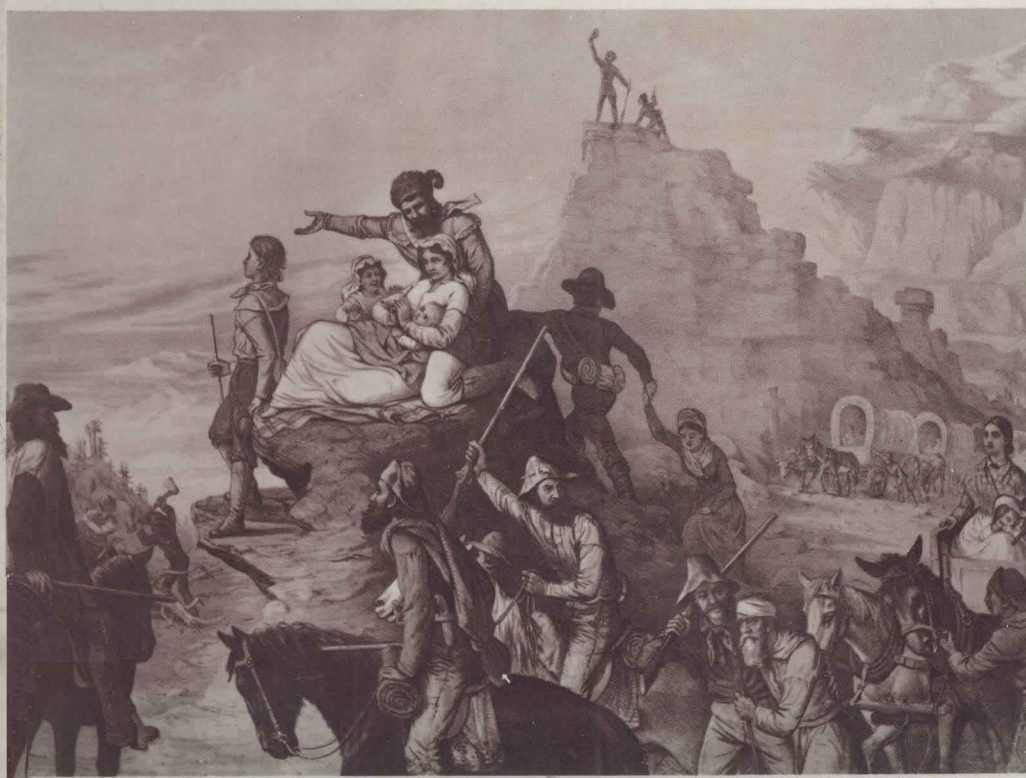


STEPHEN FENDER

PLOTTING THE GOLDEN WEST

AMERICAN LITERATURE AND
THE RHETORIC OF THE
CALIFORNIA TRAIL



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American literature and
the rhetoric of
the California Trail

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ILLUSTRATIONS

- Map The California road superimposed on a map showing modern American state boundaries. Drawn by Alick Newman, Cartographic Unit, University College London
- Introduction From a poster advertising Chase and Bachelder's American Museum of Art, after John Gast's *Westward Ho!* (1872). Reproduced by permission of the Dartmouth College Museum and Galleries
- Chapter 1 *Campfire – preparing the evening meal*, watercolour by Alfred Jacob Miller (c. 1837). Reproduced by permission of the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore
- Chapter 2 *Prosopis odorata* [*Strombocarpa odorata*, or screw bean], lithograph from John Charles Frémont's *Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842 and to Oregon and North California in the years 1843–44* (Washington, 1845)
- Chapter 3 *Our camp at Weaver Creek*, by J. D. Borthwick (c. 1850), from J. D. Borthwick, *Three Years in California* (Edinburgh, 1857). Reproduced by permission of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley
- Chapter 4 Emigrant family portrait. Reproduced by permission of the Denver Public Library, Western History Department
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- Chapter 6 *Virginia City, Nevada* (1864). Reproduced by permission of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley
- Chapter 7 Richard Mulligan as General George Custer at the Battle of Little Big Horn in the film *Little Big Man*. Reproduced by permission of National Film Archive, London

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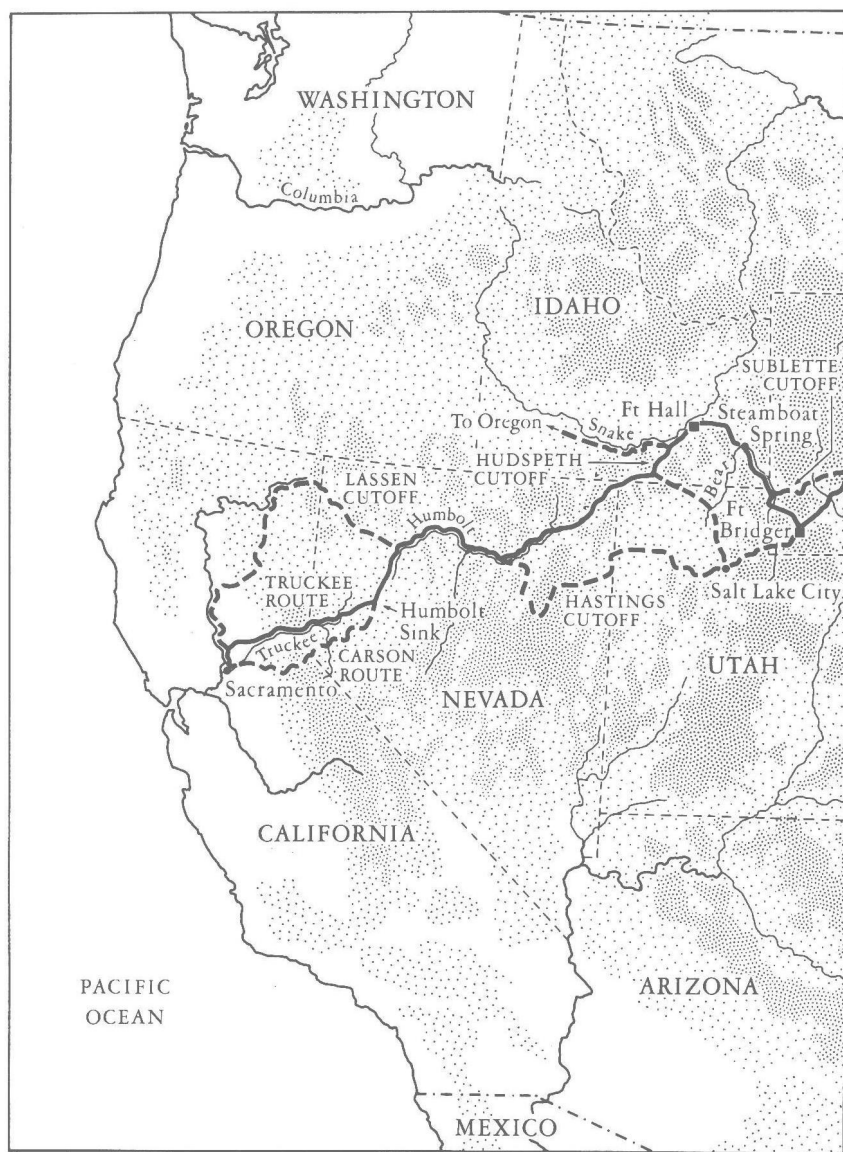
Hennig Cohen, of the University of Pennsylvania, took time off on a visit to London to instruct me in the sublime and beautiful as these terms have been applied to the American landscape, and James Cox, of Dartmouth, read and offered valuable suggestions for chapters 1 through 6. Among my colleagues at UCL who must be relieved to see this thing at last in print, I would like to mention

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INTRODUCTION



Someone once said that America was the only country to pass directly from barbarism to decadence without an intervening period of civilization. And certainly, insofar as American novelists have ever been satirists, they have addressed themselves to these two extremes. The persistent, if apparently contradictory, critique of American life is both that it lacks what Washington Irving called 'association' (by which he meant the relationship of present to past as well as of things to people in a landscape), and also that it is stiflingly, even obsessively overplotted. Henry James was not the only novelist, nor the first, to utter a long list of titles and prerogatives missing from the American scene. The famous negative catalogue in his book on Hawthorne was anticipated by over fifty years by James Fenimore Cooper's *Notions of the Americans*:

There are no annals for the historian; no follies . . . for the satirist; no manners for the dramatist, no obscure fictions for the writer of romance; . . . no costume for the peasant, (there is scarcely a peasant at all), no wig for the judge, no baton for the general, no diadem for the chief magistrate.¹

Mark Twain in *Huckleberry Finn* gets a good deal of fun out of the confusion of styles in the Grangerfords' parlor — the crockery dog, the wild-turkey-wing fans, the copy of *Friendship's Offering* on the oilcloth table cover; all overlooked by the gloomy romanticism of Emmeline's pictures. But when the more stable and comprehensible culture of St Petersburg overtakes Huck at the end of the novel, and when Tom Sawyer articulates Jim's escape according to the stale conventions of schoolboy romance, Huck has to make his own, authentic escape into Oklahoma Territory, one of the last of those magical tracts of the American West to become a state of the Federal Union. In *The Great Gatsby* Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway is amused at Meyer Wolfsheim's reference to 'Oggsford College,' and at the multiplicity of detached signifiers in the names and occupations of Gatsby's guests, but what he escapes from is the established wealth and rooted privilege of an East now grown corrupt in its antiquity. 'I see now that this has been a story of the West, after all,' he writes at the end of his tale, and Gatsby emerges as the novel's hero by virtue of the very rootlessness of his background; though, paradoxically, and unlike Tom Buchanan, he really has spent some time as a student at Oxford. Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* begins as a typical easterner's satire on California life, with its hectic uprooting and eclectic consumption of a dozen

diverse cultures, ancient and modern, European and Oriental. Oedipa Maas goes to the supermarket in *downtown* Kinneret-Among-The-Pines to buy ricotta, where she hears a Muzak recording of the Fort Wayne Settecento Ensemble playing the Vivaldi Kazoo Concerto, returns home to read the book reviews in the latest *Scientific American*, make dinner, mix the whisky sours and get the news from Huntley and Brinkley. Yet at the end of the book she looks around desperately for an escape from an America replete with plots – plots of building land as well as of schemes and stories – at about the same time the reader begins to look for a way out of Pynchon's overplotted novel. For escape Oedipa looks, not to the West (because by now the restless advance of American civilization has reached the shores of the Pacific and well beyond) but eastwards; to the white spaces in the American text, the empty tracts not seized by real-estate developers, and the waste products of American technology:

She thought of other, immobilized freight cars, where the kids sat on the floor planking and sang back, happy as fat, whatever came over the mother's pocket radio; of other squatters who stretched canvas for lean-tos behind smiling billboards along all the highways or slept in junkyards in the stripped shells of wrecked Plymouths, or even, daring, spent the night up some pole in a lineman's tent like caterpillars, swung among a web of telephone wires, living in the very copper rigging and secular miracle of communication, untroubled by the dumb voltages flickering their miles, the night long, in the thousands of unheard messages.

This is the most attractive scene in the novel, not only because it is the most concrete, but also because here, if only here, the messages no longer get through to a protagonist already burdened with a surplus of information. But like any paradisaical vision, it is unattainable, except as a gesture or a rhetorical flourish. It is, in other words, like dropping out, or like Thoreau's 'Economy' in *Walden*, which fails to account for the cost of labor and machines to cut and mill the lumber he stripped from the Irish shanty, or like Mark Twain's idea of the territories, for which he himself had once lit out from the Civil War in a fantastic search for silver, over twenty years before completing *Huckleberry Finn*.

Yet the critique of American culture is only apparently contradictory. Writers, like pioneers, experience these opposing feelings in turn, not simultaneously. The author, looking at the expanse of

white paper that confronts him at the beginning of his task, may be appalled at its emptiness; while towards the end, his boredom and disgust at a surfeit of plots may prompt him to look for a means of escape from his book. The pioneer may be uneasy at his first sight of the wilderness, but just as anxious to light out again when civilization catches him up. If this connection between writing and geography is no more than fortuitous or rhetorical, it has, at least, a long history in American criticism. As seen from the East, the unsettled West was a natural backdrop on which the still unfulfilled hopes of American society could be projected. 'It presents a fruitful theme of anxious contemplation . . . as the destined theatre of future events and exhibitions of human character,' according to the long notice in the *North American Review* of Timothy Flint's *Recollections of the Last Ten Years, passed . . . in the Valley of the Mississippi*, published in 1826. 'In that region it is to be determined whether . . . our intellectual and moral progress will be adequate to maintain our republican forms of government.'

But first the slate had to be cleaned, or the stage emptied. 'Until the cession of Louisiana to the American government, under the administration of Mr Jefferson,' the reviewer continued, '. . . Chataubriand had peopled it with beings of his own creation, and had pictured it to our imagination, as the region of romance.' Once the illusions of European, aristocratic romance were banished, the republican traveler from the American States could document the West in all its commonplace actuality. The reviewer allowed that Flint might have 'been more minute, and filled up more completely some of his outlines,' but he praised his delineation of the various types to be found in the West:

The scene is changed, and we are introduced to the rough, but frank and hospitable *backwoodsman*, with his rifle in his hand, his dogs at his heels, 'all girt for the chase,' receiving his visitant with little appearance, but with all the reality, of a cordial welcome. The preachers, the lawyers, the great and little men of the West, the Indian, the negro, the fanatic, the venerable chronicler of 'the olden time,' the fresh and lovely 'rose of the prairie,' successively pass in review before us.²

So two years before the publication of *Notions of the Americans*, someone had already produced a positive catalogue of types to be discerned, even in that sparsely cultivated part of the American continent. They were not the figment of a romantic imagination,

but really there. Though not labeled by title and uniform as in a traditional hierarchy, they could form the basis for fiction; even here they are aesthetically framed, imaged as passing on parade or across a stage. Emerson, who was twenty-three when this review appeared, and who can hardly have missed it, was later to base his program for the whole of American literature on a similar list. 'The meaner the type by which a law is expressed, the more pungent it is, and the more lasting in the memories of men,' he wrote in 'The Poet,' probably in 1842. 'Bare lists of words are found suggestive to an imaginative and excited mind . . .':

Banks and tariffs, the newspaper and caucus, Methodism and Unitarianism, are flat and dull to dull people, but rest on the same foundations of wonder as the town of Troy and the Temple of Delphi, and are as swiftly passing away. Our log-rolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes and Indians, our boats and our repudiations, the wrath of rogues and the pusillanimity of honest men, the northern trade, the southern planting, the western clearing, Oregon and Texas, are yet unsung. Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for meters.³

Quite right. As de Tocqueville had predicted, 'Amongst a democratic people, poetry will not be fed with legends or the memorials of old traditions. The poet will not attempt to people the universe with supernatural beings, in whom his readers and his own fancy have ceased to believe.'⁴ And if this was to be true of American literature as opposed to European, it was to be doubly true of writing in, or set in, the American West. Whitman took up Emerson's challenge to put the 'poem in our eyes' straight down on paper, to utter 'bare lists of words' without the mediating formalities of European meter diction or conventional figures. He too saw the western plains, in their 'superb monotony' and 'unbounded scale' as 'the home both of what I would call America's distinctive ideas and distinctive realities.'⁵

Even before Whitman wrote that, W. D. Howells, himself a westerner who saw the West as a likely source for the new realism in American letters, had begun to use his position as editor of *The Atlantic* to promote young writers, like Mark Twain, Edward Eggleston and Hamlin Garland, whom he considered western in origin. In Mark Twain's work, thought Howells, there was 'something curiously, not very definably . . . Western.' Mark Twain was western because of his very lack of association:

The West, when it began to put itself into literature, could do so without the sense, or the apparent sense, of any older or politer world outside of it; whereas the East was always looking fearfully over its shoulder at Europe, and anxious to account for itself as well as represent itself. No such anxiety as this entered Mark Twain's mind, and it is not claiming too much for the Western influence upon American literature to say that the final liberation of the East from this anxiety is due to the West, and to its ignorant courage or its indifference to its difference from the rest of the world.⁶

In fact, Mark Twain and Hamlin Garland (not to mention Howells himself) came from what we now call the Midwest, not the Far West, and their best writing was set in the towns and farms that had been settled for some fifty years after the frontier had passed their way. The fiction of the Midwest was the gritty realism* of *Main-Travelled Roads* and the social satire of *Huckleberry Finn*. For Howells' achievements like these were enough to signal 'the final liberation' of American writing from its European origins. For Garland, however, the Far West of the pioneers might yield a further stage in native realism. In *Crumbling Idols*, his collection of essays published three years after *Main-Travelled Roads*, the flare of prophecy burns as bright as ever it did in Emerson or Whitman. Even at the end of the century, the true American novel was still trembling to be born:

We have had the figures, the dates, the bare history, the dime-novel statement of pioneer life, but how few real novels! How few accurate studies of speech and life! There it lies, ready to be put into the novel and the drama, and upon canvas; and it must be done by those born into it. . . . All over the West young people are coming on who see that every literature in the past was at its best creative and not imitative. . . . They are reading the most modern literature, and their

* I should say that I am using the problematic term 'realism' here in the sense in which it was used by Howells and his contemporaries (though Garland preferred 'veritism'): that is, a form of fiction attending to the details of commonplace life, including the way people actually speak and the rather shapeless plots of actual events. The distinction between the romance and the realistic novel has been a commonplace of Anglo-Saxon literary criticism since Clara Reeve's *The Progress of Romance* (1785): 'The Romance in lofty and elevated language, describes what never happened nor is likely to happen. — The Novel gives a familiar relation of such things, as pass every day before our eyes . . .' (vol. 1, Evening vii). Other uses of 'realism' not relevant here include Zola's *réalisme* (Americans called it 'naturalism') and Lukács's socialist realism, both of which imply fidelity to objective natural or historical processes. Thus, for Lukács, Scott and Cooper are 'realistic' authors, despite their inattention, so deplored by Mark Twain, to the details of ordinary life and speech, because their fiction focussed on crucial moments in the class struggle.

judgements are not dependent upon New York or London, though they find themselves in full harmony with progressive artists everywhere.⁷

The hope of the West, then, for writing no less than for the general prosperity of the country, lay in its material resources. Had American literature failed, so far, to attend to the facts of American life and landscape? Had the authors of New England and the Atlantic States already lost their nerve and fallen back on the comforting props of Old-World cultural conventions? Never mind, the West would redeem the promise. Its splendid variety of ordinary things, its rich profusion of minerals, mountains, rivers, trees and wild animals, of big-hearted men with their novel occupations and earthy vernacular – all this would at last become so vivid (or, as Whitman would say, the monotonous would become so superb) that the most fantastic romance borrowed from conventional fiction would retreat before it as an embarrassed ghost in the light of day.

Of course, the prophecy could never have been fulfilled literally. This side of the millennium there are no places waiting to leap onto paper, canvas, or even photographic emulsion without the mediation of the artist, and there are no neutral receptors ready to transcribe the experience without infecting it with the prejudices and predilections brought from another place. Everyone, no matter how unsophisticated, has a culture. The American Far West could never have expressed itself for itself; it was described by easterners for other easterners who stayed at home. This truism requires some emphasis if only because, as chapter 7 will show, a number of historians and literary critics are still looking at the American West from the standpoint of the nineteenth-century positivists – as though it consisted of things and events in history and not those things and events as represented by people with their own inescapable stereotypes of reality.

Even so, any mediation between terms is bound to be unbalanced in favor of one or the other extreme, and it must be an occasion for some surprise that the writing of the Far West turned out to be so much more formal than material. Paradoxically, the frontier seems to have attracted more antique literary conventions, to have been more heavily plotted, than any of the more settled regions of the continent. Travelers wrote about it in terms of the sublime or picturesque. Novelists, authors of pulp fiction and screenwriters have

set it repeatedly in the frame of epic or pastoral romance. Cooper mined 'obscure fiction for the writer of romance' from the (much refined) tales about the old mountain men, and synthesized, in his hierarchies of hair color, complexion, dress and levels of speech, a set of codes to replace the missing costume, wig, baton and diadem. Garland's abhorred Dime Novelists did not give way to a new breed of realists but to yet another wave of romance – this time about cowboys – characterized by Emerson Hough's *The Girl at the Half-way House* (1900), *Bransford in Arcadia* (1913) by Eugene Manlove Rhodes, and – best known of all, because it set the pattern for thousands of western movies – Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902). Mark Twain lost his cultural bearings in Nevada, and his styles of life and prose show the signs of that strain. Even Garland, the great 'veritist' himself, defected to romance when he began to travel widely in the Far West in the 1890s. His *The Captain of the Grey Horse Troop* (1902) and *Cavanaugh, Forest Ranger* (1910) exploited the situational melodrama of cowboys struggling with Indians and federal agents trying to manage the wilderness. In *They of the High Trails* (1916) he further inflated his diction and elaborated his syntax to glamorize what he saw as types of the West ('The Grub-staker,' 'The Cow Boss,' 'The Outlaw') as stock figures in the epic or pastoral. Howells's response to all this was mild enough, considering the disappointment he must have felt in seeing his protégé relax his attention to the minutiae of social behavior. 'If [Mr Garland's] work seems to lose at times in closeness of texture on its westering way, it gains in breadth,' he wrote in 1912.⁸ By the time he came to supply a preface to *They of the High Trails*, he had to admit that he had 'enjoyed the level footing more and got [his] breath better in the lower altitudes of Main-Travelled Roads.'⁹

So the more plotless the landscape, the more plotted the writing. The paradox is easily explained by reference to that well-known anxiety which so often accompanies the exhilaration at escaping the constraints of home, the growing awareness that foreigners are dirty, dishonest and unkind to animals. The traveler's concern at leaving behind what he takes to be his cultural center prompts a more-than-ever rigorous observance of whatever forms he thinks distinguishes him from the foreign culture in which he finds himself. And these outward conventions must not be covert, subtle and recognized by only a small elite within his society; they must be the