

Authority in Fenimore Cooper's *The Pathfinder*

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The dual themes of class and authority appear almost at the very beginning of Cooper's *The Pathfinder*, his third novel based on the character of the Leatherstocking, Natty Bumppo. The persons in the opening pages are such that "their actual social positions would [not] have accustomed them to many of the luxuries of rank,"¹ the narrator informs us. This question of position does not apply immediately to the Tuscorara Indians, Arrowhead and June, but to Charles Cap and his niece Mabel Dunham. Despite his surname, Cap is of a "station little if any above that of a common mariner,"² while the woman is "of a class, in no great degree superior to his own."

Shortly after this introductory determination of class, the narrative moves to a description of the forest, listing and classifying some of the trees within it. We are told that here "and there, by some accident ... a trifling opening among these giant members of the forest, permitted an inferior tree to struggle upward toward the light" while here "and there, too, the tall, straight trunk of the pine, pierced the vast field, rising high above it, like some grand monument reared by art on the plain of leaves."³ The opening pages contrast constructed codes of privilege with an organic system where the weak can grow but where the strong also flourish. A socially inscribed inferiority is shown to differ from a landscape where democracy prevails but where a natural hierarchy is

1 James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pathfinder* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1989), p. 8. All subsequent references are to this edition.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

retained. The opposition between culturally assigned status and innate or native stature is therefore immediately established.

Henry Nash Smith has argued that this preoccupation with social station partly emerges because Cooper needed to alter the form of the sentimental novel in order to allow his main characters a certain heroic status.⁴ In this paper, I want to point out that the *Pathfinder* is, in fact, a novel which confronts the problem of social status within an American, and specifically democratic, framework. I therefore stress that the concern with antithetical orders of authority arises as much from cultural considerations as literary ones. Of course, the historical conflict between the English and French which acts as a backdrop to the story is primarily a struggle for sovereignty, for colonial dominion. The fight for control over the tiny island in the second half of the novel is an allegory of imperialistic battles for command of the larger island which was the North American continent. But the conflict between the French and English further involves competing political structures, and the engagement between them is transformed at the thematic level to a debate about definitions of class and authority in the New World. Ultimately, supremacy lies with the native American characters rather than with those who are allied to aggressive and alien powers.

Given the revolutionary history of the United States, it might be expected that the French would be regarded more sympathetically in the novel. This is not obviously the case, and presumably Balzac was not alone in being angered by the choice of a fellow countryman as the apparent villain in the novel. Writing about it in the *Paris Review* of August 1840, he pointed out that both Cooper and America itself were indebted to the French.⁵ That this is not reflected in the novel may have more to do with economic necessity than with political allegiances, however. Cooper was being as loyal as possible to the English readership which was partly responsible for his success and popularity as an author. This is perhaps ironic given that much of the book operates as a critique of British disloyalty and as a commentary on the inappropriateness of its class structures to the American experience. Small wonder then that he disguises his intentions so much. Indeed, the impact of those lines which are most directly aimed at the monarchy is partly dif-

4 Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Harvard University Press, 1950), pp. 64-65.

5 Kay Seymour House reports this in her introduction to the Penguin edition, xxv.

fused by having them spoken by an aboriginal American, Dew-in-June, who complains to Mabel about a "wicked king [and] wicked people."⁶

Although the French are clearly the enemy in this book, they are less dangerous than their surrogates, the Mingos. The story of the expedition which dominates the second half of the novel fully demonstrates this. It is only through an act of treachery instigated by a British officer that the expeditionists are exposed to danger. Firstly, the anonymous letter pointing a finger of suspicion at Jasper Western effectively robs the Scud of its most able sailor, and captain, and replaces him with Cap, a man who is unfit for command. Secondly, the red cloth torn by Muir from the sail of the boat enables an attack to be made on the tiny garrison of soldiers left on the island after the main body of men has left. But this attack is primarily conducted by Arrowhead and his Indians. And again, it is significant that those remaining on the island include characters, with the exception of Mabel Dunham, who have authority in name only. Again, too, it is significant that only she is astute enough to warn Corporal MacNab, the Scottish soldier left in charge, that precautions be taken against an ambush. Ironically, the corporal is busily ignoring this advice when he is shot. But it is significant that he too is implicated and indicted in the novel's particular class-struggle, for having "considered the American as an animal inferior to the parent stock."⁷

Nevertheless, in encounters between the French and Americans, the former are shown to lack military mastery of any kind. Chased on the lake, Jasper Western easily outmaneuvers a boat which in every other respect is superior to his own. And it is the decisive intervention of Western once more which persuades the French commander to surrender after the battle for supremacy of the island, a battle which is significantly won by native Americans and not by the opposing foreign powers. Captain Sanglier is a leader who is crucially unable to control his drunken Indians after the massacre of MacNab and his soldiers. The narrative voice is uncertain about Sanglier, as is evinced by the assertion that his behaviour "exhibited the contradictory results of both alleviating the misery ... and augmenting it."⁸ As if to augment the uncertainty, the narrator reports other perspectives. According to the inhabitants of the American Province, for instance, he is "a wretch who delighted in

6 *Ibid.*, p. 346.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 335.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 418.

bloodshed."⁹ The fear of anarchy operates as a reference to the French revolution and its aftermath. The dual impetus of attraction and revulsion operates as an oblique commentary on the benefits and excesses of radical political activity and independent historical development.

Nonetheless, the French are close to the Americans in some ways. Initially, Western has an almost telepathic understanding of the French sailors who chase him among the Thousand Islands. More importantly, perhaps, the meeting between Bumpo and Sanglier recalls "that celebrated interview between Wellington and Blucher,"¹⁰ and is therefore yet another instance in the text where the Pathfinder is compared to an illustrious and victorious general. It is clear the two enemies have a healthy respect for each other's reputations and achievements. However, Cooper is careful to point out that Sanglier does not fully understand the Pathfinder's "disinterestedness, justice and truth."¹¹ The conflict between them is further allegorized at one stage by comparing them to open-mouthed and close-mouthed diplomats. Diplomats represent national interests, and, to some extent, the comparison suggests that both act as spokesmen and models for differing political characteristics.

Despite this, Balzac misread the text when he identified Sanglier as the principal antagonist. Morally, he is superior to the real villain of the novel, Lieutenant Muir. Though both are connected, not only by the latter's treachery, but by the fact that Sanglier left France at a time when he held a similar rank to that of the Quartermaster,¹² Sanglier shows evident distaste at Muir's conduct and very quickly distances himself from his actions. Clearly, the figures are related up until this point. But the gesture of contempt implies that the Frenchman is only a secondary figure, and that the rivalry in the text which is initially most important is that of Muir and the Pathfinder.

This rivalry is central to the narrative dialectic of frontier and foreign concepts of authority and class. For instance, before the 'discovery of Muir's treachery is made, he has a private conversation with Pathfinder where he announces his intention to "claim the authority that belongs to a lieutenant's commission"¹³ and to take command of the expedition

9 *Ibid.*, p. 418.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 419.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 419.

12 Cf. p. 418.

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 416

survivors. His "blood has boiled to be in authority"¹⁴ he says, and soon after taking over the Quarter Master assumes "some of the authority that might properly be supposed to belong to his rank. This change in the dynasty was affected without any of the usual symptoms of a revolution, for as all well understood the Lieutenant's legal claims to command, no one felt disposed to dispute his orders."¹⁵ Both in this passage, and in the discussion between Muir and Pathfinder which precedes it, there is a clear contrast between legal rank and morally legitimate leadership. It is interesting that the Quartermaster feels the need to justify his behaviour to the frontiersman, and that he even tries to bribe him by offering to mention his name in dispatches. Bumpo replies that enough people, including Lundie and the general, know about his talents already and need not have them explained further. His own authority is shown to be self-assured and self-appointed.

If Muir betrays the King, it has to be said that the King's representatives, with the possible exception of the American Sergeant Dunham, show only a temporary allegiance to the interests of the new territories. Both the British and the French are seen primarily in their roles as foreign colonizers. America is seen as another arena for war. Its resources are exploited, but not fully respected. Even the cuisine has political connotations, for despite the richness of the native diet, the ordinary soldiers of the 55th find it common and complain constantly. Major Duncan Lundie, the regiment's commanding officer, has a sweetheart back home in Scotland and is billeted "in a moveable hut, which being placed on trucks, he could order to be wheeled about at pleasure."¹⁶ This ability to change location suggests the temporary and shifting character of the Major's loyalties. And since the Major is the King's agent, the hut further suggests something about the attitude of the British towards America and towards Americans.

Of course, army discipline necessarily depends on rigid differentiation between officers and soldiers. Discrimination between ranks inscribes and enforces authority. There is a clear parallel between this military structure and that of the society it acts for and represents. Speaking to Dunham before the expedition, Lundie invites intimacy and invokes friendship, but reacts bitterly when Dunham mentions George Washing-

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 416.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 417.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

ton. "You're all provincials together, man, and uphold each other, as if you were of a sworn confederacy,"¹⁷ he tells the Sergeant. This outburst simultaneously reminds the other of his inferior status as an American and as a subordinate, but additionally manages to invoke one of the heroes of the American revolution.

Again, the irony is that the accusation of disloyalty is not only unfounded, but more applicable to the accuser than to the accused. And by extension, the system whereby leadership derives from lineage is implicitly contrasted with one where authority is based on courage, commitment, and skill. In addition, Lundie's outburst occurs just before the expedition leaves for the Thousand Islands, and there is more than an element of the satirical about massive colonial empires determined to impose and to extend their supremacy over these myriad locations. But here too there is a political dimension. For, if the Islands can serve as an allegory for the fragmented states of pre-revolutionary America, the reference to Washington sets up a dialectic between forms of government, one based on imperialistic rule, and the other on federalism, "the sworn confederacy" which proleptically sums up the contents of the Declaration of Independence.

Perhaps the part of the novel where the consideration of authority and class most plainly surfaces is in the shooting contest between the soldiers and scouts of the 55th which takes place in Chapter Eleven. It is possible to see how the established hierarchy of officers and men even extends to the audience of their assembled dependents, for there is a marked difference in status between the three officer's wives and "some twenty females of humbler condition,"¹⁸ among them Mabel Dunham. Even the sitting arrangements for these spectators mirrors the ranking order, for the ladies are sat at the front of the stage, while the wives of the privates make do at the rear.

But if Mabel is inferior in class, she is superior in other ways, as I shall establish later. Even Muir recognizes this when he says that "Scotch lassies are fair and pleasant, but it must be owned these colonials are of surpassing comeliness."¹⁹ This temporary lapse in class distinctions is remarked and rebuked by Lundie, the establishment emis-

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

sary, who significantly reminds Muir of his "commission and blood,"²⁰ those twin pillars of the English hierarchy. And during the shooting competition, Muir once again steps outside the boundaries of class when he mentions Mabel during a conversation between himself and a Captain's wife, a transgression serious enough for her to comment on it. It is therefore not accidental that immediately after this infringement of social etiquette, Muir complains that the Pathfinder should not be allowed to use Killdeer, his rifle, during the contest, because of its superiority to the standard government issue. Again, there are parallel reversals at work here, where innate merit threatens culturally appointed hierarchies.

The shooting contest enacts or dramatizes the thematic contrast between native and foreign authority. The performance of the native-born Americans demonstrates their inborn superiority. By comparison, the elitism of the (largely British) army men and their wives is revealed as extrinsic, assigned to them rather than arising from within. Even in the preliminary competition among the "common men", Scots are ranked against Americans. General opinion has it that "the provincials were generally the most expert marksmen,"²¹ and a soldier from New York takes the prize. Similarly, the struggle between the Pathfinder and Muir is also between different definitions of excellence. The Quartermaster compares his own method of shooting to science, mathematics and philosophy, but for Hawk-eye thought "was scarcely quicker than his aim."²² Instinct replaces rationality as the generating principle behind a new and native aristocracy.

This distinction between spontaneous expertise and considered competence echoes the text's Preface, where heart and head, acquired wisdom and instinctive knowledge are contrasted. The evidence argues that the Americans, again, lack the competence that comes from education but derive their authority and ability from being closer to elemental nature. Once more, there is another link here between Natty and Jasper, for Mabel says of the latter that he "appears to know more than most of the young men of his class. He has read but little, for books are not plenty in this part of the world, but he has thought much."²³ Jasper may be unlettered, but he can read nature, a fact which is testified to by the

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 160.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

Pathfinder when he remarks that both he and Western "understand rifts and rapids and cataracts, and.... shall do our endeavours, not to disgrace our edication"²⁴ In two separate but similar incidents, Jasper is tested on his knowledge and mastery of river and lake. Twice he succeeds in interpreting the signs properly and navigating his way to safety. Even the Pathfinder recognizes the youth's superiority in this extent, when he says that water "leaves no trail ... and yet here is Jasper moving ahead as boldly as if he had before his eyes, the prints of moccasins on leaves."²⁵

In fact, Western is the only authentic and authoritative sailor in the novel. As this suggests, not all of the Americans rank equally. The frontiersmen generally fare better than the others. Cap is especially obsessed with differences of class and classification. Before the expedition leaves, for instance, he remarks of the Scud that he is to sail in that "no seaman could look at her a moment without seeing that she is full of faults, as a servant that has asked for his discharge."²⁶ Moreover, although Cap's name implies rank, in reality it more accurately denotes his cantankerous or captious character. This captain who is not a captain, and whose mastery of the sea is more verbal than actual, is similarly scornful of both the inland lakes, and the person who is most capable of navigating them, namely Jasper Western. To some extent, Jasper and Cap are supporting players in the textual drama, but their rivalry is still linked to the plot's thematic opposition. Again, nomenclature is significant in identifying this opposition, for the Pathfinder refers to Western as Eau-Douce and to Cap as Saltwater.²⁷ The difference between inland lakes and surrounding oceans mirrors the textual difference between native and foreign sources of merit. Cap constantly belittles the lakes and disparages them in comparison with the Atlantic. And when Jasper is first suspected of being a traitor, it is Cap who replaces him as commander of the Scud, with nearly fatal consequences.

In replacing Jasper, Cap effectively aligns himself with the army, and therefore with the system of acquired superiority.²⁸ Both he and his brother-in-law, Sergeant Dunham, are tacitly linked to the narrative

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

²⁸ Cf. p. 202, when he echoes Muir in claiming that "Law is reason, and reason is philosophy, and philosophy is a steady drag, whence it follows that crowns are regulated by law, reason, and philosophy."

conflict between instinctive and instructed codes of behaviour and authority. To some extent, Dunham is an intermediate figure, both soldier and American, not quite an officer but nevertheless holding a position of some rank.²⁹ However, he is fatally compromised by this connection to the military. Firstly, his decision to marry Mabel to the Pathfinder evidently marks him out as someone who wrongly exerts and imposes patriarchal privilege. Secondly, since he tries to arrange the marriage he necessarily ignores his daughter's feelings for Jasper, and is thus implicated in the antimony of head and heart, elements which act as underlying and alternative principles of authority in the book. In addition, the Sergeant has no male heir, and this suggests that the system of inherited or acquired authority which he partly represents comes to an end with him. The fact that Mabel eventually goes against his wishes means that she effectively rejects what he stands for.

If the Sergeant is, in Muir's words "not the great Lord Stair or even the Duke of Marlborough,"³⁰ the eponymous hero of the novel is: he is compared to the Duke of Marlborough in Chapter 24.³¹ Recognised by Mabel on their first meeting, the Pathfinder tells her that "many a great lord has got a title that he did not half so well merit,"³² thus linking himself with aristocracy. This identification is also a distinction: his supremacy is inherent rather than inherited. Throughout the text, Natty is linked with excellence of every kind, moral as well as military. Although officially ranked only as a scout, nonetheless he consorts freely with generals and is compared to aristocracy. But the difference between them is summed up by the frontiersman himself when he says that "I am but a poor hunter I know; untaught and unlearned; but God is as near me, in this my home, as he is near the king in his royal palace."³³

From the beginning, the Pathfinder offers the sort of guidance which immediately connects and contrasts him with the other leaders in the text. For instance, he clearly distrusts the direction of Arrowhead, the Tuscorara whom he describes to Mabel as "an ambitious chief."³⁴ Of

29 A similar point is made in Fussell, Edwin, *Frontier: American Literature and the American West* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press), p. 56.

30 *The Pathfinder*, p. 320.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 396.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 265.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

course, his association with pathways, routes, and trails has religious connotations. "The 'arth is the temple of the Lord, and I wait on him hourly, daily," he says in answer to a question about his denomination.³⁵ His answer identifies the source and strength of his spiritual authority as both native and natural, and therefore distinguishes him again from conventional religious practice. Bumpopo is additionally fond of invoking the name of Providence during the course of what he calls "the trail of life."³⁶ The image of the monument erected by art which I quoted at the beginning of this paper is self-conscious enough to support Kay Seymour House's assertion that it stands for the hero, and therefore links him as a primary representative of a new aristocracy based on intrinsic merit.³⁷ Unlike the colonial powers, however, who are intent on expanding *outwards*, the oak rises majestically *upwards* towards the Heavens.

It is worth pointing out too that nature, in the shape of the forest at least, is seen as predominantly masculine. Of course, the oak which the Pathfinder is compared to is essentially phallic, and throughout the novel he is associated with one masculine symbol after another. The rifle Killdeer is another instance of apparent phallic prowess. Bumpopo's description of a dream about Mabel, where he is incapable of shooting a doe identified with her, is therefore doubly interesting.³⁸ She makes him impotent as a hunter, which is his physical occupation, but additionally makes him ineffective as a spiritual guide and leader. This is significant, because it is primarily because of his attraction to Mabel that Bumpopo becomes lost, something he prophetically acknowledges earlier when he says that she "will be the spoiling of one of the best and most experienced scouts on the lines!"³⁹ The possibility of domestication leads to danger, which is again recognized by the hunter when he says that love is a distraction for soldiers, guides, and scouts, and turns "the feelings away from their gifts and nat'ral occupations."⁴⁰

To some extent, this represents the classic insertion of temptation in the journey of the hero towards salvation. The Pathfinder's instincts as a scout are effectively blunted on the lake, as is his innate ability to distin-

35 *Ibid.*, p. 433.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

37 *Ibid.*, p. xviii

38 *Ibid.*, p. 445.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 190.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 189.

guish right from wrong. It is therefore a significant reversal later in the narrative when the Scud overtakes and captures the Indian Arrowhead on Oswego, for, despite overwhelming evidence of his treachery, Bumpo accepts his excuses. Again, the setting of the novel challenges and provokes a crisis in the protagonist's nature. As Dew-of-June also recognizes, "water leaves no trail,"⁴¹ and for much of the text's second half, which is primarily located on the lake, the Pathfinder temporarily loses his way. Indeed, he is shown to be helpless and largely redundant outside the immediate boundaries of his frontier environment and existence.

Of course, there are several reasons for this, not least of them the writer's desire to show that the Leatherstocking's importance is confined to a certain period of history. Progress demands different sorts of adventurers, and towards the end of the novel Pathfinder indeed becomes superfluous, displaced at the centre of the action by, first Mabel and June, and then by Mabel and Jasper. It is possible to argue that Natty too is compromised by his complicity in the Sergeant's scheme to marry him to Mabel. For a while, he even comes to be aligned with Dunham, Cap and Muir. He submits to their authority and therefore acts against both his own integral nature and that of the authentic and reciprocated love between Jasper and Mabel, whose affection is silent, based on a natural, non-verbal discourse of looks and touch.

In fact, the textual symbolism of trees is such that the Pathfinder is meant to be associated with spiritual and not with sexual potency. At one level, he is given moral authority over other characters, most notably the French and, to a lesser degree, the British, who are alien to his native environment. But at another level, the symbolism crucially connects and confines him to the natural. Indeed, his impotence is severally indicated in the novel, most notably on the lake, when he is helpless to intervene in order to help Jasper. During the interview with Mabel which takes place in Chapter 18, but also when he is directing Jasper down the river towards the rapids in Chapter 13, he finds direction or guidance from a dead or "blasted oak."⁴² The inference is that his leadership and influence are restricted and in decline. And the concomitant implication is that the authority he embodies is continued by Jasper and Mabel.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 347.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 265, 40.

Bumppo is beaten by Jasper in the shooting contest, though this defeat is to some extent contrived. And during the chase with the Mingos which takes up much of the first half of the novel, Mabel is hidden in the hollow stump of a tree, a moment of symbolic transformation when she takes on the strengths of elemental and authentic nature.⁴³

If the Sergeant's integrity is compromised by the army, Mabel is made new by the frontier experience. And if it can be said of the father that he has no male heir, and therefore no-one to continue his line, the daughter is likened at the end of the novel with Eve, the mother of the human race. Sat on a trunk at one side of the Pathfinder with Jasper on the other, she and her lover resemble "Milton's picture of our first parents," and are tacitly recognized as the descendants of a mythic rather than a literal patriarch.⁴⁴ This is meant to suggest the sinfulness of the lovers less than the purity of the Pathfinder, perhaps, but it is significant that only when the relations between the Leatherstocking and Mabel are restored to a paternal-filial axis that order is re-introduced into the text. And when it is recalled that Hawkeye's function as a scout is to find paths for other people, then it becomes clear that his purpose in the novel is to make way for the couple who, in many senses, are its true focus.⁴⁵ The ritual of adoption points to parallels between the surrogate father and his children, but also argues that the qualities of the parent are extended and emended by those children.

Throughout the text, Jasper is related physically to the Pathfinder, while Mabel is seen as his spiritual equivalent. In a novel which begins by combining a view of the American wilderness with the Romantic concept of the sublime, it is "her full blue eye [which] reflected the feeling of sublimity that the scene excited."⁴⁶ It is equally prophetic that her eyes are turned west, for in that direction lies the location of the American dream and the person who represents, and is named after, it. Western's name makes him both a pioneer and a representative of the American ideal of continual westward expansion. But it is important to realize that Jasper and Mabel become the inheritors of the frontier myth

43 *Ibid.*, p. 72.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 457

45 The traditional sub-themes of journey and test in fact apply more readily to Jasper than to the Pathfinder. The two part structure of the novel tests *his* qualities, and not those of the Leatherstocking, who becomes largely redundant. And both sections begin with Mabel. In the first Chapter she feels the sublime beauty of the "ocean of leaves" (p. 8), while in Chapter 12 she recognises the "sublimity" of the lake (p. 172).

46 *The Pathfinder.*, p. 8.

together, as a couple, and not just as individuals. For there is a deliberately Biblical note introduced with the reference to Adam and Eve. The association with Genesis calls up both the idea of generation and the idea of a chosen people whose activity has been sanctioned by God.

The Edenic echo suggests Paradise Regained less than Paradise Redefined. The lovers are expelled from the forest and take their place in the world of imperfection. It is quite interesting that Western moves to New York and becomes a successful shipping merchant. The pioneering mission is altered spatially and temporally in order to make it more relevant to modern concerns. The frontier shifts location to the East, and changes period to the historical present. In this uniquely American vision, progress is a programme which merges Christian and commercial elements. Western and Mabel together embody the Jeffersonian ideal, combining Scripture and capitalism simultaneously.

For this is a novel where directions are just as important as destinations, and which is crucially concerned with a variety of transitions. Although set at a time in history when the New World was an arena for colonial struggle, the narrative also shows those empires in serious decline, while another, the American, is seen extending its borders and sphere of influence. Although the protagonist is revealed as redundant when taken outside his immediate geographical and historical environment, his virtues are passed on to the next generation and he himself is transformed into a mythic symbol of moral guidance. His alteration is accompanied by a parallel move away from foreign constructions of authority and class to native codes based on authentic individual merit. It is therefore appropriate that Mabel journeys back to Lake Ontario with her sons at the close of the novel, and catches a glimpse of the Leatherstocking. Her journey is almost an act of pilgrimage, and perhaps also a gesture of atonement, but it simultaneously acknowledges the debt to the past and points to its continuing presence and promise. Finally, the text itself is an act of homage to the first errand into the wilderness of the New World as well as a tacit legitimization of the material side of America's future pioneering power. The image of the oak rising upwards from the forest floor suggests not only Bumpo's final destination, but also functions as a natural and native signal of Divinely approved national destiny in keeping with the political philosophy of the day.