panza-like character named Deslauriers, whose function, in addition to handling the recalcitrant mules, is to utter a string of oaths in French patois at the slightest provocation. Equally as important as these «plot» features is that Parkman, like Irving before him, seems unable or unwilling to understand cultures at variance with his own.

Parkman's cultural myopia is most noticeable when he looks at the Mexicans or Indians he meets. Like Irving, he cannot resist the urge to categorize: «The human race in this part of the world is separated into three divisions, arranged in the order of their merits: white men, Indians, and Mexicans; to the latter of whom the honorable title of «whites» is by no means conceded» (p. 332). Whereas he dismisses the Mexicans entirely, he seems to be of two minds about the Indians, characterizing them either as horse-stealing brigands or as the apotheosis of manly virtue, remarking on their stoicism and the set of their strong Roman features. One in particular, called Panther, he feels merits a closer description:

As he suffered his ornamented buffalo-robe to fall in folds about his loins, his stately and graceful figure was fully displayed; and while he sat his horse in an easy attitude the long feathers of the prairie-cock fluttering from the crown of his head, he seemed the very model of a wild prairie-rider. He had not the same features with those of other Indians. Unless his face greatly belied him, he was free from the jealousy, suspicion, and malignant cunning of his people (p. 292).

6. Cf. Francis Parkman, *The Oregon Trail*, ed. E. N. Feltsgog (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969).

7. For a scholarly discussion of the emigrant woman's experience and how it differed from that of the frontier male, see Annette Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984). Kolodny argues that women domesticated western space rather than exploiting it.

Panther, posed more like a statue than a flesh and blood person, is the noble Uncas of Parkman's narrative. Despite the lavish attention to detail in this individualized sketch, what makes it work as a striking image are the generalized vices that Parkman has assigned to all other Indians.

What immediately strikes us about Irving's and Parkman's work is that they describe almost exclusively male worlds. Irving spends a carefree month with a company of hearty rangers. Except for scattered references to the emigrant women he sees among the wagon trains, and the wretched hags in the Ogillalah camp (p. 151), Parkman virtually excludes women from his narrative.

For a look at what life was like for women in the West, we have to turn to a woman's account. Although Isabella Bird's *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains* (1879) is a traveller's and not an emigrant's narrative, she provides a fairly detailed view of what life was like for women in the mountain valleys of the Rocky Mountains⁸. It was, in a word, hard. When she first arrives in Colorado, Bird stays with the Chalmers family. Of «Mrs. C.», she writes, «She looks like one of the English poor women of our childhood –lean, clean, toothless, and speaks, like some of them, in a piping, discontented voice, which seems to convey a personal reproach». As she travels through the mountains and high valleys of Colorado, Bird remarks on women who have brought order and beauty to their rude homes, invariably these women are German or Bohemian immigrants. Some women, like the boarding house operator with whom she stays in Colorado Springs, make a living catering to consumptives who have come west hoping to find a cure. Many find only a deathbed in an unfamiliar room. «It turns the house upside down when they just come here and die», Bird's landlady laughingly tells her (p. 179). Other women, like the lady from Laramie, «remarkable as being the first woman who had settled in the Rocky Mountains», are trying the «camp cure» for their own consumption.

Bird herself is as independent and resourceful as any of the male authors. She insists on being treated not as a weak woman but as a person. Few things give her greater satisfaction than being recognized as a hard worker. She reports that the leader of a cattle roundup had said «"I was a good cattleman", and that he had forgotten that a lady was of the party till he saw me "come leaping over the timber, and driving with the others"» (p. 149-50).

He can be hard on her own sex when they complain or take too long on a task she feels can be done with expediency. But she is equally hard on English gentlemen who have come west looking for sport; she writes of one that he «was lording it in true caricature fashion, with a Lord Dundreary drawl and a general execration for every-thing» (p. 206). As for the American passion for firearms and the need to protect oneself, Bird dismisses it entirely:

I left Estes Park with a Sharp's revolver loaded with ball-cartridge in my pocket, which has been the plague of my life. Its bright ominous barrel peeped out in quiet Denver shops, children pulled it out to play with, or when my riding-dress hung up with it in the pocket, pulled the whole from the peg to the floor; and I cannot conceive of any circumstances in which I could feel it right to make use of it, or in which it could possibly do me any good (p. 207).

8. See Isabella Bird, *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains* (London: Virago Press, 1986), p. 53. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.

Bird's narrative both repeats and, in some important ways reverses what we have read in the journals of Irving and Parkman. Like Parkman, she travelled not only out West but around the world because of her health; she seems to have felt better on the road than at home in Scotland. Like Irving, she feels the sublimity of the western landscape. Unlike these male travel writers, however, she does not glorify the hunt nor does she celebrate the ruggedness of life where she simply finds it dreary. What she does celebrate is the beauty of the mountain landscape with its «brilliant atmosphere» and the «diamond sparks» of frost-fall in the air (p. 295).

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