

Passions for Nature

Nineteenth-Century America's
Aesthetics of Alienation

ROCHELLE L. JOHNSON

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The popularity of Bartlett's image in the nineteenth century helps us recognize how Americans accepted this sort of progress. As Martha Hoppin notes, "Bartlett's prints were republished numerous times, lending them an unprecedented authority and providing a ready model for the many trained and untrained artists who produced images of [the scene] during the nineteenth century." Perhaps the most influential appearance of *View from Mount Holyoke* was in Nathaniel Parker Willis's 1840 *American Scenery*, a two-volume celebration of particular American scenes that also featured dozens of engravings based on Bartlett's drawings.⁴³

By contrast, few nineteenth-century Americans would have encountered Cole's *The Oxbow*, despite its prominence today in the history of American art. After its initial 1836 exhibition at the National Academy of Design, it was exhibited only three times in the century, and it was not reproduced as an engraving. The popularity of Bartlett's image suggests that rather than understanding images such as Bartlett's as expressions of grief over changed lands and displaced peoples, we might instead understand them as celebrations of both lands that were uniquely American and a natural environment that was accommodating development. As Angela Miller notes, "If for Cole nature and nation remained antagonists, for those who followed[,] the United States was nature's nation." For Bartlett this seems to be the case: from atop Mount Holyoke the landscape could be equated with progress.⁴⁴

Cooper's Revisionary Picturesque

Like Cole, Susan Fenimore Cooper had a complicated relationship to the picturesque aesthetic, and especially to its idealized, sweeping vision of landscape and history. In her work she directly addresses the ways in which the passion for nature as a metaphor for progress silences the real. She does so by both engaging and disrupting the traditional picturesque vision through her writing. On the one hand, Cooper celebrates the expected components of a picturesque rendering of a rural scene. Indeed, in *Rural Hours* and elsewhere she positions her narrator on hilltops and provides for readers a painterly view of the valley below. Similarly, we see throughout her works that she was capable of participating in the necessary idealization of landscape that this particular passion for landscape entailed. She appreciated a "harmonious" landscape as much as did her contemporaries. On the other hand, however, Cooper's writings at times question the assumptions implicit in this popular mode of loving the natural world. Through her attention to the specific natural life forms

in her area, Cooper invites readers to take a closer view of natural phenomena than the popular landscape aesthetic allowed. At other times, her writings call into question the ways in which that popular vision idealizes the land so that viewers are enticed to overlook its history in order to celebrate American progress. While on the surface, then, her writings may seem to emulate the picturesque vision of nature, ultimately they problematize its sweeping vision by calling attention to the ethical implications of its metaphorical view of the land.

Specifically, Cooper's work grapples with some of the same problems that Cole himself recognized as inherent in this popular way of conceptualizing the new nation's physical environment. Cooper's writings, even more forcefully than Cole's works, alerted her contemporaries to the fact that by practicing this vision of the land, they were robbing it—and themselves—of its true, complicated, age-old history. Viewing the landscape as the site of American progress meant abstracting that landscape from its past and overlooking the rapid transformation of that land—a process that, for Cooper, had disturbing consequences. In this view of nature, the "real" upon which Cooper focused so carefully in *Rural Hours* gave way to metaphor. Cooper was not as willing as many of her contemporaries to silence natural and human history. To help her contemporaries understand the implications of their vision, Cooper borrowed their techniques and painted through her words alternate scenes for them to contemplate—scenes that evinced an alternative passion for nature.

In some passages of *Rural Hours*, we witness Susan Fenimore Cooper becoming a sort of landscape artist in the traditional vein of the American picturesque. As she fashions her words into sentences, she shapes for the reader a well-crafted scene, and through its detail we behold a painting that has been created through prose. On one summer day, for example, she recounts her view from the lake, where she rows in the heat of early June. From her perspective in the boat, she sees "hills and forests, farms and groves, encircling a beautiful sheet of water." Notice as she dons the language of an artist painting a picture and as she emphasizes—as an artist might—the "harmony" of the scene:

Our own highland lake can lay no claim to grandeur; it has no broad expanse, and the mountains cannot boast of any great height, yet there is a harmony in the different parts of the picture which gives it much merit, and which must always excite a lively feeling of pleasure. The hills are a charming setting for the lake at their feet, neither so lofty as to belittle the sheet of water, nor so low as to be tame and commonplace; there is abundance of

wood on their swelling ridges to give the charm of forest scenery, enough of tillage to add the varied interest of cultivation; the lake, with its clear, placid waters, lies gracefully beneath the mountains, flowing here into a quiet little bay, there skirting a wooded point, filling its ample basin, without encroaching on its banks by a rood of marsh or bog.

Cooper begins this particular description by alerting the reader to the humble scale of the scene (the "lake can lay no claim to grandeur"), but throughout the remainder of the passage she assures us that the humble nature of the scene is part of its value. In fact, the scale of the various components of the scene contributes to its idyllic beauty and artful balance.⁴⁵

Cooper brings to her description a fine sense of what constitutes an appropriate balance of scenic elements: the height of hills are proportionate to the lake, the hillsides feature trees such that they are neither barren nor overcrowded, and the lake edges are varied enough that they are not monotonous, but not so varied as to include sections of swampy ground. Proportion and balance are the themes of her prose painting: "there is a harmony in the different parts of the picture." Cooper's emphasis on "harmony" suggests that she brought to her description a prescription of sorts—one involving a set of established criteria for rural scenes. This especially seems the case as the passage continues and Cooper contrasts the human-made aspects of her view with these balanced, natural features:

And then the village, with its buildings and gardens covering the level bank to the southward, is charmingly placed, the waters spreading before it, a ridge of hills rising on either side, this almost wholly wooded, that partly tilled, while beyond lies a background, varied by nearer and farther heights. The little town, though an important feature in the prospect, is not an obtrusive one, but quite in proportion with surrounding objects. It has a cheerful, flourishing aspect, yet rural and unambitious, not aping the bustle and ferment of cities; and certainly one may travel many a mile without finding a village more prettily set down by the water-side.

Again, Cooper emphasizes balance and "proportion," and the passage reads almost like a travel brochure. Indeed, Cooper seems intent on proving that Cooperstown and its environs meet up to some preestablished criteria for rural scenes. And this is, in fact, just what she is doing here. In this passage we find Cooper engaging in the American picturesque vision and, thereby, demonstrating the pervasiveness of its landscape aesthetic, including its celebration of progress as a necessary element of a beautiful scene.⁴⁶

But Cooper also drew for readers other pictures through her words—ones that invited readers to heed more carefully both the history and natural phenomena of their lands. In her *Rural Hours* entry for Wednesday, June 27, for example, she urges attention to the details of development that are discernible in a landscape, thereby suggesting that the historical progression of America's development is at least as important as the result of such development. She calls attention to *process* rather than *progress*, inviting people to dwell on the alterations to nature that enable progress.⁴⁷

She begins by contemplating the degree to which the cultivated landscapes around her home hide the recent history of their cultivation, leading a passerby to "[look] in vain for any striking signs of a new country." In fact, "as he passes from farm to farm in unbroken succession," he will find that "the aspect of the whole region is smiling and fruitful." The scene, that is, could be interpreted as an idyllic, picturesque one—balancing homes with cultivation, progress with rurality. In her discussion of this particular scene, however, Cooper forbids an easy capitulation to this idealized vision. She invites readers to look closely at the scene so as to discern the signs of history that, though faint, indicate a more complete story of this land. The region may seem "smiling and fruitful," and indeed it may be productive, but Cooper wants readers to know that there is more going on here than what meets the "untrained eye."⁴⁸

She begins by suggesting that people may miss those signs of history for several reasons: first, "the advanced state of civilization" allows for substantial changes to be made without many remaining signs of toil; second, the "natural features of the country itself" accommodate these changes without appearing much altered. These facts combine to create a scene that enables people to overlook the history of the development of this specific place and to see it, instead, as a mere sign of progress.⁴⁹

What Cooper illustrates, however, is that this scene testifies to progress only to those individuals content with not truly seeing the details of the scene. The picturesque vision, of course, encourages such blindness, and she means to correct it. In the paragraphs that comprise her June 27 entry, she subtly instructs her readers on how to "read" the landscape. As she looks out over a "few miles of country in sight at the moment," she describes her view and suggests that a scrupulous eye can perceive many stages of cultivation—"widely different conditions"—in this one scene.⁵⁰

Here we again experience Cooper's surroundings by means of her painterly eye, but in this particular vision we receive a lesson in landscape history rather than a celebration of American progress. She begins: "[W]e amused ourselves

by following upon the hill-sides the steps of the husbandman, from the first rude clearing, through every successive stage of tillage, all within range of the eye at the same instant." Cooper then points to several indications of the area's cultivation: remaining tree stumps, signs of some fallen forest, and topography indicative of ancient pathways for water. Within view is also "an opening in the forest marking a new clearing," its black ground the site of "charred stumps." And "on a nearer ridge" appears an area cleared and fenced, although not yet plowed or planted with crops. Cooper laments the tendency that she sees around her to clear land but then let it lie fallow, noting that "it frequently happens that land is cleared of the wood, and then left in a rude state, as wild pasture-ground." Documenting her disapproval, she calls this "an indifferent sort of husbandry . . . in which neither the soil nor the wood receives any attention." Progress merely for its own sake is not acceptable to Cooper. When informed by the clear vision that she models here, one sees not only promise in the landscape but also its unnecessary destruction.⁵¹

As Cooper goes on to point out, even cleared fields look different, revealing their varied pasts: "Those wild pastures upon hill-sides, where the soil has never been ploughed, look very differently from other fallows." The "heaving, billowy character" of the hillside pastures results from the small hillocks that form over the remaining roots of the trees felled to clear the hillside. The remains of an ancient forest thus announce themselves through the texture of the topography. There are other, "softer touches . . . telling the same story of recent cultivation," touches that most observers would miss. Seeing these subtle marks requires an attentive eye: "It frequently happens, that walking about our farms, among rich fields, smooth and well worked, one comes to a low bank, or some little nook, a strip of land never yet cultivated, though surrounded on all sides by ripening crops of eastern [Old World] grains and grasses." Cooper shares her preference for native plants as she explains: "One always knows such places by the pretty native plants growing there," the "gyromias and moose-flowers, sarsaparillas, and cahoshes, which bloomed here for ages, when the eye of the red man alone beheld them." Progress threatens native species, which serve, in Cooper's estimation, as clear reminders of prior inhabitants of this place. Not content only to distinguish the native from invasive plants, Cooper further elucidates the history of the region by reminding readers that other peoples once dwelled on these developed lands. When one sees sarsaparillas or moose flower, one is in the presence of rich history.⁵²

Understanding this place necessitates heeding its detail and variety—not merely reading a well-proportioned scene as evidence of the nation's destiny made manifest. On the contrary, what's "manifest" in this passage is the

cultural extermination of a people, silencing "ages" of their history, and a displacement of native plant species with foreign ones.

What we find, then, in this passage from *Rural Hours* is Cooper tending to the variety in her line of vision. Rather than merely idealize her landscape as one of progress and promise, Cooper alerts readers to the history of change to which the landscape attests. She thereby encourages a more finely tuned understanding of the land than the picturesque vision of nature allowed. She also expands cultural memory by demonstrating the evidence of natural history available from even one point of observation. By assuming the position of someone who reads the signs of history in the land, Cooper echoes the painterly techniques of her artist contemporaries; but rather than idealize progress, Cooper points to the ways in which progress masks both human and natural history.⁵³

Dissolving the Picturesque View

Cooper revisits her complicated interest in the picturesque in a later essay titled "A Dissolving View," which is both an exercise in the narrative picturesque and an analysis of the picturesque preoccupation with progress as it is revealed through a landscape. On the one hand, Cooper uses her essay to contemplate the beauty of autumn while perched on a hillside overlooking the valley beneath her, much as a landscape painter might do in her day—though Cooper uses words rather than paint. In this sense, she celebrates the traditional picturesque vision, even engaging in a fantasy view of the scene that enables her to pepper it with Old World ruins. On the other hand, she offers through her essay a sophisticated explanation of the role that ruins play in Old World landscapes and considers the general absence of such ruins in the New World; ultimately she suggests that the picturesque has little role to play in this New World landscape. Her essay lays open the possibility that the picturesque aesthetic is inappropriately applied to American nature. Once again, her writing functions to challenge the popular passion for landscape based in metaphor.

"A Dissolving View" appeared in an 1852 collection of essays and drawings, *The Home Book of the Picturesque*. This beautifully illustrated volume features a series of essays celebrating the American picturesque. As a modern commentator has observed, its list of illustrators "reads like the honor roll" of the finest Hudson River School painters. Indeed, the volume featured the most famous names in both literature and art: we find the words of James Fenimore

Cooper, William Cullen Bryant, and Washington Irving alongside engravings of works by Thomas Cole and Asher B. Durand, among other prominent artists. After its initial publication in 1852, the book appeared again under different titles later in 1852, later still in 1868, and again, in a slightly different form, in 1872. Its reception attests to the popularity of this particular manner of loving nature.⁵⁴

Cooper's contribution to the volume has four distinct parts, each featuring a different sort of writing: she begins with a contemplation of American autumn based on her picturesque view from a hillside on a fall day; proceeds to a discussion of the historical preference for ruins in a landscape; offers an analysis of her New World landscape in the context of this preference for ruins; and finally shares her imagined vision of an alternative scene in the valley beneath her, which is the result of a fanciful "game" that she plays that introduces Old World-style ruins into her view. The blending of genres in the essay—picturesque description with analysis of an obviously storied landscape—allows Cooper to analyze the ways in which landscapes attest to different stories of human culture.

"Autumn is the season for day-dreams," she begins. Such days "arouse the fancy to unusual activity," allowing the "caprice" to exercise itself, as the "softening haze of the Indian summer" contributes "the illusory character of the view." It is "the brilliant novelty of the scene" that invites such day-dreaming. The essay thus begins with a celebration of American autumn—a topic she had treated at some length in *Rural Hours*. Cooper plays up the fanciful mood brought on by the season, explaining that the autumnal woods seem to change color each year. Borrowing a tool in perspective from contemporary landscape painters, she describes herself as seated on a lookout over the countryside below her. From atop the "projecting cliff which overlooked the country for some fifteen miles or more," the scene before her unfolds. As she describes her view—her "magisterial gaze"—we feel as though we are viewing a landscape painting—perhaps even a portion of Cole's *The Oxbow*. She describes "the lake, the rural town, and the farms in the valley beyond" that lie at her "feet like a beautiful map." Here she celebrates the traditional American picturesque.⁵⁵

Cooper continues in this vein in the essay's second part—her discussion of ruins—where she suggests that even the magnificence of an American autumn scene benefits from the presence of humanity. Here we see Cooper engaging in the landscape aesthetics so celebrated in her day by the Hudson River School painters. She asserts that views of fall foliage are enhanced by some marks of civilization, such as a clearing, a village, or an agricultural field:

"A broad extent of forest is no doubt necessary to the magnificent spectacle, but there should also be broken woods, scattered groves, and isolated trees; and it strikes me that the quiet fields of man, and his cheerful dwellings, should also have a place in the gay picture. Yes; we felt convinced that an autumn view of the valley at our feet must be finer in its present varied aspect, than in past ages when wholly covered with wood." The ideal landscape bears the traces of humanity: "The hand of man generally improves a landscape," Cooper asserts. "Generally the grassy meadow in the valley, the winding road climbing the hill-side, the cheerful village on the bank of the stream, give a higher additional interest to the view." However, Cooper carefully qualifies her pronouncement that the "hand of man" benefits the landscape when she explains, "where there is something amiss in the scene, it is when there is some evident want of judgment, or good sense, or perhaps some proof of selfish avarice, or wastefulness, as when a country is stripped of its wood to fill the pockets or feed the fires of one generation." The signs of humanity that improve a view, then, are quiet ones, not large-scale alterations or damage to the environment.⁵⁶

After establishing that signs of human civilization (ancient ruins) enhance one's view of a landscape, Cooper then addresses the privileging of ancient ruins in the picturesque vision. She suggests that we find such improvements to the land even in lands formerly occupied by humans of the "most savage condition." She reminds readers that even the prairies of her "new" country bear the traces of prior cultures in the form of mounds built by ancient peoples. While these ruins may not look like the ancient ruins of Europe or Asia, they nonetheless function to remind us of earlier dwellers: "These lasting and remarkable tumuli, or mounds, although they produce no very striking effect on the aspect of a country, yet have an important place in the long array of works which give a peculiar character to the lands." While the mounds may strike a viewer as subtle marks of history, Cooper argues that they nonetheless lend it a particular "character" or uniqueness. She seems interested in making readers aware that the aesthetics of contemporary landscape painting and viewers' expectations, all of which have been informed by the European experience, fail to take into account the specific, New World version of "ancient ruins."⁵⁷

Cooper celebrates the particular landscape of her new nation by featuring its nontraditional ruins. Marking the distinction between Old World and New with an exclamation point, she exclaims, "How different from all this is the aspect of our own country!" This exclamation signals the start of the third section of Cooper's essay, in which she addresses the newness of her nation:

"[T]he fresh civilization of America is wholly different in aspect from that of the old world; there is no blending of the old and the new in this country; there is nothing old among us." The American landscape is bereft of ruins, but even if there were any, Americans would likely erase their presence in the name of progress: "If we were endowed with ruins we should not preserve them; they would be pulled down to make way for some novelty." This would reflect the fact that "we are the reverse of conservators in this country." The American way is to make room for the new.⁵⁸

In this regard, Cooper criticizes her fellow Americans: the "civilization of the present" is "less dignified, and imposing in aspect. It would be comparatively an easy work to remove from the earth all traces of many of the peculiar merits of modern civilization." She gives several examples, all attesting to the elusive quality of the achievements of the age: light suspension bridges, railways, steam-powered ships, the telegraph, and the achievement of Daguerre in creating the daguerreotype. In contrast to earlier ages and Old World places, the present American era seems to delight in structures and achievements that are ephemeral: "look, in fact, at any of the peculiar and most remarkable of the works of the age, and see how speedily all traces of them could be removed." If a barbaric group of people were to try to destroy all traces of her civilization, Cooper argues, they could do so easily, leaving no "monuments of our period." Significantly, given the concern that she expresses in *Rural Hours* for nonnative, invasive plant species in her region, she speculates here that the only remaining presence on the New World landscape of Euro-American culture would be nonindigenous plants: "Perchance, as regards America, the chief proofs that eastern civilization had once passed over this country would then be found in the mingled vegetation, the trees, the plants, ay, the very weeds of the old world."⁵⁹

Nonetheless, a benefit of the American tendency for development is that among its landscapes, "there is little territory which can be called really sterile." Even America's unshorn hillsides and dense forests "give it naturally a cheerful aspect." The adjectives that Cooper uses to describe American landscapes and architecture also emphasize her positive view of them: "cheerful," "pleasing," giving of "satisfaction," and providing a "general air of comfort and thrift." While American landscapes possess their own forms of beauty, they are beautiful nonetheless. Cooper therefore has redefined what makes a landscape beautiful. American nature is made beautiful not by marks of progress, such as ruins, but by its unique features.⁶⁰

Upon establishing the unique attractiveness of the American landscape and the reasons for its dearth of ruins, Cooper returns in her essay to her

position on the hillside "overlooking the country." Here in the fourth and final section of the essay, she plays "a sort of game of architectural consequences." She imagines the scene at her feet through the idealized picturesque lens, engaging in its passion for nature; she then quickly escapes her imagined vision, leaving behind that aesthetic for her preferred, uniquely American scene. Once again, she rejects the picturesque.⁶¹

Cooper's "game" begins as she waves a sprig of "wych-hazel"—associated with magic in folklore—over the valley at her feet and fantasizes a "razing" of the village. Its bridge, homes, and other village buildings disappear quickly, as if her witch-hazel-induced fantasy were the work of a barbaric race intent on erasing the Euro-American settlement from the region. She waves the sprig again, and the old-growth forest returns to the valley, "in the same stage of autumnal coloring with the woods" surrounding her. Another wave of the witch-hazel brings to the valley "a spectacle" indeed: a vision of the valley as it would look "had it lain in the track of European civilization during past ages." This transformation is so severe that "it required a close second scrutiny" to determine that the view now in sight was truly the same place now settled into a picturesque village—"every thing was so strangely altered."⁶²

Cooper's "game of architectural consequences" is not unlike Cole's vision as expressed in *The Course of Empire*. There, Cole allows certain physical features of the land to appear in each painting, thus ensuring that the viewer realize that she is witnessing different versions of the same scene. Cole's high, rocky outcrop appears in each of the five paintings, and in all but *Consummation* and *Destruction* the same kinds of trees appear in the foreground. Just like Cole, Cooper fixes her gaze on geographical features to ensure that she is witness to the same location. As she sees the valley in its Old World guise, she determines "that all the natural features of the landscape remained precisely as we had always known them; not a curve in the outline of the lake was changed, not a knoll was misplaced." Familiar plants remain, and the autumnal woods retain their bright hues. Other than these similarities, however, "all resemblance ceased."⁶³

First, Cooper notices that many of the hills "had been wholly shorn of wood." She then provides a detailed account of the "mere hamlet" that remains: its cottages; a central green sporting a large, stone cross; an inn; one old church; a few shops; a stone—as opposed to wooden—bridge; the ruins of a tower, and narrow roads lined with hedges in the English style. A country estate lies just outside of the village, and on its outskirts are a castle, a convent that has been converted to a farmhouse, the ruins of "feudal castles," and a "whispered" ancient Roman road that had once led to a villa on the site of the

convent-farmhouse. In the distance are eight other hamlets, all within view. Cooper describes what seems to be a pleasant view, if one that is decidedly different from the view at her feet or those depicted by her painter contemporaries devoted to particularly American scenes.⁶⁴

Then, as quickly as her fantasy game begins, it ends. A bee visits her witch-hazel sprig and stings her, awaking her to reality. The bee is not native to America, and to Cooper's imagination its presence signals the passage of time—and of the progress associated with Anglo-European settlement. The arrival of the bee as an end to imaginative musing was a familiar trope in American literature at this time: a bee's hum wakens William Cullen Bryant's speaker from his landscape reverie in "The Prairies," and, as Duncan Faherty notes, we encounter bees as signals of future domestication of wilder spaces in both Irving's *A Tour on the Prairies* and James Fenimore Cooper's *The Oak Openings*. At the close of her essay, Cooper drops the sprig (which now also carries the bee), and "the spell was over; the country had resumed its everyday aspect." Given the course of this essay, we can take Cooper at her word and assume that this last section of the essay is what she claims it to be: a game. Having discussed the New World landscape in relation to the Old, she simply launches into an imaginative redrawing of the land.⁶⁵

But this is a game with a context: the picturesque aesthetic as represented by the Hudson River School painters. The picture that Cooper draws tells a different story of the land than the one they typically depicted on their canvases. Through her vision, we are witness to the Roman conquest, the history of religious conflict between Catholics and Protestants, and a highly stratified society. Her New World landscape tells a different story altogether. As she remarks in the middle of this piece, "there is not in those old countries a single natural feature of the earth upon which man has not set his seal," and her whimsical description of the European version of her valley bears this out. When she says upon first viewing the imagined scene that many hills were "wholly shorn of wood," we cannot hear these words as preferential, especially if we read them within the context of Cooper's other passionate discussions about deforestation.⁶⁶

Indeed, her treatment of European ruins and their New World counterpart suggests the possibility of a new aesthetic, one based in New World landscapes and on the realities of the new nation's physical environment. After all, it is the European landscape that "dissolves" in the course of her game, giving way to the pastoral reality at her feet. Whereas Cole's *Course of Empire* moves from the savage state to an unpopulated, "destroyed" scene, in "A Dissolving View" Cooper takes readers from her rural countryside surroundings to

the nation's prehistory, with its old-growth forests, and then to the imagined European scene, only to return again to the genuine vision before her. The reality of the scene at her feet bookends her fantasy visions of it, which "dissolve," impossible—and perhaps not preferable—as they are. While Cooper engages in the techniques of a landscape painter as she sprinkles her fantasy scene with ruins and other reminders of an Old World history, she takes care to emphasize that her creation of that vision is a game. To assume that course for the new nation is to erase its distinctions. As Calvin Luther Martin points out, "Human monuments" are often "a means of preempting the stories inherent" in the landscape. Cooper's essay indicates the need to recover those stories.⁶⁷

"A Dissolving View" suggests that what should "dissolve" is a landscape aesthetic that, while producing beautiful art by American artists, imposes Old World expectations on the New World landscape and hurries "progress" toward a goal that, while no one says it, seems European in origin and outcome. Indeed, earlier in the essay we find Cooper chastising humanity for its tendency toward "rivaling the dignity and durability of the works of nature" through its monuments, columns, and arches, arguing instead for its inherent superior beauty. Here, she quietly endorses the primacy of the literal view that she does have, rather than the one that can be imagined through the picturesque.⁶⁸

Finally, then, "A Dissolving View" engages the picturesque aesthetic in order to examine its applicability to the New World. The essay suggests that this aesthetic depends upon an understanding of landscape that is foreign to America—or on what Robert Abrams has called "a set of representational and discursive practices rooted in European interests, economic priorities, and cultural assumptions." The traditional elements of the picturesque landscape do not fit within Cooper's New World setting, and so she dissolves the scene before her. Cooper's essay takes us through a series of impositions onto the landscape—a trying on of alternatives, as it were: a wilderness scene, Europeanized nostalgia for a landscape with ruins, and, finally, the rural valley alive with autumn's colors. This aesthetic tour suggests that the moral and historical significance of the American landscape awaits representation. The new nation's lands require an aesthetic that attends to the reality of the land: its species, seasonal cycles, and history of change. Once again we find Cooper's passion for nature based in the real.⁶⁹

As we have seen, Cooper's contemporaries in the picturesque held a different sort of passion for American nature. They represented landscapes as scenes evincing the good that accompanies progress. This meant that they frequently

ignored the negative effects of the nation's development and silenced the history that predated European settlement of the area. In "A Dissolving View," Cooper called attention to this tendency toward erasure by imagining and then dismissing certain types of scenes in favor of the scene at her feet: the literal landscape. In this way, she championed a passion for nature based on attending to nature's variety.

Manifest Losses

In *Rural Hours*, Cooper had also carried on this revision to nature's meaning: she urged her contemporaries to dwell on both the evidences of natural history that one could witness in the landscape and the history of the Native peoples who had lived in these lands. As she demonstrates, consideration of these displaced peoples complicated an ethic of progress by forcing one to recognize the losses that Native Americans had incurred as a result of American development. Through *Rural Hours*, Cooper calls the attention of readers to what we now call the "prehistory" of the United States—that portion of history that precedes the written records of Europeans and that the popular picturesque vision silenced. Not only does she do this by invoking the natural history of landscapes; she also does so by prompting readers to dwell on the role that Native Americans have played in the country. Rather than contemplate a landscape as a testament to progress, as some of her contemporaries did, she contemplated a landscape as a testament to loss.

In devoting pages in her writings to the tendency of American history to silence the realities of Native American presence in the landscape, Cooper necessarily faces head-on the historical vision and popular legacy of her father's work. James Fenimore Cooper, after all, had popularized the story of the inevitable demise of Native peoples as a result of the European settlement of the North American continent. In the works of James Fenimore Cooper, the land is "pictured . . . as ready for life," as one scholar notes: the prehistory of the land "has ended." As Lee Clark Mitchell and Lucy Maddox expertly demonstrate, the stereotype of the noble savage who had "vanished" from eastern lands permeated nineteenth-century American culture, and at times we find Susan Cooper's language echoing this unfortunate stereotype. Yet despite the fact that she uses terminology that strikes modern-day readers as degrading, Cooper's writings about Native Americans suggest that she was sympathetic toward them and that she mourned their displacement in the name of white civilization.⁷⁰

In several places, Cooper gives sustained attention to the sense of loss that she experiences as she considers their displacement from the land. In one particular passage in *Rural Hours*, we find Cooper seemingly endorsing the view of Natives that her father and Bryant had advocated even as she sympathizes with them. In the midst of an overview of the history of her particular valley, she writes:

At length . . . the white man came to plant a home on this spot, and it was then the great change began; the axe and the saw, the forge and the wheel, were busy from dawn to dusk, cows and swine fed in thickets whence the wild beasts had fled, while the ox and the horse drew away in chains the fallen trunks of the forest. The tenants of the wilderness shrunk deeper within its bounds with every changing moon; the wild creatures fled away within the receding shades of the forest, and the red man followed on their track; his day of power was gone, his hour of pitiless revenge had passed, and the last echoes of the war-whoop were dying away forever among these hills, when the pale-faces laid their hearth-stones by the lake shore. The red man, who for thousands of years had been lord of the land, no longer treads the soil; he exists here only in uncertain memories, and in forgotten graves.

Here Cooper echoes the treatment of Native Americans popularized in her father's novels. Hearthstones replace tomahawks, and all seems well with the land.⁷¹

Elsewhere Cooper wrote more sensitively about the history of Native Americans. Between February and June 1886, she published thirteen articles in *Living Church* magazine conveying with care and sympathy the history of the missions to the Oneida peoples. In addition, we know from extant letters that Cooper intended to publish a book called *The Shield*, which she planned to be a fictionalized rendering of early Native American history. A letter from George P. Putnam to Cooper indicates plans to begin printing *The Shield*. While Putnam issued prepublication notices for the volume, *The Shield* has not been found in either book or manuscript form. Nonetheless, these letters reveal Cooper's intention to devote her writings to Native American subjects. Ultimately, it seems that she represents the Native American presence on these lands differently than her father. This fundamental disagreement between father and daughter must have been difficult for Susan Cooper, as undoubtedly she felt a debt of gratitude toward her father that acknowledged more than his role as the mere facilitator of her publications.⁷²

Cooper's references to Native Americans in *Rural Hours* take various forms. Sometimes she makes a passing comment about Indian traditions—

that maple sap was an important source of sugar to them, for instance, or that they ate passenger pigeons seasonally and hung gourds for the benefit of flocks of purple martins. She also wants readers to understand the importance of certain aspects of the physical environment to the Natives: they used the black ash for their baskets, ate many of the local mushrooms, used the feathers of the wood duck and porcupine quills for ceremonial purposes, and, she presumes, considered whortleberries precious eating.⁷³

In several passages, Cooper educates her readers about the Natives of her particular area, sharing both her own encounters with Oneida peoples and information that she has gathered from others. On one particular summer day, she describes her past encounter with Native American basket makers, who moved through the village every now and again trying to sell their goods. She had received three basket sellers in her home and, later that afternoon, visited their encampment near the river. In this same entry, she recounts a visit of a larger group to her home and writes a brief essay on the obligations of American civilization to the Native peoples: "It is easy to wish these poor people well; but surely something more may justly be required of us—of those who have taken their country and their place on the earth." "But such is only the common course of things," she says as she closes her entry. Capitulating to the belief that the Natives will eventually benefit from Euro-American civilizing influences, Cooper closes her entry with the expected refrain: "they suffer from the vices of civilization before they learn justly to comprehend its merits."⁷⁴

There is a real tension in Cooper's discussions of Native Americans that readers cannot ignore. On the same summer day that she recounts the visit of the basket makers, she records in a particularly powerful paragraph her contemporaries' ignorance about Native Americans:

There are already many parts of this country where an Indian is never seen. There are thousands and hundreds of thousands of the white population who have never laid eyes upon a red man. But this ground lies within the former bounds of the Six Nations. . . . [W]hen it is remembered that the land over which they now wander as strangers, in the midst of an alien race, was so lately their own—the heritage of their fathers—it is impossible to behold them without a feeling of peculiar interest.

In part, Cooper's "peculiar" interest seems to center on educating her readers as much as possible about the "remnant of the great tribes" that remains in her area. But she seems equally intent on disrupting nationalistic assumptions by inviting readers to contemplate the morality of Native American

displacement. In this passage she claims the lands on which she lives as "their own—the heritage of their fathers." Given that Cooper's own grandfather, William Cooper, had carved the village out of the wilderness, and that her own father had celebrated that pioneering spirit in his fictional works, Susan Cooper's willingness to attribute "the heritage of their fathers" to fathers other than her own is remarkable. She seems perfectly willing to cast doubt on her own right to occupy this ground.⁷⁵

We find her unwillingness to endorse progress in other passages as well. For Thursday, May 30, Cooper writes about the natural springs in her area, which are "all full to overflowing" at this time of the year. After discussing their wide presence in the village and its surrounding fields and forests, as well as noting the typical properties of their waters (some are particularly sulfurous, others touched with limestone), she remarks on the pleasure of encountering springs on one's walks. On this particular day, she attests to coming across "more than a dozen distinct fountainheads within a distance of a mile." In the penultimate paragraph, she focuses on the pleasures of springs, and in particular on their "purity" and the humility with which they make their sounds in the landscape as their waters rise to the surface of the land: "There is a quiet beauty about them all which never fails to give pleasure. There is a grace in their purity—in their simplicity—which is soothing to the spirit; and, perhaps among earth's thousand voices, there is none other so sweetly humble, so lowly, yet so cheerful, as the voice of the gentle springs, passing on their way to fill our daily cup." Here, within the last two paragraphs of the day's entry, Cooper does a remarkable thing.⁷⁶

After her tribute to the pure beauty of springs, she immediately offers a striking treatment of the subject of loss. While the entry up to this point could be seen as superficial in its appreciation of this form of natural beauty, here in the final paragraph, Cooper lends both moral and historic significance to her observations. She expresses her awareness that the "daily cup" of villagers and travelers who now enjoy the waters from the springs has replaced the daily cup of others who are now—and suddenly—removed from this place. She refers here to the Native Americans who once lived in much larger numbers in the region and also to the wild animals who have been displaced by the growing numbers of Euro-American inhabitants in the area. Her words are moving, in spite of her use of terms such as "savage" and "red man," which modern readers will find degrading:

When standing beside these unfettered springs in the shady wood, one seems naturally to remember the red man; recollections of his vanished race linger

there in a more definite form than elsewhere; we feel assured that by every fountain among these hills, the Indian brave, on the hunt or the war-path, must have knelt ten thousand times, to slake his thirst, and the wild creatures, alike his foes and his companions, the tawny panther, the clumsy bear, the timid deer and the barking wolf, have all lapped these limpid waters during the changing seasons of past ages.

Not content merely to admire the springs for their beauty and utility, Cooper invests them with history. And she goes on to invest that history with moral significance for her readers.⁷⁷

She does this first by alerting Euro-American readers to their ignorance of such springs. It is "quite possible," she says, that there "may still be springs in remote spots among the hills of this region, yet untasted by the white man and his flocks, where the savage and the beast of prey were the last who drank." Through this sentence, she suggests that the recent settlers of the area may not even *know* their home places; in making this suggestion, Cooper implicitly questions whether they belong here and raises ethical concerns over the various displacements that have resulted from American progress.⁷⁸

However, she lends additional moral significance to her observations by focusing on the issue of displaced history itself. Cooper describes the sounds and sights that one imagines as one contemplates the springs: she envisions a panther or deer advancing toward "the fountain at our feet," and hears the rustle of leaves or breaking of a dry branch that might signal an approaching "painted warrior." The springs, for her, function as a signal of former life in this place—what Thoreau would call "Former Inhabitants" in *Walden*. As she witnesses the springs, she recollects the many life forms that have lived in their midst.

In fact, Cooper's entry suggests that the springs are inseparable from this natural and human history. Her final sentence emphasizes this notion by insisting on the humanity of Native Americans while lamenting the lack of evidence of their recent residence in these woods: "It was but yesterday that such beings peopled the forest, *beings with as much of life as runs within our own veins*, who drank their daily draught from the springs we now call our own; yesterday they were here, today scarce a vestige of their existence can be pointed out among us." In this one sentence, Cooper indicts her culture for its presumed right to these lands, which were so recently home to a people whose humanity—completely comparable to her own—is scarcely visible. She also imbues the landscape with deep history and insists that her readers recall losses as they pursue progress.⁷⁹

The one sign of evidence that Cooper does see for the former prominence of other cultures in her area are the Native American names for things that remain scattered throughout the land. In a lengthy discussion of the need to name landmarks, towns, and natural features of the landscape, Cooper suggests retaining whenever possible Native American names. Language serves as a "monument" to the past, she claims. Native words are usually pleasant to the ear, she notes, but the real reason to use these original names is to keep alive the memory of the peoples to whom they attest. Again, she resists the subtle erasure of history by progress:

There are many reasons for preserving every Indian name which can be accurately placed; generally, they are recommended by their beauty; but even when harsh in sound, they have still a claim to be kept up on account of their historical interest, and their connection with the dialects of the different tribes. A name is all we leave them, let us at least preserve that monument to their memory; as we travel through the country, and pass river after river, lake after lake, we may thus learn how many were the tribes who have melted away before us, whose very existence would have been utterly forgotten but for the word which recalls the name they once bore.

Although she employs the language of her day, which has reached the status of cliché in ours (the tribes have "melted away before us"), Cooper again insists on the importance of the landscape bearing testimony to its past. To the ear cognizant of origins, words can evoke history. The landscape bears few traces of displaced peoples, yet the language used to describe that land might. Again, Cooper's purpose is to convince her readers of a moral obligation to preserve the history of the landscape.⁸⁰

But here we also witness her desire to attend to results of America's corrupting influences: "And possibly, when we note how many [tribes] have been swept away from the earth by the vices borrowed from civilized man, we may become more earnest, more zealous, in the endeavor to aid those who yet linger among us, in reaping the better fruits of Christian civilization." Referring, no doubt, to the debilitating effects of alcohol on Native Americans—effects now known to be exacerbated by different genetic tolerances of sugars—Cooper suggests her fellow countrymen's duty to help those peoples who remain. Modern day readers will likely experience a twinge of anger at Cooper's neglect to mention European disease, relocation, and outright murder as additional—in fact, the most potent—"vices" wrought by "civilized man" on Native Americans. Some readers will also find troubling Cooper's tendency to mingle the history of Native Americans with the history

of nature, as if indigenous peoples are just another natural creature. Indeed, in her moving passages on forests, Cooper even seems to equate old growth trees with Native Americans by saying that the presence of one reminds her of the other. But for Cooper, both the “vanished savage race” and the “vanished” wild animals native to her home comprise the identity of her landscape. She is deeply troubled that the tendency in her day is to silence both the history of Native Americans and the history of the former animal inhabitants of her area amid a widespread celebration of progress. Against this popular vision, *Rural Hours* suggests through its overt pleas for preservation of native species and its reminders of the Native American history on the land that, increasingly, national progress is built upon significant loss. A passion for nature that overlooks this reality neglects the true history of the land itself—its displaced peoples, plants, and animals.⁸¹

We see Cooper pointedly questioning her nation’s ethic of progress in *Rural Hours*’ treatments of forests. In the passage from July 23, for example, Cooper suggests that a local stand of old-growth trees has historical value in that it serves as a reminder of a wilderness condition now passing away. After a moving description of a specific stand of old-growth trees and a consideration of how easily one human armed with an ax could fell them, Cooper suggests that even if the trees were replaced now with new trees that were allowed to grow indefinitely, the history that the old growth trees represent would be lost forever. The loss of wilderness is the loss of history. Changes in a landscape prevent people from realizing the history of that land:

But allowing even that hundreds of years hence other trees were at length to succeed these with the same dignity of height and age, no other younger wood can ever claim the same connection as this, with a state of things now passed away forever; they cannot have that wild, stern character of the aged forest pines. This little town itself must fall to decay and ruin; its streets must become choked with bushes and brambles; the farms of the valley must be anew buried within the shades of a wilderness; the wild deer and the wolf, and the bear, must return from beyond the great lakes; the bones of the savage men buried under our feet must arise and move again in the chase, ere trees like those, with the spirit of the forest in every line, can stand on the same ground in wild dignity of form like those old pines now looking upon our homes.

Cooper enters the realm of preservationist rhetoric here, arguing eloquently that the old-growth trees should not be felled because they testify to a wilderness condition now altered forever. Cooper’s thesis is not that the trees serve

as a reminder of God’s greatness, or even as a reminder of how quickly or remarkably human civilization has progressed. Rather, the passage paints a picture of the impossible, playing a “game” of “consequences” of the sort she plays in “A Dissolving View,” imagining the forests swallowing up the fruits of the new nation in order to return to its wilderness condition. Of course, this is a vision that cannot be. Even if the thriving civilization growing in her valley should “fall to decay and ruin,” there will remain “a state of things now passed away forever.” But preserving this stand of trees amid her nation’s ethic of progress will take hard work—work necessary, she argues, to preserving history.⁸²

This passage, which again mentions in one breath Native Americans and wild animals, is clearly a lamentation for an irrevocably diminished quality of nature. Cooper’s references to even the possibility of destroying the region’s new civilization in order to bring back the state of native grace once found there suggests that she sees something troubling about the European colonization of this land, which has emphasized progress at the expense of natural history. She turns the landscape scene back on the viewer, forbidding an erasure of history. Nowhere does Cooper suggest that Europeans should not have settled America in the first place, but she recognizes that not only Native Americans have been colonized: so has the natural environment.

What is lost to progress is lost forever, and there can be no complete recovery of destroyed peoples or landscapes. Cooper wants her readers to recognize—and to feel—this loss to the land. She wants them to heed evidence of loss in the landscape, and to preserve evidences of that loss, which, she suggests, are valuable precisely because they testify to the rich history of these lands. Her passions for both nature and nation depend on this recognition and celebration of history.

Rewilding the Landscape

Cooper’s emphasis on the literal history of the natural world and its peoples helps us recognize that the ethic of progress celebrated by her contemporaries led to a widely held passion for nature that depended on a metaphorical, abstract understanding of the physical world. As artists and writers expressed this passion for nature through painting and literature, they celebrated a vision that had little to do with the natural and human history of that landscape. By abstracting the land from its human and natural history contexts, artists and writers created a story for the land based on their hopes for the