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Painters of a Changing New World: James Fenimore Cooper and Thomas Cole

BY CORIE DIAS

Author James Fenimore Cooper and painter Thomas Cole both observed man’s progress west and both disapproved of the way in which the settlers went about this expansion. They were not against such progress, but both men disagreed with the harmful way it was done, with the natural environment suffering irreversible harm. Had the pioneers gone about making their changes in a different way, Cooper and Cole seem to suggest, the new society could have been established without corrupting the environment and would not have been criticized by these artists; however, the settlers showed little or no regard for the natural state of this new land. As a result, Cooper and Cole found reason to voice their displeasure and disapproval, doing so through their art.

In the first of the Leatherstocking series, The Pioneers, Cooper makes his strongest arguments against man’s wasteful ways and first introduces the audience to woodsman Natty Bumppo. The fictional town of Templeton had its roots in the real town that Cooper’s father had founded: Cooperstown. Cooper grew up watching the changes that man inflicted on the landscape and his conflicted attitude towards the “progress” that those settlers made are expressed throughout The Pioneers. During the time that Cooper wrote the Pioneers, there was much concern in the Otsego area about the environment, as the area grew more and more crowded and as the ground was depleted of nutrients from all of the farming being done (Taylor 387). This depletion caused a great financial burden in Cooperstown, with Cooper and his family taking a severe financial blow as a result (Taylor 390). Cooper called this time in the process of settlement the “second stage” where “we see the struggles for place, the heart-burnings and jealousies of contending families, and the influence of mere money” (Taylor 426). A large part of these jealous contentions were over the land, as the settlers fought to claim and tame the natural landscape,
and as the people then overworked that land in their thirst for wealth. These concerns all went into the writing of *The Pioneers*, where Cooper depicts the state of New York as he saw it growing up.

Cooper begins the novel with a very positive description of the frontier and its settlers, describing Otsego county as "one of the most populous districts of New York. It sends forth its emigrants like any other old region, and it is pregnant with industry and enterprise. Its manufactures are prosperous" (*The Pioneers* 8). Cooper begins with a fairly positive image of the land and its settlers. However, this glowing review of such newfound industry must be reconciled to the open critique of the destructive ways of the settlers throughout the novel, showing Cooper's unresolved tension about the white man's progress west. This tension is never resolved through any of the Leatherstocking Novels, as he expresses both the necessity of expansion and a concern for the effects that this expansion had on the natural state of the land.

The attitude of many of those settlers in Templeton toward their surroundings can be summed up in the words of the local sheriff, Jones, who remarks to his cousin Elizabeth, "We must run out streets by the compass, coz, and disregard trees, hills, ponds, stumps, or, in fact, any thing but posterity" (183). Streets were a necessity, but it was this attitude of total disregard for the natural state of the land that disturbed Cooper, as trees were felled and ponds polluted with no thoughts as to the future. Man stormed the countryside; there was no middle ground, no compromise with the natural state, but a complete takeover. It was not the expansion that was the problem in Cooper's mind, but the way it was accomplished.

This wrong attitude towards the westward expansion is also addressed by Judge Temple, who is largely responsible for many of the changes being made. Temple, like Cooper, approves of growth of the civilization, but sees serious problems in the actions of the settlers. Temple addresses this wrong attitude on the part of the townspeople, saying, "It grieves me to witness the extravagance that pervades this country...where the settlers trifle with the blessings they might enjoy, with the prodigality of successful adventurers" (228). The settlers, rather than appreciating this new country's bounty, act extravagantly, heedlessly harvesting all of what the land has to offer with the attitude of "successful adventurers," rather than respectful new inhabitants of an untamed land.

Throughout the novel, Cooper cites many examples of what were simply inexcusable examples of wastefulness and destruction of the environment. During a Christmas shooting match, we are introduced to the character Billy Kirby, an obnoxious and arrogant logger. Kirby becomes the wrongdoer in several extended examples of wastefulness, opposed by both Natty and Judge Temple. At one point, several of the characters, including Natty, Temple, and Temple's daughter Elizabeth, go to watch the destructive Kirby in one of his many enterprises: making sugar. Billy makes use of an "extremely wasteful and inartificial arrangement" that Temple openly criticizes, saying "You make dreadful wounds in these trees, where a small incision would effect the same object. I earnestly beg you will remember, that they are the growth of centuries, and when once gone, none living will see their loss remedied." Kirby responds ignorantly that he does not see the need for so many trees anyway, saying, "Now, I call no country much improved, that is pretty well covered with trees. Stumps are a different thing, for they don't shade the land; and besides, if you dig them, they make a fence that will turn any thing bigger than a hog, being grand for breachy cattle" (228-229). Kirby only sees the value of trees in terms of the money he can make from either chopping them down or gouging unnecessary holes in them, and the other characters see that there is no reasoning with him. The chapter ends with Billy singing a logging song about the "proud forest falling." It concludes with the verse, "Choose the oak that grows on the high land, or the silvery pine on the dry land, It matters but little to me" (*The Pioneers* 230).
As Natty comments, the settlers “alter the country so much, one hardly knows the lakes and streams” (206). Cooper also describes a mass shooting of pigeons, of which Temple disapproves. This is another example of what Natty calls the “wasty ways” of the pioneers. Soon after the pigeon shooting, a fishing expedition is made by Richard, Benjamin, and Kirby among others, with Temple and the two girls along to watch. This is another extensive example of the wastefulness indulged in by these men, as they haul in far more fish than they can eat. The young ladies watch from the shore with Temple, as the bulging nets are dragged in several times, resulting in a vast heap of fish on the sand. Temple comments to his daughter, “This is a fearful expenditure of the choicest gifts of Providence. These fish, which...will be rejected food on the meanest table in Templeton. are of a quality and flavor that, in other countries, would make them esteemed a luxury” (259). What they have is not appreciated by the settlers, but wasted. Food that would be seen as a luxury in other lands is not valued and respected, but hauled up on the beach to rot. Temple’s words go unheeded as the fishermen go out for another run.

This fishing expedition is contrasted against the actions of characters more appreciative of the land’s bounty. Natty makes a similar statement to Temple, but does it through his actions, as he sails over the lake in his own manner of fishing, accompanied by Oliver and John. Natty’s way of fishing is beautiful, and Cooper adopts an almost sacred tone when describing it, as the men slip quietly over the water in their tiny boat. Elizabeth goes along with them to see how these men fish, and it seemed to her “that they glided over the water by magic, so easy and graceful was the manner in which Mohegan guided his little bark” (268). Rather than catching every fish they see, these men treat the fishing trip as a kind of journey through nature, taking a step back to observe all that is available to them: “Elizabeth saw thousands of these fish, swimming in shoals along the shallow and warm waters of the shore; for the flaring light of their torch laid bare the mysteries of the lake, as plainly as if the limpid sheet of the Otsego was but another atmosphere” (268). Natty spears just one large fish with a single blow, not wishing to take more than he needs as they glide over this other “atmosphere” that is the lake. Unfortunately, the peace presiding over the group is broken as the other fishing party again comes into view, and Natty, Elizabeth, John, and Oliver are bombarded by “the hoarse sounds of Benjamin’s voice, and the dashing of oars, as the heavier boat of the seine-drawers approached the spot where the canoe lay, dragging after it the folds of the net” (270).

Kirby may be a completely thoughtless and wasteful character for much of the novel, and Temple does act as a voice of reason in combating his ridiculous attitude towards the environment. However, Temple, as founder of the town, bears a great responsibility for the changes being made. He may openly criticize the wasteful practices he sees, but takes no action himself. He is content to wait for future laws, ones that have already been called into question by other characters. Natty questions the effectiveness of such laws, saying, “You may make your laws, Judge,' he cried, 'but who will you find to watch the mountains through the long summer days, or the lakes at night?’” (160). As Temple watches in distress, the trees are felled and the animals are killed needlessly. Temple may speak out, as Cooper does through his writing, but nothing in Templeton changes as a result.

Cooper does not limit himself to these straightforward, inarguably wrong methods on the part of the pioneers; he also gives several examples which are not set down in black and white. In several portions of the book, it becomes apparent that Cooper himself cannot come to terms with what the setters are doing, but at the same time cannot be wholly against westward progress. Soon after seeing Kirby’s wasteful ways in making sugar, Temple, Richard, Elizabeth, and Louisa all go on a sight-seeing trip on horseback. The conversation centers around how much the land has
been "improved" by the settlers, with Temple leading the conversation. Temple has been a voice for conservation of the land, but he also speaks approvingly of the improvements that have been made, including clearing away underbrush and forming better roads. He tells his daughter that the earliest settlers in that area were miserable, and that man's changes were what made living there possible:

If thou hadst seen this district of country, as I did, when it lay in the sleep of nature, and had witnessed its rapid changes, as it awoke to supply the wants of man, thou wouldst curb thy impatience for a little time...no more than five years have elapsed, since the tenants of these woods were compelled to eat the scanty fruits of the forest to sustain life, and, with their unpracticed skill, to hunt the beasts as food for their starving families. (232-233)

The improvements made by those earlier settlers were necessary and justified; the animals were needed to provide food, and trees had to be cut down to build shelter.

However, due to man's greed, the situation only grew worse, as Temple tells the others: "It was a season of scarcity; the necessities of life commanded a high price in Europe, and were greedily sought after by the speculators. The emigrants, from the east to the west, invariably passed along the valley of the Mohawk, and swept away the means of subsistence, like a swarm of locusts" (234). It was not the land that caused the real devastation to the settlers; it was the greed of man. Speculators and emigrants alike were responsible for the early settlers' financial hardships, and they chose to sweep away the "means of subsistence like a swarm of locusts." Eventually, these hardships were dealt with by relying on what the land had to offer:

Something like a miracle was wrought in our favour, for enormous shoals of herrings were discovered to have wandered five hundred miles, through the windings of the impetuous Susquehanna, and the lake was alive with their numbers. These were at length caught, and dealt out to the people, with proper portions of salt; and from that moment, we again began to prosper (234-235)

This fishing expedition was not the fishing of Richard, Benjamin, and Kirby. The fish were seen, not as something to be cast aside and wasted, but as a miracle, a life-saving miracle that was evenly distributed and used by grateful settlers. Man's greed had devastated those early settlers, but their problem was resolved through a proper use of natural resources. Such use of the natural resources was necessary, but there is a fine line between harvesting resources out of want, and harvesting them out of greed, and it was in that gray area that Cooper's discomfort existed. In the case of both fishing expeditions, massive amounts of fish were caught, but there is a tension between what is the proper use of the fish, and by extension all of the land, and what is not. There has undoubtedly been an improvement, but there has also been destruction and waste.

This tension is also shown as the author paints a picture of the land trying to renew itself. He reflects on the changing seasons, and what changes result in the plant growth:

The heats of the days, and the frequent occurrence of balmy showers, had completed, in an incredibly short period, the growth of plants, which the lingering spring had so long retarded in the germ; and the woods presented every shade of green that the American forests know. The stumps in the cleared fields were already hid beneath the wheat, that was waving with every breath of the summer air, shining, and changing its hues, like velvet. (283)

Cooper shows the power of nature in the rebirth that is spring, as "the woods presented every shade of green that the American forests know." But Cooper does not just dwell on
the new growth; he also shows us the presence of man, which is evident from the "stumps in the cleared field...already hid beneath the wheat." In this short period of time, the land was trying to renew itself, but the wheat could only cover the stumps; the land could only cover over the damage that man had caused. Planting crops is necessary, but Cooper reminds his reader that something is lost in the process.

Elizabeth’s journey to an area called The Vision to meet with Natty best exemplifies this tension between natural land and forward movement. This area, like many of the places described in The Pioneers was modeled on a real area in Cooperstown, also known as The Vision (Taylor). This area is renowned for its beauty and incredible views of the surroundings lands; interestingly, this area has also been improved by man:

On the summit of the mountain which Judge Temple had named the Vision, a little spot had been cleared, in order that a better view might be obtained of the village and the valley. At this point Elizabeth understood the hunter she was to meet him; and thither she urged her way, as expeditiously as the difficulty of the ascent and the impediments of a forest in a state of nature would admit. Numberless were the fragments of rocks, trunks of fallen trees, and branches, with which she had to contend; but every difficulty vanished before her resolution, and, by her own watch, she stood on the desired spot several minutes before the appointed hour (398-399).

The Vision is a beautiful spot, and the improvements that man has made improve the view; in this way, man’s improvements have aimed towards a greater appreciation of the landscape. But at the same time, this improved view comes with a cost. The “numberless” bits of fallen trees and branches left behind on the ground contribute greatly to the forest fire that soon follows, caused by the settlers’ mining into the side of the mountain. As a result of man’s greed and their carelessness in taking down the trees and shrubs, the mountainside is destroyed, and Indian John dies in the fire. Cooper may have appreciated the view of The Vision himself while growing up in Cooperstown, but he juxtaposes man’s improvements against the devastation that results from their greed.

Cooper presented his views on the destruction of the natural environment in other novels of the Leatherstocking Series, including The Prairie, published in 1827. In The Prairie, the familiar character of Natty Bumppo is known only as The Trapper, transformed from the mighty hunter into a kind of sage, permanently imbedded in the landscape, apart from the ways of the white man. The Trapper also becomes a voice for Cooper’s environmental concerns. The prairie here is not an authentic representation of the American prairie in Cooper’s day. Cooper paints a picture of what he saw in the future: a vast, inhospitable wasteland, the result of man’s destructive ways.

At the beginning of this novel, the Trapper meets the Bush family, who wish to settle down in more uninhabited parts of the west. Upon finding a spot to camp, the family must procure some kind of firewood, so “the eldest of the sons stepped heavily forward, and, without any apparent effort, he buried his axe to the eye in the soft body of a cotton-wood tree.” However, the damage does not end with just one tree:

They advanced in a body to the work, and in a space of time, and with a neatness of execution that would have astonished an ignorant spectator, they stripped a small but suitable spot of its burthen of forest, as effectually, and almost as promptly, as if a whirlwind had passed along the place. The stranger had been a silent, but attentive observer of their progress. As tree after tree came whistling down, he cast his eyes upward, at the vacancies they left in the heavens, with a melancholy gaze, and finally turned
away, muttering to himself with a bitter smile, like one who disdained giving a more audible utterance to his discontent (18).

They have no regard for the environment, and the Trapper can do nothing but stand by and watch as these people, like a whirlwind, ravage an area where peace and quiet had ruled only hours before. The Prairie is the last of the Leatherstocking Series, and it does not present a positive view of the future of the environment.

Cooper’s environmental statements also serve as a warning for the settlers. In his article “James Fenimore Cooper: Pioneer of the Environmental Movement,” Hugh C. MacDougall of the James Fenimore Cooper Society discusses Cooper’s interest in providing a warning for his fellow settlers. In The Prairie, “Cooper uses the idea of the prairies to forecast the future of the America whose wasty frontier customs he had described, and deplored, in The Pioneers” (MacDougall 6). Cooper attempted to show his fellow Americans that “our natural resources are not inexhaustible; that natural beauty, wilderness, and wild creatures and plants must be preserved; and that failure to heed nature’s warnings may spell our own destruction” (MacDougall 7).

Like Cooper, Thomas Cole expressed similar misgivings about the environment, both in his paintings and in his poetry. In Cole’s series masterpiece, The Course of Empire, the artist worked to show the devastating effects of man’s actions of nature. This series focuses on the same piece of land, seen from different viewpoints in different stages of civilization. A distant cliff serves as a common focal point in each painting around which the changing landscapes revolve. The first of the series, from 1836, “The Savage State,” presents the viewer with a group of hunters chasing down a herd of deer.

“The Course of Empire: The Savage State”

The animal kingdom has succumbed by the next painting, “The Pastoral or Arcadian State” from 1834. Here there is a portion of natural landscape left, with the mountains remaining undisturbed in the background, and a forest coming down uninhibited to meet the edge of a pond in the middle ground. However, as the empire moves through its stages, the landscape is virtually obliterated, only to be replaced by columns, statues, and fountains in addition to endless buildings in “The Consummation of Empire.” Here, even the revolving point of the cliff is being taken over; in place of unbroken vegetation, roadways and buildings now zigzag their way up the side of the mountain.

The fourth painting, “Destruction,” shows what Cole saw as the inevitable fate of any empire bent on such total control: violence, fire, destruction of property, and loss of life. As Cole remarked on the painting, “Luxury has weakened and debased. A savage enemy has entered the city. A fierce tempest is raging” (Wilton and Barringer 105). In the final painting, entitled “Desolation,” man has departed,
leaving only the ruins of empire behind him. However, this painting does present hope and new life to the viewer. It is done in somber tones of dark greens and grays, punctuated by sickly shades of yellow and off-white, but patches of lively green can be seen in some areas where the trees are growing back. As Wilton and Barringer point out, “Human life has vanished, but nature is reclaiming the landscape..."

"The Course of Empire: Desolation"

This changing world portrayed in the Course of Empire has much in common with Cooper’s changing world of Templeton. In both worlds, we see the animals being chased out, as the new inhabitants take hold of the land. As Elizabeth observes in The Pioneers, “How rapidly is civilization treading on the footsteps of nature!” (212). Just as greed takes over the settlers in The Pioneers, prompting them to waste hundreds of fish in sport, greed takes over in Cole’s painted society, with ornate buildings completely overtaking the landscape. The result of this is a weakness that is tested by the enemy invader; the civilization is destroyed. It becomes a desolate wasteland, much like the one predicted by Cooper in The Prairie. Cooper depicts a mass devastation of trees in word, as the Bush family strips away an entire section of forest and the Trapper looks on with a bitter smile. Cole depicts the same situation in paint, as man completely removes all vestiges of

The cycle that opened with hunters pursuing deer in the Savage State has reversed itself, and the animals can now graze without fear of predators” (108). The vegetation, along with the appearance of deer, herons, and a stag all show the reemergence of nature, of the world undisturbed that Cole pictured existing before being taken over by man.

A View of the Mountain Pass Called the Notch of the White Mountains (Crawford Notch).” It is an autumn scene, with a mountain looming in the background. The foreground consists of a small clearing bordered on each side by thickly wooded areas; the greens of the woods are occasionally pierced by a patch of yellow or orange, and a gleam of sunlight illuminates a small, clear pond. But the light also illuminates the focal point of the painting: a man-made clearing with an expanse of stumps where trees once thrived, complete with both a small house and desolate shack, one on either side of the entrance to the notch. The few trees remaining in the clearing are mere skeletons, with twisted trunks naked of their leaves and only stumps remaining where their boughs have been lopped off. There is but one lone rider in the center of the clearing, apparently making his way towards the house. The man is dwarfed by the enormity of the mountain behind him, but at the same time, it is clear that this small figure is a force to be reckoned with; in this area alone, he has stripped away much of what existed naturally. It seems inevitable that the wooded areas both to the right and to the left of this clearing will also be stump fields in a short matter of time.
“A View of the Mountain Pass Called the Notch of the White Mountains”

As in Cooper’s work, Cole’s paintings show an unresolved tension between the progress of man and the conservation of nature. To build the empire, it is necessary for man to chop down the trees and pursue the animals. Yet the final outcome of this course of empire shows a clear warning, showing a bleak future where the natural forces of nature will once again come to reside where man has failed to prosper. In “Crawford Notch,” the home that exists in the painting is required by the lone figure, and the wood that has been chopped down needed both to build with and to burn for heat. Nevertheless, these painting leave the viewer with a sense of desolation, as they see the progress of man destroying the untouched beauty of the wilderness.

Cole mourned the passing of the natural environment in his poetry as well as his painting. In his 1825 poem “Vision of Life” he expresses his anxiety over the loss of the land due to the progress of industrialization, a land that he saw as an earthly paradise (American Painting, 40). In this poem, Cole is visited by a spirit who tells him to look “Below-before-behind.” The poet’s eye is met with what man has done to the earth, the remains of an idealized paradise: “But left unfinished/and nought but weeds/And plants pale in the poisoned sickliness/Could vegetate in that accursed soil.” All the poet could see were “bare rocks and rugged hills” sparsely covered by the sickly plants, all that would grow in the poisoned soil. When told to look to the past, the poet sees a different scene, a “veil of tender beauty,” but can find no comfort from it:

And the drear, desolate wild, that we had passed-
Retiring grew more lovely ere ‘twas lost-
"Is this my destined lot," I sighing said, "thou spirit
Ne’re to find joy, but in the fading past?
Bliss sicklied with regret

Cole can find no comfort in this past beauty, as it is gone and he does not seem to think that it will occur again. The spirit’s answer reconfirms the fact that Cole himself had no answer:

-The spirit spoke again
But faint and brokenly: and much escaped
My lingering ear- "another state of being"
“Eternity” - “good, evil” - “woe and bliss”
Were all I gathered more

The painter, like Cooper, was deeply concerned over what he saw happening to the American landscape. However, he is grasping at a paradise that only exists in his mind, an idealized version of the land that will never exist again, except perhaps in "another state of being." Whether this land is described by Cooper, like Lake Otsego, as a different atmosphere, or by Cole as another state of being, it is a doomed land, one that by nature must change. With the coming of a new civilization, the ideal natural landscape is swept away, and all that is left is the image left in the artist’s mind.
Works Cited


