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COOPER AND WORDSWORTH

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To modern readers, James Fenimore Cooper and William Wordsworth exemplify important but quite different facets of Romanticism. To contemporaries, they ranked among the foremost writers in English in the first half of the nineteenth century. Yet these similarities pale before their apparent differences. Wordsworth's lyric art and his introspective range of mind are far from what we usually think of as Cooper's strengths—exciting narratives and ambiguous characters like the Leatherstocking who provoke us to contemplate the distinctiveness of American stock. Further, Cooper's distaste for personal reflection (even in his letters) or for critical inquiry about the nature of literature differs strikingly from Wordsworth's probings, in prose and poetry, about his art.

Documentary evidence does exist, however, to indicate that Cooper read Wordsworth, and from that evidence we can begin to look more closely at both common traits and even literary influence. Because the Cooper family suffered the bad fortune through the nineteenth century of repeatedly losing their homes and personal libraries to conflagrations, we cannot tell what books the author owned or perhaps annotated. Fortunately, however, we can chart Cooper's interests in poetry through his career-long use of chapter epigraphs or "mottoes," by which he characterizes the ensuing chapter in all his fiction from his second novel, *The Spy* (1821), through *Ways of the Hour* thirty years later.¹ And as I shall argue, these mottoes not only disclose his reading of poetry, but in their thematic anticipation of the narrative, they also enable us to see how the novelist used selected verse to complement his own prose.

1.

Cooper almost met Wordsworth. The American spent seven years in Europe between 1826 and 1833, mostly on the Continent. His longest sojourn in England, however, lasted only three months, from 28 February 1828 to the 28th of May. Settling with his family in St. James Place near Green Park, Cooper soon discovered the benefits of an association with the banker-poet, Samuel Rogers. Often in Rogers's company, Cooper visited and dined with prominent British literary and public figures. His travel book on England records a delightful evening

with Coleridge and Sir Walter Scott on 22 April, during which the poet's flood of imaginative discourse on the Unity of Homer daunted the two novelists into comparative silence.²

Cooper was less fortunate in his plans to meet Wordsworth. The same travel book laments that

I have just missed seeing Mr. Wordsworth too, in consequence of ill health. He dined with Mr. Rogers, and I was asked to meet him, but my old enemy the headache and a severe nervous attack, obliged me to send excuses, though I put them off as long as I could, and drank hot tea all the morning to get myself in trim. Mr. Rogers sent to press me to join them in the evening, but I was then in bed. (p. 166)

Thus ended the only occasion where the two authors might have met. Knowing of Cooper's mixed feelings about England, one cannot help but wonder about the nature of his "severe nervous attack." Cooper records that he had talked to Scott at length about the inequities for writers in both countries because of the absence of international copyright laws.³ Such matters were appropriate to novelists depending on sales in times of uncertain markets and of commercial reversals. But what topic could have occupied Cooper and Wordsworth?

One topic Cooper very much had on his mind but probably would not have broached was his book then in progress, *Notions of the Americans*. Written at the behest of Lafayette to explain American institutions to Europeans, *Notions* expanded in scope as Cooper labored to correct what he viewed as purposeful distortions by Europeans of American democracy. The demands on his energy this book exacted weighed heavily on him, and according to his wife, led to the very kind of nervous irritation that sent him to his bed the night of the Wordsworth dinner.⁴

In *Notions of the Americans*, Cooper—four generations distant from his namesake who emigrated from Stratford-on-Avon in 1679—pleaded for his countrymen to strive for cultural independence from England as fifty years earlier they had acquired political sufficiency. Servile deference to British critics, especially about political and literary matters, hobbled native growth of a true indigenous literature. Cooper also lamented the absence of a copyright agreement, though for reasons different from those of Scott (and later of Dickens.) To Cooper's distress, American pirating of British authors, free of royalty charges, flooded the new world with cheap British books, thus dampening the

market for native authors. Understandably, these suspicions about the consequence of British cultural hegemony helped make Cooper uneasy during his social visits in London. Perhaps, then, the pressures of composing his longest declaration of American cultural independence prevented Cooper from accepting his one invitation to meet Wordsworth.

2.

Judging from the novelist's use of chapter epigraphs, Cooper's inability to dine with the poet did not diminish his reading or use of Wordsworth in his mottoes. Indeed, a survey of the roughly one thousand chapter epigraphs discloses helpful evidence of Cooper's broad reading and his use of what he read, by which we can chart an interest in Wordsworth that matures in the novelist's prolific last decade.

Almost half of Cooper's chapter epigraphs come from Shakespeare, a not surprising tribute to an author Cooper clearly knew well. At the outset of his career, in books as diverse as *The Prairie*, *The Red Rover*, and *The Water Witch*, Shakespearean texts supply almost every motto. Both early and late through his thirty-one novels, Cooper turned to Shakespeare for pithy mottoes to typify the content of a new chapter.

After Shakespeare, Cooper most often drew on contemporaries, Scott and Byron, who share with him an ability to "spin a good yarn." Byron is the most frequently quoted author after Shakespeare, with fifty-six attributions spread throughout Cooper's works. Scott's poetry contributes twenty-three mottoes, though curiously Cooper's use of Scott drops off after his return to the United States. Following Scott are twenty epigraphs borrowed from Cooper's London neighbor, Samuel Rogers. And as a writer born in 1789 and first educated in Albany by an English cleric of orthodox tastes, Cooper's reliance on eighteenth-century poets like Pope, William Cowper, Thomson, and similar figures occasions little surprise.

In choosing epigraphs, Cooper turns less often to American sources than one would expect from an author who pleaded vigorously for American independence from British literature. The young authors Cooper cites in *Notions* for trying "to extract sweets from even these wholesome, but scentless, native plants"⁵—Halleck, Bryant, Percival, and Sprague—appear occasionally with Bryant the dominant source. Various American satiric verse writers contribute to Cooper's stock of epigraphs, as do folk-tales, anon., and in *Wing-and-Wing*, the "14,763d verse of Yankee Doodle." Nor did Cooper ignore the younger

generation of American poets who dominated the scene after his death in 1851. Longfellow (born 1807), who did not begin publishing regularly until the 1830's, supplies epigraphs for five of Cooper's novels of his last decade. Similarly, Whittier (also born in 1807) is quoted twice in Cooper's third from last novel, *The Oak Openings* (1848).

Surveying Cooper's epigraphs yielded as the greatest surprise, however, his use of epigraphs drawn from all of the major Romantic poets save Blake: five sources from Shelley, five from Coleridge, nine from Wordsworth and even one (in *Oak Openings*) from Keats. The Shelley references occur as early as *The Headsman* (1833), the last of the three historical romances set in Europe and fruit of Cooper's Continental sojourn. The remaining Shelley quotations, like all those drawn from Coleridge, occur in Cooper's final decade during which he produced almost half his fictional titles.

3.

After Byron, Scott, and Campbell—whose *Gertrude of Wyoming* mirrored the sentiments of many Cooper situations—Wordsworth proved to be Cooper's favorite source for epigraphs among the poets of the older Romantic generation. Cooper first used a Wordsworthian tag as the motto for chapter VI in one of his earlier works, *The Red Rover* (1827). Here a reference to lines from "Rob Roy's Grave" (1807) parallels Rob Roy's boast of taking the law into his own hands with similarly unsettling insinuations expressed by Cooper's titular character, another freebooter who mixes love of personal liberty with selfish gain and anti-authoritarian politics.

Cooper's other eight Wordsworth epigraphs all occur in the fiction of the 1840's, and display familiarity with some of the poet's best known lyrics. In *The Pathfinder* (1840), the heroine's first impressions in Chapter VII of the wilderness (soon to be filled with threatening Indians) is introduced by the opening lines of Wordsworth's lyric of 1815 "Yarrow Visited." The thematic anticipation of these lines is apt. "Yarrow Visited" opens in disappointment that a stream long sought supplies so little to the fancy, but the poem concludes with a wealth of associations to "heighten joy/ And cheer my mind in sorrow." Similarly, Cooper's heroine in *The Pathfinder* experiences enough excitement in her trip down the wilderness stream that "the real sublimity that belonged to the scene"⁶ becomes indelible. In his epigraph, Cooper apprehends and emulates the dynamics of Wordsworth's lyric with its movement from wan indifference to

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recognition that Yarrow with its acquired cast of human ties yields at last a "genuine image" (1, 86).

The other two references in *Pathfinder* are more conventional tags, less complexly woven into the fabric of the novel. Chapter XXII opens with lines from Wordsworth's "Laodamia" (1815) paying tribute to Laodamia's fidelity to her dead husband; as Laodamia follows him into the shades, so in *Pathfinder* a soldier's wife has been tomahawked by Indians as she left safety to grieve for her fallen husband. And in Chapter XXV, the opening lines of "Resolution and Independence" (1807) with "the sun...rising calm and bright" after "a roaring in the wind all night" aptly herald the rescue of the heroine and her friends by a young suitor.

Cooper's next novel, the historical romance *Mercedes of Castile* (1840), draws upon two of the poet's best known lyrics to introduce the novel's principal heroines. We are prepared for Isabella of Castile, who in Chapter II decides to leave her sheltered life by marrying Ferdinand of Aragon, by the conclusion of "To a Skylark" (1827) which celebrates the lark as "Type of the wise, who soar, but never roam." And the last chapter memorializes the marriage of Mercedes to her suitor Luis with the final lines of "She Was a Phantom of Delight" (1807):

A perfect woman, nobly planned,
To warn, to comfort, and command;
And yet a Spirit still, and bright
With something of angelic light.

Before examining in more detail Cooper's use of Wordsworth in *The Deerslayer*, let me comment briefly on two final Wordsworth epigraphs drawn from the first and last parts of Cooper's anti-rent trilogy, the "Littlepage Manuscripts." In the final volume of the trilogy, *The Redskins* (1846), Cooper calls for the last time on a Wordsworth lyric—"Louisa" of 1807—to introduce his heroine in Chapter V. More interesting is his use in the first volume of the trilogy, *Satanstoe* (1845), of the whole of one of Wordsworth's central lyrics, "My Heart Leaps Up" (1807). In the context of Chapter XVII (an exciting narrative where the hero completes his rescue of the heroine), Cooper seems to quote the poem to evoke the sense of joy the lovers naturally feel at being saved from a threatening flood. "When I behold/A rainbow in the sky" marks for them as for Noah an escape from the waters. Yet as I shall argue, Cooper knew the deeper levels of the poem well, for in *The Deerslayer* Cooper explores the consequences of "natural piety."

4.

In his preface to *The Deerslayer* (1841), Cooper attributed to a singular letter from England the encouragement he needed to continue with his labors when doubts about the novel beset him during its composition. "An anonymous letter from England...written as he thinks by a lady" reached him during his difficulties, which he took as "a request that he has been willing enough to construe into a sign that his attempts will be partially forgiven, if not altogether commended."⁷ Thus he persisted in finishing the novel, the last of the Leatherstocking Tales to be written, but the earliest in terms of the age of the hero, Natty Bumppo.

Cooper's indebtedness to the land of Wordsworth went beyond this encouragement. Cooper spent most of his life after his return to the United States in 1833 in Cooperstown, the village founded by his father William Cooper at the southern end of Lake Otsego, one of the finger lakes in New York's own Lake District. In his introduction to the Cooper Edition text of the novel, James Franklin Beard cites a Wordsworthian "vision" of nature at Lake Otsego as a deeper source and inspiration for *Deerslayer*. Beard recounts a passage in the Introduction to the novel written by the author's daughter Susan. She narrates returning from a summer afternoon excursion in 1840 around the lake when her father fell into a reverie: "He was lost in thought for a moment, —figures and scenes foreign to the day and hour seemed to rise before him. Soon the vision passed away." But her father immediately declared his intent to write one more book about "our little lake" (p. xx).

Beard regards this vision, as Susan terms the event, to be a Wordsworthian spot of time, and draws comparisons between the poet's youthful roamings of Cumberland and Westmorland and the novelist's similar laying down of memories as a boy in Otsego County (pp. xx-xxi). Cooper's recollections of the past did not cease with this vision, however, which Beard suggests was sustained by the novelist's success with the book:

By 5 May the book was in press; and the novelist, still captive to the nostalgia of his effort, was inviting boyhood friends like James Stevenson and Peter Gansevoort, Herman Melville's uncle, to visit him for a week at the Hall where, as he wrote Gansevoort, "IWel could all turn boys again." (p. xxxvii)

For Cooper, the *Deerslayer* was the final occasion—the last of three—through which to render his affection for the lake and village of his childhood memories. At the outset of his career, Cooper had drawn upon childhood memories of Cooperstown for the geography of Templeton in *The Pioneers* (1823). Set in 1793, *Pioneers* shows the wilderness already threatened by human encroachment: the novel's best-known scenes of the pigeon-hunt, the dragging of the lake for fish, and the forest fire all depict nature ravaged by the thoughtless settlers. *Home as Found* of 1838 discloses a Cooperstown still further removed from pastoral, for the central action revolves around the attempts of populists to wrest away from the Effingham family a choice fishing spot picturesquely situated on the lake. (The plot was a thinly-disguised borrowing from real life as Cooper after returning from Europe asserted the family's ownership of "Threemile Point," a rendezvous claimed by popular will while the Coopers had been on their extended visit to Europe).

But *Deerslayer* was different from these earlier evocations of Cooperstown. The novel takes place in about a week's time, vaguely specified as between 1740 and 1745—a half century before the novelist's father began the settlement of Cooperstown. Though squatters have already moved in—the former pirate Tom Hutter claims the lake and its environs by right of force—nature remains as largely unfettered as the countryside of Wordsworth's youth. Indeed, another Englishman, D. H. Lawrence, spoke of Cooper's presentation of nature in *Deerslayer* as "a decrescendo of reality, and a crescendo of beauty" when compared to its four predecessors.⁸ Lawrence responds to the hazy glaze over the novel which mellows its landscapes even as it blurs its plot: *Deerslayer* "is a gem of a book. Or a bit of perfect paste. And myself, I like a bit of perfect paste in a perfect setting, so long as I am not fooled by pretence of reality" (p. 57).

Cooper recaptures in *Deerslayer* the awe he as a youth must have felt when first encountering fresh vistas. When young Natty Bumppo—not yet possessor of the honorific "Deerslayer" he later earns—first sees Lake Otsego or "Glimmerglass," the narrative voice turns lyrical to capture the hunter's emotions:

the most striking peculiarities of this scene, were its solemn solitude, and sweet repose. On all sides, wherever the eye turned, nothing met it, but the mirror-like surface of the lake, the placid void of heaven, and the dense setting of wood. So rich and fleecy were the outlines of

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the forest, that scarce an opening could be seen, the whole visible earth, from the rounded mountain-top, to the water's edge, presenting one unvaried hue of unbroken verdure. (pp. 35-36)

Deerslayer here as elsewhere responds to the tranquility of Glimmerglass, for he can mirror its calm. But his traveling companion, the boisterous Harry March or "Hurry Harry," is too much the restless American ill at ease in the wilderness (a type Lawrence quickly pierced) to share Natty's equanimity. Like the "Youth of green savannahs" in Wordsworth's "Ruth" (1800) whose contact with the American wilderness only feeds his "voluptuous thought," Hurry Harry is too restless to sense in nature a standard of order against which human action may be judged. Thus throughout the novel he is oblivious not only to the signs Deerslayer can read to sense the presence of others, but he is also unable to comprehend the larger text of natural order open to Natty.

Like Wordsworth, then, Cooper repeatedly contrasts the naive, even simple characters, Natty Bumppo and later Hetty Hutter (the heroine's younger and enfeebled sister) with more sophisticated figures like Hurry Harry, the piratical Tom Hutter, and the beautiful but unchaste Judith Hutter. Hetty proves to be so "natural" that she can do no wrong. But she also cannot make sound judgments about right and wrong (she is befriended by a she-bear with cubs but yearns for the handsome yet heartless Hurry Harry). Natty places above self preservation a primitive sense of keeping his word by returning to Indian captivity, and thus gains respect from his enemies even as he rejects Judith's offer of marriage.

Near the center of the novel, in a rich description of a June evening tremulous with beauty but also threat as the whites approach Hutter's abandoned island home, Cooper explicitly points to the failure of Hurry and Hutter to respond to nature. The narrative draws our attention to the "hymns of birds" which sound a "moral counterpoint" to the "appearance of the sun itself" which "Bathes in deep joy, the land and sea." The last line, a verse from Bryant's "The Firmament," resembles the Wordsworthian

sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man.

While this scene moves the others on board Hutter's ark, "All this, however, Hutter and Hurry witnessed without experiencing any of that calm delight, which the spectacle is wont to bring, when the thoughts are just, and the aspirations pure."⁹

Though *Deerslayer* is in captivity among the Hurons when this moment occurs, we may assume he would not have been deaf to the "moral counterpoint" of nature. He is a youth intrinsically good, though not primevally innocent. He is fallen and human enough to err and to recognize his errancy, as when he boasts of his sureness of eye and slays a distant eagle on the wing. "We've done an unthoughtful thing in taking life with an object no better than vanity," he laments when the thrill of success fades before "the dying eyes riveted on its enemies with the gaze that the helpless ever fasten on their destroyers" (p. 446). (Compare the narrator's "troubled pleasure" in the purloined boat in *The Prelude*, Book 1, which results in his return home "in grave/ And serious mood," or the "sense of pain when I beheld/ The silent trees, and saw the intruding sky—" at the end of "Nutting.")

Invoking *The Prelude* as a comparison to *The Deerslayer* focusses other similarities. Both deal centrally with growing up. Both works tell of initiations. As the ego in *The Prelude* faces college, London, and the French revolution, Natty Bumppo faces his first warpath, his first human killing (soberly told with his tender regard for his dying foe), and his encounter with the beautiful Judith Hutter. In both works characters make moral choices, and turn to nature for refreshment if not guidance. Both works end up with a sense of youth passed by, and new but straitened paths opened ahead.

In excusing returning for the fifth time to the character of Natty Bumppo in the Introduction to *Deerslayer*, Cooper pleads that "the pictures, of his life, such as they are, were already so complete as to excite some little desire to see the 'study,' from which they have all been drawn" (p. 1). This study, I suggest, is Cooper's attempt for the five Leatherstocking Tales to show how "the Child is the father of the Man." The later use of the epigraph for *Satanstoe* (1845) demonstrates Cooper's knowledge of this lyric; his sense of the importance of narrating Natty's youth shows his desire as a novelist to demonstrate how for his most famous character the "days" are "Bound each to each by natural piety."

Earlier I noted that the one Wordsworth epigraph in *Deerslayer* is from "To the Cuckoo" (1807). Having touched upon similarities of mood and tone between *Deerslayer* and parts of the central body of

Wordsworth's lyrics, we can turn again to Cooper's use of the epigraph from "To the Cuckoo." The epigraph sets out chapter 16, which narrates Deerslayer's attempt to rescue his friend Chingachgook's betrothed from the Hurons. The attempt succeeds, but Deerslayer is captured and later freed to negotiate with the remaining whites; still later he returns to the Hurons to endure "the tortures" from which he is saved ultimately by the arrival of British regulars. Cooper's rendering of the quatrain betrays either a misremembering of the text he read, or a faulty version, but he does capture Wordsworth's point:

I hear thee babbling to the vale,
Of sunshine and of flowers,
But unto me thou bring'st a tale
Of visionary hours. (p. 271)

While the cuckoo, the "wandering Voice" bespeaking nature, brings to others sunshine and flowers, Deerslayer's environment is about to grow darker and to initiate "visionary hours" from which, after trial, he will emerge triumphant, his initiation completed.

Earlier I asked what Cooper and Wordsworth possibly could have spoken about had they dined together on 22 April 1828. Clearly, from Cooper's sympathetic use of Wordsworth's nature lyrics, a topic both men could have shared—had they overcome their considerable reticence—was their youthful love for nature's wealth, and their mature recollections of such intimacies. Wordsworth in Cumbria, Cooper in Otsego—both could recall the mood of "To the Cuckoo":

To seek thee did I often rove
Through woods and on the green;
And thou wert still a hope, a love;
Still longed for, never seen.

As Cooper labored to show Deerslayer truly was the "Child" who "was father to the Man," the author himself tapped rich veins of memory which unlocked what Lawrence called the "crescendo of beauty." If *Deerslayer* was, as I have suggested, Natty Bumppo's *Prelude*, then the act of writing it released for Cooper, in the words of the penultimate quatrain of "To the Cuckoo," the ability to

listen, till I do beget
That golden time again.

NOTES

All references to Wordsworth's poetry are taken from *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt and H. Darbishire.

¹*Precaution* (1820), Cooper's first novel and an imitation of the contemporary English novel of manners, contains no chapter epigraphs. *The Monikins* (1835), a political satire, employs summary phrases in prose as chapter headings. The remaining twenty-nine novels all use verse epigraphs to open chapters.

²James Fenimore Cooper, *Gleanings in Europe: England*, ed. James P. Elliott, Kenneth W. Staggs and Robert D. Madison (Albany, N.Y., 1982), pp. 126-128.

³Cooper had tried to assist Scott by proposing strategems to obtain benefit of American copyright for his recent life of Napoleon, by which Scott hoped to profit enough to reduce his debts after the Ballantyne bankruptcy. See *Gleanings in Europe: England*, p. 315.

⁴See *The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper*, ed. by James Franklin Beard (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), 1: 253.

⁵James Fenimore Cooper, *Notions of the Americans*, ed. Gary Williams (Albany, N. Y., 1991), p. 349.

⁶*The Pathfinder*, ed. Richard D. Rust (Albany, N.Y., 1981), pp. 90-91.

⁷*The Deerslayer*, ed. by Lance Schachterle, Kent Ljungquist, and James Kilby (Albany, N.Y., 1987), p. 1. For the text of this anonymous letter, see pp. xlii-xliii.

⁸"Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking Novels" in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (London, 1964), p. 47.

⁹*The Deerslayer*, p. 324. Cooper's compositors misread "moral counterpoint" as "novel counterpoint," and editions prior to the SUNY text have failed to recognize Cooper's sense in this passage of the moral gravity of nature.