

Some Versions of the Primitive and the Pastoral on the Great Plains of America

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For over three hundred years prior to the beginning of white settlement, the Great Plains of America offered to European eyes a novel landscape and culture. European notions about man and nature were frequently tested on these relatively flat, dry, treeless plains, which stretch from the Missouri River to the Rocky Mountains. In particular, the Plains evoked from travelers ideas that cluster around the terms *primitive* and *pastoral*. In my search for various versions of the primitive and the pastoral, I have surveyed most of the literature written before the Plains were open to white settlement in 1854. I have tried to pay more attention to diction, tone, imagery, and literary convention than have historians, geographers and social scientists who have made Plains travel literature their subject. I have not kept a particularly steady eye on what the Plains really were or are; rather, I have emphasized what writers have said they are like. I have assumed, at least in part, that each writer about the Plains—a land where “there is little to see, but plenty of room to look”—is a bit like Wright Morris’ Old Man Scanlon: “What he sees are the scenic props of his own mind.”¹ William Gilpin, who challenged one version of the primitive and dreamed a pastoral future for the Plains, is a good writer to start with.

In October of 1857, Gilpin, a visionary statistician from Independence, Missouri, wrote a letter to the New York *National Intelligencer* attacking what he called the “counterfeit geography” that for half a century had described the Great Plains of America as the Great American Desert. Three years later, Gilpin included the letter as one chapter in his geographical treatise *The Central Gold Region*, a title probably designed, as James Malin suggests,² to attract public attention so that Gilpin could tell his readers of treasures other than gold that lay in the American interior. (The gold was in the mountain west. The notion that there might be gold on the Plains was never seriously entertained once Coronado reported back to his king that in 1542 at Quivira the “natives there gave me a piece of copper that an Indian wore suspended from his neck. I am sending it to the viceroy of New Spain, for I have not seen any other metal in this region except this and

some copper jingle bells. . . .”³) Gilpin was but one of several writers who, in the 1850’s, were revising the image of the Plains as a desert. But the hortatory and prophetic tone of Gilpin’s language separates him from the more tentative and careful prose of, say, a Captain Randolph Marcy or the reports of the Topographical Engineers. Gilpin opens his letter with a fine declamatory assertion:

There is a radical misapprehension in the popular mind as to the true character of the ‘Great Plains of America,’ as complete as that which pervaded Europe respecting the Atlantic Ocean during the whole historic period prior to COLUMBUS. These PLAINS are not *deserts*, but the opposite, and are the cardinal basis of the future empire of commerce and industry now erecting itself upon the North American Continent. They are calcareous, and form the PASTORAL GARDEN of the world.⁴

So Gilpin opens his letter. Had not events during the next three decades proved him a fairly accurate prophet, he might seem to be using language in one of its more magical modes: by naming anew he would alter reality. Gilpin’s act is similar to a more recent act of language on the Plains: Allen Ginsberg’s prophecy while driving near El Dorado, Kansas, in February of 1966 and asking all the powers of the universe to aid him and

Come to my lone presence
into this Vortex named Kansas,
I lift my voice aloud,
make Mantra of American language now,
pronounce the words beginning my own millennium,
I here declare the end of the War!⁵

For Ginsberg, the Viet Nam war ended upon the utterance of his prophetic interdiction. The Great American Desert did not immediately—upon Gilpin’s earlier utterance—blossom into “the PASTORAL GARDEN of the world.” But within three, at most four, decades the desert had been banished from the Plains. By 1872, Francis Parkman would note in his preface to a new edition of *The Oregon Trail* that his account of the Plains as he knew them in 1846, a scant quarter of a century earlier, now “reflects the image of the irrevocable past.” Parkman complains that “buffalo give way to tame cattle, farm-houses [are] scattered along the water-courses, and wolves, bears,

and Indians are numbered among the things of the past."⁶

In 1810 Zebulon Montgomery Pike had foreseen that "These vast plains of the western hemisphere, may become in time equally celebrated as the sandy deserts of Africa. . . ." The region must of necessity, he thought, be left "to the wandering and uncivilized aborigines of the country."⁷ The next year Henry Brackenridge found in the Plains a "resemblance to the Steppes of Tartary, or the Saara's of Africa."⁸ Stephen Long and Edwin James confirmed the analogy in 1819, and James prophesied that "this region may forever remain the unmolested haunt of the native hunter, the bison, and the jackall."⁹ By 1832, Washington Irving, with livelier imagination, foresaw that on these Plains in the future "may spring up new and mongrel races, like new formations in geology, the amalgamation of the 'debris' and 'abrasions' of former races, civilized and savage. . . ."¹⁰ This was the "counterfeit geography" challenged by Gilpin. As he comes to the close of his letter of 1857, Gilpin rather surprisingly accepts the analogy of the Old World deserts; then, he radically transvalues the image. "The atmosphere of the Great Plains," he writes almost lyrically, "is perpetually brilliant with sunshine, tonic, healthy and inspiring to the temper." The region, he says,

. . . corresponds with and surpasses the historic climate of Syria and Arabia, from whence we inherit all that is ethereal and refined in our system of civilization, our religion, our sciences, our alphabet, our numerals, our written languages, our articles of food, our learning, and our system of social manners.¹¹

Condorcet, in 1795, had sketched ten stages of the progress of the human mind and civilization, from hunting and gathering societies, to the pastoral and agricultural, to the highest refinements of human society. Gilpin, if only by analogy, has brought the Great Plains through all those stages within a few sentences.

I have begun with Gilpin because his letter is a brief, forceful (and I suppose unconsciously comic) expression of a theme that is nearly obsessional in the literature of the Great Plains: the transformation of the Great American Desert from a sterile wasteland, fit only and forever for the primitive and nomadic savage, into a garden, a fertile and salubrious home for the pastoralist and husbandman. The editor of a recent collection of essays, *Images of the Plains*, complains that the theme has become stale and hackneyed.¹² Yet many of the essays he has edited return, at some point, to the

images of the desert and garden. Necessarily the images persist and attract our interest because they are so pervasive in the recorded human experience on the Plains. The making of such images inevitably involves some degree of subjectivity and cultural conditioning. Quite recently two quasi-scientific methodologies have been devised to measure degrees of subjectivity and conditioning in the creation of images of the Great Plains.¹³ One is a systems-model-process-response flow-chart contrived by John L. Allen; the other is an "equation" constructed by G. Malcolm Lewis, a part of which I reproduce here:

$$D = \sum_{i=1}^n A_i + \sum_{j=1}^n + \sum_{k=1}^w C_k$$

In this construct Cabeza de Vaca, say, or Francisco de Coronado became Σ or "First White Sensors"; their prose accounts became C_k or "Message Images." I think. But because I am uncertain, I will rely on Wright Morris, who warns us in the opening section of *Ceremony in Lone Tree* that "the plain is a metaphysical landscape" and that the "emptiness of the plain generates illusions that require little moisture, and grow better, like tall tales, where the mind is dry."

Subjectivity is a category more appropriate to some writers and to some writings than to others. Andy Adams' *Log of a Cowboy* is rightly praised as a more objective account of the life of a cowboy than Owen Wister's more imaginative *The Virginian*. Yet what are we to do when Adams invents a fabulous river for Western Kansas just to dramatize the difficulty of getting a herd of Mexican cattle over the "Big Boggy"? Contemporary poets like William Stafford, James Wright, or Ken Irby are obviously more self-consciously subjective in their creation of images of the Plains than a careful observer like Cabeza de Vaca or an experienced, informed, and commonsensical Santa Fe trader like Josiah Gregg. James Wright finds the Plains but one stage in a journey westward as he sleeps and dreams "now" (c. 1965) in western Minnesota:

The only human beings between me and the Pacific Ocean
Were old Indians who wanted to kill me.
They squat and stare for hours into small fires
Far off in the mountains.

The blades of their hatchets are dirty with the grease
Of huge silent buffaloes.¹⁴

In a long meditative poem, Ken Irby muses over the available historical data and ponders the meaning of the death by Comanche arrows of the trapper Jedediah Smith on the Cimarron in 1831.¹⁵ William Stafford weighs the meanings of William Sublette's experience of the wilderness on the same river in the same year. He concludes:

no one can sound
the deep rope to those days, hold level the wide ranch
that swung in his life in his mind
That man—fugitive from speed, antagonist of greatness—
comes here quietly still lost, trying to tell us what he means.¹⁶

All three poets, working from historical knowledge and personal feeling and experience, evoke, then enrich and extend the inherited images of the Plains. They have, to put it another way, led us to prior human experience and given voice to present human experience. All three have implied, further, that to move through space—to come to the Plains—is to move back through time. In these and other recent poems, the Plains are the nineteenth century: for Wright it is the vengeful dispossessed Indian and silent buffalo; for Irby it is the figure of Smith who “went West not / so much for beaver as for ‘the novelty of the thing’”; for Stafford, Sublette “heard some string that sang the wilderness.” For Irby and Stafford, the Plains offered an original human relationship with nature. Irby's musing on Smith leads him to a land that “looked Kansas, that is, childhood, promised / all again.” The poem itself—“the discontinuous / narrative of a journey”—becomes a “form of pasture, anabasis and return / pastoral . . .” To Stafford, what Sublette found is irrecoverable: “once that place / was found, the West had come; no one could undiscover / it.” For these and other contemporary poets, the Plains is a lost world to be recovered only in the imagination; it is, perhaps, another version of the “paradise within” which Richard Hardin identifies as the final stage of the pastoral experience.

The notion that by moving through space one also moves back through time is an old one in the literature of the Plains, as it is in the entire history of the westward movement in America. This literature inherits that strain of eighteenth-century thought which, as Richard Eversole has shown, had

begun to locate the pastoral life in geographic space rather than in historical or legendary time. Henry Nash Smith has particularly emphasized this notion in *Virgin Land* while discussing Condorcet's theory of civilization:

Although in Europe the successive stages of society were naturally thought of as succeeding one another in time, so that primitive conditions could be studied only through historical and archeological research, the situation in America was quite different. When the theory of civilization became current in this country many observers were struck by its applicability to the actual state of affairs in the West. The comment was frequently made that in America one could examine side by side the social stages that were believed to have followed one another in time in the long history of the Old World.¹⁷

Condorcet's first three stages of society were most applicable to the Plains: tribal hunting and gathering peoples, pastoral peoples, and agricultural peoples. From the first Spanish *entrada* in the early sixteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century, nomadic hunting and gathering tribes possessed the Plains; then, within two or three decades, the Plains moved from the nomadic stage through the pastoral and into the agricultural. Nearly every writer about the Plains will note these stages, dramatize or speculate about the transition between them, and often lament the transitoriness of the first two stages.

The most radical poetic formulation of the idea that the Plains offers a return to the original condition of man comes from a most unexpected source, W. S. Merwin, who, to my knowledge has written only two poems about the Plains. Merwin's imagination has for many years been animated by thoughts of prehistoric man, his rituals, magic, and totems. That interest and his long residence in the Dordogne region of France are, perhaps, preconditions for his "Beginning of the Plains":

On city bridges steep as hills I change countries
and this according to the promise
is the way home

. . . .

I recognize the first hunger
as the plains start
under my feet¹⁸

Before the Spanish *entrada* onto the Great Plains, European man had not known such extensive grasslands since the forests had invaded the savannahs of Europe and driven out the big game at the end of the last Ice Age. Here Merwin, in his typically enigmatic manner, alludes to the prehistoric European plains and heralds his own return "home" to the prehistoric landscape of the Great Plains. In the background of Merwin's poem are the recent anthropological discoveries that point to man's first emergence on grasslands rather than in forests. Or, as the poet-anthropologist Loren Eiseley records the event: "One day a little band of these odd apes—for apes they were—shambled out upon the grass: the human story had begun."¹⁹

Without benefit of later anthropological knowledge, Walter Prescott Webb published in 1931 the first important study of the Great Plains. Much of Webb's *The Great Plains* is devoted to exposition of the novelty the Plains landscape presented to Europeans and Americans and to celebrating the "timberdweller's" often painful adaptation to these grasslands. But in his final chapter, Webb allows himself to speculate upon what he calls the "Mysteries of the Plains." One speculation is strangely at odds with Webb's general theme of man's painful but heroic struggle to adapt to the Plains. "It may be permitted to approach," Webb begins cautiously, "the mysterious effect of the Plains upon the human mind through an inquiry into the place of man's origin or differentiation." If man's "primal home," he goes on, were the forest then man upon encountering the Plains might feel sensations of fear, wonder, awe, and surprise so often expressed in Plains writing. But what if "he became *man* on the plains and not the forest?"

If man did become what he is on the plains, and not in the "warm forest-clad land," then perhaps it was natural for him to reenter the old familiar environment with dim stirrings of deeply embedded racial memories; to return with a certain abandon and joy to a closer association with horses and cattle, after an interval of some millions of years in the forests.²⁰

All great ideas, Wallace Stevens tells us, are essentially poetic. The idea of the original home of man persisting in racial memory is such an idea. Merwin, boldly and starkly, and Webb, cautiously, find the Great Plains a hospitable setting for the entertainment of such an idea. The Texas historian is no less free of subjectivity than is the poet. Throughout his book, Webb has celebrated, as a major form of human adaptation to the Plains,

the Man on Horseback, whether Comanche or Texas Ranger. And his "history" can, without much distortion, be called a lament for the loss of the pastoral world of the Cattle Kingdom, "a world within itself, with a culture all its own, which, though of brief duration, was complete and self-satisfying."²¹ Webb's version of the primitive or original home of man merges within it elements of the pastoral or bucolic as he finds men returning to the grasslands with "abandon and joy to a closer association with horses and cattle. . . ."

I have not found pre-twentieth-century speculation about plains as an original environment for man. A discovery of man-made projectile points within the fossil skeleton of an extinct bison was made in Western Kansas in 1898; the discovery was immediately published but its implications were not followed up until similar discoveries and the speculations of Carl Sauer in the 1930's began to emphasize that the Great Plains were the original home of man *in the New World*. A century before, in the 1830's, the notion that the Indians were the descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel was widespread, fostered mainly by the Mormons. But to Francis Parkman in 1846, this is an "absurd notion":

. . . the Indians raised in concert their cries of lamentation over the corpse, and among them Shaw clearly distinguished those strange sounds resembling the word "Halleluyah," which, together with some other accidental coincidences, has given rise to the absurd notion that the Indians are descended from the ten lost tribes of Israel.²²

A part of this general idea was that the North American Indians, who had domesticated no grazing animals, had degenerated from the Old World pastoral and agricultural tradition. A year after Parkman, Lewis Garrard, after watching some Cheyenne take a sweat bath, remarks laconically:

To those fond of speculating on the origin and probability of the North American Indians belonging to the lost tribes of Israel, I would say here that these Indians *purify* themselves before entering upon the performance of their religious duties.²³

Later, Garrard recounts the Cheyenne tradition that the tribe came from the headwaters of the Mississippi; he then speculates that the Cheyenne are descendants of the moundbuilders of the Mississippi Valley or are "the progeny of the Aztecs and Peruvians." But the Cheyenne, he concludes, "are

totally ignorant of the most common inventions—a woefully degenerate set, in truth, if they are so descended.”²⁴ In *Commerce of the Prairies* (1844) Josiah Gregg, an older, better informed and more systematic man than either Parkman or Garrard, declined to enter into such speculations. He did, however, find in the Plains Indians “a strong resemblance to the patriarchs of old” and thought that resemblance some proof of their “Asiatic origin.”²⁵ Gregg, who always felt awkward and uncomfortable when forced to return periodically to “civilization,” switched his metaphor or analogy for the Indians when in an uncharacteristically lyrical (or perhaps wryly mocking) passage he expresses his desire

to spread my bed with mustang and the buffalo, under the broad canopy of heaven,—there to seek to maintain undisturbed my confidence in men, by fraternizing with the little prairie dogs and wild colts, and the still wilder Indians—the *unconquered Sabaeans* of the Great American Desert.²⁶ (Gregg’s italics)

Comparisons, like Gregg’s, of Plains Indians to more ancient or less civilized peoples of the Old World, do not appear in the travel literature prior to 1800. (Analogies to Tartars, Huns, and Mongols cluster in the 1810-1860 period.) However, in early Spanish and French accounts there appears to be something like an evocation of the Golden Age. I will draw upon only four accounts: that of Cabeza de Vaca, who journeyed naked and afoot across the southern margin of the Plains from 1528 to 1535; those of Francisco de Coronado and his officers Castañeda and Jaramillo, who came to Central Kansas in 1542; that of Étienne de Bourgmont, a traveler in Eastern Kansas in 1717; and a report issued by a provincial Spanish governor, Athanase de Mezières, in 1770.

Cabeza de Vaca felt severely the harshness of nature. He was one of four men to survive from a Spanish force of three hundred which put ashore in Florida in 1528. From November, 1528, until the summer of 1533, he lived among and was enslaved by Indians living along the Texas Gulf Coast, but making treks inland in search of food. These peoples were extremely impoverished and in a state of almost daily famine. The Yguaces, for example, were basically root-eaters; but occasionally, De Vaca writes,

these Indians kill deer and take fish: but the quantity is so small and famine so prevalent that they eat spiders and ant eggs, worms,

lizards, salamanders, snakes, and poisonous vipers: also earth and wood—anything, including deer dung and other matter I omit.²⁷

In the autumn of 1535, he came for the first time among the “cow people,” the buffalo hunting people of the Plains. De Vaca’s reportorial, plain style does not aspire toward the creation of images of the Golden Age, but it is clear that these Plains Indians of Eastern New Mexico are a less barbarous and more prosperous people than those he had previously known:

Houses they had made to accommodate us stood ready. Our gifts, from the first place that received us like this one, included many skin blankets; but there was nothing they owned that they did not freely give us.

They are the best looking people we saw, the strongest and most energetic, and who most readily understood us and answered our questions. We called them the “Cow People,” because more cattle are killed in their vicinity than anywhere. . . .

They go absolutely naked as the first Indians we encountered, the women of course wearing deerskins, as well as a few men, mostly those too old to fight anymore. The country is incredibly populous.²⁸

Farther west he would find an even more “substantial people with a capacity for unlimited development.” These were the Pima, whose southern frontiers were already being invaded by the Spanish slavers from Mexico City. As he journeys southward, de Vaca mourns the invasion:

With heavy hearts we looked out over the lavishly watered, fertile, and beautiful land, now abandoned and burned and the people thin and weak, scattered or hiding in fright.²⁹

De Vaca does not display the kind of literary sensibility—and sensitivity to pastoral conventions—which Leo Marx finds so evident in the writings of those Renaissance Englishmen who described the native peoples of the Atlantic coastal regions.³⁰ Nevertheless, de Vaca’s brief lament evokes a primitive Arcadia, vulnerable and already in the process of being destroyed by a corrupt civilization. In tone and imagery, the passage is not dissimilar to Spenser’s description of Calidore returning to discover Pastorella’s world invaded and wasted by brigands, its people carried into slavery:

He sought the woods; but no man could see there:

He sought the plaines; but could no tydings heare.
The woods did not but echoes vaine rebound;
The playnes all waste and emptie did appeare:
Where wont the shepheards oft their pypes resound,
And feed an hundred flocks, there now not one he found.

(*The Faerie Queene*, VI. 11. 26)

Two years after de Vaca had finally made his way to Mexico City, Coronado's expedition headed north into New Mexico. In 1542 he moved northeastward onto the Plains in search of Quivira. The narratives of Coronado and his officers Castañeda and Jaramillo extensively document for the first time the novel experience the Plains presented to European man. The land was vast and level and often appeared, Castañeda says, in "the shape of a ball, for wherever a man stands he is surrounded by the sky at the distance of a crossbow shot." Lying on his back, a man can see nothing but sky; or, looking between the legs of a shaggy buffalo he can still see the horizon. The absence of trees and other vertical landmarks causes men to become lost. The short, stiff grass "rises up again after being trampled on." Who among his readers would believe, Castañeda asks,

that although one thousand horses, five hundred of our cattle, more than five thousand rams and sheep, and more than 1500 persons, including allies and servants, marched over those plains, they left no more traces when they got through than if no one had passed . . . ?³¹

It was a land of whirlwinds, of hailstones that dented armor, of squirrels that lived in holes, and of large hares unafraid of horsemen; it was a land where one could march twenty leagues and see "nothing but cattle and sky."

Despite the novelty of the landscape and of its flora and fauna, the tone of these narratives does not suggest that the Spanish sensed that they were in a frighteningly alien world. On the contrary, the narratives are punctuated by images of the familiar rather than the alien. East of the Llano Estacado, they found

a small valley covered with trees, with plenty of grapes, mulberries, and rose bushes. This is a fruit found in France and which is used to make verjuice. In this barranca we found it ripe. There were nuts, and also chickens of the variety found in New Spain, and quantities of plums like those of Castille.³²

Along the way they found a fruit "which tasted like muscatel grapes," a plant with "leaves resembling parsley" and "much wine and marjoram." Finally at Quivira (in present Central Kansas) they found a land much like home:

From the very border of the land it was noticed that it is very similar to that of Spain in its vegetation and fruits and climate. One finds plums like those of Castille, grapes, nuts, mulberries, rye grass, oats, pennyroyal, wild marjoram, and flax in large quantities. . . .³³

Coronado himself thought the soil "the most suitable that has been found for growing all the products of Spain, for, besides being rich and black, it is well watered by arroyos, springs, and rivers."³⁴ Jaramillo thought Quivira both similar to and superior to the lands around the Mediterranean:

This country has a fine appearance, the like of which I have never seen anywhere in our Spain, Italy, or part of France, nor indeed in other lands where I have traveled in the service of his Majesty. It is not a hilly country, but one with mesas, plains, and charming rivers with fine waters, and it pleased me, indeed. I am of the belief that it will be productive of all sorts of commodities. As for the cattle, we have proof that large numbers exist there, as large as anyone could imagine. We found Castilian plums, a variety that are not wholly red but blending from red to somewhat black and green. The tree and the fruit are surely Castilian, the latter of excellent taste.³⁵

There is, to be sure, an emphasis in these narratives upon the potential usefulness of this fine country to the Spanish. But the narratives also produce a composite image of a generous, fruitful, and friendly natural state. The three large tribes that the Spaniards meet share these qualities with the land. These people are "by far more numerous than those of the pueblos, better proportioned. . . ." The Querechos "have the best physique of any [Coronado has seen] in the Indies." The Teyas are "large people of very fine appearance." Coronado has some Quivirans measured and finds them "ten spans tall." All are generous, peaceful (to the Spanish), and comely; the women are "modest." In Castañeda's listing of their virtues, he notes:

These people eat raw meat and drink blood, but they do not eat human flesh. They are a gentle people, not cruel, and are faithful in their friendship.³⁶

The next authorized Spanish expedition to Quivira came sixty years later when, in 1601, Juan de Oñate was escorted to a large (1200 grass houses) agricultural village by nomadic Escanjaques. Oñate's force was caught in the hostility between the villagers and the nomads, and the Spanish soundly defeated the nomads. A few years later (1606?), six hundred Quivirans journeyed to Santa Fe to make an alliance with the Spanish against the nomads. At this time the Indians used only dogs for transport, but within the next hundred years both nomads and villagers acquired the horse; with the horse, the nomads became a formidable military barrier to Spanish intrusion from the southwest, further onto the Plains. On the eastern edges of the Plains, the Missouri and the Osage tribes had allied themselves with the French. The most suggestive version of the primitive on these eastern prairie-plains comes from a young Frenchman, Etienne de Bourgmont, who in about 1717 visited the Kansas Indians. Upstream from the Missouri villages, he writes,

is a smaller river which flows into the Missouri, called the "Rivière d'Ecanzé" and a nation of the same name, ally and friend of the French; their trade is in furs. This is the finest country and the most beautiful land in the world; the prairies are like the seas, and filled with wild animals; especially oxen, cattle, hind, and stag, in such quantities as to surpass the imagination. They hunt almost entirely with the arrow; they have splendid horses and are fine riders.³⁷

Here is a vision of beauty, fruitfulness and freedom. The simile of the sea (used also in the Coronado narratives) makes the unfamiliar grasslands familiar to a seafaring people but it also lends a note of sublimity and vastness which, like the numbers of wild animals, pushes beyond the imagination. Only historical hindsight could supply an ominous note in the fact that the Kanza are now engaged in trade with Europeans. The Kanza would suffer severely from this contact with Europeans and would by the time Parkman saw them (1846) be reduced to wretched beggary.

To the south and west another nation of mounted Indians was prospering; and this nation, according to a Spanish bureaucrat, had "no need to covet the trade pursued by the rest of the Indians whom they call, on this account, slaves of the Europeans, and whom they despise. . . ." The bureaucrat was Athanase de Mezières and the Indians were the Comanche. On October 29, 1770, he wrote a report to his superiors about the Comanche,

who had effectively limited Spanish expansion onto the Plains. The Comanche evoke from de Mezières profound respect for their freedom, communal loyalty, bravery, and prosperity:

The Comanche are scattered from the great Missouri River to the neighborhood of the frontier presidios of New Spain. They are a people so numerous and so haughty that when asked their number they make no difficulty of comparing it to that of the stars. They are so skillful in horsemanship that they have no equal; so daring that they never ask for nor grant truces, and in the possession of such a territory that, finding in it an abundance of pasturage for their horses and an incredible number of cattle which furnish them raiment, food, and shelter, they only just fall short of possessing all the conveniences of the earth. . . .

The Comanche are an enviable people; but, in their nomadic freedom and seasonal followings of the herds, they are also a threatening people:

From these perpetual comings and goings it arises that the Comanches, relying upon one another, made proud by their great number, and led by their propensity to steal, let few seasons pass without committing the most bloody outrages against the inhabitants of New and Old Mexico.³⁸

De Mezières clearly admires the Comanche, but the Spanish sanctuaries are constantly endangered by them. De Mezières ends his report by coldly recommending alliances with any tribes “interested in the destruction of so proud and cruel an enemy.” In this official report by a provincial administrator we can, I think, sense something of a “double feeling” toward primitives, an ambivalence not unlike that which Empson finds in the pastoral. De Mezières seems to see the Comanche as both superior and inferior to the Spanish, admirable but dangerous; they possess nearly “all the conveniences of the earth,” but they must be destroyed. This ambivalence toward the primitives of the Plains appears regularly in the travel literature of the next one hundred years. Some of the later writers will take on attitudes that might be called “primitivist”: Josiah Gregg and Lewis Garrard, for example, often claim to value the “natural state” of man more than they value their own civilization; Parkman, too, will occasionally lapse into the primitivist stance. De Mezières was certainly not a conscious primitivist; nor

were de Vaca, Coronado, Castañeda, Jaramillo, or de Bourgmont. But they did, *in the course of their writing*, supply us with versions of a free, abundant, generous, and beautiful life among aboriginal peoples of the Plains. This version of the primitive would be revised in the opening decades of the nineteenth century by American travellers who began to examine the land with an eye to its potential settlement by American pastoralists and husbandmen.

One of Wright Morris' characters proudly claims to have been the father of the Dust Bowl. The acknowledged father of the Great American Desert is Zebulon Montgomery Pike. His account of his 1806-1807 expedition across present Kansas and Eastern Colorado clearly fixed the image of a dry and sterile desert upon the landscape. Yet, read as a whole, his notebooks and his appendix to *An Account* (1810), "Dissertation on Louisiana," reveal rather careful discriminations in his descriptions of the grasslands as he moves from east to west; and his description of the drier western areas contains a puzzling analogy which turns the desert into its opposite, a garden. Coming up the timbered and well-watered Osage River valley, Pike had by early September, 1806, come out onto the grasslands of Western Missouri and Eastern Kansas. On September 4, on the Marmaton in Southeast Kansas, he made this entry in his notebook:

We found a most delightful bason of clear water, of 25 paces diameter and about 100 circumference, in which we bathed; found it deep and delightfully pleasant. Nature scarcely ever formed a more beautiful place for a farm. We returned to camp about dusk, when I was informed that some of the Indians had been *dreaming* and wished to return. Killed one deer, one turkey, one racoon. Distance 13 miles.³⁹

Pike's notebook style is generally prosaic and factual. The measuring of the "bason" and the listing of the game killed and miles traveled is typical of that style. That his Osage guides had been "*dreaming*" and wished to return to their villages is for Pike, as subsequent entries show, not an exotic primitive phenomenon but a mere inconvenience. But the pleasant bathing in the clear water leads to unexpected dreaming by Pike himself: here nature had formed a "beautiful place for a farm." In his "Dissertation," Pike expanded and elaborated this brief note to describe the general region:

The country around the Osage Villages, is one of the most beautiful

the eye ever beheld . . . the extensive prairies crowned with rich and luxuriant grass and flowers—gently diversified by the rising swells, and sloping lawns—presenting to the warm imagination the future seats of husbandry, the numerous herds of domestic animals, which are no doubt destined to crown with joy those happy plains. . . . From the Osage towns to the source of the Osage river, there is no difference in the appearance of the country, except that on the south and east, the view of the prairies becomes unbounded, and is only limited by the imbecility of our sight.⁴⁰

Pike's "warm imagination" has conjured a future pastoral garden, abundant and joyful. (It would be sixty years before real husbandmen would come to the Marmaton, among them the poet Eugene Ware. In yet another hundred years, Ken Irby would make the Marmaton the setting of much of his poetry, a consciously "pastoral" poetry of "particularly two concerns: a calmness, a quietude of the whole being; and a feeling of great closeness with the vegetation lived among—an ecological calm—poetry that *feeds* us, not just that tends the sheep.")⁴¹

Pike moved westward from the Marmaton and into the "mountainous" terrain of Central Kansas where he spent one rainy day in his tent reading Pope's "Essays." By the time he moved down onto the Arkansas River, near the former site of the Quiviran villages Coronado had visited, the imagined pastoral garden to the east had given way to a version of the primitive quite similar to that we have seen in earlier Plains writing:

The borders of the Arkansas river may be termed the paradise (terrestrial) of our territories, for the *wandering savage*. Of all countries ever visited by the footsteps of civilized man, there never was one probably that produced game in greater abundance . . .⁴²

The imagined future herds of domestic animals are now replaced by the wild game, the future husbandman with the present savage, the imagined garden by the desert. Here is a permanent and useful barrier, Pike thinks, to the American husbandmen, "so prone to rambling and extending themselves." From the great bend of the Arkansas to the mountains, the September landscape became progressively drier and more akin to the "sandy deserts of Africa." The region will remain the home of the nomads because

nations purely erratic must depend solely on the chase for subsistence,

(unless pastoral, which is not the case with our savages) it requires large tracts of country, to afford subsistence for a very limited number of souls; consequently, self-preservation obliges them to expand themselves over a large and extensive district. The power of certain chiefs becoming unlimited, and their rule severe, added to the passionate love of liberty, and the ambition of other young, bold, and daring characters, who step forward to head the malcontents, and like the tribes of Israel, to lead them through the wilderness to a new land: the land of promise, which flowed with milk and honey (alias abounded with deer and buffalo).⁴³

Pike's analogy of the Plains Indians to Israelites moving through the wilderness to a land of milk and honey is a curiously mixed figure. By distorting the analogy to the point of turning milk and honey into deer and buffalo, Pike has located the "land of promise" in the drier western reaches of the Plains rather than in the eastern grasslands where he had warmly imagined "future seats of husbandry." In his metaphor, desert *and* garden both exist within the area soon to be designated on maps as "The Great American Desert." Perhaps the confusion is simply a result of rhetorical inflation, perhaps it suggests a double feeling toward the region, an ambivalence or an unconscious paradox. The analogy certainly prefigures the conscious commercial use of the analogy of Canaan by land agents in the "boomer" literature they wrote to attract settlers to the Plains after 1870.

In 1811, the year after Pike's *Account* was published, Henry Brackenridge, son of the novelist and poet, Hugh Henry Brackenridge, had ascended the Missouri and been out on the Northern Plains. His assessment of the land is similar to Pike's, especially in its emphasis that the Plains will form a barrier to agriculturalists. However, he muses, if there were no Indians the country might support small, widely scattered settlements. His vision is overtly pastoral:

This country, it is certain, can never become agricultural, but is in many respects highly favorable for the multiplication of flocks and herds. Those delightful spots where the beauty and variety of landscape, might challenge the fancy of the poet, invite to the pastoral life. How admirably suited to that interesting animal, the sheep, are those clean smooth meadows, of a surface infinitely varied by hill and dale,

covered with a short sweet grass intermixed with thousands of the most beautiful flowers, undeformed by a single weed.⁴⁴

The challenge to the "fancy of the poet" was taken up by the novelist James Fenimore Cooper in the third of his Leatherstocking books, *The Prairie* (1827). Perhaps it is significant (in light of the national image of the Plains as a desert) that the first person to bring his family, his wagons, his flocks, and his "implements of husbandry" onto the Plains was an imaginary person. Cooper's Ishmael Bush is the first to test that barrier to the husbandman which Pike and others had posited. Ishmael is of a "fallen race," descendant of those who have labored long around the "shrine of Ceres"; for fifty years he has remained on the "skirts of society," and his "ears had never willingly admitted the sound of a church bell."⁴⁵ Consequently, he has regressed into a nearly barbarous or savage state despite his ostensible vocation as husbandman. As the plot unfolds, it is clear that Ishmael seeks in this "empty empire" neither land to cultivate and to pasture nor that freedom associated with the nomadic aborigines; he seeks, rather, an anarchic freedom from the restraint of even the loose laws of frontier society. Ishmael is defeated in this attempt to escape "the forms of human institutions." The land does not defeat him, although the land is portrayed as sterile and penurious. "The rifle is better than the hoe in such a place as this," one of Ishmael's sons says while "kicking the hard and thirsty soil on which he stood with an air of contempt."⁴⁶ Men here must become as animals, his brother-in-law Abiram comments: "'Tis time to change our natur's . . . and become ruminators, instead of people used to the fare of Christians and free men."⁴⁷ Ishmael's defeat, however, comes from his discovery of lawlessness (murder) within the family he has sought to bring away from law and society. Ishmael himself must then become one of the "forms of human institutions" and judge, then execute, the murderer. Having discovered the terrible peril of living without restraint, Ishmael turns his herds and teams back east and is last seen entering the "confines of society."⁴⁸ The Great American Desert as a barrier to pastoral settlement remains intact as *The Prairie* ends. The ritualistic death of the old trapper Natty as the novel closes suggests that the Plains will not even be the haunt of the white or half-breed trappers who took on so many of the ways and even the "natur" of the aborigines. The Pawnee-loups and Dahcotah possess the land.

The ostensible date for the action of *The Prairie* is 1804-05. By the time

the novel was published in 1827, the Plains were known intimately by hundreds of men who had gone onto and across them to meet the European demand for furs or the Mexican demand for American goods. By 1820, the wilderness of Missouri had, to use William Stafford's phrase, "subsided and become a state." In the 1820's and 1830's, the civilized eastern tribes had been removed to Eastern Kansas and Oklahoma. The trappers' road to the Northern Rockies and the merchants' road to Santa Fe were familiar and well used. In 1831, Josiah Gregg, a sickly Independence lawyer, on the advice of his doctors, made a tour onto the Plains. He joined a Santa Fe caravan, and for over a decade he was engaged in trade between the eastern settlements and Mexico. In 1844 he published *Commerce of the Prairies*. The book is so full of accurate information for travelers and traders, of careful and scientific observation of geography, flora, fauna, climate, of interviews with Indians and their white captives, of anecdote and humor, that Gregg's book remains the best book ever written about the Great Plains. His description and classification of Indian tribes according to language and custom has not been greatly improved by modern anthropologists. It is a big, rich book; I can only look at a few specific passages. On his first journey, Gregg's party was only about a month behind the party of William Sublette and Jedediah Smith. Gregg would not learn that Smith had been killed by Comanche on the Cimarron until he arrived in Santa Fe. But there was a great deal of anxiety within his party when they met on the Cimarron nearly three thousand Comanche. They parleyed with some of the chiefs, then moved into encampment; guards were doubled. That evening when some forty Indians approached the camp, Gregg's party made ready to fire; the Indians, however, turned out to be women. They were turned away, but a horse was apparently stolen by them. The next day Gregg's party continued southwestward into extremely dry country, and at a distance the Indians followed. When the party, rather desperate for water, was feeling "lost on that inhospitable desert, which had been the scene of so many former scenes of suffering," a few Comanche approached. To the surprise and relief of the party, the Indians returned the "lost" horse, then led them into an "elysian vale" where there was water, wood and grass for the stock. However, Gregg goes on, the traders were not "destined to rest long in peace":

About midnight we were all aroused by a cry of alarm the like of which had not been heard since the day Don Quixote had his famous

adventure with the fulling-mills; and I am not quite sure but some of our party suffered as much from fright as poor Sancho Panza did on that memorable occasion. But Don Quixote and Sancho only heard the thumping of the mills and the roaring of waters; while we heard the thumping of Indian drums, accompanied by occasional yells, which our excited fancies immediately construed into notes of the fearful warsong.⁴⁹

Alarms and guns were raised but nothing happened. The "fearful warsong" had been but a "serenade"; and during the next several days the horde of Indians crowded into the party's various encampments serenading, trading, raising dust and noise, stealing a little. Soon the fearful three thousand savages had become, in their excessive friendliness, a nuisance and an annoyance. The party finally stole away early one morning, glad to be shut of the too friendly savages.

In this incident and others Gregg successfully debunks, with humor and commonsense, the image of the Plains Indian as a dangerous and treacherous savage. He consistently counsels trade and reciprocal gift-giving. Toward the end of the book he summarizes this attitude, beginning with a slightly sarcastic allusion to Washington Irving's *A Tour on the Prairies* (1835), which was but one of many books of the period to romantically exploit the dangers of the Plains:

A "tour of the Prairies" is certainly a *dangerous* experiment for him who would live a quiet contented life at home among his friends and relatives; not so dangerous to life and health, as prejudicial to his domestic habits. Those who have lived pent up in our large cities, know but little of the broad, unembarrassed freedom of the Great Western Prairies. Viewing them from a snug fireside, they seem crowded with dangers, with labors and sufferings; but once upon them, and these appear to vanish—they are soon forgotten.⁵⁰

As well as debunking popular notions about the Plains, this passage also sounds what is a persistent personal theme in the book: Gregg's almost pathological discomfort whenever he is periodically forced to live within "civilized communities." By Gregg's time the Plains have become a place of escape for civilized men, not merely a refuge for degenerate men like Ishmael Bush. The Santa Fe trader or the tourist can now participate in the

natural freedom previously reserved for the nomadic aborigine. The white man on the Plains

knows no government—no laws, save those of his own creation and adoption. He lives in no society which he must look up to or propitiate. The exchange of this untrammelled condition—this sovereign independence, for a life of civilization, where both his physical and moral freedom are invaded at every turn, by the complicated machinery of social institutions, is certainly likely to commend itself to but few,—not even to all those who have been educated to find their enjoyments in the arts and elegancies peculiar to civilized society;—as is evinced by the frequent instances of men of letters, of refinement and wealth, voluntarily abandoning society for a life upon the Prairies⁵¹

Gregg's version of the white man's experience of the Plains is beginning to resemble the sequence Richard Hardin has proposed for the pastoral experience: flight from complex civilization to natural simplicity and freedom. What Gregg learns there—as do Parkman and Garrard after him—is a kind of self-reliance taught by the "God of Nature." For these men, of course, the experience was not "pastoral" but "primitive." And, for Gregg, there can be no return to civilization nor any discovery of peace and simplicity "within the self." Later travelers onto the Plains, Parkman, Garrard, the narrators of Owen Wister's *The Virginian* and Willa Cather's *My Antonia*, all will more nearly fit Hardin's pattern. The return of Gordon Boyd and the Scanlon clan for the ceremony in *Lone Tree* will provide a complex variation on the theme.

I must linger a bit longer with Gregg. His is a difficult book to leave. Gregg accepts the general notion that "these great Steppes seem only fitted for the haunts of the mustang, the buffalo, the antelope, and their migratory lord, the prairie Indian." Yet during his long experience he has seen changes: increasing travel, decrease in the buffalo, changes in Indian ways. Toward the end of his chapter on the "Geography of the Prairies," Gregg allows himself a moment of visionary speculation about the future of these "Steppes":

The high plains seem too dry and lifeless to produce timber; yet might not the vicissitudes of nature operate a change likewise upon

the seasons? Why may we not suppose that the genial influences of civilization—that extensive cultivation of the earth—might contribute to the multiplication of showers, as it certainly does of fountains? Or that the shady groves, as they advance upon the prairies, may have some effect upon the seasons? . . . Then may we not hope that these sterile regions might yet be thus revived and fertilized, and their surface covered one day by flourishing settlements to the Rocky Mountains?⁶²

The future pastoral world will be, in Gregg's eyes, the result not of nature but of man the artificer, amending natural processes by "extensive cultivation" which will revive and make fertile "these sterile regions." Gregg seems unaware that a more genial climate, cultivated earth, fountains, shady groves, and settlements will deprive the Plains of the primitive freedom he has elsewhere celebrated.

One of the young men of "refinement" who had abandoned "society for a life upon the Prairies" had a much different vision of the future of the Plains. He was George Catlin, who had spent nearly the whole of the 1830's living among and painting the Plains Indians. In 1844, the same year as Gregg's book, Catlin published his London edition of *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of North American Indians*. Toward the end of his first volume, Catlin laments the increased slaughter of the buffalo "in those desolate fields of silence"; he knows that once the buffalo is "extinguished" so too will be the "peace and happiness (if not the actual existence)" of the Indians. Catlin then has a "splendid contemplation" about the Plains Indians as he

imagines them as they *might* in the future be seen, (by some great protecting policy of government) preserved in their pristine beauty and wildness, in a *magnificent park*, where the world could see for ages to come, the native Indian in his classic attire, galloping his wild horse, with sinewy bow, and shield and lance, amid the fleeting herds of elks and buffaloes. What a beautiful and thrilling specimen for America to preserve and hold up to the view of her refined citizens and the world, in future ages! A *nation's Park*, containing man and beast, in all the wild and freshness of their nature's beauty!⁶³ (Catlin's italics)

By the early 1840's, the desert and its primitive peoples are no longer a barrier to pastoral and agricultural settlement; they are something to be "preserved" for the future contemplation of America's "refined citizens." The end of the nomadic stage of human life upon the Plains is in sight.

One of America's most refined young men, Francis Parkman, visited Catlin's London exhibition in 1844; back in Boston the following year, he made plans for his "tour of curiosity and amusement" on the Plains. By the time he left Boston for Westport in the spring of 1846, he had doubtless read both Gregg and Catlin. What Parkman experienced on the Plains must await another essay. He went there knowingly anxious that the wilderness and its primitive life were rapidly disappearing. But even an alert, knowing, and caring Parkman was unprepared for the suddenness with which the primitive world would be swept away. In his preface to the 1852 edition of *The Oregon Trail*, only six years after his tour, Parkman strikes the pose of a Persian king and laments the loss of a place where once one could be free of civilization:

"This, too, shall pass away," were the words graven on the ring of the Persian despot, Nadir Shah, to remind him of the evanescence of all things earthly. *This, too, shall pass away,* was the doom long ago pronounced on all that is primitive in life or scenery within the limits of our national domain; but no one could have dreamed that the decree would find so swift an execution. . . .

Primeval barbarism is assailed at last in front and rear, from the Mississippi and from the Pacific; and, thus, brought between two fires, it cannot long sustain itself. With all respect to civilization, I cannot help regretting this final consummation; and such regret will not be misconstrued by anyone who has tried the prairie and mountain life, who has learned to look with affectionate interest on the rifle that was once his companion and protector, the belt that sustained his knife and pistol, and the pipe which beguiled the tedious hours of his mid-night watch, while men and horses lay sunk in sleep around him.⁵⁴ (Parkman's italics)

Parkman has infused the lost primitive world of his immediate past with the traditional pastoral elements of leisure, simplicity, and solitude. The "pipe which beguiled the tedious hours" is for tobacco rather than shepherd's tunes, but it is a clear linguistic link to the world of Theocritus and Virgil.

NOTES

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6. *The Oregon Trail*, ed. Elmer Feltskog (1849, Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1969), p. xi.
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29. Cabeza de Vaca, p. 123.
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31. *Coronado Narratives*, p. 279.
32. *Coronado Narratives*, p. 239.
33. *Coronado Narratives*, pp. 262-63.
34. *Coronado Narratives*, p. 189.
35. *Coronado Narratives*, p. 305.
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48. *The Prairie*, p. 427.
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