

Ahistorical Histories: Ideological Persuasion in Cooper's European Novels

Udo Nattermann

IN *AMERICAN INCARNATION*, Myra Jehlen gives an instructive account of the significance of the land for the American national consciousness. American ideology, she points out, is informed by a belief in natural law, which was reinforced in America because the very presence of (presumably) empty land, a vast continent stretching from ocean to ocean, made "Americans [see] themselves as building their civilization out of nature itself, as neither the analogue nor the translation of Natural Law but its direct expression."¹ As a consequence, since God created Nature and Nature was embodied in America, Americans came to regard their country as the perfection of human society, a belief which in turn affected the American attitude towards other societies. Jehlen writes, "By comparison..., the histories of most other nations seem to have just grown, first prehistorically over indistinct and indefinite lapses of time before time, then through multiple incomplete versions whose coherence and meaning are produced afterward, by retrospective interpretations."² This perspective is precisely what we find in James Fenimore Cooper's European novels—*The Heidenmauer* (1832), *The Bravo* (1831), and *The*

Headsman (1833)—which are "retrospective interpretations" of events occurring in three "incomplete" Old World societies. The three romances are grounded in Lockean concepts of natural law and natural right, and reflect their author's attempt at participating through his narratives in the shaping of an emerging national consciousness.

Like the Leatherstocking tales and the Littlepage trilogy, Cooper's European novels constitute a chronological sequence, giving us snapshots of crucial moments in the historical development of three Old World societies. The defects of these societies, *i.e.*, their unnatural features, lead to various kinds of societal ills, or abuses of nature. *The Heidenmauer* depicts Reformation-torn Germany in the early sixteenth century; a Bavarian count seizes the moment of a power vacuum and, supported by a mayor, uses military force to get rid of a Benedictine abbey. *The Bravo* concerns the ordeal of several characters of different social provenance in early eighteenth-century Venice, which is threatened by external and internal foes and protected by a totalitarian political apparatus. *The Headsman* describes an episode in the (relatively) enlightened, tolerant, and peaceful Switzerland of the early eighteenth century; the happiness of a motley group of people is endangered by the tradition of heredi-

UDO NATTERMANN is an Adjunct Professor of English at the University of Indianapolis.

tary law.

Implying in all three romances that America is in tune with nature, Cooper presents Europe as a place of religious, political, and juridical conflicts that violate natural law and the natural rights of human beings. Further, the abuse of nature—rendered in the fictions as the abuse of God, family, and individual—does not happen without consequence. The immoral behavior of the Benedictine monks leads to their violent removal; the Venetian policy results in the destruction of families, a fact that, in the long run, will destroy the republic itself; and Swiss hereditary law endangers the happiness of the individual and *ipso facto* that of society in general. As Leo Strauss puts it, “There is ... a kind of sanction for the law of nature in this world: the disregard of the law of nature leads to public misery and penury.”³ Hence the disorder and suffering in the societies which Cooper describes; hence, too, the novels’ virtuous characters, who resist the harm inflicted upon nature: Father Arnolph, Ulricke, and Odo von Ritterstein; the Bravo, Antonio, Gelsomina, and Father Anselmo; and, finally, Sigismund. Inevitably, nature holds court over the abuse it suffers (as God holds court over evil), which means in historical terms that the abusive systems of Europe are eventually supplanted by the positive model of America. In short, Cooper’s European novels are allegories of nature’s workings in the historical world, closed ideological spaces conveying what American readers either unconsciously already know or (through early national literature like Cooper’s) ought to be made aware of: that America is the *telos* of the historical process.

Yet, though he draws on his own knowledge of and experiences with the countries of the Old World, Cooper does not fully succeed in presenting to his readers the injustices of the undemocratic political systems of Europe and the superior-

ity of America as the model nation. He tries to have America emerge from the fictions, through indirect contrast and comparison, as what a nation can and should be, but he merely accomplishes an ideologically distorted, propagandistic depiction of European societies. This weakness arises from one of the major problems frequently haunting Cooper: his difficulty in reconciling writing historical romances with writing political tracts, being a historian with being an expert in politics. This problem is manifest in the European romances in their machinery of ideological persuasion.

Apart from Cooper’s direct authorial intrusions, which are only the most visible of his strategies of manipulation, his crafting of character and plot in the three romances also contributes in a subtle manner to his goal of influencing the ideology of his readers. Here, however, Cooper trips and falls in the web of historical text and ideological subtext; he can depict European history at three of its crossroads only by employing European characters who surprise the reader with their typically American attitudes and ideas. Cooper wants to show that human society naturally tends toward the American model, whose cultural DNA must therefore already be present in the Old World societies he describes. Making the Old World appear as the seedbed of the New, Europe as America *in statu nascendi*, Cooper creates characters who, fulfilling their function as purveyors of an American ideology, compromise his obligations *vis-à-vis* history; in other words, bolstering the national consciousness of America’s role as the natural destiny of the world comes only at the price of tampering with Europe’s past.

The Heidenmauer depicts the power struggle between castle, town, and abbey, the three dominant factions in a province of early-Reformation Bavaria, which are represented by their respective leaders: Emich of Leiningen, the

Count of Hartenburg; Heinrich Frey, the burgomaster of Duerckheim; and Father Bonifacius, the Abbot of Limburg. By turning Protestant and by ridding itself of an illegitimate elite, the Bavarian community follows an essentially American path of individualization and democratization—a parallel development of America and Europe also emphasized when Cooper likens the southern German locale to American environments.⁴ The German Reformation is, in Cooper's view, a variation on the American Revolution, another instance of "an entire people awakening, as it were, by magic, to the virtues of a new set of maxims." At the climactic moment of the romance, Emich and Heinrich, with four hundred soldiers, destroy the abbey and drive away the monks, whose levying of taxes and worldly, immoral behavior have been a burden on the region. Thus aristocracy and bourgeoisie defeat the clergy; and thus the Reformation weakens the Catholic Church and paves the way for secularized society. Cooper justifies the raid on the abbey by pointing out that, "Happily, this is an age in which no sophistry can long escape unscathed, nor any injury to natural justice go long unrequited." The burning and leveling of the building and particularly the destruction of the confessionals, described in the narrative as "attacking the enemy in his citadel," are presented as the natural, inevitable course of history.

The American nature of the events taking place in Germany is nowhere more obvious than in Cooper's choice of characters. The members of the higher classes are either, like Emich, already converted Protestants or, like Father Arnolph and Ulricke, Catholics surprisingly tolerant of the heretic Luther. Odo von Ritterstein is a special case; though now a repentant Catholic, he was in his youth a small version of Luther, trying to achieve some sort of church reform. More important, however, are the members of the lower

class, Berchthold and Gottlob, with whom the romance begins and ends, for both are veritable Yankees in disguise. Rejecting Catholicism, Berchthold's ideology goes beyond purely religious convictions and embraces a secular faith worthy of a Ralph Waldo Emerson or a Henry David Thoreau: "I am myself a miracle, that tells me every moment of the existence of a superior power; and in that much I bend to its control. But it hath never been my fortune to hear an image speak, or see it do aught else that belongs to the will." Gottlob, though less prone to entertain notions of the "infinite of the private man," also betrays an American frame of mind, not only because of his irreverent attitude toward the monks, but because of his egalitarianism: "There is a moon for a monk as well as for a cow-herd, it would seem, ...we vassals are little more than so much clear water in which our master may see his own countenance, and at need his own humors." Yet to Berchthold and Gottlob belongs the future. The former will inherit Odo von Ritterstein's riches and marry Meta, the mayor's daughter; and the latter will wed Gisela, Count Emich's servant. In short, the common men—Protestant in religion, republican in politics, and revolutionary in spirit—rise to eminence and, together with their wives, will be fruitful and multiply; Bavaria will emulate the thirteen founding states of America.

But the narrative's ideological thrust, emphasized at the end of the romance through the marital deals of a particular set of characters, becomes compromised when ideology gets in the way of history. It is therefore not surprising that some critics are puzzled by the amount of positive valuation which the old order, represented by the traditional Catholic characters, receives in *The Heidenmauer*. For example, Allan M. Axelrad argues that

Cooper wholeheartedly sides with the traditional against the new. The moral to this

story is, when sacred traditions are attacked, when legitimate authority is undercut, then the forces of barbarism will be released, causing anarchy, chaos. ... *The Heidenmauer* does not celebrate the liberation of a community from the tyranny and superstition of the medieval Church, as many scholars contend; rather, it analyzes the rationalization of a decadent society, forewarning of the unhappy results that predictably ensue. This was the moral he wished to impart to the American people.⁵

The mistake of such a view lies in the critic's determination to resolve the inconsistencies of the text by interpreting it as a unified whole with an unambiguous message; however, none of Cooper's literary productions is strictly unified and unambiguous, and certainly not *The Heidenmauer*. A more instructive view is one that sees Cooper's intentions as conflicting: while his political convictions make him manipulate certain aspects of characterization and plot in a direction which suggests, teleologically, that Bavarians are on the way to embrace an American-style system, writing an historical romance also forces him to paint especially some of the conservative characters in his fiction in the quaint, rosy pastel tones so typical of this literary mode. The slant Cooper thus gives to historical reality clashes with the text's ideological slant.

While his concern in *The Heidenmauer* is primarily psychological (the turn toward Protestantism involves major changes in people's emotional attachment and intellectual bias), in *The Bravo*, Cooper investigates the *political* aspect of the modern development toward the American model. Defending his literary treatment of European countries in *A Letter To His Countrymen*, Cooper formulated his plan for *The Bravo* in the following words: "The moral was to be inferred from the events, and it was to be enforced by the common sympathies of our

nature."⁶ Cooper faithfully implemented this strategy. What happens in the novel (the "events") is the gradual decline and eventual destruction of the family—the nucleus of society—across all borders of class, age, sex, and human relationship, caused by Venice's totalitarian regime, which brutally exercises power in its own interest. The "common sympathies" which Cooper enlists in *The Bravo* are the reader's feelings for the emotional fabric of the family and his rejection of everything that poses a threat to familial bonds. And it is the interest of women in particular that is jeopardized by the ruling elite of Venice. Within the family as the constitutive element of society, women are the privileged incarnations of nature, as Cooper underscores time and again, particularly in chapter 23 where Donna Violetta, the novel's heroine, relies on her "female instinct" to escape from a mob and find sanctuary in the abode of the Bravo's only friend, Gelsomina. Cooper suggests to the reader that women cannot but feel, think, and act in natural ways; and since their natural inclinations—Violetta's love for Don Camillo, and Gelsomina's love for the Bravo—are threatened by the Venetian oligarchy and thus lie at the heart of the entire narrative, *The Bravo*, like *The Heidenmauer*, can be said to negotiate the fate of nature in the historical world.

To establish the novel's events as based on a nature that is essentially American and that brings forth a process culminating in an American political system, Cooper again employs Yankees in disguise. Two male characters, Father Anselmo and Antonio, obviously have trouble with their Catholicism. The former, though a Carmelite monk, seems to be in love with Donna Florinda, Donna Violetta's governess, who at one point divulges her intimate relationship with him by addressing him by his first name. The fisherman Antonio has fallen into disrepute with the Venetian authorities and, as a result of his conflicts with the

oligarchy, has lost his "leisure or heart for the confessional." The female protagonist of the novel, Donna Violetta, also bears the marks of an American, for she appreciates the womanly values—privacy and a simple demeanor—which Cooper, defending the United States against European prejudice and ignorance in his *Notions of the Americans*, generally attributes to the American female.⁷ Courted one night by Don Camillo, who plays music under her window, Donna Violetta, as it befits an American female according to Cooper, is embarrassed by her pursuer's intrusion upon her privacy: "I would that they were done!" exclaimed Violetta, stopping her ears. "None know the excellence of our friend better than I; but this open exposure of thoughts that ought to be so private, must wound her." The girl's reserve is complemented by a natural (American) simplicity which contrasts with the vulgarity of the conspicuously fanciful (European) dresses worn by other women:

There were many unmasked and highborn dames, whirling about in their boats, attended by cavaliers in rich attire.... One gondola, in particular, was remarked for the singular grace and beauty of the form it held, qualities which made themselves apparent, even through the half-disguise of the simple habiliments she [Donna Violetta] wore. The boat, the servants, and the ladies, for there were two [the other is Donna Florinda], were alike distinguished for that air of severe but finished simplicity....

The most interesting feature of *The Bravo*—apart from the tacit Americanism of some of the "good" characters, who subtly convey elements of an American ideology to the reader—is Cooper's play with the institution of the confessional. And here, dealing again with material germane to historical reality, Cooper bungles. In three instances, he uses Jacopo Frontoni's, the Bravo's, "con-

fession" in an undeniably secular, not religious, sense, thus undermining the spiritual meaning which the practice has for Catholics. One dark night, hard-pressed by his conscience, Jacopo meets Don Camillo at a secret place and reveals to him the true motives for his actions. Cooper seems to play a game with us, for the conversation occurs, of all places, in a cemetery for heretics and Jews, and the Bravo's reason for divulging his background is psychological rather than religious. To this point, the conditions for the confessional are stood on their head, but then Cooper—now seemingly true to the nature of the confessional—(ironically?) withholds from the reader the content of the Bravo's revelations by ending the scene with the following words: "The course of the narrative does not require that we should accompany this extraordinary man th[r]ough the relation of the secrets he imparted to Don Camillo." Later we learn these secrets, but then in a different, yet again purely secular, context: Jacopo "confesses" his true identity to Gelsomina, his love. And soon afterwards, Cooper misuses the confessional for the third time when he has Father Anselmo attempt to utilize the Bravo's "confessions" as legal statements that, as evidence presented to the Council of Three, might prevent the authorities from executing him. In other words, Cooper denies Catholic Venice one of its most common, everyday rites in order to suggest to his readers the city on the way to a more Protestant, American state of affairs; historical fact once again collides with ideological purpose.

In *The Headsman*, violating nature, Europe's sin from which America is allegedly free, takes the form of legal injustice. Balthazar, a gentle family man, is forced to perform the duties of an executioner in spite of the fact that his natural inclinations militate against the bloody profession. And even though the position of headsman is hereditary by Swiss law,

Balthazar and his family suffer social ostracism. In America, whose nature is superior to that of Europe, such discrimination is presumably unknown. But the little country in the Alps is slowly becoming American, for many of its people—like those in *The Heidenmauer* and *The Bravo*—already entertain a love of privacy as well as an overt or covert dislike for Catholicism. Most important for Cooper's strategy of Americanizing the European narrative in *The Headsman* is his treatment of the issue of hereditary law, criticized in the United States since the days of Thomas Jefferson. Cooper describes a Swiss people that, like the American a few decades earlier, is grappling with a basic social problem. By depicting Swiss characters who come to realize that making heredity a social determinant results in injustice, Cooper bestows upon them an enlightened American sensibility, but he does not see that his explicit and implicit criticism of the principle of heredity clashes with his own manipulation of plot. Thus the novel's central aspect, its stance on heredity, is peculiarly his own, and historical fact and ideological fiction once again part ways.

In the last two chapters of *The Headsman*, Cooper resolves the novel's major conflict and its major mystery: Sigismund, the alleged son of Balthazar, turns out to be the son of Gaetano Grimaldi and the noble Angiolina, and, as an offspring of full-fledged aristocracy, becomes worthy of the hand of the equally noble Adelheid; and Maso, the half-evil/half-good adventurer, reveals his identity as the illegitimate son of Gaetano, who once had an affair with "poor Annunziata Altieri." The reader is led to believe that Maso's character is "bad" because it is the product of aristocracy corrupted by the underclass; Sigismund's "good" character and high-class "habits ... education ... feelings" appear as the product of unadulterated social-sexual inter-

course; and his sister Christine's honest but plain character seems the result of her being the child of the common Balthazar and the better-educated Marguerite, whose higher intellect expresses itself, rather awkwardly, through an "exaggerated manner."

In Cooper's genealogical arithmetic, both parents have to be of decent stock in order to guarantee a classy offspring; if one of the two parents is of inferior quality, so will be their child. True to his own social beliefs, Cooper employs standards of an Aristocracy of Man whose personality features are passed down from generation to generation, that is, according to a law of heredity. At the same time, however, he criticizes this very law when it determines that a son take over the profession of his father, as in the case of Balthazar's family, even though the talent which a person brings to a particular profession is, very much like a person's moral character, dependent upon heredity. The contradiction in which Cooper entangles himself in *The Headsman* can be seen as an involuntary expression of his attempt at weaving into the European novels character features and plot outcomes that one would expect from fiction dealing with American rather than with Old World milieux. He needs these character features and plot outcomes in order to make his ideological point, yet in imparting his message to his readers, he departs from a credible representation of history.

Cooper's goal is to present European societies as underdeveloped versions of the United States and as systems in the process of embracing the American model; America is to appear as the endpoint of the historical process, as what nature wills human society finally to become. He works this national ideology into his European romances by Americanizing some of his characters' frames of mind and by Protestantizing their religious sensibilities. But the European ro-

mances are also historical novels, describing actual moments in the history of three countries—the decline of Catholicism in Germany, the decline of the republic in Venice, and the decline of notions of heredity in Switzerland. Properly balancing ideology with history becomes Cooper's stumbling-block, for by subordinating the historical content to the ideological purpose, history eventually figures in the three fictions as nothing more than a pretext for the evocation of sentiments and thoughts that are part and parcel of an American ideology. The subtext gains priority over the text.

We know that Cooper despaired over the European ignorance of and condescension toward America, and that he diligently tried to instruct a European and American audience about the social and political system of the United States. In light of this attempt to inform, however, Cooper's European novels seem failures, particularly for an author who, through travel and through study, knew what he was writing about. For whatever poetic license historical narratives written in the romantic mode afford, they

must not presuppose what they intend to demonstrate. Instead of showing the injustices of Old World societies with the help of Old World characters, Cooper smuggles into his novels proto-Americans who are alien to the narratives and who serve as tools of ideological persuasion. Ultimately, the fault lies with Cooper's handling of the philosophy of natural law underlying the historical events in his fictions; since this philosophy is essentially teleological, it leaves little room for the play of historical contingencies.

Cooper misuses the small space separating the determinism of a particular philosophy from the openness of the historical realm. Cooper wants to show his readers what European society is like, but he also places his historical narratives on the Procrustean bed of natural law, with the result that *The Heidenmauer*, *The Bravo*, and *The Headsman* become not three books about three countries, but one and the same book telling the same story of America as the apogee of nature.

1. *American Incarnation: The Individual, The Nation, and The Continent* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), 3. 2. *Ibid.*, 6. 3. *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, 1953), 229. 4. Page references are to Volume 6, 2, and 5 of the *Novels and Tales*, 27 vols. (New York, 1873-1885). 5. *History and Utopia: A Study of the*

World View of James Fenimore Cooper (Norwood, Pa., 1978), 94, 97. 6. *A Letter To His Countrymen* (New York, 1834), 12. 7. *Notions of the Americans: Picked Up By a Travelling Bachelor*, *The Writings of James Fenimore Cooper* (Albany, 1991), 33, 165.