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THE WRITINGS OF JAMES FENIMORE COOPER — AN ESSAY REVIEW

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Of the nine volumes under review I have already reviewed two, The Pioneers and The Pathfinder, in the September 1981 Nineteenth-Century Fiction. I will not repeat myself much. Working from the outside in, I praise first the dust jackets. The cover illustrations are striking, even gorgeous reproductions of early illustrations of scenes from Cooper's novels and of scenes he describes in his travel books: for The Pioneers, "Turkey Shoot" by Tompkins H. Matteson; for The Pathfinder, a depiction by F. O. C. Darley of Natty Bumppo and his friends hiding, in Natty's case not very furtively, from the "accursed Mingos"; for Wyandotte, a depiction by Darley of Nick escorting Major Willoughby and Maud to the Hut; for The Last of the Mohicans a sumptuous reproduction of Thomas Cole's "Cora Kneeling at the Feet of Tamenund"; for Lionel Lincoln an engraving by John Lodge of a drawing by Miller called "View of the Attack on Bunker's Hill, with the Burning of Charles Town, June 17, 1775"; for Switzerland the Castle of Spietz, Lake of Thun, by W. H. Bartlett; for Italy, "Venice," as drawn by James Baker Pyne and engraved by S. Bradshaw; for England Thomas Hosmer Shepherd's engraving of Cheapside, looking down Poultry and Bucklersbury from High Street, Aldgate; for France, an engraving of the Garden and Palace of the Tuileries, by Jacques Antoine Dulaure. Within the volumes the cover illustrations are reproduced along with many other illustrations of scenes from the novels, scenes in America and Europe which Cooper depicted, and appropriate maps. The sources of illustrations are meticulously described in a succinct section at the front of each volume.

One cannot overpraise the effort to present the user of these volumes with contemporary depictions of scenes Cooper witnessed and with contemporary visual tributes to the vividness of Cooper's own prose scene-painting, tributes which must have contributed, however incalculably, to the enduring power Cooper's works have had on the American and European imagination. Readers will be most interested in the reproductions of illustrations for Cooper's novels, I suspect; a younger generation may need this sort of lavish reminder that contemporary painters and engravers loved doing scenes from Cooper about as much as they loved doing Rip Van Winkle, Ichabod Crane,
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and the Headless Horseman. In his “Historical Introduction” to The Pioneers Beard has a fascinating paragraph on the rush to illustrate that book. Many illustrations known to have existed are now destroyed or unidentified, so Beard has to conclude that “the effect of The Pioneers (and the later Leather-stocking novels) “on the emergence of the Hudson River Valley School is difficult to assess precisely, but its impact would seem to have been direct and decided.”

Richard Hendel’s design for the Cooper Edition strikes me as the best for any CEAA/CSE Edition, although I can see why some would vote for Bert Clarke’s Howells or P. J. Conkwright’s Thoreau. The blue cloth is that of Mohicans looking smaller than that of Pathfinder (is it photographically reduced?). Within particular volumes, changes in font size are appropriately made, smaller type going to the textual commentaries and lists. As I said in 1981, from volume to volume there is flexibility in the design of the lists, as when the emendations list was put one column per page in The Pathfinder because the list was short but two columns per page in The Pioneers, where there are more items. It’s easy to glance down the “Textual Notes” to see if there’s a discussion about something that puzzled you, for the entries are printed in reverse paragraph indentation, the line number starting flush left and all subsequent lines of the note indented about six spaces. Reverse paragraph indentation may strike you as a ridiculous thing to be grateful for, but you’ll agree if you look at the Irving Edition, which has the right idea but indents only two or three spaces, enough to have two digits catch your eye but not enough to separate the beginning of an entry from any numbers that happen to fall at the start of the second line of a note. Or you can contrast the Ohio State Hawthorne, which did not get the idea at all, and on facing pages has textual notes bobbing like demijohns in parallel off-white canals. I do wish Hendel had made better use of the running heads. Why give the title of the novel on both verso and recto when a chapter number could have been given, conventionally, on the recto? In the travel books, especially, it seems wasteful to see “England” on both pages in an opening when a location in England could have been specified, or at least the number of the “Letter” could have been printed. The Press served the Edition badly at times, as in the distracting occurrence of lightly printed and sometimes slanted lines
in Mohicans, presumably where late corrections were made. I thought I could review The Prairie here when I learned that some people had received copies, but the Press withdrew the volume for corrections. (Professor Beard mentions misprints in various volumes which I prefer not to itemize here: errors are inevitable, and I don’t want to bog down in particulars when I have some broad comments to make.)

The designer and Cooper experts did not think ahead to avoid awkwardnesses that result from printing footnotes at the end of each of the Historical Introductions. Writers of the essays ought to have been warned to put all essential information into the text rather than putting it in footnotes which are not even on the same page but several pages away. I have in mind needless mystification when a person is first referred to by surname, with the full name in the note; or when the pattern of following first mention of a novel by the date of publication is violated because the date is given in a note; or when the text has a reference (this is in Wyandotte) to “the arbitration with Stone” (p. xvii) but the information that Cooper had “won a stunning victory over Stone in an arbitration suit concerning the accuracy of The History of the Navy” is reserved for p. xxx. This failure to give sufficient information at the appropriate place penalizes good readers, who naturally assume that they have missed something, and then waste time reviewing the previous pages. Such failures to think in terms of the way readers encounter information, while distracting the few times they occur, are anomalies in a remarkably well thought out Edition.

James Franklin Beard and James P. Elliott in their Statement of Editorial Principles and Procedures (1977) (guidelines for themselves and the contributing Cooper editors) made it clear that they expected each “Historical Introduction” to offer much fresh biographical information in the course of telling, always for the first time, the story of the genesis, composition, early publication history, and contemporary reception. The essays in the volumes so far published do in fact constitute new chapters in Cooper’s biography. They also constitute an extraordinarily important contribution to William Charvat’s old project, the study of the profession of authorship in America — and in Europe. As a Melvillean I was struck by the remarkable resilience and confidence Richard Bentley must have possessed for him to have treated Melville as generously as he did after his experiences with Cooper’s writings. Other readers will find these accounts of author-publisher relationships equally informative and provocative, for other
reasons. It will be a shame if one of the Cooper experts does not, toward the end of the Edition, draw all the information together in a monograph on Cooper and his publishers.

James F. Beard as general editor has approved the "Historical Introductions" which he did not write, so I have not felt obliged in this review to check historical and biographical facts. I made an exception when I encountered the claim by Thomas and Marianne Philbrick that the "reviews of Wyandotte were neither numerous nor, with a few exceptions, penetrating." I know from my work on Melville that you just don't make that kind of assertion without serious review hunting. I went up to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania with my research assistant Kenneth McNamee to see what the local papers did with a Lea and Blanchard book. In a couple of hours we had supplemented the Philbricks' account with a notice in the United States Gazette and one in the Pennsylvanian as well as one in the Saturday Courier which promised a fuller review (did it ever appear?); I also checked the New York Albion and found a notice of Wyandotte. We checked a little further in the Philadelphia papers and found three notices of The Pathfinder not mentioned in the historical introduction to that volume; one of them quotes from a review in the New York Evening Post also not mentioned.

I understand that the Cooper Edition has not been funded by NEH on the grand scale of some other editions, but I think the Cooper editors ought to have been able not only to use the files of reviews (admittedly incomplete) which Beard has set up at Worcester but also to supplement his files by what they could find through some systematic hunting expeditions. Of the volume editors only Donald and Lucy Ringe, in Lionel Lincoln, offer what looks like a genuinely representative survey of contemporary reviews, based on personal inhaling of newspaper dust and eye-strain from peering into microfilm readers. As I keep saying, any contemporary review may be more important than the most clever modern critical article simply because it may have affected the way an author wrote a later work. Anyone who does a historical introduction in collected edition owes it to the rest of us, and to posterity, to be as exhaustive as possible, or, at least, to avoid giving the impression that the work has been done when it has not: you have to earn the right to generalize about the number and the nature of reviews of any book.

The Editorial Apparatus in these Cooper volumes typically consists of "Explanatory Notes," "Textual Commentary," Textual
Notes,” “Emendations,” “Rejected Readings,” and “Word-Division.” The last of these the Cooper Edition puts compactly into double columns. I question only the inclusion of words like “New-York” and “Anglo-Saxon,” where the capitalization of the second part would prevent anyone from mistranscribing. Since this list, one of Fredson Bowers’s best innovations, and essential if one is to know how to quote accurately, has been the subject of much ignorant ridicule, it behooves editors to define it stringently. About the other lists, aside from the unexceptionable “Emendations,” I have more to say.

The “Explanatory Notes” are succinctly informative. Following the page-and-line citation comes the part of the text being explained (a word or two or a phrase, usually; longer passages are given as the opening and closing phrases separated by three ellipsis dots), then after a colon comes the note. And the Cooper notes are useful, not pedantic. Where the Howells Edition sometimes glossed the obvious (“divvy” as slang for “divide,” “without form and void” as biblical, “funeral baked meats” as Shakespearean), the Cooper editors tell you about “Rodney’s victory” and “Denman’s Midwifery.”

Each “Textual Commentary” contains, in the words of the Statement, “a complete and concise explanation of all phases of the establishment of the eclectic text of the volume.” All editors were enjoined to present information “as clearly and intelligibly as possible, with as little technical jargon and unnecessary complication as the inclusion of essential facts permits.” Beard and his colleagues have made these commentaries about as clear and succinct as anyone could hope for, and the design, once again, helps the reader, for discussions of particular editions are usually set off by space and preceded by a subheading (e.g., “WILEY-CLAYTON FIRST EDITION”). The commentaries are well proportioned, short when a work went into few editions (7 pages for France), longer when the textual histories are more complicated (29 for The Pioneers).

When there is surviving manuscript to serve as full or partial copy-text the “Textual Commentary” is supplemented by a “Note on the Manuscript,” and the textual apparatus takes on more than ordinary interest. The best fun comes in sharing Richard Dilworth Rust’s great pleasure in demonstrating that the printed texts of The Path-finder were replete with compositorial mistranscriptions which, cumulatively, are enough to undermine anyone’s confidence that Cooper knew or cared much about stylistic felicity. (It’s just too bad that Mark Twain cannot be shown to have worked himself into a
lather over an error in transcription.)

I like the look of the Cooper “Textual Notes” but not the way they are worded. They are not self-contained; you have to consult the text and other lists in order to know what the note is about. This is from *Italy*: “12.16. Cooper obviously means to suggest a contrast between the road and the rest of the scene, making the Bentley reading more appropriate.” What Bentley reading? A reader who forgot what was copy-text might look in the “Emendations” list, but there is no entry for 12.16 because the Bentley edition was in fact the copy-text. Properly chastened, the reader may then look in “Rejected Readings,” where he will find that the first edition (London) had “otherwise” while the American edition had “other.” In *England* the textual note to 125.3 reads “Although both prepositions are possible here, ‘on’ seems more appropriate.” Since my raise for 1986 depends on my doing this review right, I dutifully turned to the text at 125.3: “circumstances that enlisted the public feeling on his side, in which.” I was not enlightened. “Both prepositions” might refer to “on” and “in”—after all, both occur at 125.3. But that couldn’t be. On to the list of variants. Whoops! there is no list of variants. Try “Rejected Readings.” No such list. Try “Emendations”! Success: “on[JCE; of A] — just what I wanted to know: the first edition had “of” where the Cooper Edition prints “on.” They could have told me so in the “Textual Notes.”

Another example and I’ll stop. The first of the “Textual Notes” to *Mohicans* reads: “The correct spelling actually originates in the second American edition.” Well, I am a man of great good feeling toward the Cooper edition, but “actually,” I don’t care what correct spelling you are talking about if you don’t care enough to tell me instead of teasing me. It’s only for that 1986 raise that I look at “Emendations” and find that the first edition had “downfal” and the second edition had, actually, “downfall,” which the Cooper edition adopted. With the addition of a little more information, enough to take up a dozen more lines for a volume, the notes could have been self-contained. If anyone tells me that the notes are not meant to be read I reply that if they are not meant to be read they should not have been included. I hope the Cooper Edition changes policy in subsequent volumes.

I approach a list of “Rejected Readings” cautiously because of its doleful sound, so suggestive of outgrown novels by Grace Livingston Hill and William Buckley. In the Cooper Edition the list consists mainly of readings in “authorial” editions (editions Cooper super-
vised or at least authorized) which the editors have judged to be non-authoritative. That is, in the case of volumes edited from manuscript they mainly consist of misreadings made by the first compositors, misreadings never corrected by Cooper in later editions. In the case of volumes for which the first edition is copy-text, the list consists mainly of words in later authorized editions which the editors think are not changes made by Cooper but by others, primarily compositors. Now, there is nothing inherently wrong about printing a list of words you do not adopt because you are pretty sure they are non-authorial, but sometimes the lists are long — nineteen pages in The Pathfinder — a lot of space to devote to words you think are non-authorial. I complained about this in 1981 on the grounds of misplaced priorities: ‘Rust prints a table of ‘Rejected Readings’ — readings from early editions which seem to be mainly compositorial errors or casual compositorial changes. He does not print a list of authorial revisions in the manuscript. I assume the reasons are partly economic — the manuscript alterations would take many pages to list (and could never satisfactorily represent the chronology of revision for a much-reworked passage) while the printed variants could be handled tidily. Whatever the justifications, the effect of the policy is to valorize the nonauthorial printed variants over the variants which survive from the author’s active engagement in what we must, as admirers of Cooper, call the creative process.’

The more I think about the “Rejected Readings” the more I think they are negative lists — mere records of words you can be sure, sometimes, are not Cooper’s and never were Cooper’s: when you have the manuscript, you can be fairly confident about when a variant in the first edition is there because a compositor had trouble reading a word that the Cooper editors, trying harder, can read perfectly well. Once in a while a reading on the list will be a variant Cooper could have substituted, though the editors think it is really not his (if they thought it was his change they would have put it in the “Emendations”). The inclusion of these lists is justifiable — these are not off-the-wall lists like the Kent State Arthur Mervyn list of variants in non-authorized editions. But when you are omitting any record of Cooper’s manuscript revisions and are including a long list of compositorial variants, you are getting your priorities wrong. Professor Beard wrote me in 1981 that a list of alterations in the Pathfinder manuscript would have been prohibitively expensive, fifteen times, he guessed, as long as the list of alterations of the manuscript in the Ohio State The
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House of the Seven Gables. I take his word that the press would not have printed such a lengthy list, but given nineteen pages to play with, I would rather have had a sample of Cooper's revisions — after all, we know in these cases that the variants are all his — than nineteen pages of variants the editors think are not authorial.

My uneasiness with the "Rejected Readings" becomes acute in Wyandotte, where the editors in the "Note on the Manuscript" describe Cooper's holograph revisions: "The first stage of revision reflects chiefly an occasional groping for the right word and syntax. The later stage, insofar as it can be distinguished from the first, involves not only stylistic improvement but more substantial changes, most of them with the design of making what was written earlier consistent with what was written later." Now, the editors nowhere list the revisions Cooper made in order to make parts of the manuscript consistent, yet one would think those changes would be fascinating. It is very strange to see the editors suppressing such indisputable evidence of how Cooper revised yet printing (in the "Emendations" list) the later-stage continuation of the process of imposing consistency — the variants in the first edition which the editors take as Cooper's "extensions" of his patterns of revisions in the manuscript, including "the adjustment of early portions of the novel to elements introduced late in the composition." The result of this policy is that part of the pattern of weeding out inconsistencies is printed, but the less-interesting part — less interesting because farther removed from the creative process and less interesting because they are not certainly by Cooper but only very probably by him; the most interesting and the demonstrably authorial parts of the pattern are not listed. As I said in 1981, this is to valorize printed variants over manuscript variants (as almost all editing inspired by Greg and Bowers has tended to do) even when manuscript survives. The printing of these elaborate lists of rejected variants seems to me a case of doing meticulously something that is not the most desirable thing to do. What gets lost sight of is the use people might make of any conceivable list of variants for a particular work — real people who love literature and are concerned with the process of literary creation more than they are with the vagaries of compositors.

The Cooper apparatus is cautious and conventional. Apprised of some minor errors and blunders in advance, I have assumed that the lists are otherwise accurate except when something leapt out at me in Mohicans — where apparently the "Emendations" list does not con-
tain some 1850 changes in the “Introduction” which are discussed as emendations in the “Textual Commentary.” Now and then in the “Textual Commentaries” the reasoning may be awkwardly stated even though the decision is one most of us would approve, as in this rather circular passage from Mohicans: “Since the Miller edition, while liberally restyled, evidences no changes attributable to Cooper, the Clayton & Van Norden sheets sent to England presumably contained no scribal corrections.” One can argue about particular decisions, of course, as well the wording of the textual reasoning, but I think anyone would agree that for the most part the Cooper editors have carefully following the principles of editorial apparatus as developed by CEAA editions and as best explored (not just laid out) in G. Thomas Tanselle’s now-classic essay in the 1972 Studies in Bibliography. But it is fair to say that the editors do not seize the opportunity to rethink Tanselle’s arguments either when they follow the pattern which he had described or when they diverge from it, as in the “Rejected Readings” list. They do not, in short, use their textual findings to think through the rationales for all of the parts of the apparatus.

In textual policy one also finds that the Cooper volumes, as I said in 1981, are “models of conservative, responsible editing in accordance with W. W. Greg’s theory of copy-text.” The other side of this responsible policy is that textual evidence is not brought to bear on textual theory either to confirm or challenge it. Fredson Bowers has said practically everything about eclectic texts except why you might want one and what you can do with one once you have it. The Cooper editors had chances aplenty to rethink the utility of eclectic editing, as in Mohicans, where they print Cooper’s 1826 “Preface” in a form which no reader saw in 1826; Cooper’s 1831 “Introduction” in a form which no reader saw in 1831; an addition at the end of the “Introduction” which no one saw until 1850; and a text of the novel which no one saw until 1983. I am not arguing that the Cooper editors were wrong to do what they did, but merely that they passed by an opportunity to explore practical and theoretical issues of the highest interest. I made a similar point in 1981 in regard to Rust’s amusingly formulated “Agnes Principle,” according to which the editors carry out alterations which Cooper started but did not finish, as when he decided to change Mabel Dunham’s first name to Agnes. I was not and am not concerned with challenging the “Agnes Principle” but with reminding us all that even so reasonable a policy can be extremely
tricky: what if Cooper had punned repeatedly on "Mabel" in several chapters?

In 1981 I concluded that "Cooper's texts are being lovingly and learnedly prepared under the supervision of an Editor-in-Chief devoted to his author and responsible to the readers of the Edition. Cooper is having his second chance." The hottest topic at the 1984 MLA was the canon of American Literature, and in the present fervor about *Reconstructing American Literature* the danger is that Cooper will be swamped not by Herman Melville but by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. Second chances are chancy, and fads, we all know, can delay the rehabilitation of a neglected writer, no matter how great his or her historical and even aesthetic significance. More frequently than we acknowledge, fads in what English professors write and publish can also delay recognition of important scholarship. I wish I saw clearer signs that the Cooper editors will receive the great praise they deserve for their durable contributions to the history of authorship in America, to Cooper's biography, and to the purification of classic texts.