

Comparativist Interpretations of the Frontier in Early American Fiction and Literary Historiography

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Volume 3 Issue 2 (June 2001) Article 8**Barbara Buchenau,****"Comparativist Interpretations of the Frontier in Early American Fiction and Literary Historiography"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol3/iss2/8>>

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Abstract: In her article, "Comparativist Interpretations of the Frontier in Early American Fiction and Literary Historiography," Barbara Buchenau points towards problematic processes of selection and narrative positioning at work in historiographical studies when analyzing and synthesizing early American frontier fiction. Apart from selecting only a small number of literary texts from the large pool of frontier fiction, these over-arching narratives tend to reduce the meaning of the literary works selected to those characteristics that are understood to be of importance for the emerging national literature. Concentrating on two novels long excluded from the American canon, Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* (1827) and James Fenimore Cooper's *The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish* (1829), Buchenau argues that even literary histories that aim at a depiction of the diversity characterizing the American literary landscape find it difficult to incorporate novels that either, as in the case of Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie*, find fault with certain established myths (the American West as virgin land; unsubdued nature as pitiless danger zone), or, as in the case of Cooper's *The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish*, deconstruct both the heroic implications and the perceived optimistic consequences of a mythic metaphor (the frontier's privileging of the survival of the fittest, its suggestion of a glorious national future).

Barbara BUCHENAU

Comparativist Interpretations of the Frontier in Early American Fiction and Literary Historiography

In "Rethinking Literary History, Comparatively," Mario Valdés and Linda Hutcheon propose a reconsideration of literary historiography that will respond to the challenges raised by "the new methodological [and theoretical] paradigms" in literary study (Valdés and Hutcheon; for a revised version see <<http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/lithist/>>). Most important for my purpose at hand is their adaptation of Wlad Godzich's argument about the key role played by different "patterns of reception and usage" (81). In a chapter entitled "Popular Culture and Spanish Literary History," co-authored with Nicholas Spadaccini, Godzich suggests that the "auditive" culture of the Spanish romantic period (marked by a transformation from oral to written culture) developed "different styles of culture consumption" (79), with a) the uncritical "mass reception" unaware of the manipulations produced by the text, b) the critical reception of those who do sense the manipulation and "identify with the goals of the manipulators," and c) the critical reception intent on "refusing [the] goals" of the manipulators emerging as the most important "patterns of reception and usage" (80-81). Godzich's observation that from the moment of its first reception a literary text acquires different meanings depending on the context in which it is received and used, supports Valdés and Hutcheon's endeavor to broaden the object of study. But it also has repercussions in considerations that move far beyond Godzich's scope of contemporaneous forms of reception in suggesting that there are "multiple and complex histories of [literary] production, but also of [literary] reception" (Valdés and Hutcheon 2, emphasis in the original).

Drawing on arguments by such different critics as Michel Foucault, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Wolfgang Iser, and Hayden White, Valdés and Hutcheon not only argue that these patterns of reception and usage are subject to historical change, but also that both scholars and their products are "situated" in the "epistemological limitations" of their respective time (4) and that any historiographical investigation of literature needs to foreground the diversity of literary production and reception. Of these three aspects, it is especially the "situatedness" (5) of the literary historian that I am interested in and that I would like to explore further. Valdés and Hutcheon invite their readers to be aware of "the ideological underpinnings" (2) guiding literary historians' responses to their objects of study and to consider the fact that it is a combined process of "selection and narrative positioning" (6) by which a literary historian assigns both meaning and significance to a given text. These invitations suggest that literary histories have a specific pattern of reception and usage determined by the ideological bias, "the epistemological limitations," and the specific concerns of their authors. There also exists a potential correlation to the most important categories of the initial patterns of reception and usage delineated by Godzich and Spadaccini: Literary historians may belong either to the group of critical recipients that accept the goals of the manipulations envisioned by the literary text or to those critical recipients that stand in opposition to the intended manipulations. More likely, however, they will belong to a third group of critical recipients endeavoring to reinterpret the manipulations of a text in the context of both their own time and their own perception of the past.

In the following, I bring these theoretical considerations to a rereading of two early American novels, Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* and James Fenimore Cooper's *The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish*, texts that cannot be said to have profited from the various processes of "selection and narrative positioning" at work in literary histories. Recent changes in the critical reception of especially Sedgwick's novel suggest, however, that some of the patterns of "reception and usage" detectable in literary histories have found elementary revisions on the basis of new criteria for the choice and interpretation of literary texts. Revised goals such as the deconstruction of established hierarchies, gendered, ethnic, and others, have led, for instance, to a reappraisal of the work of numerous women writers. However, I am arguing that in spite of these revisions and reappraisals, and despite our critical awareness of the "situatedness" of literary historians, we have done little to understand fully the various facets and consequences of the selective processes that have been and still are involved in the construction of what might be called "the grand national narrative." In

my comparative investigation of Sedgwick's and Cooper's visions of the American frontier and their respective assessment in critical and historiographical discourses, especially in the most recent and most explicitly revisionary *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, I argue that their exclusion from many synthesizing narratives about the frontier in American literature is owing to their unwillingness to share some of the mythic interpretations of the American frontier still valid today. Re-reading these novels might help us to re-think both the established meaning of one of the most prominent mythic metaphors in early American fiction and the premises of literary historiography supporting this established meaning.

Readers of early American fiction are confronted with the key role that authors of various origins and persuasions have assigned to the frontier and to human experience in "the American wilderness," that is, in nature un-subdued by European civilization. Literary scholarship has variously honored, appreciated, and analyzed this preeminence. It is the merit especially of the investigations of the myth-and-symbol school in the 1950s and 1960s that we have become aware of an important nexus between literary narratives about frontier life and the formation of an American national identity. Studies such as Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950) and later Richard Slotkin's studies such as *Regeneration Through Violence* (1974) and *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization 1800-1890* (1985) have delineated the formative impact of the often aggressive human struggle with the un-subdued American nature on the American mind. According to Slotkin, even the "real" Western frontier was "a space defined less by maps and surveys than by myths and illusions, projective fantasies, wild anticipations, extravagant expectations" (*The Fatal* 11). In the following, I argue that the reminiscences of some of these expectations and myths have helped to trigger processes of selection and narrative positioning that, in turn, support the exclusion or reductive reading of Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* and James Fenimore Cooper's *The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish* in studies of American frontier fiction. To re-read them in the frontier context can tell us something about the selective processes at work in even more specialized works of literary historiography, and additionally might suggest hidden strains in literary treatments of wilderness experiences that are not restricted to Sedgwick and Cooper.

Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* (1827) is one among numerous literary works to treat fictitiously the history of the settlement of New England, a history, which -- as Lawrence Buell points out -- "became invested with a special mystique as the key source of what was distinctly American" (196). Contemporary reviews hailed the novel as being "of purely national manufacture" (Greenwood 412), meeting "the national mind," and warming "the national heart" (Martineau 42). In the US, however, the novel was immediately read not only in a patriotic but also in a gendered context; a reception that assisted the discursive construction of the concept of "female literature" (Greenwood 403; see also Opfermann, *Discours* 177, 97-115). Susanne Opfermann has argued that this delimitation of a "female literature" provoked a reductionist reading of *Hope Leslie* and the other non-didactic novels by Sedgwick as it fostered a concentration on those qualities of the texts that were conceived of as "female" (*Discours* 175-81). By emphasizing features that, according to Greenwood, help to "soften and refine the character of society" (410), contemporaneous American literary critics quickly disengaged Sedgwick's fiction from that of Cooper, ignoring the fact that to a large extent they were competitors in the same field and were, at their time and -- in the case of Cooper's frontier novels, far beyond -- both considered to belong to the most influential works of early American fiction (see Arac 37, 42).

This gender-oriented generic division of American literary production, while accounting for the obscure role Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* has played in the American canon throughout much of the twentieth century, has survived in literary scholarship up to date. The most recent literary history of the United States, the *Cambridge History of American Literature* edited by Sacvan Bercovitch and his colleagues, wants to replace the "single vision" of former histories by "a polyphony of large-scale narratives" in order to arrive at "a federated histories of American literatures" held together by both "an adversarial thread" and a concept of "America" as "rhetorical battleground" (3). This ambitious endeavor, situated in revisionary politics which draw attention to the polyphony inherent in American literary production and leading to a fragmentation of the "grand national nar-

native" into a large number of individual narratives investigating the different concepts of cultural identity in America is not without its difficulties. In order to record the diversity of voices in American literature, irreconcilable differences are established that run the danger of fostering a curtailed reading of specific texts. For Michael Davitt Bell, for instance, the "pronounced differentiation of 'masculine' and 'feminine' American fiction ... [emerges] as perhaps the major fault line in the American literary landscape" of the mid-nineteenth century ("Conditions" 43). In order to avoid simplistic generalizations, Bell stresses the diversity in the fiction of "Lydia Maria Child, Timothy Flint, James Paulding, John Neal, and Catharine Maria Sedgwick, [to whom] Cooper's success apparently suggested the possibility of fiction writing as an American profession, but it suggested little else" ("Conditions" 42-43). Here, as in other synthesizing narratives, a logic of long-term personal and larger literary developments (i.e., Sedgwick's later turn towards didactic literature and the differentiation of "feminine" and "masculine" literary traditions) stands persistently in the way of a comparative treatment of novels by Cooper and Sedgwick and that are related unmistakably.

Whereas the literary tradition built on the initial discursive construction of a feminine context for fiction written by women has thus supported the exclusion rather than the inclusion of Sedgwick in histories of American literature, it has been the patriotic context of *Hope Leslie's* initial reception -- here especially in the context of a patriotic re-reading of the colonial past -- that secured the survival in comparative obscurity as well as the modern reassessment of *Hope Leslie*. Yet, this reassessment did not proceed without setbacks nor did it effectively manage to move beyond the initial patriotic category, subdivided in more recent criticism into two strains, one commenting on Sedgwick's approach to colonial history, the other investigating her stance on miscegenation and racial conflicts. In earlier accounts, *Hope Leslie* is seen as an extraordinarily conventional book that does not manage to elaborate its patriotic possibilities because of its failure to use national symbols meaningfully (Bell, "History" 219; see also Buell 242). More recent criticism, however, has responded to the impetus of feminist critics to understand the works of women writers as alternative voices that tend to subvert the male-dominated narratives of American history (see Karcher; Person; Zagarell; for a reading of these revisions, see Arch). It has been Philip Gould, who took the closest look at Sedgwick's intricate blend of a republican interpretation of the Puritan settlement of New England and a careful criticism of Puritan historiography. Thanks to the efforts of Gould, Stephen Carl Arch, and also a more recent article by Opfermann ("Lydia Maria Child"), Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* as well as Lydia Maria Child's *Hobomok* have been reinserted at least partially into the context in which they were being read at their time, namely that of historical and frontier fiction by Cooper and his contemporaries -- British and American (see also Buchenau "Wizards," "Windschattenfahrt"). Yet, although all of these studies underline a reading of Sedgwick's novel as a "national narrative," telling, as Jonathan Arac has it in the *Cambridge History of American Literature*, "the story of the nation's colonial beginnings and [looking] forward to its future as a model for the world" (608), Sedgwick is not mentioned by Arac, and neither are William Gilmore Simms or Robert Montgomery Bird, two other competitors in Cooper's field.

Perhaps this still lingering exclusion of *Hope Leslie* from generic categories highlighting the national importance of literary texts not only has to do with her approach to history that early critics have found fault with because of its romantic thrift and later critics have hailed because of its critical undertones. Nor will her treatment of miscegenation -- which is much more suggestive of the reciprocal processes of acculturation resulting from interethnic love than Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* -- explain sufficiently why Sedgwick continues to be regarded in opposition to Cooper rather than in comparison with him. But maybe their different, yet comparable treatment of frontier life might help us to get closer to the problem. Cooper's power has been regarded "to be less compelling in treating groups than solitary individuals; less in treating settlements than wilderness; less in treating government than the margins of the law" (Arac 610). Accordingly, readers have stressed the individualistic, adventurous and uncouth elements in his fiction and have revealed, as Honoré de Balzac put it, in "the poetry of terror" inherent in Cooper's wilderness (qtd. in Arac 617). Perhaps most important for the persistent tendency in literary histories to separate the frontier novels of Cooper and Sedgwick is Cooper's reputation for having offered "a fictional codification of ideas about the significance of the Frontier to the ideology of Jeffersonian republicanism"

(Slotkin, *Fatal Environment* 86); a codification that Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* to some extent does not support or undermines implicitly.

The narrative development in *Hope Leslie* suggests unmistakably that Sedgwick has watched Cooper's narrative movements in *The Pioneers* (1823) and in *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) very closely and has shaped the wilderness scenes in *Hope Leslie* so far along the lines of elements in Cooper as to be able to play with and to critically respond to the expectations of her readers whom she knew to be well trained in Cooper. Two of these responses, I argue, not only indicate her distance to Cooper, but have also made it difficult for literary historians, whose policies of selection and narrative positioning up to date have tended to support Cooper's codification of the meaning of the frontier, to incorporate Sedgwick's novel into their analyses of frontier fiction.

One of Sedgwick's responses is to Cooper's Mount Vision scene in *The Pioneers*, reenacted in *Hope Leslie* (HL) in the baptism of Mount Holioko, but with a telling difference. In *The Pioneers*, Judge Temple climbs a mountain top to survey an area for future settlement. In close analogy to the words of Cooper's father William -- who in *A Guide in the Wilderness* (1810) had depicted his own settlement experiences leading to the foundation of Cooperstown, the real-life counterpart to fictive Templeton -- Temple claims that "no clearing, no hut, none of the winding roads that are now to be seen, were there" (*Pioneers* 299; see W. Cooper 13), only to gratefully accept a berth in Natty Bumppo's hut at the foot of the mountain right afterwards (*Pioneers* 300). Despite the fact that Native Americans and European settlers and squatters had already started to cultivate the area around Cooperstown long before William Cooper's arrival (Taylor 52), the fictive Temple, like the real Cooper, sticks to the more heroic story of envisioning the settlement of an impenetrable wilderness, a story that will nevertheless involve him in disturbing conflicts over property rights. *Hope Leslie* right from the start does not share in the common image of Western landscape as virgin land, an image reinforced in literary scholarship by titles such as Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*. Countering the uncultivated-land image of Cooper's Judge Temple, the narrator states: "The settlers followed the course of the Indians ... The wigwams which constituted the village ... gave place to the clumsy, but more convenient dwellings of the pilgrims" (HL 16-17). As the story evolves, the heroine of the novel also climbs a mountain, sure enough accompanied by male protectors, who, however, turn out to be much less adapted to nature than she is. Instead of the "deer path" Temple followed up the mountain, the path they use revealingly is an "Indian footpath" (*Pioneers* 298; HL 99). The vision they encounter on the mountain top is not so much a dream of future progress and prosperity, but rather an aesthetic experience. True to Cooper and the common definition of male and female spheres at her time, Sedgwick leaves the settlement prospects to Hope's male companions, but cannot resist to again spoil the image of the virgin land by having Hope insist that "the sites for future villages were already marked out for them by clusters of Indian huts" (HL 100). While the baptism of Mount Vision supports the construction of a settlement myth that will help to glorify the hardships encountered, to mythically evade the nevertheless impending conflict over property rights and to unify the disparate motley of settlers in the new community, the correlative act in *Hope Leslie* serves to appropriate the land in both an aesthetic and a religious sense (see Opfermann, *Diskurs* 208-09), thus elegiacally disowning the spiritual ground of native tribes.

Yet, in *Hope Leslie* nature un-subdued by European civilization is not only a wilderness bereft of that visionary spirit of the frontier that still entices literary historians, it also almost purposefully seems to turn its back on Cooper's proposition in *The Last of the Mohicans* that the American wilderness is a danger zone that threatens all existence (Brumm, "Motive" 66). Although in *Hope Leslie* an entire Indian tribe and almost a whole settler family is wiped out in the warfare between Europeans and Native Americans, captives taken, and an execution only barely avoided at the cost of maiming the dark heroine, the novel has never attained the rank of *The Last of the Mohicans* as being "unrelentingly bloody, cruel, and savage" (Fussell 40). This, I suggest, is partly owing to the fact that it does not -- as does *The Last of the Mohicans* in a movement intriguing to all synthesizing narratives about American frontier fiction -- allow nature to step between the conflicting parties and become one of the rulers of the plot (Brumm, *Geschichte* 86-87). Blending the

images of garden idyll and "savage howling wilderness" (HL 16-17, 18), *Hope Leslie* refuses to give its readers a clear sense of what to expect of nature.

In *The Last of the Mohicans* the borders of the woods are feared as the primary source of irrevocable and unremitting danger, danger coming almost solely at the hands of those inhabiting the woods. Right before the massacre at Fort William Henry we learn that: "along the sweeping borders of the woods, hung a dark cloud of savages, eyeing the passage of their enemies, and hovering, at a distance, like vultures, who only kept from stooping on their prey, by the presence and restraint of a superior army" (*Mohicans* 174). In a scene prior to an Indian raid on a house lying just outside a tiny frontier settlement, Sedgwick seems to draw on Cooper's scene, when she has the watchmen seek to "command the whole extent of cleared ground that bordered on the forest, whence the foe would come, if he came at all" (HL 41). However, this careful scrutiny of what had earlier on been described as "the borders of a dark and turbulent wilderness" (HL 5) is of no avail, only sparking off fearful fantasies in the watchmen, and the readers, too. On the next morning, with sparkling sunshine and good news of the patron of the house returning, the anxieties of the night-watch have evaporated. It soon becomes evident that the border of the forest is no more than a symbolic source of danger when the vengeful Indians "suddenly, as if earth had opened on them" (HL 63) attack the peacefully assembled family from the side of the house facing the settlement. By thus unmistakably disengaging the actual Indian threat from the natural scenery of the frontier, Sedgwick first disappoints the expectations of her readers only then to shock them the more. Additionally, she also refuses to contribute to Cooper's codification of the meaning of either frontier or nature, a meaning supported by quite a few other American frontier novels. Neither does the forest share in the dangers of frontier life by giving protection only to those who prove to be the enemies of the settlers, nor does nature mirror the horrors experienced at the frontier. In *Hope Leslie*, the sun continues to shine on a scenery that initially deceives all that come to it as peaceful, whereas in *The Last of the Mohicans* a frightful change had also occurred in the season. The sun had hid its warmth behind an impenetrable mass of vapour and hundreds of human forms which blackened beneath the fierce heats of August, were stiffened in their deformity, before the blasts of a premature November" (181).

Taking a look at Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie*, I argue that it is not so much owing to the author's gender or to her later choice of more "feminine" literary genres that her frontier romance continues to play a very obscure role in literary histories that investigate either national narratives or the narratives of the frontier (the novel is briefly mentioned by Eric Sundquist in his account of "The Literature of Expansion and Race" in the *Cambridge History* [223]). Rather, it is Sedgwick's alternative conceptualization of both the myth of the virgin land and the concept of the American wilderness as a positive danger zone, which makes it difficult to integrate her novel into narratives that, despite their ambitions to delineate the diversity of American fiction, still adhere to some of the central myths that Cooper helped to establish in his *Leatherstocking Tales*. In a tentative appropriation of Godzich's two patterns of critical reception and usage, one might argue that literary historians on the one hand have identified largely with or have reinterpreted the goals of Cooper's codification of the meaning of the frontier, but on the other have turned their backs on the goals of Sedgwick. However, it is not only a woman writer like Sedgwick, but also Cooper himself, who eventually falls victim to processes of selection and narrative positioning at work in literary histories. In a hitherto little noticed endeavor to move beyond both Sedgwick's and his own treatment of frontier danger, Cooper substantially reconsidered some of his own mythic interpretations. In *The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish* (1829), a novel that earned Cooper the dubious reputation of plagiarizing from *Hope Leslie* (Anonymous 141; Legaré 219), his productive response to Sedgwick culminates in a vision of the frightening psychological consequences of American frontier life that up to date has caused literary historians to rather exclude the novel from their analyses of frontier fiction than to try to contextualize within either Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* or Sedgwick's novel. However, *The Wept* is a case in which Richard Slotkin's argument about the Leatherstocking cycle most certainly holds true, namely that "the narrative subtext in which Cooper carries forward his integrated retelling of the Frontier Myth, develops and grows from book to book, adding meanings rather than repeating them" (87). Unfortunately, the growth contributed by *The Wept* has

rarely been acknowledged. In *The Wept*, we find scenes of night-watches and Indian raids at the frontier that show resemblances to scenes in *The Last of the Mohicans* and in *Hope Leslie*, but which aim at a much broader investigation of the psychological significance of the frontier.

The night before the Indian attack in *Hope Leslie*, Sedgwick has her two watchmen pass time with relating "tales of adventure, and danger [at the American frontier]. They thus wore away time till the imaginations of both relater and listener were at the pitch, when every shadow is embodied, and every passing sound bears a voice to the quickened sense" (HL 43). Cooper elaborates on this deception of the senses provoked by overwrought imaginations in *The Wept*, where the watchmen, "excited by their fears, fancied each dark and distant stump a savage; and they passed no angle in the high and heavy fences, without throwing a jealous glance to see that some enemy did not lie stretched within its shadows" (*Wept* 1, 66). Surpassing Sedgwick's suggestion of an American imagination haunted by the actual and imaginary dangers of frontier life, Cooper not only sets the imagined threat to life when he has "each dark object in the fields, [give] up a human form" (*Wept* 1, 169), but also links the fear of the settlers to a claim to the land which they know to be contested by Indian tribes. With the "jealous glance" of the watchmen that is much more than merely vigilant, suspicious and fearful, Cooper's narrative subtext in *The Wept* has the conflict over property rights, initially treated in *The Pioneers*, develop and grow to an extent that is little digestible for readers who are not ready to embrace the psychological and mental consequences of such a conflict. In *The Wept*, the most important meaning of *jealous* is "troubled by the belief, suspicion or fear that the good which one desires to gain or keep for oneself has been or may be diverted to another" -- in this case to the Indian "enemy" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 5, 562; see Buchenau, "Wizards" 295-301).

The earlier frontier novels of both Cooper and Sedgwick had closely dealt with the rivalry between Indian and European culture, but in none of the books is the conflict as symbolically linked to the territory on which the contesting parties stand as in *The Wept*, where it is the earth that almost seems to give birth to either Indian assailants or European settlers (see *The Wept* 1, 169, 230) and where settlers and natives repeatedly take turns in disappropriating the same piece of land from one another. Tellingly, this is a process that only stops when the settlers overcome their fear of the unknown surroundings and start to use means they had earlier opposed on moral grounds. This fear of the unknown territory is born of a sense of rootlessness of those who left their European homes for good, thereby breaking most of their emotional, intellectual and cultural ties to their personal past. In *Hope Leslie*, it had been a product of narration rather than of daily experience; in *The Wept* it advances to the rank of moving principle of the story. It is, I would argue, this fear that can help us to understand why literary historians up to date have had little to say about Cooper's pessimistic New England novel in their considerations of either national or frontier narratives.

In *Hope Leslie*, Sedgwick depicts William Fletcher, who will later adopt the titular heroine, as a character who suffered a complete disruption of all emotional, mental, and political ties to Great Britain. Fletcher seeks the isolation offered by the American frontier to overcome the loss of his British home, only to lose almost his entire family there in the Indian attack mentioned earlier. Despite these traumatic experiences, Fletcher does not suffer a mental breakdown, but continues his struggle for liberty that had exacted his emigration. Fletcher's moral code, a code strengthened by his alienation from his former home, is meant to foreshadow the most prominent republican virtues. As (adoptive) father, he passes these values on to the surviving children who overcome the homelessness of their parent and will develop a patriotic sense of belonging. In *The Wept*, Cooper, too, investigates the consequences of breaking ties with one's British home. Although his version of the sequential disengagement and ensuing identity formation also bears a proto-national face, his emphasis lies on the psychological consequences of this process. This psychological undercurrent -- a strain that can be interpreted as having prepared the ground for the later psychological fictions of Hawthorne and Poe -- has so far been overlooked because Cooper's adamant opposition to any patriotic interpretation of the Puritan endeavor has made his novel little tractable for literary histories interested in the mythic or patriotic quality of early American fiction. Instead of disturbing, like Sedgwick, the *virgin-land*-justification of American expansionism,

Cooper strikes this American myth at its roots by equaling the Puritan sense of mission with a ruthless impulse towards expansion. Mark Heathcote, the patriarch in *The Wept*, who proclaims himself ready to "cheerfully devote to the howling wilderness, ease, offspring, and, should it be the will of Providence, life itself" (1, 16), states a religious creed of highest national consequence: "It hath been accorded to us to know the Lord; to his chosen worshippers, all regions are alike. The spirit can mount, equally, through snows and whirlwinds; the tempest and the calm; from the land of the sun, and the lands of the frosts; from the depth of the ocean, from fire, from the forest" (2, 23).

Here, the unquenchable thirst for expansion finds vocal expression, revealing as well the major motivation for what Warren Motley has called "the endemic disrespect for nature blighting the sacred groves" (22). More important for Cooper's interpretation of the frontier, however, is the emphasis that for the Puritan settlers "all regions are alike." Cooper's Puritan characters not only cut all their ties to anything that might be a home to them, they also deliberately opt for an eternal continuation of this process on the American continent. In *The Wept*, this decision against any personal roots has quite frightening consequences for the human psyche. In *The Pioneers* the frontier had acted as an ambivalent "temporal divide" pointing towards the "continental past" as well as "the 'will have been' of conquest" (Clark 67), thus enabling the novel to offer both optimistic and highly critical comments on the American past as well as its future. In *The Wept*, however, the frontier amounts to almost something like a psychological divide, taking a heavy toll on the mental setup of the European settlers. In contrast to the pastoral Fletcher home in *Hope Leslie*, the home of the Heathcotes does not embrace nature but is devised as a "frontier fortress" kept in "jealous and complete repair" (1, 28), symbol of the endless and destructive fear of loss and disappropriation. Wayne Franklin has argued that the settlers in *The Wept* are driven by their "Gothic predilections" (127).

These predilections, however, are not just strange character traits. They result from the settlers' sense of insecurity and alienation in the New World. Not surprisingly, then, the settlers in *The Wept* live in a world of deluded senses. Throughout the first book -- which describes the first generation of Puritan settlers in the area -- the characters have to struggle with "conjectures," "fancied images," "strange delusion[s]," "deception[s] of vision" and the fact that they often cannot detect "the smallest symptoms of intelligence" in their frontier surroundings (1, 54, 62, 68, 119). This depiction of an epistemological struggle on the part of the settlers picks up Charles Brockden Brown's epistemological skepticism voiced in *Edgar Huntly* (see Frank, "Cooper"; Glasenapp). Cooper, who had commented on Brown's novel in the preface to *The Spy* (1821), is much more encompassing than Brown, who had restricted the almost destructive mental consequences of frontier life to a young man of particularly high sensitivities. In *The Wept* almost all characters of European descent struggle unconsciously with multiple anxieties and unreliable perceptions. While they do not acknowledge their self-consciousness and accordingly do not anticipate any impact on their ability to make correct judgments, the narrative development dismantles their shield of certainty based on their religious sense of mission. Cooper's *The Wept* confronts those literary historians who are trying to weave different mythic interpretations of the American frontier into one synthesizing narrative with serious difficulties in both its suggestion that the Puritan mission is accompanied by serious mental derangements, and its delineation of the earliest endeavors of American expansionism in an especially tragic light. To again come back to Godzich's patterns of initial reception and usage, literary historians confronting Cooper's *The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish* can be understood as critical recipients who have earlier been able, and to some extent glad, to accept the goals of Cooper's codification and manipulation of the meaning of the frontier, but who now find themselves compelled to oppose the revised goals of an author developing a much more pessimistic interpretation of America's frontier and her past.

If it is true that even in times cherishing pluralism and diversity, historiographical treatments of early American fiction find it difficult to incorporate novels that either, as in the case of Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie*, find fault with certain established myths (the American West as *virgin land*; un-subdued nature as pitiless danger zone), or, as in the case of Cooper's *The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish*, deconstruct both the heroic implications and the perceived optimistic consequences of a

mythic metaphor (the frontier's privileging of the survival of the fittest, its suggestion of a glorious national future), we might start to wonder whether there is a way to more effectively capture the multiplicity of voices in the American literary landscape. One helpful move that I suggest might be a stronger emphasis on the dialogic features in literary life, that is on the various processes of communication, interaction, interrelation and interference that support any author in finding and defining his or her own standpoint.

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